HYBRID CREATURES

New Museum Educator Resources provide families and educators with activities to learn about contemporary art and ideas at home and in learning spaces for kids and youths.

Artist Wangechi Mutu's (b. 1972, Nairobi, Kenya) solo exhibition, “Intertwined,” encompasses painting, collage, drawing, sculpture, film, and performance. The artist's collage-based practice explores camouflage, transformation, and mutation. Working across various other mediums, Mutu develops hybrid, fantastical forms that fuse mythical and folkloric narratives. She combines animals, humans, plants, and machines to create hybrid creatures while mixing found and organic materials with more conventional art materials like paint, ink, and magazine cutouts. In some sculptures, Mutu mixes soil from Nairobi with paper pulp and tea to make a type of clay she calls “porridge.” In Seeing Cowries, a sculpture of a creature or an ambiguous figure made with soil, charcoal, paper pulp, glue, paint, ink, synthetic hair, wood, and cowrie shells—Mutu incorporates cowrie shells and soil to connect African and diasporic cultural traditions important to her identity.

“... The soil here in Kenya resides very deeply in my memory and how I work. With the color, texture, and conscious and subconscious implications of earth, soil, and home—it's a bit of everything...”

- Exhibition catalogue, Wangechi Mutu: Intertwined
Watch this video to learn more about Mutu's process of creating art and working with diverse materials.

**KEY WORDS FOR KIDS**

- **hybrid**: 1) a mix of two or more different elements, materials, concepts or images; 2) a new animal or plant bred by combining animals or plants of different species.
- **cowrie shells**: shells used for trade across Africa, Asia, Europe, and Oceania and for money on Africa’s western coast as early as the fourteenth century. In the sixteenth century, Europeans entered African markets by using cowries to buy goods and people as part of the slave trade. Today, members of the African diaspora sometimes incorporate cowrie shells into artwork and jewelry, and the shells have become an important symbol of reclaiming sovereignty.
- **sculpture**: a three-dimensional artwork that has volume and depth. Viewed from different sides or angles, one sees different shapes and parts of the artwork.

**KEY WORDS FOR YOUTH**

- **hybrid**: 1) a mix of two or more different elements, materials, concepts or images; 2) a new animal or plant bred by combining animals or plants of different species.
- **cowrie shells**: shells used for trade across Africa, Asia, Europe, and Oceania and for money on Africa’s western coast as early as the fourteenth century. In the sixteenth century, Europeans entered African markets by using cowries to buy goods and people as part of the slave trade. Today, members of the African diaspora sometimes incorporate cowries into artwork and jewelry, and the shells are an important symbol of reclaiming sovereignty.
- **ambiguous**: having more than one meaning or interpretation
- **symbol**: an image, logo, or set of visual elements that represent an object, place, or set of beliefs, ideas, or meanings
sculpture: a three-dimensional artwork that has volume and depth. Viewed from different sides or angles, one sees different shapes and parts of the artwork.

START WITH ART: WANGECHI MUTU

Wangechi Mutu's sculpture Seeing Cowries, combines many different materials to create a creature or ambiguous figure.

1. What materials and textures do you notice?
2. Describe the shapes that you see.
3. How would you describe the creature or figure’s pose?
4. What are the patterns you see?
5. What is the mood or tone of the sculpture?
6. Who or what do you think the creature or figure represents?

MAKE ART FOR KIDS

Let’s create a sculpture of a hybrid creature using a combination of materials we create or find at home.

Materials

- Paper and pencil
- Modeling or air-dry clay. You may also create your own clay following these instructions:
  - Pour one cup of all-purpose flour and ½ a cup of salt into a mixing bowl and stir gently with a spoon.
  - Add ½ cup of water and stir with the spoon until all three ingredients combine.
Use your hands to continue mixing the ingredients until they are smooth.
Optional: add a brushful of acrylic or watercolor paint. Use your hands to mix in the paint until it spreads across the clay
- Shells, feathers, beads, yarn, fabric or lace scraps, and other textured materials
- Glue
- Optional:
  - acrylic or watercolor paint or markers
  - soil or sand
  - pet hair or human hair from a comb or brush

Making

1. Collect materials you can find at home to add texture and form to your sculpture, such as shells, beads, yarn, or pet or human hair you find on furniture or in combs or brushes.
2. Think about the plants and animals you want to include.
3. Use a pencil and paper to write down ideas or make sketches of your hybrid creature. This can be a mix of several different plants, animals, or people, or any combination of human, plant, animal, and/or machine.
4. Start molding your clay into the shape of your creature.
5. If you want to add color to your clay, you can add paint or markers to model magic or homemade clay before sculpting.
6. If you collected soil or sand, experiment with mixing it into a piece of clay or model magic to shift the texture and look of your creature.
7. Add textural materials like fabric scraps, shells, and beads to your sculpture, pressing them onto the surface and smudging the clay around them to make them stick. You can also use wet glue to attach these.
8. Once you are done adding objects, add color using paint or markers if you have not already.

MAKE ART FOR YOUTHS
Let’s create a sculpture of a hybrid or ambiguous figure, incorporating symbols that represent our cultural and/or social identities.

Materials

- Paper and pencil
- Modeling or air-dry clay. You may also create your own clay following these instructions:
  - Pour one cup of all-purpose flour and ½ a cup of salt into a mixing bowl and stir gently with a spoon.
  - Add ½ cup of water and stir with the spoon until all three ingredients combine.
  - Use your hands to continue mixing the ingredients until they are smooth.
  - Optional: add a brushful of acrylic or watercolor paint. Use your hands to mix in the paint until it spreads across the clay
- Materials for adding texture, including fabric, paper or lace scraps, yarns or threads, buttons, beads, shells, or stones as available materials
- Glue
- Small objects, photographs, or images that symbolize different aspects of your identity
- Optional:
  - human or pet hair you can collect from furniture, combs, or brushes
Making

1. Start by using paper and drawing media to sketch ideas for your hybrid creature, incorporating animal, human, plant, or mechanical components.
2. Write down attributes or aspects of your identity you would like to represent. Draw symbols or search around the house or online for symbols, small objects, mementos, or artifacts. Symbols might include a flag from your country of origin or affiliation, foods you like to eat, music notes if you play music, and other symbols.
3. Make your own clay or use modeling or air-dry clay to sculpt the form.
4. If you collected sand or soil and would like to incorporate these, consider folding and rolling them into the clay before you start sculpting, or smearing them on the clay surface while it’s wet or still pliable.
5. Consider how to add symbols and materials to your sculpture. While the clay is wet, use a pencil point to carve symbols into the surface, and/or press small objects onto the surface, smearing the clay around them to secure them. Use glue to attach hair, buttons, beads, and other materials, or paper cut outs of symbols.
6. Give your sculpture one last look and decide if it needs added color, texture, or symbols.

REFLECTION

- What elements did you combine to create your hybrid creature?
- How is your creature unique or different from existing plants, animals, people, and machines?
- Show your hybrid figure to a friend or family member. Can they identify the different plant, animal, machine, or human elements you incorporated?
- How does your sculpture represent you or your identity? What kinds of symbols, colors, images, and textures did you choose to represent yourself?
- Where does your creature live? Consider adding to your sculpture by creating the figure’s habitat or environment.