
MEMORY CAPSULE

Artist and musician Terry Adkins (1953–2014), whose work is included in “**Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America**,” used found materials, sometimes collected from junkyards, to create sculptures and installations. Among the objects he collected are memory jugs – an African-American folk tradition of commemorative objects found on some graves in the American South throughout the mid-20th century – designed to honor the deceased. The jugs were decorated with buttons, charms, pieces of shells, and other materials representing the deceased. The ritual is said to have originated in Central African Bakongo culture, brought to this country by people who were enslaved. Adkins grew up seeing a memory jug in his grandmother’s home in Upperville, Virginia, and began collecting and caring for other memory jugs in the mid-1990s. He photographed them with an X-ray machine, creating ghost-like images that bring attention and care to the deceased person by spotlighting objects that tell a story of how the person lived and who they were. Adkins’s rituals of attention and care through collecting and photographing memory jugs are particularly poignant amidst a history of violent erasures of Black lives.

“...I take the things that society considers useless and throws away, and give them a new life by recreating and recombining them into works of art.”

– **Terry Adkins: Resounding Audio Tour, Pulitzer Arts Foundation**

To learn more about Adkin’s process of seeing spiritual potential in found materials and history, and to hear his music, you can **watch** or **listen** to recordings of him.

KEY WORDS AND PHRASES

- **memory jug**: a vessel decorated with objects representing a deceased person, including buttons, shells, charms, and other objects, which is ritually placed on their grave. Memory jugs were made primarily by African Americans in parts of the American South through the mid-20th century. This ritual of memorialization is thought to have originated in Central African Bakongo culture, and to be passed down in this country from enslaved people to subsequent generations.
- **ritual**: a spiritual and/or religious ceremony consisting of actions done in

a prescribed order. Sometimes people think about rituals in non-religious ways. For instance, a bedtime ritual might be reading a story, and a graduation ceremony at school might be considered a community ritual. We might share our own rituals while we learn about rituals that are new to us, be inspired to create new rituals, and respect that rituals have different meanings for people based on their experiences, histories, beliefs, and cultures.

- **discarded:** unwanted or thrown away



START WITH ART: TERRY ADKINS

- What shapes do you notice inside the memory jugs? What objects do you see?
- How do these photographs, which are of x-rays, look different from photographs you're used to seeing?
- Describe the way the objects look in the x-ray pictures. Does the effect create a mood or feeling?

Let's build on Adkins' use of **memory jugs** and **discarded** materials to inspire us and make a memory capsule honoring a special person or occasion with

recycled materials found at home.

LOOK AROUND

- Is there an occasion, event, or person you would like to celebrate or honor? This can include a friend or relative who is far away or who has passed away, or a birthday, holiday, graduation, or other special event.
- Do you have recycled plastic or glass containers or bottles?
- Do you have objects or materials at home relating to your memory of the special occasion or person?

MAKE ART

Let's create a memory capsule by attaching objects honoring a person or event onto a recycled container.

Materials

- Plastic or glass recycled container one can see through
- Elmer's glue, or other wet glue
- Scissors
- Objects related to memories of a person or event, including photographs, buttons, charms, ticket stubs, letters, photographs, and other small objects. Ask an adult if it's okay to glue them to a container.
- *Optional:* paper and pencil. If there are objects you want to include, but don't want to damage or affix to your container with glue, consider tracing them on paper or cardboard and cutting out their shapes instead. Use a collection of silhouettes or drawings of photographs to show the meaningful items.

Making

1. Identify an occasion or person to honor, and find photographs, small objects and mementos relating to the event or person. Objects might include invitations to a party, small party favors, ticket stubs to a venue, buttons, small pieces of ribbon and other small objects.
2. Find a glass or plastic container, ideally one you can see through, to decorate with the objects.
3. You can put a thin layer of glue over the outside of the container, and then place objects on top. You might need to hold the objects in place for a minute so that they stick.
4. Objects included in traditional memory jugs were often broken to release the spirit of the deceased loved one. If you have paper photographs, tickets, notes, shells, or other mementoes that can be cut or made into smaller pieces, consider if you want to change them in a way that is meaningful to you before gluing them.
5. *Don't cut or glue anything you want to keep intact, including objects you*

might still use. See another option under the “Materials” section, above, if you do not want to alter the objects.

6. Place your memory capsule in a spot where you can see it every day. You might also put it where your family members can see it.

REFLECTION

- How did you select an occasion or person to honor?
- Did your search for objects to commemorate the person or event spark new memories?
- Can you share memories and stories about the objects you included in the jug?
- Does seeing your memory capsule every day remind you of the occasion or person?
- What other rituals might you create to honor a loved one or special event?

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MUSEUM

IMAGES: “Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America,” 2021. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. Photo: Dario Lasagni (Featuring work by Terry Adkins)

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