

Nature in Art

On Friday, September 20, 2019, three days before the United Nations Climate Action Summit in New York, hundreds of thousands of young people and adults around the world rose up to demand that their political representatives take immediate and meaningful action to mitigate climate change and safeguard the planet for future generations. While the enormity of the climate crisis can feel overwhelming, it is important that we do our part to encourage students' curiosity about, emotional connection to, and stewardship of nature. Experiences in nature can promote a greater sense of well-being in students, and can lead to higher levels of achievement.

Encouraging environmental stewardship is important, and many teachers already engage students in recycling, resource conservation, and anti-littering activities. Experiences in nature are also crucial for fostering students' ability to care for the environment. Over fifty studies show that such experiences help learners create emotional connections to nature and develop pro-environmental behavior.¹ In addition, nature may promote learning by improving students' attention, levels of stress, self-discipline, interest and enjoyment in learning, and physical activity. As might be suspected, nature also seems to provide a calmer, quieter, safer context for learning.²

Art supports students' ability to meaningfully connect to nature and encourages interdisciplinary associations that deepen understanding and engagement. For centuries, artists have encouraged viewers to relate to nature in a positive way by creating artwork that celebrates many of the qualities we most love about it: its beauty, complexity, vastness, harmony, balance, and serenity. Artists

spark a new interest in the environment for students and help them make connections between content areas.

The artworks in focus demonstrate different ways of relating to nature. American artist Robert Irwin's *Primal Palm Garden*—an outdoor installation of over one hundred trees, cycads, and ferns on LACMA's campus—is a wonderful example of how we can engage with art and nature in a similar manner to promote well-being: by slowing down, looking closely, and noticing details. Irwin is interested in changing our perceptions so we see something in a new way. He hopes that viewers will appreciate a shadow on the grass or the sunlight on a tree trunk, for example, as art.

Like Irwin, Chinese artist Liang Shaoji directly incorporates nature into his artwork. His *Nature Series* foregrounds the productive power of silkworms to illuminate their artistry and our interconnectedness with nature. *Chains: The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Nature Series No. 79* consists of a series of large chains hanging from the ceiling, wrapped in raw silk. Seeing the cocoons and the raw silk can inspire curiosity about the life cycles of silkworms: what do they eat? How long do they live? How do they spin silk?

American photographer Thomas Joshua Cooper's project *The World's Edge—The Atlas of Emptiness and Extremity* embraces curiosity and bravery in approaching nature, and demonstrates how nature can represent our sense of the unknown, both out there in the beyond and within ourselves. Cooper's project involved retracing parts of sixteenth-century Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan's voyage in order to recreate the feeling of stepping beyond the limits of the known world. Like Liang's silk-wrapped chains, Cooper's photographs hint at the ways in which we are intimately connected to nature.

1 Ming Kuo, Michael Barnes, and Catherine Jordan, "Do Experiences With Nature Promote Learning? Converging Evidence of a Cause-and-Effect Relationship," *Frontiers in Psychology*, February 19, 2019, accessed October 1, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00305>.
2 Ibid.

American artist Robert Rauschenberg created his poster *Earth Day* in direct response to the catastrophic 1969 oil spill off the coast of California, near Santa Barbara. The spill is credited with igniting the modern environmental movement and leading to the creation of Earth Day, which first took place on April 22, 1970, to protest environmental degradation. Rauschenberg made *Earth Day* to raise money for the American Environment Foundation. The poster demonstrates how individual action can become part of something larger to raise public awareness, and it continues to be a strong reminder today of our individual and collective responsibility to protect the environment.

Addressing today's environmental challenges requires that we strengthen our bond with nature. This doesn't have to entail a backpacking trip or an escape from Los Angeles; instead, it can involve making sure recess is dedicated to outdoor play, observing and developing an interest in the animal and plant life around us, encouraging curiosity and question-asking, and conducting small-scale investigations. Teachers can use the aforementioned nature artworks in the classroom to inspire connections to a wide variety of content areas, including science, natural history, language arts, history-social science, and geography. Conversation about one or more of the artworks may simply begin with slowing down, looking closely, and pointing out details. Connections to other content areas will often arise naturally and through student initiative.

Speaking about her artwork, American painter Georgia O'Keeffe once commented, "when you take a flower in your hand and really look at it, it's your world for the moment. I want to give that world to someone else. Most people in the city rush around so, they have no time to look at a flower. I want them to see it whether they want to or not." Reaping the benefits of nature, and learning to care for it, can go hand in hand with meaningful art experiences. Artists show us different ways of relating to nature, helping us understand our place in the world—and just how dependent we are on the planet that sustains us.

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Primal Palm Garden, 2010 **Robert Irwin**

“One must make an optic, one must see nature as no one has seen it before.”

—Paul Cézanne¹

American artist Robert Irwin’s *Primal Palm Garden*, comprising 150 different palms, cycads, and tree ferns, is an integral part of LACMA’s campus. Created in response to the museum’s architecture, the neighboring La Brea Tar Pits, and the city of Los Angeles, the artwork causes visitors to perceive nature in a fresh, new way.

Los Angeles–based artist Robert Irwin began his career in the 1950s as a painter involved in Abstract Expressionism on the West Coast. In the late 1960s, he was a founder of Light and Space, a Southern California–based art movement that explored the viewer’s experience of sensory phenomena, especially light, volume, and scale. From then on, Irwin created art whose main focus was the act of perception itself.

Many of Irwin’s artworks are paintings and sculptures, yet others are large indoor and outdoor installations that move beyond the limitations of frames and break down the distinction between art and the rest of the world. Irwin wants viewers to be able to approach both art and the world in a direct way, with open perspectives free from prejudice. He hopes viewers will appreciate a shadow on the grass or the light on a tree trunk, for example, as art.

Irwin’s garden spreads out along the west side of the LACMA campus. A grid of palms is interspersed among Auguste Rodin’s sculptures in the B. Gerald Cantor Sculpture Garden. Rows of palms, cycads, and ferns flank the Kendall Concourse, a narrow covered walkway that runs between the Broad Contemporary Art Museum (BCAM) building and the Resnick Pavilion. Dwarf palmettos and Mexican blue palms, among other varieties, run along the eastern walls

of both buildings, and a grid of date palms welcomes visitors at the 6th Street entrance.

The palms on campus form a relationship with the palms lining Wilshire Boulevard, and the ancient varieties engage in conversation with the Tar Pits and the site’s primordial past. The connection to the palm tree as an icon of Los Angeles cannot be overlooked either, though none of these associations is as important to the artist as viewers’ direct perception. The garden addresses visitors who are already prepared for an aesthetic experience at the museum and invites them to turn their heightened senses toward it.

According to Irwin, viewers are responsible for their own pleasurable experience of this complex, ever-changing artwork. Each plant is grouped with others of its kind, making it easier to focus closely on one type at a time and experience its unique responses to shifts in light, wind, and temperature. Viewers’ ability to forget habit and directly perceive the work will allow them to see nature anew, through the lenses of light and shadow, movement and stasis, contrast and similarity, and texture and line, among others.

Discussion Prompts

1. Go outside and find a plant you like. Study it the way you would a work of art, using the elements of art: line, shape, space, value, form, texture, and color. You can also practice looking at the plant using the principles of design: balance, rhythm, pattern, emphasis, contrast, unity, and movement.
2. Irwin worked with landscape architect Paul Comstock to create *Primal Palm Garden*. What are some things you would take into account if you created an artwork using live plants?

¹ Quoted in Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book By Artists and Critics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 13.



Robert Irwin, *Primal Palm Garden*, 2010, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Kelly and Robert Day Garden (Sl.2010.1), photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

Chains: The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Nature Series No. 79, 2002–7
Liang Shaoji

In his *Nature Series*, Chinese artist Liang Shaoji works with live silkworms to highlight their creative power. Liang’s artwork inspires reflection on our interconnectedness with nature and its role in our shared cultural history.

Liang was born in Shanghai in 1945. He studied at a professional art school before the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), then worked in a textile factory that made fabrics and tapestries. After seeing contemporary art in museums abroad, he decided he wanted to become an artist, and so, at age forty, he went back to school. His interest in textiles grew when he worked in the tapestry studio of Bulgarian artist Marin Varbanov (1932–1989), who considered tapestry “soft sculpture.”

Under Varbanov’s influence, Liang began to experiment with incorporating silkworms into his artwork around 1989. First, he spent time learning about silkworms—he even slept on the ground beneath them to observe how they spun silk—and practicing sericulture. Sericulture is the art of cultivating mulberry leaves (what silkworms eat), tending silkworms, and gathering threads from the worms’ cocoons. Legend has it that sericulture started in China around 3000 BCE, after a silkworm’s cocoon fell into the teacup of Empress Leizu and she had the idea to weave with the fibers.

Chains: The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Nature Series No. 79 consists of seven giant lengths of brown chain suspended from the ceiling, enveloped by layers of raw white silk in varying thicknesses. On closer inspection, one might notice small cocoons among the layers and observe the chains twisting and turning ever so slightly in the air. The silk and the chains—one nature-made and the other human-made—have very different textures. The silk is smooth and shiny, refracting the gallery lights. And even though the chains are hollow—they are made of

heavy, rough, and rusty.

Liang’s artwork can be interpreted in many different ways. By incorporating cocoons and raw silk, without altering them, Liang shows that he views silkworms as his collaborators and equals. The artwork’s silk wrapping (a natural material) is tightly bound to the chain framework (a human-made object), further representing our interconnectedness with nature. The infinity symbol appears in this artwork as well: all silkworms spin their fiber in figure-eight shapes and the chains themselves resemble figure eights. Perhaps Liang is suggesting that nature is infinite. In 1994, he wrote about *Nature Series*, proclaiming, “I can’t stop creating new artworks like the continuous and endless nature.”¹

Discussion Prompts

1. How do you think it would feel to walk underneath *Chains: The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Nature Series No. 79*? What questions would you like to ask Liang Shaoji about his artwork?
2. Research the life cycle of a silkworm and create an artwork that illustrates it.
3. What role have silkworms played in Chinese history? In global history?
4. Who is the artist of *Chains: The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Nature Series No. 79*? Liang Shaoji, the silkworms, or both? Write an argument that includes claims, counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.

¹ Liang Shaoji, “Liang Shaoji: About Nature Series,” *ShanghART*, accessed September 20, 2019, <https://www.shanghartgallery.com/galleryarchive/texts/id/54>.



Installation photograph, featuring Liang Shaoji's *Chains: The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Nature Series No. 79, 2002-2007*, in the exhibition *The Allure of Matter: Material Art from China* (Jun 2, 2019–Jan 5, 2020), Los Angeles County Museum of Art, courtesy of the artist and ShanghART Gallery, © Liang Shaoji



The artist Liang Shaoji in the studio, featuring *Chains: The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Nature Series No. 79, 2002-2007*, © Liang Shaoji, photo courtesy ShanghART Gallery

The World's Edge, Remembering Magellan—The North Atlantic Ocean, Five Capes, Cabo da Roca, Lisbon, Portugal, the West-Most Point of Continental Europe, 1994
Thomas Joshua Cooper

For the last thirty-two years, American photographer Thomas Joshua Cooper has circumnavigated the Atlantic Basin, photographing the most extreme points of land in Europe, Africa, South America, the Arctic, and Antarctica. Called *The World's Edge—The Atlas of Emptiness and Extremity*, Cooper's project is partially inspired by the global circumnavigation of sixteenth-century Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan.

By retracing parts of Magellan's voyage, Cooper attempts to recreate the feeling of stepping beyond the limits of the known world. How did Magellan feel when standing at the edge of the "Old World," uncertain of what lay beyond? How, when, and where do we—five hundred years later—experience the feeling of reaching an edge, an extremity? And what do we do once we're there? Cooper's work probes these questions.

Cooper's artistic process is laborious. Not only does he travel extreme distances to remote locations, he also carries a heavy large-format camera—an 1898 Agfa—and a tripod with him. Arriving at his destination, he sets up his shots and then waits, sometimes more than an hour, before releasing the shutter. Cooper makes only one photograph at each location.

The artist's titles usually function as cartographic and historical signposts. *The World's Edge, Remembering Magellan—The North Atlantic Ocean, Five Capes, Cabo da Roca, Lisbon, Portugal, the West-Most Point of Continental Europe* is one such example. The specificity of the title contrasts with the somewhat nondescript vista Cooper represents. In the image foreground, white surf and mist swirl around rocks protruding from the water. Farther out, soft gray tones characterize the calmer, sheet-like water, a

lighter patch on the left indicating the direction of the sun.

Cooper made a number of careful decisions when creating this photograph. For example, we cannot see a horizon line or the land beneath the artist's feet. Instead, we are free to float above the great expanse of water and reflect, perhaps, on the unknown, emptiness, or human history. Similarly, the thick mist partially obscuring the rocks—the result of a long exposure—might invite closer looking, and what appears to be a boat in the left middle ground emphasizes the ocean's vastness.

The World's Edge—The Atlas of Emptiness and Extremity tests Cooper's personal limits and touches on the historical events that laid the groundwork for today's interconnected globe. Perhaps most significantly, the project shows how nature—especially the remote edges of continents meeting the ocean—can represent our sense of the unknown, both out there in the beyond and within ourselves.

Discussion Prompts

1. Do you have a special connection to a specific place in nature? Write a descriptive journal entry about this place, how it makes you feel, and why it makes you feel that way.
2. Cooper has photographed many sites that will either melt or be underwater soon due to climate change. How does this change your impression of his project?
3. Cooper adopts the perspective of sixteenth-century Europeans in *The World's Edge—The Atlas of Emptiness and Extremity*. What are some other perspectives on European exploration and its aftermath, and how do they differ?



Thomas Joshua Cooper, *The World's Edge, Remembering Magellan—The North Atlantic Ocean, Five Capes, Cabo da Roca, Lisboa, Portugal, the West-Most Point of Continental Europe*, 1994, selenium- and gold-toned chlorobromide gelatin silver print, 43 x 50 7/8 in., Collection Lannan Foundation, © Thomas Joshua Cooper, photo courtesy of the artist

Earth Day, 1970 **Robert Rauschenberg**

American artist Robert Rauschenberg designed his poster *Earth Day* in 1970 to benefit the American Environment Foundation in Washington, DC, and raise awareness about environmental pollution. The poster continues to be a strong reminder today of our individual and collective responsibility to protect the environment.

Robert Rauschenberg is primarily known for his “Combines” of the 1950s, which are painting-sculpture hybrids that can either hang on the wall or stand upright. Often incorporating found objects and imagery, the Combines reflect Rauschenberg’s belief that “painting relates to both art and life.”¹ The artist also practiced photography and printmaking throughout his career, and supported a wide range of social causes.

Rauschenberg designed *Earth Day* in response to a massive oil spill that occurred in the Santa Barbara Channel in January and February 1969. The result of a blowout on an offshore oil platform, it was the largest oil spill in the United States at the time, releasing three million gallons of oil into the ocean and creating a thirty-five-mile-wide oil slick that killed countless wild animals.

Senator Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin, a strong environmental advocate, flew over the area in early 1969. Viewing the huge oil slick from the windows of his plane, he was struck by the idea of having a nationwide teach-in about conservation and environmental issues. Later named Earth Day by advertising copywriter Julian Koenig, the inaugural teach-in took place on April 22, 1970. Twenty million Americans participated in the first Earth Day, which sparked the modern environmental movement and is now annually observed in nearly two hundred countries.

An image of a bald eagle, likely torn from a nature magazine, dominates the poster, symbolically centering the United States as both agent and victim in the ongoing global environmental crisis. The national bird, a then-endangered species due to the pesticide DDT, is surrounded by newspaper and magazine images depicting contaminated waters, junkyards, polluted cities, landscapes barren of trees and cut through by roads, and a gorilla (another endangered animal). White letters, also torn from magazines, spell out “Earth Day” along the bottom of the image.

The juxtaposition of grainy, grim images with the proud, erect eagle—a stand-in for the American people as a whole—demonstrates just how high the stakes are and urges viewers to take action. Rauschenberg believed in taking individual responsibility for environmental welfare: “I try to use my art to communicate that you, yourself, must take responsibility for life on earth,” he said.² *Earth Day* is one of many posters Rauschenberg created to raise funds for social causes that were important to him. In 1990, the artist founded the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation and made caring for the environment central to its mission.

Discussion Prompts

1. How do you think Rauschenberg made *Earth Day*? Describe his step-by-step process as you imagine it.
2. What messages does Rauschenberg’s poster communicate about Earth Day and its goals?

¹ “Overview: Life and Art,” Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, accessed October 1, 2019, <https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/artist>.

² Mary Lynn Kotz, “Art; Rauschenberg’s Tour de Force,” *New York Times*, May 3, 1987, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/05/03/arts/art-rauschenberg-s-tour-de-force.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.



Robert Rauschenberg, Gemini G.E.L., LLC, *Earth Day*, 1970, 47 of 50, color lithograph with chine collé on Rives paper, sheet: 52 1/4 x 37 1/4 in., image: 49 x 35 1/2 in., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of the Sidney and Diana Avery Trust (M.80.241.6), © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation and Gemini G.E.L.

Resources

Books for Students and Teachers

The Allure of Matter: Material Art from China

Edited by Wu Hung and Orianna Cacchione
Exhibition catalogue discussing twenty-five artists who work with unconventional materials, including Liang Shaoji.

Last Child in the Woods

Richard Louv
This book argues that exposure to nature is essential for healthy childhood development and for the physical and emotional health of children and adults. Grades 9 and up

Nature and Selected Essays

Ralph Waldo Emerson
In his essays, nineteenth-century writer Ralph Waldo Emerson calls for harmony with, rather than domestication of, nature. Grades 8 and up

One Plastic Bag: Isatou Ceesay and the Recycling Women of the Gambia

Miranda Paul, illustrated by Elizabeth Zunon
This inspirational true story shows how one person's actions can make a difference in our world. Grades K-4

Robert Irwin: A Conditional Art

Matthew Simms
This book introduces Irwin's work and his long-standing interest in perception. Grades 9 and up

Silent Spring

Rachel Carson
Published in 1962, Rachel Carson's seminal environmental science book documents the negative environmental effects of pesticides.

The Tree Lady: The True Story of How One Tree-Loving Woman Changed a City Forever

H. Joseph Hopkins, illustrated by Jill McElmurry
This moving picture book tells how Katherine Olivia Sessions started a tree-planting movement in San Diego. Grades K-2

Walden

Henry David Thoreau
Thoreau reflects on the more than two years he spent living in a cabin he built near Walden Pond in Massachusetts in the mid-nineteenth century. Grades 8 and up

Online Resources

“How an Oil Spill 50 Years Ago Inspired the First Earth Day”

Smithsonian
This illustrated article details the 1969 oil spill and how it gave rise to Earth Day.
<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/how-oil-spill-50-years-ago-inspired-first-earth-day-180972007/>

Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

The Robert Rauschenberg Foundation fosters the legacy of Rauschenberg's life and work.
<https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/>

“Six Ways Nature Helps Children Learn”

Greater Good Magazine
This article argues that spending time in nature helps kids do better in school.
https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/six_ways_nature_helps_children_learn

“Teaching the Environment”

Harvard University
Highlights five approaches to environmental education for teachers.
<https://green.harvard.edu/tools-resources/research-highlight/teaching-environment>

“Whole Child: Developing Mind, Body and Spirit through Outdoor Play”

National Wildlife Federation
A comprehensive report on the benefits of nature for children, reviewed for accuracy by medical professionals.
https://www.nwf.org/~media/PDFs/Be%20Out%20There/BeOutThere_WholeChild_V2.ashx

Classroom Activity

Sketching Shadows

Essential Question How can we create a work of art based on our observations of shapes, lines, light, and shadows in the natural environment?

Grades K–8

Time One class period, plus time prior to gather natural materials

Art Concepts Shape, line, form, shadow, light, abstraction, composition, representation, texture

Materials Found natural materials (leaves, small twigs, flowers), recycled glass jars (one per student or pair), flashlights or music stand clip on lights, 9" x 12" watercolor paper, ebony drawing pencils, watercolor paints and brushes, water cups, paper towels

Note: This project could also be done with regular white drawing paper, colored paper, chalk pastels, oil pastels, and colored pencils.

Talking About Art American artist Robert Irwin's *Primal Palm Garden*, comprised of 150 different palms, cycads, and tree ferns, is an integral part of LACMA's campus. Created in response to the museum's architecture, the neighboring La Brea Tar Pits, and the city of Los Angeles, the artwork causes visitors to perceive nature in a fresh, new way.

Look closely at one of the palm trees in Irwin's garden just as you would look at a sculpture or a painting. What do you notice? What shapes do you see? How would you describe the textures of the trunk compared to the leaves?

Irwin uses nature to create works of art. Why do you think he used the word "primal" in the title? Irwin has said, "Palms are like cockroaches. They were here long before us, and they'll be here long after us. They're the only things standing after a hurricane." His use of 'primal' plant varieties also connects to the nearby La Brea Tar Pits and the Ice Age fossils discovered there.

Choose one area of the garden to focus on. What do you notice about the plants as a group? How are they arranged? How are they similar to each other? How are they different?

Irwin chose to group together each plant type with others of its kind, making it easier to focus on the qualities of each type and their responses to changes in light, wind, and temperature. Irwin is fascinated by these environmental conditions because they continually change how we see the world around us. Look at the way the light shines on these trees. Where do you see light and where do you see shadow? What shapes do the shadows cast? Is the wind moving the plant or is it still? How does the wind affect the shadows?

Irwin hopes viewers will appreciate a shadow on the grass or the light on a tree trunk as they would a work of art. The artist has said, "There's no palette as rich as a garden. And the intensity of it."

Making Art Collect a variety of natural materials that are small enough to fit in a glass jar. Focus on small leaves, twigs, and flowers that have interesting shapes.

Making Art (cont.)

First, place one or two leaves, twigs, or flowers into your jar. Next, place the jar on one corner of a piece of drawing paper.

Then, place or hold your light source behind your jar so that a shadow is cast onto your paper. Move the light around and observe how the shapes of the shadows change. Once you are happy with the shapes on your paper, use a pencil to trace the outlines of the shadows. Try shading parts of the shadows with the side of your pencil.

Next, you can choose a new leaf or flower, or change the position of the current one and repeat the previous steps. Add color to your artwork by tracing some of the shadows using watercolor paint and a brush. Notice how the colors change as the light hits different parts of the plant. A petal might look bright pink in the light or dark purple in the shadows. Mix more water with the paint to get lighter shades and less water for darker shades. Add the shapes of the shadows until you are happy with the composition.

Look closely at the textures on your leaf, twig, or flower. Experiment by adding pencil lines to your drawing to represent the textures of a smooth leaf, soft petal, or bumpy twig. Press lightly on your pencil to create soft lines, or firmly to create darker, stronger lines. You could use dots, dashes, or zig zags to represent a rough or bumpy texture.

Modifications for 5–8 Grades

In addition to collecting natural materials, students can use aluminum wire to create a representation of forms they see in nature. They can then use their wire sculptures to cast shadows along with collected natural forms.

Reflection

Share your artwork with a partner. What is similar or different between your two artworks? What choices did each of you make and why? Share what you noticed with the whole class.

Optional Follow-up Activity for 5–8 Grade Students

What are some of the ways that humans interact with nature in everyday life? Consider Robert Irwin's idea of looking at nature in a new way. If you could change the way that people engage with nature, what would you change and why? Write down or sketch your ideas.

Curriculum Connections

California Arts Standards for Visual Arts. K-2

K. CR1.1 Engage in exploration and imaginative play with various arts materials. 1. CR1.2 Use observation and investigation in preparation for making a work of art. 2. CR3 Discuss and reflect with peers about choices made in creating artwork.

California Arts Standards for Visual Arts 3-8

6.VA:Cr2.1 Demonstrate openness in trying new ideas, materials, methods, and approaches in making works of art and design. 7.VA:Re7.1 Explain how the method of display, the location, and the experience of an artwork influence how it is perceived and valued. 3.VA:Cn10 Develop a work of art based on observations of surroundings.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy. Speaking and Listening. Language.

K-2.6. Use words and phrases acquired through conversation. 3.6. Acquire and use accurately grade-appropriate conversational, general academic, and domain-specific words and phrases, including those that signal spatial and temporal relationships.

Classroom Activity

Weaving Flipbooks

Essential Question How can we find stories in visual art, and discover new meanings and ideas along the way?

Grades K–12

Time 1–2 class periods

Art Concepts Narrative, animation, flipbook, perspective, imagination, rhythm, time, setting, symbols

Materials Pencils, colored pencils, sheets of 4" x 3" white paper, cut and stapled into flipbooks. Each flipbook should have 12 separate pages, stapled together on one of the 3" sides. Post-it notepads and index cards also work well!

Talking About Art We're going to spend some time with this unique sculpture, *Chains: The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Nature Series No. 79 (2002–2007)*, created by artist Liang Shaoji. What do you see? What materials do you see? What do the shapes mean to you? What do you make of the display and installation, the overall "shape" of the piece here in the museum space?

Shaoji worked in a textile factory early in his adult life, and returned to his love for fine art in his forties. He began making tapestries with his mentor, a Bulgarian artist named Marin Varbanov who considered tapestry "soft sculpture." Shaoji became increasingly interested in silkworms, who are essentially the first step for much of the textiles and tapestries that made up his work. He began observing silkworms, sleeping underneath their cocoons, and practicing sericulture, a practice dating back to China in 3000 BCE, in which humans cultivate mulberry leaves for silkworms to eat, gather silk from their cocoons, then boil the cocoons and process them into the silk we use for textiles.

In this piece, we might say that Shaoji collaborated with his silkworms, presenting a counterpoint between the heavy, rough metal chains and the soft, light silk that enshrouds them. One material is human-made, the other completely from nature. We can also note from the title of the piece that this is number 79 in his *Nature Series*—in 1994, Shaoji wrote about the series, stating "Nowadays, our era is a complicated era. In this era of sharp competition, people both want to follow the social steps of high-speed changing and to free them from the fast rhythm of life for returning to nature [...] It is the "Nature Series" that casts all my feelings."

Before we transition to our own artwork, let's discuss *Chains* a bit further. How does this background into Shaoji's life influence your understanding of the piece? What do you make of Shaoji's work with silkworms, and presenting work with these diverse materials? What stories do you see in these chains?

Making Art Using *Chains: The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and our discussion as a starting point, we are each going to create a flipbook that brings a related story to life. Flipbooks are a simple, hospitable step toward animation, comics, and even filmmaking.

1. Think about a simple story that came up in our discussion, or in your imagination as you take in this piece. Determine a main character, an action for them to do,

Making Art (cont.)

and a suggestion of the setting. To get our ideas flowing, we might consider the life cycle of a silkworm, or the collaboration between the artist and his silkworms.

2. We'll draw this story over 12 illustrations, or "frames," to borrow a term from film and animation. Your skill as an illustrator isn't very important: even stick figures (or stick worms) are fine. We're more interested in the story, and planning it out across 12 frames. Draw your first frame.
3. Next, draw each frame afterward. Every movement should be very small, so that when we "play it back" at the end, we'll see smooth movement rather than big jumps that might feel confusing.
 - a. It's helpful to check your frames as you go; you'll get a sense of how clear your movement is, and if you should make smaller adjustments on the next set of frames.
4. When you're finished, find a partner who has also finished. Exchange flipbooks and enjoy each other's stories.

Reflection

Share your flipbook with several people around you. What did you admire about some of your classmates' flipbooks? What did you find surprising about the other stories? What did you learn about the artwork through creating these flipbooks? If you had more time, how would you expand or revise your flipbook story?

Curriculum Connections

This activity could be reshaped to fit a variety of learning goals in your class, including story structure, visual art principles, and more. The flipbooks could also be produced collaboratively, either in pairs or as an entire class, with each student adding one frame to a collaborative flipbook.

California Arts Standards for Visual Arts

VA:Cr2.1 Artists and designers experiment with forms, structures, materials, concepts, media, and art-making approaches. VA:Cr2.3 People create and interact with objects, places, and design that define, shape, enhance, and empower their lives. VA:Cr6 Objects, artifacts, and artworks collected, preserved, or presented either by artists, museums, or other venues communicate meaning and a record of social, cultural, and political experiences resulting in the cultivating of appreciation and understanding. VA:Cr11 People develop ideas and understandings of society, culture, and history through their interactions with an analysis of art.

Classroom Activity Art for the Earth

- Essential Question** How can our actions make a positive impact on the environment?
- Grades** 6–9
- Time** 1–2 class periods
- Art Concepts** Collage, upcycling (creative reuse), juxtaposition, contrast, background, foreground, composition
- Materials** Sketch paper, pencils, 6” x 9” white cardstock, 9” x 12” black paper frame, *National Geographic* magazine pages, recycled textured and patterned paper, construction paper, scissors, glue sticks, markers or colored pencils
- Talking About Art** View and discuss Robert Rauschenberg’s *Earth Day* (1970). What do you notice? What messages does Rauschenberg’s poster communicate about Earth Day and its goals? How do you think Rauschenberg made *Earth Day*? Describe his step-by-step process as you imagine it.

Rauschenberg designed *Earth Day* in response to a massive oil spill that occurred in the Santa Barbara Channel in January and February 1969. It was the largest oil spill in the United States at the time, releasing three million gallons of oil into the ocean and killing countless wild animals. Rauschenberg hoped his poster would raise awareness about environmental pollution and remind people of their individual and collective responsibility to protect the environment.

Wisconsin Senator Gaylord Nelson, a strong environmental advocate, flew over the area in early 1969. Viewing the huge oil slick from the windows of his plane, he was struck by the idea of having a nationwide teach-in about conservation and environmental issues. The inaugural teach-in took place on April 22, 1970, with twenty million Americans participating. Earth Day sparked the modern environmental movement and is now annually observed in nearly two hundred countries.

Rauschenberg believed in taking individual responsibility for environmental welfare: “I try to use my art to communicate that you, yourself, must take responsibility for life on earth.”

Brainstorm: How do our actions impact the environment? As a class, make a list of environmental issues. Next, generate a list of actions that could be taken to help repair environmental damage. Finally, describe the desired outcome of each action.

Environmental Concerns	Helpful Actions	Desired Outcome/Hope for the Future
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plastic in the ocean is harmful to sea creatures • Air pollution • Tourists damage the desert wildflowers by going off trail 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stop single use plastic • Clean up beach litter • Use public transportation • Stay on marked trails 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clean ocean and healthy animals • Fresh air without pollution • Beautiful super blooms for future generations to enjoy

Making Art

You will identify an environmental issue from the class discussion and create a collage that juxtaposes two or more images to depict the environmental concern, a helpful action we can take to combat the concern, and a desired future outcome. Use the lists you created during the brainstorming session to help you get started. For further inspiration, visit <https://350.org/support-climate-strikes/> to learn more about the Youth Climate Strike organized by Swedish activist Greta Thunberg.

Posters are powerful tools for communication and persuasion. A strong design uses art to attract and engage people while delivering a clear message. Our posters must convince viewers that their actions can impact the earth in either negative or positive ways, and educate on how small changes in behavior can lead to beneficial outcomes. Juxtaposition is one strategy for persuasion that contrasts two or more things. For example, contrasting environmental concerns with the foreseeable results of taking action can help persuade people to combat climate change and protect the environment.

Sketch: Imagine the landscape that is impacted by your environmental concern and consider how you could juxtapose images to communicate your message.

Collage:

1. Using recycled magazine images of nature and landscapes, select 1-2 images to create a background. Found images should be altered in some way (cropped, ripped, folded, etc.) so that the artist's intention is visible.
2. Consider how you connect the background and foreground of your collage: larger shapes will appear closer to the viewer and smaller shapes will appear farther away. How will you lead the viewer's eye with your composition?
3. Use construction paper, textured and patterned papers (upcycled if possible!) to add details to the collage.
4. Lay out your composition and glue when satisfied.

Text:

1. Add a clear and concise message to complete your poster. What do you want viewers to think about? How do you want people to change? Why does this issue matter and what are the consequences of failing to act? What is your hope for the future?
2. Adhere final work to 9" x 12" black paper frame for a polished finish.

Reflection

Participate in a gallery walk and share your work with the class. Are the posters persuasive? What could make them even more persuasive? What small changes might you make to combat climate change? How can we spread this message to others?

Media Arts Extension

Students can use Adobe Spark or another free graphic design program to replicate their poster. As a class, compare and contrast the handmade and digital versions and strategize about how to spread the word to your school and community.

Curriculum Connections

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.8.5 Integrate multimedia and visual displays into presentations to clarify information, strengthen claims and evidence, and add interest.

California Arts Standards for Visual Arts

7.VA:Cr1.2 Develop criteria to guide making a work of art or design to meet an identified goal. 6.VA:Cn10 Generate a collection of ideas reflecting current interests and concerns that could be investigated in artmaking. 7.VA:Cr2.3 Apply visual organiza-

tional strategies to design and produce a work of art, design, or media that clearly communicates information or ideas. 6.VA:Re7.2 Analyze ways that visual components and cultural associations suggested by images influence ideas, emotions, and actions.

Images



Classroom Activity Beyond the Lines

Essential Question	How can we deepen our experience of art and nature through seeing, writing, and drawing?
Grades	6–12
Time	Two class periods
Art Concepts	Photography, subject, composition, value, perspective, viewfinder, mood
Materials	3" x 5" index cards, 6" x 6" white card stock, drawing pencils, rulers, erasers, X-Acto knife, black and white nature photos from magazines or printouts, scotch tape
Talking About Art	<p>View the photograph, <i>The World's Edge, Remembering Magellan—The North Atlantic Ocean, Five Capes, Cabo da Roca, Lisboa, Portugal, the West-Most Point of Continental Europe</i> (1994).</p> <p>Thomas Joshua Cooper is a photographer who documents extreme environments along the farthest edges of the Atlantic Basin. His inspirations include poets and explorers whose encounters with nature range from intimate impressions to historic voyages. The title references the sixteenth-century Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan, who led the first expedition to successfully circumnavigate the globe. During his own, often harrowing travels by air, sea, and land, Cooper carries a heavy, large format camera and photographs his isolated sites in a single exposure so that only one image serves to document each remote location. He purposely excludes the horizon line in his photographs, leaving us to only imagine what lies beyond the edge, both visually and psychologically.</p> <p>Is there a place you've been where you have a connection to nature? If so, how would you describe this connection? What, in your opinion, might be the difference between "looking" and "experiencing" when it comes to nature? How might this compare to looking at and experiencing art?</p>
Making Art	<p>I.</p> <p>Look closely at <i>The World's Edge, Remembering Magellan—The North Atlantic Ocean, Five Capes, Cabo da Roca, Lisboa, Portugal, the West-Most Point of Continental Europe</i>. What area is your eye drawn to? The subject in art is considered the main idea or point of interest. In nature, this may be a feature that stands out within the setting. What, in your opinion, do you think is the subject of this scene? Consider the composition by reflecting on how the visual elements are arranged within the edges of the photograph. What do the different shades of light and dark, or values, tell you about the time of day?</p> <p>Look closer to investigate the details. Create a viewfinder, or "cropping frame," by forming two Ls with your fingers to make a small open window to peer through. Scan the photograph by using your viewfinder like the zoom lens of a camera. Develop your own composition within the setting by moving your viewfinder across the surface of the picture and honing in on the visual details. Keep scanning until you find a composition that most appeals to you. Take a mental picture and share your thoughts and observations as a group.</p>

Making Art (cont.)

II.

For this next exercise, we will use writing as a tool to help enhance our “experience” of the art. Look again at Cooper’s photograph. Picture yourself at this location. Consider the journey to get here and how you might have reached this place. What is your point of view, or **perspective**? How does the setting make you feel? Consider the overall **mood**, or feeling, of the place.

Cooper refers to this series of photographs as “The World’s Edge” perhaps as a metaphor for what lies beyond what we can physically see. A metaphor is a figure of speech that imaginatively draws a comparison between two different things. Ex: *The rocky cliff is a stairway to the sky*. Can you think of any metaphors that you could use to describe the scene you see here?

Use these writing prompts to help guide your viewing and contemplation of the artwork:

- What time of day is it and where are you? *It is morning. I am at sea.*
- What is the subject you see? *I see the ocean surf.*
- Describe the subject using two adjectives. *It is misty and white.*
- Describe the action/s you see. *It is rising and swirling.*
- What does the subject make you think of/imagine? *I think a cold wisp of breath.*
- Describe the action you think of/imagine. *It is dancing in circles.*
- Now consider the overall mood, or how it feels to be in this place. *I feel lost and free.*

Look over your description and reflect on the imagery and mood you’ve expressed in writing.

It is morning. I am at sea. I see the ocean surf. It is misty and white. It is rising and swirling. I think a cold wisp of breath. It is dancing in circles. I feel lost and free.

Now, we will transform this description into a poem.

Cross out all the words such as *It is, I see, I am, I think, and I feel*.

~~It is~~ morning. ~~I am~~ at sea. ~~I see~~ the ocean surf. ~~It is~~ misty and white. ~~It is~~ rising and swirling. ~~I think~~ a cold wisp of breath. ~~It is~~ dancing in circles. ~~I feel~~ lost and free.

Then, using the first line as your title, rewrite the text line by line to create your poem.

Morning at Sea

Ocean surf

Misty and white

Rising and swirling

A cold wisp of breath

Dancing in circles

Lost and free

In what ways did these two exercises help deepen your viewing and contemplation of the art?

Making Art (cont.)

III.

To begin the artmaking portion of the project, select a black and white photograph of a scene in nature from either a magazine or printout. Notice the different shades of lights and darks, or **values**, in the photograph.

On the blank side of a 3"x 5" index card, create a value scale in pencil from dark to light to practice shading. To get the darkest values, press hard. As you move towards the right, lighten the pressure of the pencil until it nearly matches the white of the paper.



Next, we will be using a 6" x 6" sheet of white cardstock, another index card, and a ruler. Place the index card on the top half of the paper, leaving about a half inch border around the edge. Trace the outer edge in pencil to make a rectangle. Then, slide the index card to the bottom half of the paper. Align the top edge of the card with the bottom line of the rectangle. Use the lines on the index card to make small guide marks in pencil on the larger piece of paper. Put the index card aside and use a ruler to lightly pencil in the lines from mark to mark.



We will now make a paper viewfinder. We will use the same index card, an X-Acto knife (or scissors), a ruler, and pencil. In the center of the blank side of the index card, measure a 1.5" x 2.5" rectangle. These dimensions are proportional to the 3" x 5" dimensions of the rectangle you drew on your paper. Cut out your rectangle to form a window to look through.

Scan an area within the photograph that stands out to you using the viewfinder. Try to find an area that shows at least three values (light, medium, and dark) and that emphasizes a subject you find interesting. Once you find a composition you like, tape down your viewfinder to secure it in place for sketching. Begin to sketch what you see by scaling up the composition on your paper. Start by lightly penciling in the lines and shapes you see. Then shade in your values, using pressure, to create a contrasting range of light and dark.



Making Art (cont.)

Reflect on your drawing by using the writing prompts above. On the lined side of the index card that you used for your value scale, respond to each prompt.

Finally, you will transform your writing into a short poem to accompany your drawing. To create the poem, begin by blacking out all the words such as *I see, It is, I think, I feel*, etc in your description (refer to the example above). Then, use the first line as your title and write your poem beneath your drawing. To complete the artwork, trace over your words in fine-tip black sharpie and erase the pencil lines.

*It is night and I'm on a cliff.
I see a jagged peak.
It is tall and glistening.
It is rising above the sea.
I think of an ancient statue.
It is guarding the night.
I feel alone.*

~~It is~~ night ~~I'm on a~~ cliff.
~~I see~~ a jagged peak.
~~It is~~ tall and glistening.
~~It is~~ rising above the sea.
~~I think of~~ an ancient statue.
~~It is~~ guarding the night.
~~I feel~~ alone.



Reflection

Gather the artwork and poems together and view them as a series. What would this series be called? As an extension, scan the artwork into a computer and compile the pages into an art/poetry book. This could be printed using a variety of online book printing services or printed and bound together by hand in the classroom.

Curriculum Connections

CCSS.ELA- LITERACY.W.8.3.D Use precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory language to capture the action and convey experiences and events. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.2.D Use precise language, domain-specific vocabulary, and techniques such as metaphor, simile, and analogy to manage the complexity of the topic. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.11-12.5 Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

California Arts Standards for Visual Arts.3-12

8.Va:Cr2.3 Select, organize, and design images and words to make visually clear and compelling presentations. 7.VA:Re8 Interpret art by analyzing art-making approaches, the characteristics of form and structure, relevant contextual information, subject matter, and use of media to identify ideas and mood conveyed. 8.VA:RE7.2 Compare and contrast contexts and media in which viewers encounter images that influence ideas, emotions, and actions.