

A Woven Collective:

Transformative Practices Through Contemporary Art

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Recommended for grades 9-12

This Instructional Resource outlines an approach for art educators to engage their students with contemporary art through examining the works of two artists whose art is transformative, challenging us to connect and respond to the context of time and space in unique ways. Also in this IR are guiding questions and a suggested activity where students engage with all artistic processes to create art that is highly contextual, transformative, and wholly contemporary.

Learning Goals

Students will be able to:

- Respond to works by artists L. Mylott Manning and Beverly Semmes, interpreting intent and meaning through discussion about the artists' unconventional choice of materials, the resulting forms and the time and spaces they occupy.
- Connect with the terminology and key concepts associated with the elements of art and principles of design—texture, color, movement, direction, emphasis or exaggeration, scale, tension, and space—in discussion, critiques, and written assignments.
- Create an art form using weaving materials and techniques that symbolize one's experiences inspired by personal observations, associations, and memories.
- Present final artworks as an installation, collaborating on the selection and placement of the art forms in an exhibition space.



L. Mylott Manning, *Kiss the Dark (Dress of Watches)*, 2013. Photograph.

When first encountering contemporary art, the viewer is confronted with particular challenges—the works can be both surprising in application of materials and provocative in presentation. Contemporary art can confound its audience as they attempt to decode and interpret its meaning. As Arthur Danto (1997) suggests, contemporary art is to be “stared at, but not primarily looked at” (p. 16). In fact, contemporary art frequently stops us in our tracks, leaving us in the gaze to uncover its purpose.

Featured Artists

The artworks presented here date from 1994 to 2013. Though some works are older, they are contemporary, having been created by living artists of the 21st century (Art21, 2014).

L. Mylott Manning

Manning's work integrates sculpture and fashion through performance. She studied at Rhode Island School of Design, receiving a BFA in Sculpture; and holds an MFA in Interdisciplinary Arts from Vermont College of Fine Arts. Manning has also studied at Pont Aven, School of Contemporary Art in France. Recent projects and exhibitions include: Push it, Art Now NY, New York, NY; Fibers & Threads, sponsored by Coats, The Carlton Hotel, New York, NY; Art Inside, Baur au Lac, Zurich, Switzerland; Group Suit: A Day in the Park, presented by New York City Parks & Recreation, Dag Hammarskjold Plaza,

United Nations Headquarters, New York, NY; and 700 Spools of Thread (Keep it Together) chashama, supported by the National Endowment for the Arts, New York, NY.

Manning's performances invite her audience in by allowing them to walk through the space as she performs. At times, her audience walks away with the art she creates. Manning's interpretative acts are based on memory associations and feelings about the spaces in which she performs. The art she creates during the performances is uncomplicated, distinctly feminine,



L. Mylott Manning, *Perennial Passage b*, 2009. Photograph. Performance, Montpelier, VT.

L. Mylott Manning, *Perennial Passage c*, 2009. Photograph. Performance, Montpelier, VT.

“We assign meaning to our memories, then turn them into something different over time...”





L. Mylott Manning, *Perennial Passage a*, 2009. Photograph. Performance, Montpelier, VT.

and expressively abstract. Manning's performances are held in public places: parks, streets, buildings, and galleries.

"My experience as a Costume Designer also contributes to my wearable art. The found objects included in my wearable pieces range from watches, clothespins, pieces of chalk, and even solar-power toys." (Arte Fuse, 2014, para 9). Manning's goal is "to empower the viewer to think critically and to build a stronger sense of self-identity" (para. 12).

***Perennial Passage* (performance art). Montpelier, VT. August 3-8, 2009.** This 6-day process-based performance began with a clothesline and a pile of cast-off clothing. Wearing a garment made of 2,000 wooden clothespins, Manning tore the clothing into fragments. The color, style, and texture of each fragment sparked a memory or association from which Manning used to paint images on the cloth. These "memory drawings" were hung to dry on a nearby clothesline using the clothespins from her dress and deconstructing the piece as part of the performance.

As Manning moved, the pins from her wooden dress knocked gently, adding a soothing auditory element to her process. The dress functioned as a practical means for storing many clothespins and served in its scale and form as a symbol of a bygone era when women wore housedresses and toiled with daily chores. The weight of the garment was lifted with the removal of each clothespin used to hang a memory drawing. This act could be interpreted as the spirit being lifted with the sense of accomplishment in completing a daily task. With this performance, Manning recalls the early feminist art project



Womanhouse (1972), which explored the daily tasks and rituals of women.

From another perspective, with the hanging of each memory drawing, Manning released herself from her own storehouse of memories, turning them into art and revealing them to her audience as they walked through the paths she created with the clotheslines. As the week progressed, the clotheslines sagged as if to cave into the weight of Manning's accumulated memories. Manning explains, "We assign meaning to our memories, then turn them into something different over time, layering them with emotion, embellishing or diminishing them" (L. Mylott Manning, personal communication, January 27, 2011).

L. Mylott Manning, *Perennial Passage d*, 2009. Photograph. Performance, Montpelier, VT.

Kiss the Dark (Dress of Watches), 2013, Cortlandt Alley, NY, was created for *Chronos/Éclat International Magazine* using more than 100 vintage and contemporary watch pieces. In an interview with *Arte Fuse* (2014), Manning explained:

There is a lot of mystery in time. You have to embrace it and accept the unknowns. This helps to move forward in life with confidence. A timepiece relays a form of structure. Each hour indicates a different responsibility, for example, getting to work on time, or having a meeting. (para. 5)

Manning set each watch to a different time, creating a degree of erraticism and tension.

L. Mylott Manning, *Kiss the Dark (Dress of Watches)*, 2013. Photograph. New York's Cortlandt Alley.



Beverly Semmes

Born in Washington, DC, and now residing in New York City, Semmes has a long list of exhibitions: the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC; Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, OH; The Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, PA; and most recently, Susan Inglett Gallery in New York, NY. Her work is found in many public collections (Semmes, 2014).

Semmes' career began in the early 1990s, soon after receiving an MFA from Yale School of Art in 1987. Early works include performances, film, and photographs often depicting a figure in a landscape and dressed in outfits of pink feather coats, oversized "cloud" hats, and purple velvet bathrobes. The figure is indeed a focus—the unusual clothing (pink feather coat) or accessories (hedge and cloud hats) tell us so, while the materials used to make the clothing suggest that the figures are an essential part of their surroundings, emphasizing Semmes' interest in the landscape.

In other works, Semmes appears to flip the context from outfitting figures in a landscape to the clothing itself. Clothing flows uncharacteristically long, pooling into puddles of fabric, billowing organza, gold lamé, or saturated velvet, performing through Semmes' overindulgent and sensational use of fabric. Olga Viso, executive director of the Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis, MN, describes Semmes' art forms: "Narrative is implicit in Semmes' independent fabric sculptures... which may be said to 'perform' in their own right; they imply motion, tension, and direction via their scale and placement within an architectural space" (Viso, 1996, p. 3). The audience is left to gaze upon these sizable forms, moving beyond the association with women's apparel to sculptural forms with personalities all their own, discovered through Semmes' choice of fabric. Perhaps we can perceive of these forms as monumental vessels, the female metaphor of the Feminist Art movement. Although Semmes' began her career at the end of this movement, she moves this ideology into the present day with a minimalist sensibility through a body of work that reinvents and renews the feminist dialogue.



Beverly Semmes, *Cornelia Walking through the Formal Garden in the Pink Feather Coat and Hedge Hat #1*, 1998. C-print, edition of 5; paper 10 by 8 in., image 4³/₈ by 3 in. Collection of the artist, courtesy of Susan Inglett Gallery, New York.



Beverly Semmes, *Rhonda, Lavonda, Yolanda, Chiffonda*, 1995. Organza and crushed velvet, 31'3" by 22' overall; each work 31'3" high by 4' wide, Collection of the Progressive Corporation, courtesy of the artist and Susan Inglett Gallery, New York.

Beverly Semmes, *Buried Treasure*, 1994.
Velvet. Dimensions variable.
Courtesy: Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC.

Guiding Questions

Reflection on the works of each artist might include the following questions:

- Why do you think the artists found a basis for their art in the form of a garment? How do their approaches differ (e.g., in materials and presentation)? What, if any, similarities exist between the two artists? Why might you describe their work as feminine?
- What is the significance of the wooden clothespin dress in *Perennial Passage*? What is the significance of the watches used to make the dress Ms. Manning used in *Kiss the Dark*? If you were to make a garment using unconventional objects, what would you choose and why?
- Why do you think Ms. Manning performs her art rather than creating singular artworks for display? What might this level of engagement do for the audience and for her? Do you perform what you wear? Explain.
- What relationships do you think Ms. Semmes is trying to build in her use of color, texture, and the exaggerated lengths of these garments? How would you describe the fabrics she uses? Why do you think Ms. Semmes' forms take up as much of the surrounding space as they do? Is it important that they do?
- Compare and contrast *Wild Child* and *Buried Treasure*. Why do you think Ms. Semmes chose these titles, and how do the titles relate to the materials used in creating them? What do these forms communicate to you?
- In what way does each artist make use of movement, direction, emphasis or exaggeration, and scale? How does the artist create tension?
- After our discussion, did you change your opinion about the artworks? How does your first impression differ from what you think now? Or does it? Explain.



A Woven Collective

The art activity that follows involved high school art students. With a focus on textile and weaving, students were able to explore the use of color and texture, and experiment with length, scale, direction/movement, and emphasis/exaggeration in some of the same ways our featured artists did. The context students chose to work from was based on recent Challenge Day¹ assemblies. They wanted to make a class piece that spoke to the feelings that remained from this emotionally charged event about harassment, intimidation, and bullying. They wanted their final exhibition to be a *collective* where they could voice a common concern against Harassment, Intimidation, and Bullying (HIB) in their school.

A woven art form was also chosen because backstrap looms are inexpensive and easy to make. Prior to learning how to weave, students were given a little background history. The backstrap loom, used for centuries by the women of Mesoamerica and the Andes, results in elaborate wool and cotton textiles depicting animals, plants, and figures from this culture's oral history. The textiles had both practical and ritualistic purposes, seen in everyday clothing and the designs of sacred cloths, expressive of a given community's beliefs and its social organization (Shevill, Berlo, & Dwyer, 1996). Backstrap looms may be of different sizes, depending on the weavers' goals, and they can be easily constructed from wooden sticks. The looms are transportable, allowing for work anywhere, anytime. The weaver becomes part of the loom by using a waist or cinch belt, while the far end of the loom is fastened to a stable structure, such as a

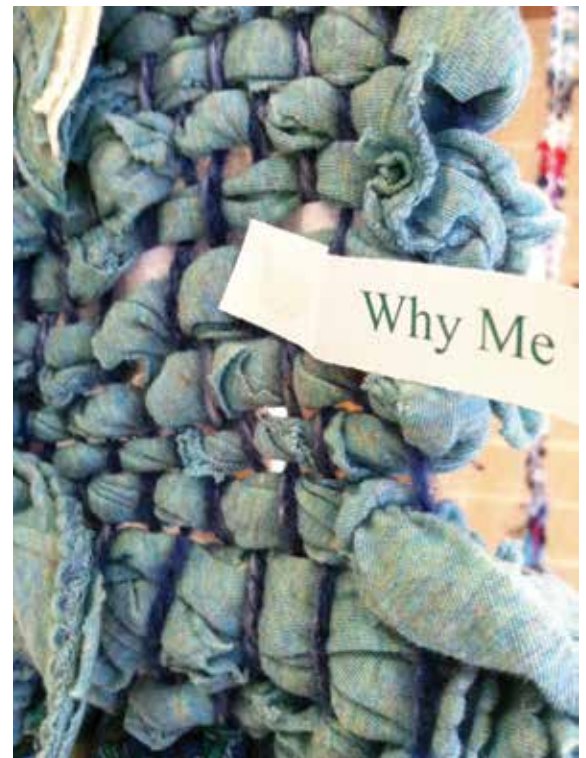


Beverly Semmes, *Wild Child*, 2009. Cotton, velvet, chiffon, faux fur. 75 by 92 by 68 in.
Courtesy: Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC.

tree or post; the weaver controls the tension of the warp threads by leaning back ("Backstrap Looms," n.d., para. 10).

Students built their own loom and heddle, assisting each other in pairs. They learned the vocabulary of weaving through the process of construction. They cut lengths of yarn to create their warp and to further their understanding of how weavings are made.² In preparation, students brought in old clothing such as tee-shirts, jeans, or skirts—anything that reminded them of people and important moments in their lives. As Manning had done in *Perennial Passage*, students tore clothing into long strips and combined them with colored yarns, threads, and ribbons tied end to end to use as the weft.

Students were prompted to think about how Manning used recycled clothing to elicit associations and memories of people, places, and things; and how each of Semmes' forms can be interpreted as having a personality based on the colored and textured fabrics she used. Students considered their feelings stirred by the types of clothing they brought in. We examined the qualities of denim, cotton, organza, silk, and polyester in terms of significant memories or experiences in their lives. Touching the materials led to descriptions such as stiff, soft, scratchy, and plush; associating these textures with experiences from Challenge Day helped students make decisions about what to use when making their woven forms to express their feelings or convey an idea.



TOP:
Jane Graziano, 2011. Photograph, Student Weaving.

BOTTOM:
Jane Graziano, *Why me?*, 2011. Photograph, Student Weaving, 2011.

While weaving, students anchored one end of their loom onto a hook or doorknob, or through some other stable means, so the weaving could be made quite long; as they worked, they rolled up the bottom of the weaving to maintain tension. Recalling Semmes' elongated forms, students were encouraged to think how length and scale could serve to expand their works in unpredictable and expressive ways. Some chose to add written statements and quotes about their Challenge Day experiences on ribbons that they wove through the form, partially hidden from view, while others boldly pinned written statements onto the surface of the forms.

For the exhibition, students made decisions about how to display their forms based on how they wanted to steer the "gaze" of their audience. Further, by hanging their works as a collective, they learned negotiation and collaboration. Using tall ceiling spaces allowed for length and enabled the longer forms to pool onto the floor below, similar to Semmes' pieces.

Assessment

The learning outcomes regarding student responses to the artists' works were assessed through teacher-led discussion. Students were initially skeptical about whether Manning and Semmes' works were art. When encouraged to examine the particulars, they showed interest at the artists' choice of materials by pointing out that Manning's performance would lead her to use up all her clothespins so the dress would eventually disappear, and that time would run out for the watch dress made for *Kiss the Dark*. While in discussion about Semmes' forms, students questioned the practicality of clothing that was made too long; but again, the fabrics sparked more in-depth conversations about Semmes' use of rich materials. The titles of Semmes' pieces helped students interpret and infer meaning by making connections with her choice of colors, textures, exaggerations, and sheer scale, and the physical spaces they occupied.

Other assessments included written self-reflections and a final class critique that examined students' forms similarly to the way in which we looked at the artists' works with a focus on the message/feelings they wanted to convey expressed through the use of color, textures, emphasis/exaggeration, direction/movement, scale, and space. This critique was conducted in the exhibition space to allow the students to talk about the context of their work personally and as a whole, and to participate in the transformative possibilities offered by the process and in examination of the final pieces.

Conclusion

The contemporary artworks of L. Mylott Manning and Beverly Semmes provoke us to reconsider the familiar. Through their art, they challenge us to shift our perspective about time, space, and the feminine—Manning's housedress and the chore of its weight eventually lessened by task and time and the watch dress burdened by schedules and managed time; Semmes' richly adorned and textured forms, apparel-like but stretched long and pooling to the floor, filling in the spaces they inhabit but creating new spaces in the process. Both artists invite their audience to *partake in* as well as *partake of* their art. Introducing students to contemporary art engages them with a narrative in a modern sense and can shepherd them into different kinds of engagement that can be profoundly unpredictable, highly interpretative, and transformative.

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ARTIST WEBSITES

- L. Mylott Manning: <http://mylottmanning.com>
 Beverly Semmes: <http://beverlysemmesstudio.com>

ENDNOTES

- Challenge Day is a non-profit program offering schools (grades 7-12) and community organizations workshops that assist young people in understanding what is meant by healthy self-expression. Through activities that promote empathy and community connectedness, counselors move students beyond traditional-type anti-bullying practices by giving them opportunities to practice compassion for their peers—opportunities that foster positive lifestyle skills for themselves and for living with others ("Challenge Day," n.d., Challenge Day Program, para. 1. 4).
- For resources to build a backstrap loom see:
 - <http://bobs crafts.com/bobstuff/backstrp.htm>
 - www.snomnh.ou.edu/collections-research/cr-sub/ethnology/mayan/Technology/Backstrap.html
 - <http://weavezine.com/content/backstrap-basics>