

Teaching *Crafting a Tale of Ecology*

Overview

Students will take notes and make sketches (for later discussion) while viewing the Preston Singletary segment in the NATURE episode. After a class discussion of the video, students will use the worksheet *Ecology of Art Materials* to research qualities of some of the art materials they use every day. Later, during studio time, students will use the worksheet *Crafting a Tale of Ecology* to rewrite a traditional tale and create a diorama to represent the tale.

(Video and Discussion: (two 45 minute class periods)

Before Viewing

Introduce the scope of the lesson to students, sharing the key concepts, critical questions, and objectives. Post or print the following questions for students to answer as they take notes during viewing. Allow students to work in teams so they can cooperatively gather the information as the video plays. They will be listening and looking for the following:

- How does Singletary describe his position as an artist?
- Why does he work in glass?
- What is a curator?
- What does storytelling provide for the Tlingit people?
- What is "bounded space?"
- Is each piece of the show an artwork on its own? What does studio assistant Joseph Benvenuto say about the pieces?
- How important is the environment to the artist and the curator? To the Tlingit people?
- What are the jobs of Singletary's studio production team?
- What is the story of Raven and The Box of Daylight?

After Viewing/Discussion

Begin a discussion of the video. Using students' notes, discuss the information they gathered about the listed categories. Following are discussion ideas and potential answers to the questions above.

- What did students find interesting?
- What questions do they have?
- How does Singletary describe his position as an artist?
Singletary considers himself a bridge, joining traditional Tlingit culture with new ways of sharing the stories and knowledge.

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- Why does he work in glass?
The artist notes that many traditional northwest materials are gone or in short supply. Introducing glass provides a new, plentiful material but also a new way of creating traditional art.
- What is a curator?
After entertaining guesses, have students look up this word in several sources. Curators may be responsible for planning art shows, acquiring art for institutions, deciding what to exhibit, and caring for artworks.
- What does storytelling provide for the Tlingit people?
Miranda Belarde-Lewis states that “Native storytellers are the best storytellers in the world because our stories carried knowledge...that was needed to survive...” Also, environmental knowledge was passed along through storytelling.
- What is “bounded space?”
Miranda Belarde-Lewis shares this definition from Apache philosopher Viola Cordova: “In Native American philosophy, bounded space is the natural environment one exists in; and the relationships one has with that space. Cordova believed this space affects everything about a person: their language, culture, spirituality, and their aesthetics (how they believe something should look, or their ideas of beauty.) What do students think of this philosophy?”
- Is each piece of the show an artwork on its own? What does studio assistant Joseph BenVenuto say about the pieces?
BenVenuto remarks that “One piece of his (Singletary’s) work is merely one line in a story.” This is a different view of art objects than the western view of each crafted object being precious in itself. This topic could be interesting to discuss with students. Have they ever crafted a piece that was part of a whole, and not complete in itself?
- How important is environment to the artist and the curator? To the Tlingit people?
Preston Singletary and Miranda Belarde-Lewis each comment on sustainability. For example, the preservation of natural species such as the cedar trees, used for canoes, baskets, and more was (and perhaps remains) essential to survival.
- What are the jobs of Singletary’s studio production team? Encourage students to describe how they see studio glassworking assistants Sean Albert and Joseph BenVenuto, master cutter Brittany Shanta, and sandblaster Terri Rau working.
- What is the story of Raven and The Box of Daylight? Have students tell the story. Ask them to look up versions of the story online. Does the story remind students of other stories they have heard? Discuss the term origin story and ask students to name other examples of origin stories.



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Studio Investigations

Worksheet: *The Ecology of Art Materials*

Have students research and share information in small groups. Then have students share as a whole. Each student is responsible for creating one information card (such as a large index card) about one material that can be posted on a bulletin board for the education of all.

Worksheet: *Crafting a Tale of Ecology*

This worksheet introduces the story and diorama project.

Studio Production

After using the worksheets, students should have ideas for stories they intend to rewrite and dioramas they can create. Story ideas could start with fairy tales, such as retelling *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* as Goldilocks wreaks havoc in the bear's environment. Students may have stories that already include an environmental component, such as from blockbuster disaster films or from comics. Have students write the story in their sketchbooks and embellish the tale with sketched ideas for their dioramas.

The diorama projects can vary according to students' ideas. Some students may have traditional crafts practiced in their family that can become part of the scene and add more meaning; for example, a knitted landscape. Students who camp, fish, hunt, or practice outdoor sports might want to include references to those family traditions in their story and their diorama.

To make a diorama, begin with a box set on its side to form a small "stage." Prime the box by covering it with paint, paper, or fabric inside and out. Set the scene: Like stagecraft, add a background, and flooring base. Position characters and props by gluing found or crafted pieces in place. Consider the outside of the box as well as offering several surfaces for further treatment and visual embellishing of the story.

Reflection

Encourage students to work with each other to curate a show of what they have produced. They can decide on whether the exhibit should be brief or extended, where it should be placed, how it should be arranged. Do they think there should be video or recordings to accompany the show? Singletary talks about stagecraft and theatrics as a way of telling stories. He mentions having the story told in the Tlingit language playing in the background of his show, adding a layer of ambiguity for those who do not speak the language, yet adding to the "authentic" experience of the northwest. Students may want to consider these ideas in their own show planning.

Assessment



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In discussions with the class and with individual students throughout the lesson; through students' writings and responses; and/or by reviewing the students' studio work, it should be evident that the student:

- Understands that connection to environment and place can be a theme for an artist's work.
- Researched the sustainability and ecological significance of their chosen art materials.
- Rewrote a traditional tale including an ecological metaphor and presented the story in a diorama.

Extensions

Glasswork: Setting up a lampworking studio in the classroom is not inexpensive but a possible option with fundraising. Lampworking allows students an experience sculpting small projects (such as beads) with molten glass.