

Teaching *Terese Agnew: Drawing with Thread*

“What I’m looking for is common ground with shared experiences with people.”
- Terese Agnew

Explain to students that the artist they featured in the video uses quilts as her medium. Share the following comment made by Terese Agnew: “Everybody has a quilt story. It’s about being loved and cared for, and I think that’s one of the things I’m trying to say with my work.” Based on what the artist has to say about quilts, ask students what they might expect to see. Watch Terese Agnew’s segment in the THREADS episode, craftinamerica.org/short/terese-agnew-segment

After Viewing & Discussion

Begin a discussion of Agnew’s work by asking for student reactions.

- Why does Agnew make quilts instead of making paintings? (She hopes the familiarity of quilts as blankets creates a connection with viewers.)
- Why does Agnew take so much time on her quilts? (She says she wants them to reflect the richness of the world. The detail and time could represent a caring for or honoring of her subject, as in *Portrait of a Textile Worker*.)
- For whom, and what, does Agnew express empathy? (Workers, and nature such as birds and forests.)
- How does she show this? (Perhaps in the time and attention she devotes to the work. Also through juxtaposition, such as the textile labels with the textile worker; the highways with the woods.)
- Encourage students to examine the many meanings and uses of perspective in Agnew’s work, including in composition (she combines different “views,” as in *Proposed Deep Pit Mine Site, Lynne Township, Wisconsin*), her own political perspective represented in the work (often she encourages empathy in others for the people or other life depicted in her work, she protests certain events, such as a deep pit mine and a road reconstruction) and the perspective of characters within the quilts, such as the visual perspective of the cedar waxwings and the factory laboring perspective of the textile workers.)
- How might Agnew’s work make a difference or help people? (Perhaps people seeing *Portrait of a Textile Worker* will question the treatment of textile workers, here and abroad. Maybe some viewers will appreciate nature and seek to protect it because of how effectively she combines beautiful images of nature with what can affect nature adversely. Also, posters of *Portrait of a Textile Worker* are sold to raise money for a workers’ rights organization.)
- Most of Agnew’s pieces have a conflict of interest represented. Can you identify the conflicts? (Textile workers’ treatment vs. profits. Parking lot vs. birds. Workers with pink slips against the parking lot of the business that laid them off. Highways vs. woods.)

Studio Production

Tell students they will be making a quilt that will express an idea. Discuss Agnew's comments about craft, and the idea that quilts connect to people because of their reference to warmth and nurturing. Present the idea that some students may want to focus on the historical situation of women who had no other socially approved ways of expressing their political ideas. Have them consider the question: Does this apply to any populations in the world today? This can lead to a discussion of the situation of women in various parts of the globe, or, on a local scale, the dialogue could turn to the rights of expression for people their own age. Show them the books and available online content for their research. Also, discuss whether they will use new or recycled fabrics, and how Agnew uses each (mostly new fabrics, but also the recycled labels) and why some quilts are made with recycled fabrics because of the limited resources people may have (or have had in the past.)

What's Your Perspective?

Using this worksheet, have students consider the multiple uses of perspective in Agnew's work, including as a compositional device, as a political view, and as a sight point of view from a particular place (such as the cedar waxwing's view of the lot.) Guide students to discuss ideas and to use the available books, newspapers, and online resources for research. Help students choose social issues that interest them, and to define their stance. This could involve discussions with individual students, or opening up discussion about certain topics to the entire class. Political topics encourage lively dialogue. Social issues may be small-scale and local, or large national issues. School issues are social and political issues as well, and students may want to look at their own school for ideas. One generative topic: what would you change about school? When they have an idea and are ready to draw it, encourage students to try different compositional views in their work. On the other hand, Agnew's quilts are extremely complex, and some students might like to work in a simpler format. Perhaps they will rely on larger shapes and symbols to create their sketch. This sheet will provide the start on a design for their quilt.

Your Designer Label: Creating Titles

This worksheet allows students practice with creating titles, and pushing titles to indicate meaning. Provide magazines and strips of paper for practice with inventing titles. Students can create titles

that are simply descriptive (which actually takes some time) and then move on to inventing titles that convey other meanings, whether they are humorous, ironic, evoking a mood, creatively descriptive, or purposely ambiguous.

Quilting

Have students practice painting techniques and formulations on fabric scraps. This is a good opportunity to understand the qualities of various paints. Tempera will crack and flake off if fabric is folded, but acrylic and watercolor remain pliable. Acrylic can be diluted to achieve



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watercolor like effects. Also, acrylic is fairly laundry-proof, so students can quilt a wearable item if they choose.

Agnew uses a sewing machine, and that can be a useful classroom tool that students can share. The machine can be used for quilting and/or machine embroidery. To make a quilted square, first the top layer of fabric is decorated, then pinned together, right side up, with the batting sandwiched between the top and backing layers. The sandwich is sewn through all layers, creating the dimpled, puffy, quilted appearance. Edges can be finished in different ways: turning in raw edges and sewing, overcasting, or applying binding strips of fabric.

To decorate the face, or top layer of the quilt, there are many options, which may be used alone or combined. Designs may be painted on the surface. When dry, painted designs may be outlined with stitching. Fabric shapes can be cut and sewn in place (appliqué). Designs can be embroidered by hand or machine. Agnew creates some quilts using fabric that sticks up from the surface, and students may want to try that.

Note: Quilts can be very small, just a patch size, or very large (see the AIDS quilt link). Smaller quilts may be more feasible depending on your allotted time with students, and the availability of materials. Keep in mind recycled fabrics from used clothing and linens are appropriate for this project and have a long tradition in quilt making. Consider the possibility of a group project, or allowing students who choose to do so to work together.

Agnew's quilts seek to engage the community, and Portrait of a Textile Worker relied on contributions from thousands of people, who became, in a sense, co-constructors of the piece. Community interaction can occur through displaying students' individually created pieces to engage the viewing public, or through students working together as a classroom community to create a quilt.

Reflection

Encourage students to examine how Agnew describes her work, and to consider how they will describe their work. Have students write an artist's statement to be displayed with their quilt. They may want to include details of interest, for example, if they used clothes with a family heritage, such a detail could add to their statement and to the appreciation of their work. Student quilts and these artist statements can be displayed for the viewing of the rest of the school. However, to continue in Agnew's theme of engaging the public, perhaps the quilts can be displayed at a local library or community center to engage with a larger community.

Assessment

In discussions with the class and with individual students throughout the lesson; by examining the students' worksheets; and by witnessing the students' studio work, it should be evident that the students:

- Explain the work of Terese Agnew and her use of quilts as a medium for expressing political ideas.



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- Identify potential uses of perspective in a work of art.
- Create a meaningful title for a work of art.
- Create a stitched or painted textile piece to communicate a message or political idea.

Extensions

Students may examine the work of the following fiber artists on the Craft In America website.

- Quiltmaker Faith Ringgold also creates pictorial quilts that tell stories, craftinamerica.org/artist/faith-ringgold
- Lia Cook uses weaving, photography, painting and technology to craft intricate fiber pieces that rival the detail and intricacy in Agnew's work, craftinamerica.org/artist/lia-cook
- Janet Lipkin creates wearable art pieces of yarn, some of them inspired by traditional quilt designs, craftinamerica.org/artist/janet-lipkin