

Art & Ecology

Professional Development for Educators

Tuesday, April 5, 2016



Barbara Hepworth, (British, 1903-1975), *River Form*, 1965, Bronze, Gift of the Sydney and Walda Besthoff Foundation, 1998.134

Artists have explored environmental themes in their work throughout many centuries in many different styles. Whether documenting the existence of land after its disappearance like 17th century Dutch artist Marinus van Reymerswaele, integrating native materials like the Native Louisiana Chitimacha, or responding to natural or man-made disasters like Thornton Dial, ecology has been a source of both inspiration and distress. This workshop includes eleven works of art made between 1545 and 2013 and examines how artists have perceived changes within the environment and told those stories.

Educator Resources

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NOMA
New Orleans Museum of Art

List of Works

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Sebastiano Ricci (Italian, Venetian, 1659 – 1734) and Marco Ricci (Italian, Venetian, 1676 –1730), *Imaginary Scene with Ruins and Figures*, c. 1725, Oil on canvas, The Samuel H. Kress Collection, 61.85

Richard Clague (American, 1821 – 1873), *Batture Shanty*, 1870, Oil on canvas, Museum purchase through the Ella West Freeman Matching Fund, 71.3

Eugène Boudin (French, 1824 – 1898), *The Bridge at La Touques, Normandy*, 1891, Oil on canvas, Gift of Armand Hammer Foundation, 70.14

Chitimacha Peoples, *Plaited Storage Baskets*, c. 1920, split cane and natural dyes, Gift of Mercedes Whitecloud in memory of Dr. Thomas St. Germain Whitecloud, III, 97.94.a.b, 97.100, 97.101.a.b, 97.102, 97.104, 97.105

Barbara Hepworth, (British, 1903-1975), *River Form*, 1965, Bronze, Gift of the Sydney and Walda Besthoff Foundation, 1998.134

Lynda Benglis (American, b. 1941), *Wing*, 1970, Cast aluminum, Museum purchase with funds provided by The Helis Foundation, additional funds provided by the Freirson Art Purchase Fund, 2015.123

Thornton Dial (American, 1928 - 2015), *Ninth Ward*, 2011, Various media, Gift of Souls Grown Deep Foundation, 2014.38

Alexis Rockman (American, b. 1962), *Battle Royale*, 2011, Oil on wood, Museum purchase, The Diana Helis Henry Art Fund, The Helis Foundation, 2012.67

Will Ryman (American, b. 1969), *America*, 2013, Car parts, railroad parts, cotton, computer parts, corn, coal, bullets, arrowheads, chains, shackles, wood, exterior paint, Gift of Sydney and Walda Besthoff, 2013.8

**Marinus van Reymerswaele (Claeszoon),
Flemish (1495 – 1566), *The Lawyer's Office*,
1545, oil on wood, Ella West Freeman
Foundation Matching Fund, 70.7**

Paintings by masters of Northern Renaissance realism often recorded official contracts or acts, and *The Lawyer's Office* is a remarkable example of this practice. The papers pinned to the wall in the background of the painting tell us about a 1526 lawsuit begun in Reymerswaele on the North Sea by the heirs of a man who had purchased a salt refinery from another man. The buyer refused to make the initial payment, and a lawsuit was established by the heirs of the seller. By the time that the legal transactions ended in 1538, the property had been destroyed by storms, leaving only the lawyer to profit from the venture through his legal fees.



Marinus van Reymerswaele was known in his day as a painter of genre scenes and satire. This painting exemplifies both of these subjects, depicting a record of everyday life in a detailed and satirical style. The conniving lawyer appears well fed and is dressed luxuriously in his red velvet shirt and brown outer garment with a fur-lined collar. Next to him is his clerk who furiously jots down every word that is spoken. The man in the foreground on the far right empties his bag of its contents, probably all of his money in the world. His thin face tells us that he is poor and has had a difficult life and his clothes are simple and made of wool. The two figures in the background appear hopeful (on the left) and stunned (on the right). The artist tells the story of the legal transaction through costume, facial expression and body language.

QUESTIONS

How does the artist indicate that this painting is a document?

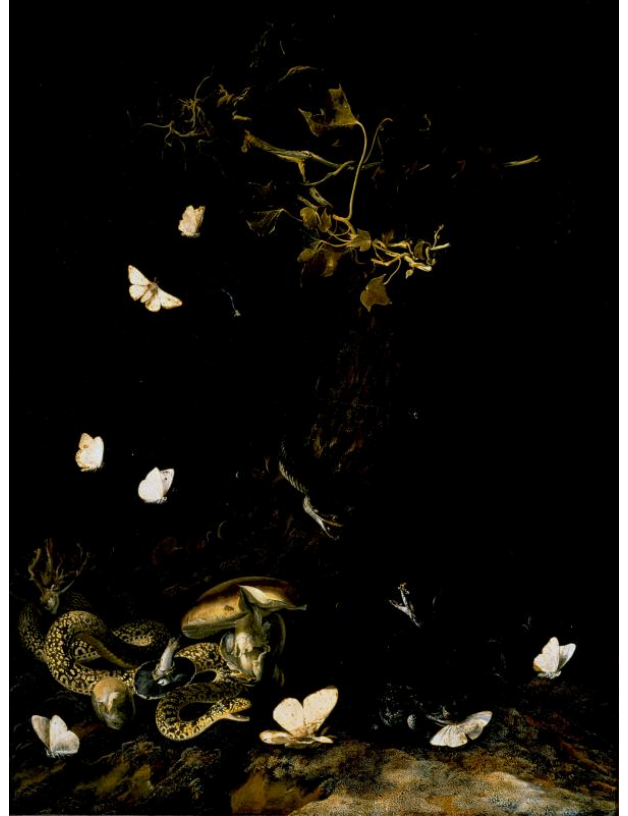
How was this family affected by environmental factors?

What in this painting indicates the passage of time?

**Otto Marseus van Schreick (Dutch, 1619 - 1678),
Serpents and Insects, 1647, Oil on canvas, 56.30**

Close view point, painstaking fidelity to reality, and unusual zoological subjects are the characteristic elements of Otto Marseus Van Schreick's somewhat bizarre imagery. The Dutch artist based his paintings upon the rare insects, frogs, lizards, and snakes that he collected and raised in a vivarium. He assembled the domesticated reptiles and amphibians in a manner similar to how still life painters choose objects, creating vignettes of living creatures. Eventually his snakes became so tame that the artist could position them with his stick and they would remain in place until he moved them.

The art market flourished at this time in the Netherlands as merchants and other middle class professions purchased art for their homes. Here, the animal grouping appears within a forest ecosystem engaged in activities that indicate relationships of predator and prey. This illustration of the brutality of the natural world conveys a *vanitas* theme that was common among Dutch artists and patrons of the 17th century. The reminder of the brevity of life reminded viewers of their place in the world.



QUESTIONS

What kind of ecosystem is represented here?

What are the relationships between the various animals included in the painting?

Sebastiano Ricci (Italian, Venetian, 1659 – 1734 and Marco Ricci (Italian, Venetian, 1676 – 1730), *Imaginary Scene with Ruins and Figures*, c. 1725, Oil on canvas, The Samuel H. Kress Collection, 61.85

The uncle and nephew team of Sebastiano Ricci and Marco Ricci often worked together on imaginary scenes of ruins referred to as capriccio. Sebastiano provided the groupings of figures that enliven the setting. His nephew Marco painted the pastiche of Roman buildings and was also known as a theatrical scenic painter. The combination of large scale sculpture, crumbling architecture, and small scale figures is unsettling. The relationship of the figures to each other and to the setting is unknown. We can speculate that the ravages of nature or of man have wreaked ruin on this place. Some of the monuments included in this piece are identifiable as actual Roman buildings, but seem to have been selected for visual interest rather than topographical accuracy. The pyramid of Caius Cestus is shown crumbling in the right background next to the Arch of Dolabella. The ruined building at right suggests the Temple of Antonius and Faustina.



QUESTIONS

In what ways does this painting reflect environmental concerns?

What man-made events might have happened here?

How did nature affect this place?

**Richard Clague (American, 1821 – 1873),
Batture Shanty, 1870, Oil on canvas, Museum
purchase through the Ella West Freeman
Matching Fund, 71.3**

Though born in Paris, Richard Clague's early life and artistic training were divided between France and New Orleans. The artist's father came to New Orleans around the time of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and became a prominent member of the community. Clague's father financially backed the Americans during the Battle of New Orleans and was a close friend of Andrew Jackson. In 1832 when his parents separated, Clague moved to Paris with his mother, a free woman of color. He studied art in Switzerland and the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris returning to New Orleans. In the United States Clague's style of naturalistic landscape painting was accepted and praised whereas at the Paris Salon landscapes were considered secondary to history painting.

Though Clague had many European influences, he is very much part of the American naturalistic landscape tradition. He was the first artist in Louisiana to understand in aesthetic terms the distinct character of the swamps, forests, and rivers of Louisiana. In *Batture Shanty* we see Clague's ability to characterize the atmosphere and geography he was painting. He depicts a way of life on the batture of which many in the U.S. and Europe were unaware. Clague's adaptation of the Barbizon artists' composition, style and technique to the representation of Louisiana resulted in a native landscape tradition.



QUESTIONS

How does the artist indicate atmosphere?

What would life be like in this house?

What plants and animals would you find here?

Eugène Boudin (French, 1824 – 1898), *The Bridge at La Touques, Normandy*, 1891, Oil on canvas, Gift of Armand Hammer Foundation, 70.14

Eugène Boudin was the son of a ferry boat captain who took passengers across the Seine River between Honfleur and Le Havre in the Normandy region of France. The area is an estuary where the Seine River meets the English Channel. As a young man, Boudin worked in a stationary and framing shop that his father opened in Le Havre. The shop was often frequented by painters, including Jean-François Millet, who encouraged young Boudin to take up painting. In Paris, he studied at the Louvre and established contact with painters of the Barbizon School.



Boudin was largely self-taught and preferred to work directly from nature. He was one of the first French painters to paint outdoors, and as a result he developed insight into the changing affects of light. The majority of his paintings are small landscapes of harbors and beaches of the coast of northern France. Around 1856, Boudin met Claude Monet, fifteen years his junior, and urged him to come to Honfleur to experience the light. Eventually Monet accepted the offer, and the two worked together in the 1860s painting outside, “en plein aire,” with portable paints and easels. Monet, the father of Impressionism, acknowledged the influence of Boudin and considered him a major influence.

QUESTIONS

What would be the benefits of painting outdoors?

What signs of human civilization can be found in this scene?

What do you think Boudin meant when he encouraged his friend Monet to come and experience the light?

Chitimacha Peoples, *Plaited Storage Baskets*, 1920, Split cane and natural dyes, Gift of Mercedes Whitecloud in memory of Dr. Thomas St. Germain Whitecloud, III, 97.94.a.b, 97.100, 97.101.a.b, 97.102, 97.104, 97.105

The Chitimacha Reservation is located in Charenton, Louisiana in St. Mary parish following the curve of Bayou Teche. Long before explorers entered the New World the Chitimacha Indians established settlements around the bayous of South Louisiana. From the earliest documentation, music, dance, ceremony, and crafts played important roles in every aspect of Chitimacha life.



The Chitimacha dedicated most of their efforts to agriculture, fishing, and the domestic arts. The women of the tribe wove cloth from native weeds and bark and made all of the objects necessary for daily life. The women's greatest skill was basket weaving. Cane was collected from the marshes and split by the women's teeth; it was then dyed and woven. The vivid yellows, reds, and blacks were woven into two layers creating intricate designs. These baskets were also capable of floating. The grouping of baskets in this image depicts various designs including fish scales, alligator entrails, blackbird eyes, cattle eyes, and worm tracks.

QUESTIONS

What are some other examples of objects made from natural materials?

What do you think the Chitimacha women used to dye the river cane?

What is the significance of the patterns in these baskets?

What do you recognize from the natural environment of Louisiana?

Barbara Hepworth, (British, 1903-1975), *River Form*, 1965, Bronze, Gift of the Sydney and Walda Besthoff Foundation, 1998.134



Dame Barbara Hepworth was born in Wakefield, Yorkshire, England and studied at the Leeds School of Art from 1921 to 1924 and then at the Royal College of Art from 1924-1925. One of Hepworth's classmates at both schools was Henry Moore, with whom she had a strong life-long friendship. Whereas Moore was interested primarily in the figure, Hepworth worked in a more abstract mode, drawing much of her inspiration from the sea. After the artist died tragically in a fire in her studio in St. Ives, The Barbara Hepworth Museum was opened at her Cornwall estate by the Tate Museum. Hepworth was very prolific during her lifetime, creating nearly 600 sculptures.

River Form reminds the viewer of a pebble that has been gently shaped by the currents of a churning river. The piece is a contemplation of water, space and the sky. The artist's interest in exploring the void and the interaction between positive and negative space is evident in the cutaway interior which gives the impression of having evolved over time. *River Form* interacts with the natural environment in a more obvious way as well. Rain water often collects in the hollow of the interior of the piece. The collected water then reflects the light entering from the voids recalling light filtered through leaves on a still pond

QUESTIONS

Describe the process that causes river rocks to become rounded.

Why do you think the artist allowed for water to collect inside this sculpture?

Lynda Benglis, (American, b. 1941), *Wing*, 1970, Cast aluminum, Museum purchase with funds provided by The Helis Foundation, Additional funds provided by the Frierson Art Purchase Fund, 2015.123

In the 1960s, Louisiana native Lynda Benglis startled the art world with her electric-hued pours of polyurethane and provocative video and performance work. Much of her art is simultaneously subtle and imposing, subdued and sensual, earthy and surreal. Benglis' art ran counter to the more austere minimalist aesthetic of much art of the time, especially minimalism. She created works she called "fallen paintings" by dripping and pouring industrial materials like latex and polyurethane directly on gallery floors or upon armatures installed on museum walls. *Wing*, a large scale aluminum sculpture cast from one of these poured pieces, extends dramatically out from the wall to enter into the space of the viewer, inviting us to explore, in her words, "the way we experience the world through the body."



Calling forth natural phenomena like erupting volcanoes and crashing waves, *Wing* foreshadowed a number of cantilevered outdoor fountains Benglis began creating in the early 1980s. The first of these, *The Wave of the World* was commissioned for the 1984 Louisiana World Exposition in New Orleans, recently restored and installed by City Park's Big Lake in front of NOMA.

QUESTIONS

In what ways does the 3-dimensionality of this work make it more engaging?

What do you think the artist meant to represent here?

How does the process of making this work speak to the nature of change and chance?

Thornton Dial (American, 1928 – 2015), *Ninth Ward*, 2011, Various media, Gift of Souls Grown Deep Foundation, 2014.38

Thornton Dial is a self-taught artist who grew up in rural Alabama. Inspired by a neighbor's found-object lawn sculptures, Dial began creating his own paintings and assemblages from discarded materials in the 1940s and 1950s. Although rooted in the American South, Dial's art addresses issues of global concern, from class and race to the war in Iraq, 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina. Dial's *Ninth Ward* is part of his larger *Disaster* series, which explores Hurricane Katrina, the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami in Japan, and the Texas drought as part of the same global environmental struggle.



Drawing inspiration from the rich aesthetic traditions of the black South and with no formal education, Dial has forged a major body of astoundingly original work. Influenced by the found-object displays of African American yard shows, his work incorporates salvaged objects—from plastic grave flowers and children's toys to carpet scraps and animal skeletons—to create highly charged assemblages that tackle a wide range of social and political subjects, with a particular focus on the struggles of historically marginalized groups such as women, the rural poor, and the impoverished underclass. Born out of decades of struggle as a working-class black man, Dial's work also explores the long history of racial oppression in America and offers a moving testimony on the human struggle for freedom and equality.

QUESTIONS

What objects do you recognize in this painting?

Why do you think the artist chose the color blue for this work?

How does this work respond to changes in the environment?

Alexis Rockman
(American, b. 1962),
Battle Royale, 2011, Oil
on wood, Museum
purchase, The Diana
Helis Henry Art Fund,
The Helis Foundation,
2012.67



Born in 1962, in New York City, Alexis Rockman grew up near the American Museum of Natural History, where his mother worked. His fascination with animals, theories of evolution, and the panoramic format of natural history dioramas is reflected in his paintings. Following in the tradition of naturalists such as James John Audubon and the American painters of the sublime such as Frederick Edwin Church, Rockman's work explores how natural history is shaped by culture as well as by natural forces.

In the monumental painting *Battle Royale*, Rockman depicts 54 different species engaged in a scene of warfare set in a Louisiana swamp. Many, such as the alligator, the black bear, the pelican, and the bald eagle, are indigenous to Louisiana. Others, such as the house cat, the Formosan termite, the feral hog, and the red imported fire ant, come from other parts of the world, but are now having a significant effect on Louisiana's environment. Some species arrived as stowaways while others were deliberately imported. The proliferation of these has had an adverse effect on many plant and animal species that were already native to Louisiana. Nutria, for example, were imported into Louisiana in the 1930s from South America for fur farms. Since then their multiplying numbers has resulted in widespread destruction of aquatic vegetation and marshes. The fallen bridge in the mid-ground signifies the absence of humans from this scene and our inability to control the situation. Each animal is depicted in an exacting realistic style, reminiscent of the scientific accuracy of Dutch painting.

QUESTIONS

How have invasive species affected your community?

What role do humans play in this "battle" scene?

***America*, 2013, Will Ryman (American, b. 1969), Car parts, railroad parts, cotton, computer parts, corn, coal, bullets, arrowheads, chains, shackles, wood, exterior paint, Gift of Sydney and Walda Besthoff, 2013.8.**

Artist Will Ryman (born 1969 in New York) is renowned for his large-scale sculptures and public art installations. He was raised in New York City, and over the last twenty years has fostered his own successful art career. He is most widely known for *The Roses*, 38 vividly colored pink and red rose blossoms along the Park Avenue Mall in 2011, a red rose from this series was included in the New Orleans Biennial, Prospect 3 in 2014.



America was inspired by the history of capitalism in the United States. The cabin's structure is a direct reference to the boyhood home of Abraham Lincoln, a figure who personifies the struggle of the Civil War and the quest for America to redefine its identity. Inside the cabin, a variety of materials chosen for symbolic resonance are arranged in geometric, mosaic-like panels. Shackles and chains cover the floor, alluding to the role of slavery in the shaping of the U.S. economy. The interior walls are adorned with arrowheads (symbolizing the economy of indigenous), pills (representing the pharmaceutical industry), railroad ties (representing transportation), cotton (representing textiles and slavery), coal (representing energy), phone cords (representing the telecommunications industry), keyboards, iPhones and iPads (representing recent technology).

QUESTIONS

What items would you have chosen to represent America?

What agricultural products are represented here?

What do you think is the significance of the color gold?

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