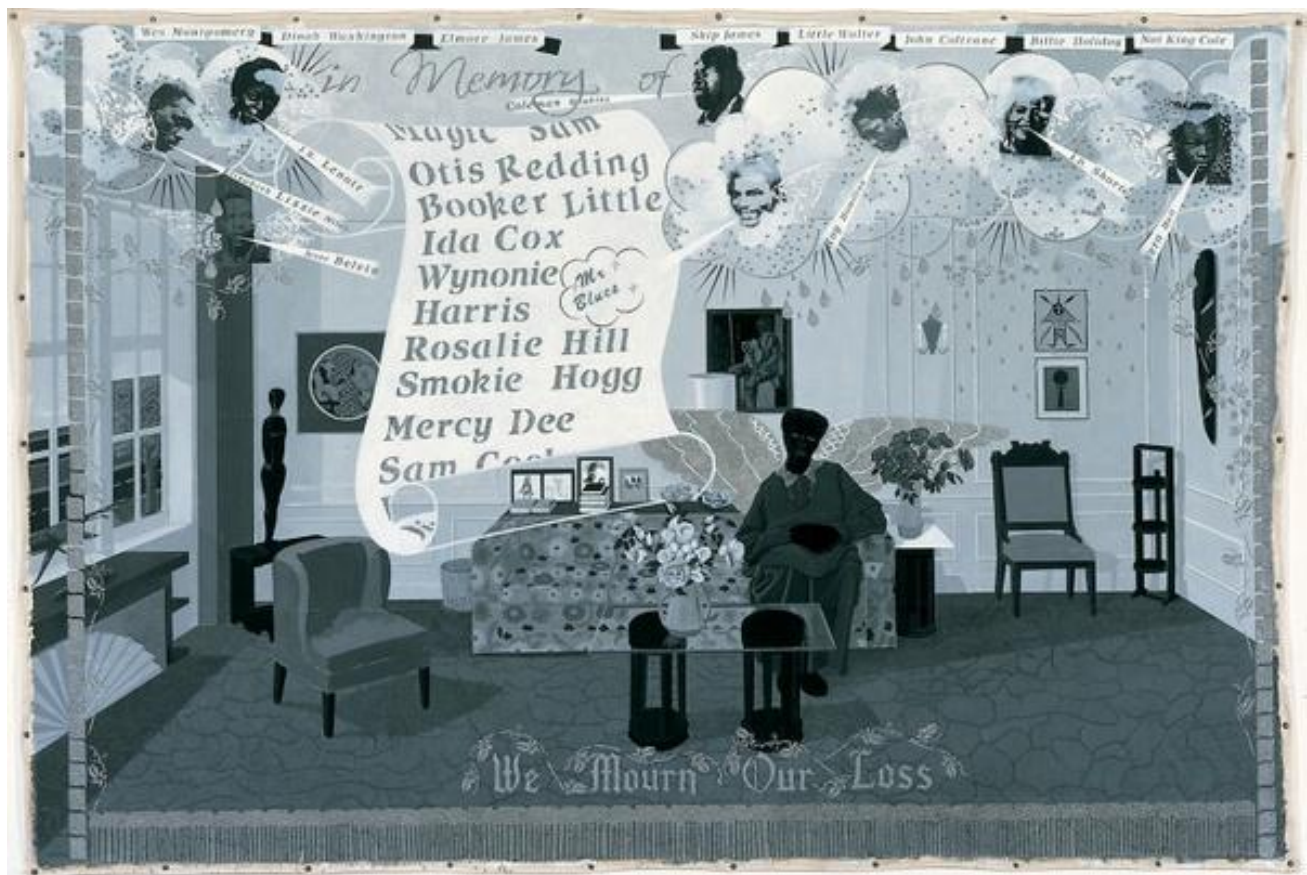


WHITNEY

Blues for Smoke

February 7 – April 28, 2013



Teacher Guide Pre- & Post-visit Materials

Education
whitney.org/K-12

About This Teacher Guide

How can these materials be used?

These materials provide a framework for preparing you and your students for a visit to the exhibition and offer suggestions for follow up classroom reflection and lessons. The discussions and activities introduce some of the exhibition's key themes and concepts.

p. 5	About the Exhibition
pp. 6-9	Pre- & Post-visit Activities
pp. 10-19	Images and Related Information
p. 20	Bibliography & Links

Which grade levels are these materials intended for?

These lessons and activities have been written for Elementary, Middle, or High School students. We encourage you to adapt and build upon them in order to meet your teaching objectives and students' needs.

Learning standards

The projects and activities in these curriculum materials address national and state learning standards for the arts, English language arts, social studies, and technology.

The Partnership for 21st Century Learning Skills

<http://www.p21.org/>

Common Core Standards

<http://www.corestandards.org/>

Links to National Learning Standards.

<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>

Comprehensive guide to National Learning Standards by content area.

<http://www.education-world.com/standards/national/index.shtml>

New York State Learning Standards.

<http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/standards.html>

New York City Department of Education's Blueprint for Teaching and Learning in the Arts, grades K-12.

<http://schools.nyc.gov/offices/teachlearn/arts/blueprint.html>

Feedback

Please let us know what you think of these materials. How did you use them? What worked or didn't work?

Email us at schoolprograms@whitney.org.

For more information about our programs and resources for schools, educators, teens, and families, please visit whitney.org/Education.

Cover image:

Kerry James Marshall, *Souvenir IV*, 1998. Synthetic polymer and glitter on paper on canvas with grommets, 107 1/2 x 157 1/2 in. (273.1 x 400.1 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from the Painting and Sculpture Committee 98.56

At the Museum

Guided visits

We invite you and your students to visit the Whitney to see the exhibition *Blues for Smoke*, on view at the Whitney from February 7-April 28, 2013. To schedule a visit, please go to whitney.org/education/k12. Guided visits are hour-long thematic tours that build upon classroom learning. We introduce students to three to five works of art through careful looking, discussions, and activities that incorporate the artist's voice and process. Museum educators lead inquiry based conversations as well as sketching or writing activities in the galleries.

Guided Visit Themes

School Programs uses a thematic-based approach to teaching in the galleries. We created these themes in order to foster thoughtful connections between K-12 classroom learning and the art on view. When you schedule a guided visit, you will be able to choose one of the following themes.

Artist as Observer (K-12)

How do artists represent the world around them? How do they choose to show people and places? This theme can address topics including New York City, community, landscape, and portraiture. This is a great thematic tour for first-time visitors as it incorporates visual literacy skills and introduces students to multiple ways of looking at and talking about art.

Artist as Storyteller (K-12)

How do artists tell a story? What is their point of view? This theme addresses ELA concepts such as narrative, tone, character, and setting and is recommended for literacy and writing classes.

Artist as Experimenter (K-12)

How do artists push boundaries and explore new concepts? This theme examines how artists experiment with materials, processes, and ideas. Younger students may look at how artists use formal elements such as line, shape, color, texture, and composition, or how they transform everyday objects. Older students may consider more conceptual questions, such as "What makes this art?" and "Why is this in a museum?"

Artist as Critic (6-12)

How do artists respond to the social, political, and cultural climate of their time? What does their work tell us about American life and culture? How can art serve as a catalyst for change? Students examine how artists respond to the topics that shape history, politics, and contemporary culture. This thematic tour can address subjects such as current events, war, gender, race, politics, and activism.

Working with Museum Educators

If you are scheduled for a guided visit, your museum educator will contact you in advance. Let them know what preparatory work you have done, how this connects to the rest of your curricula, and what you would like your visit to focus on. The more you tell them, the better they can prepare for your visit. Please also let them know if your students have any specific needs. If you are visiting during public hours, you and your students (in chaperoned groups) are welcome to stay after your guided tour.

All educators and students who have a guided tour will receive a pass which offers free admission to the Whitney through the end of the school year.

Self-guided visits

High School students are welcome to visit the museum during public hours in a self-guided capacity. Self-guided visits must be scheduled in advance. A maximum of 60 students may arrive at the museum together and must then divide into small groups (no more than 4 students) to visit the galleries. One chaperone must accompany 15 students.

Discuss museum rules with students before your visit. We have found that works of art are more accessible if students are provided with some structure or direction, and we recommend giving students a task to complete while in the galleries. You may want to create a worksheet, free-writing or poetry activity, or a sketching assignment.

whitney.org/ForTeachers

Check out our new web resources especially for K-12 teachers! Here you can explore the Whitney's collection, try out an activity with your students, prepare for a Museum visit, and learn some tips for working with modern and contemporary art. For Teachers also includes a Build Your Own Collection feature, discussion, research, art making, and writing activities, downloadable teacher guides, and links to related websites. You'll also find more works by artists in *Blues for Smoke*.

We look forward to welcoming you and your students to the Whitney!

About the Exhibition

Blues for Smoke

Blues for Smoke is an interdisciplinary exhibition that explores a wide range of contemporary art through the lens of the blues and blues aesthetics. Turning to the blues not simply as a musical category but as a field of artistic sensibilities and cultural idioms, the exhibition features works by artists from the 1950s to the present, as well as materials culled from music and popular entertainment.

Throughout the past century, writers and thinkers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, Albert Murray, Amiri Baraka, and Cornel West have asserted the fundamental importance of the blues both to American music (in its legacy and influence on jazz, R&B, rock, and hip-hop) and to developments in literature, film, and visual art. In all its diversity, the blues has been hailed as one of America's greatest cultural achievements and, along with jazz, has even been called America's classical music.

The origins of the blues lie in the vernacular culture of African Americans living in the Mississippi Delta and New Orleans around the turn of the twentieth century—people for whom slavery was a recent memory and basic civil rights were far in the future. As the literary historian Houston A. Baker writes, the blues emerged from a matrix of “work songs, group seculars, field hollers, sacred harmonies, proverbial wisdom, folk philosophy, political commentary, ribald humor, elegiac lament, and much more.” Rather than retelling this story, *Blues for Smoke* proposes that certain topics in contemporary art might be animated by the blues. These include a grappling with personal and social catastrophe; an emphasis on improvisation and movement; the performance of extravagant or ambiguous identities; the expression of sexuality and intimacy; and an impulse towards archiving, sampling, and translation.

The exhibition's title is drawn from a 1960 solo album by virtuoso jazz pianist Jaki Byard in which improvisation on blues form becomes a basis for avant-garde exploration. The title suggests that the expanded poetics of the blues is pervasive, but also diffuse and difficult to pin down. By presenting an uncommon heterogeneity of subject matter, art historical contexts, formal and conceptual inclinations, genres and disciplines, *Blues for Smoke* holds artists and art worlds together that are often kept apart, within and across lines of race, generation, and canon.

Artists in the exhibition

Jean-Michel Basquiat, Romare Bearden, Gregg Bordowitz, Mark Bradford, Kamau Brathwaite, Ed Clark, Roy DeCarava, Beauford Delaney, Jeff Donaldson, Stan Douglas, Jimmie Durham, Melvin Edwards, William Eggleston, Charles Gaines, Renée Green, David Hammons, Kira Lynn Harris, Rachel Harrison, Barkley L. Hendricks, Leslie Hewitt, Martin Kippenberger, Jutta Koether, Liz Lerner, Zoe Leonard, Glenn Ligon, Kerry James Marshall, Barbara McCollough, Dave McKenzie, Rodney McMillian, Mark Morrisroe, Matt Mullican, Senga Nengudi, Kori Newkirk, Lorraine O'Grady, John Outterbridge, Adrian Piper, William Pope.L, Jeff Preiss, Amy Sillman, Lorna Simpson, Henry Taylor, Alma Thomas, Bob Thompson, Wu Tsang, Kara Walker, Carrie Mae Weems, William T. Williams, Martin Wong.

Blues for Smoke is organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. The exhibition is curated by Bennett Simpson. At the Whitney, the installation is overseen by Chrissie Iles, Anne and Joel Ehrenkranz Curator.

<http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/BluesForSmoke>

Pre-visit Activities

Before visiting the Whitney, we recommend that you and your students explore and discuss some of the ideas and themes in the *Blues for Smoke* exhibition. You may want to introduce students to at least one work of art that they will see at the Museum. See the **Images and Related Information** section of this guide on pages 10-19 for examples of artists and works that may have particular relevance to the classroom. Use the **Bibliography and Links** on page 20 to explore the history of blues music and listen to music clips. The pre- and post-visit activities on the following pages are recommended for middle and high school students.

Objectives:

- Introduce students to blues music
- Explore African American history and politics
- Make connections to artists' sources of inspiration

The blues are a synthesis. . .Combining work songs, group seculars, field hollers, sacred harmonies, proverbial wisdom, folk philosophy, political commentary, ribald humor, elegiac lament, and much more, they constitute an amalgam that seems always to have been in motion in America—always becoming, shaping, transforming, displacing the peculiar experiences of Africans in the New World.

Houston A. Baker. *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, 5.

The works in the exhibition represent diverse aspects of the blues: David Hammons's installation, *Chasing the Blue Train*, (1989) and Kori Newkirk's piece, *Yall*, (2012) conjure the history and aesthetics of the blues. Alma Thomas's painting, *Late Night Reflections*, (1972) demonstrates the connection between the blues and the natural world. Kerry James Marshall's *Souvenir IV*, (1998) and Zoe Leonard's installation of blue suitcases, *1961* (2002-ongoing) relates to the idea of the blues and personal and collective memory.

1. What are the blues?

Use the resources on page 20 to explore the history of the blues and play a selection of blues music with your students. After listening, discuss how your students would describe the blues. Make a list or word wall of their descriptions. What are the words or phrases that come up the most? Is there a pattern you notice?

The artists in the exhibition were inspired in different ways by blues music. For example, David Hammons's installation, *Chasing the Blue Train*, (1989) presents the train as a potent symbol in the blues while Alma Thomas's painting, *Late Night Reflections*, (1972) suggests a connection between the blues and the night sky.

Discuss the types of music that inspires your students—for example, a specific style or genre, or even a particular song. In what ways does it inspire them? You may also ask students to consider if their favorite music is related to the blues. Have students research the sources and influences of their favorite music and report their findings to the class.

Pre-visit Activities (continued)

2. Explore the lyrics

Ask students to use the resources on page 20 to look at a selection of blues lyrics. How do the lyrics relate to African Americans' struggle for equality in the United States? For example, how do they address the legacies of slavery, the development of Jim Crow, the Great Migration, the Civil Rights Movement? Discuss some common themes in music produced today. What are musicians writing about? What events are they responding to?

3. Artist as Critic: Kerry James Marshall

“criticality is what the blues is all about.”

George E. Lewis. “The Timeless Blues,” in Bennett Simpson, *Blues for Smoke*, exhibition catalogue, CA: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles & DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2012, 76.

Ask students to look carefully at Kerry James Marshall’s work, *Souvenir IV* (1998) on page 14. Discuss the image with your students. Ask them to describe what they see. Have students research the people and names in the work. What might they have in common? What do the words “We mourn their loss” mean in this context?

4. Artist as Storyteller: David Hammons

Ask students to take a close look at David Hammons’s installation, *Chasing the Blue Train* (1989) on page 10. What do students notice about the objects and materials Hammons used to make this work? How are they arranged? What do students think these objects might represent?

Let students know that a blue toy train runs on a track that covers the floor, weaving around upturned piano lids and through a tunnel covered in coal. The installation includes three boom boxes playing music by jazz musicians John Coltrane and Thelonius Monk.

First, ask your students to listen to the excerpt of this track entitled “Blue Train” from John Coltrane’s 1957 album *Blue Train*.

<http://www.last.fm/music/John+Coltrane/Blue+Train/Blue+Train>

Ask your students to read and discuss the lyrics of *Blue Train*.

<http://www.lyricszoo.com/john-coltrane-john-coltrane/blue-train/>

What do students think may have happened to the person taking the train? What metaphors describe the journey that this person is taking? In what ways might this song refer to the blues?

Post-visit Activities

Objectives

- Enable students to reflect upon and discuss some of the ideas and themes from the exhibition *Blues for Smoke*.
- Have students further explore some of the artists' approaches through discussion, writing, and art-making activities.

1. Museum Visit Reflection

After your museum visit, ask students to take a few minutes to write about their experience. What do they remember most? Was there a specific artist that caught their attention? Why? What did they learn about the artists in general? What new ideas did the exhibition give them? What other questions do they have? Ask students to share their thoughts with the class.

2. Artist as Observer: Contemplating the blues

With its irregular, all-over pattern of black rectangular brushstrokes over a solid golden-yellow ground, Alma Thomas's painting *Late Night Reflections* evokes the sensations of looking at the sky at night and contemplation.

Review and discuss *Late Night Reflections* on page 18. How might the pattern and color be different at different times of day? What do your students think of when looking at the night sky? In what ways might their thoughts relate to the blues? Have students write a poem or a paragraph about what they think of when gazing at the night sky. Ask them to share their writing with the class.

Compare *Late Night Reflections* with other works of art that depict the night sky. For example, Vincent van Gogh, *Starry Night* (1889), Vija Celmins, *Constellations* and *Star Fields* (1982-1983), and Charles Burchfield, *Night Scene*, (1935). How are they similar or different?

3. Artist as Critic: The blues today

Kori Newkirk uses familiar objects to reference contemporary social issues. The central component of Newkirk's *Yall*, (2012) is a shopping cart—a common sight among the current homeless population of Los Angeles's Skid Row and other urban areas around the United States.

Review and discuss *Yall*, (2012) on page 16. Who is addressed in this work? What do the objects in Newkirk's piece tell us about the world we live in? How might this work relate to the blues?

Ask students to make an artwork that represents a current event or issue that they feel passionate about, using found objects or images of objects. Ask them to carefully consider how the objects they choose, color, and composition will symbolize their selected event or issue. Have students create a title for their work and present it to the class.

Post-visit Activities (continued)

4. Artist as Storyteller: Time Capsule Autobiography

Zoe Leonard's installation, *1961*, (2002-ongoing) consists of used blue suitcases that represent each year of her life. The suitcases are a type of autobiography of the artist's life and containers of memories.

Ask your students to reflect on their own lives and think of a significant event or memory for each year. What personal objects, photographs, drawings, or writing would they choose to represent those events or memories for each year of their life?

Ask students to find a small container—(eg. a bag, a box, a wrapper, used or new)—that is meaningful to them and could represent an autobiographical “time capsule” of their lives. Have them collect small objects and photographs or photocopies that stand for important events or memories in their lives. Students could also include their own drawings or write a short story or poem about the events or memories. Place the small objects, photographs, drawings, and/or writing in the container.

Have students display, share, and discuss their time capsule autobiographies with the class. What type of container did they select? What meaning does it have for them? What did they include in the container? Why? How do the contents represent students and their memories?

5. Go Digital

If computers and the Internet are available to you and your students, use online resources for student projects and assignments. Make a blog (<http://www.tumblr.com/>) or Flickr set (<http://www.flickr.com>) for student work. Include the assignment instructions and use the text and image features for student work. For student work, you may want to use Blurb, (<http://www.blurb.com>), a site for creating and producing books.

Images and Related Information

We have included some selected images from the exhibition, along with relevant information that you may want to use before or after your museum visit. You can print out these images or project them in your classroom. For additional works by exhibiting artists to use in your classroom, please visit whitney.org/ForTeachers.

David Hammons, *Chasing the Blue Train*, 1989



David Hammons, *Chasing the Blue Train*, 1989. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Collection S.M.A.K., Ghent, Belgium. Photograph by Dirk Pauwels

In this installation, a blue toy train runs on a track that covers the floor, weaving around upturned piano lids and through a tunnel covered in coal. Here, David Hammons focuses on the powerful metaphor of the railroads that have transformed the landscape and American society since the nineteenth century. Hammons has often invoked the blues and jazz as forms steeped in cultural and mythical significance. The work also contains a pun: there is a pile of coal and a train, plus the music of Thelonius Monk and John Coltrane—the artist behind the LP *Blue Train*—playing on three boom boxes. Hammons’s installation suggests the constant mobility and multiplicity of the blues—and that it must always be “chased” along the tracks.

About the Artist

David Hammons

b. 1943

Born in Springfield, Illinois, David Hammons moved to Los Angeles in 1962, studying advertising at the Los Angeles Trade Technical College and then fine arts at Chouinard Art Institute (1966–1968) and the Otis Art Institute (1968–1972). At Otis Art Institute, Hammons trained with draughtsman and printmaker Charles White, an African-American artist who had been committed to socially oriented art since the 1930s. His example was especially important to Hammons, who sought to connect his work to the Black Power movements and the black cultural nationalism of the 1960s. Hammons began making prints himself, many of which altered the American flag from red, white, and blue to the red, black, and green of the Pan-African flag. He also began making body prints, using his figure as the printing plate: he would smear his body, clothes, and hair with grease, press himself against a board, and then dust the resulting mark with pigment. He became, as he put it, “both the creator of the object and the object of meaning.”

After he moved to New York in 1974, Hammons grew interested in artist Marcel Duchamp and his art became increasingly conceptual. In the mid-1970s, he began his metaphorical “spade” series, examining a derogatory term for African Americans that he claimed never to have understood. The works in the series often included discarded shovels (literal spades), initiating a practice of using found objects that he subsequently expanded to include chicken bones, bottle caps, and paper bags. Hammons also began making sculptures and installations from human hair, which he collected from African-American barbershops around the country. In one of his best-known performances, *Bliz-aard Ball Sale* (1983), he went to Manhattan’s East Village—the heart of the new gallery scene at the time—and stood on street corners selling snowballs, implicitly questioning the value of the art for sale in the neighborhood.

Hammons has also made public works in urban settings. In *Higher Goals* (1986), created for Brooklyn’s Cadman Plaza Park, he and a group of locals installed five 20-30-foot-high telephone poles, topped them with basketball hoops, and covered the installations with thousands of bottle caps in configurations which suggested snakeskin, Islamic design, or African textiles. Hammons has also used video as a medium, collaborating with artist Alex Harsley on works including *Phat Free* (1995), shown in the 1997 Whitney Biennial exhibition. In the video, Hammons, dressed in a long coat, hat, and sneakers, kicks a metal bucket down a deserted city sidewalk at night. Hammons’s recent work includes a series of paintings in which areas of the canvases are partially concealed by found material such as tarpaulins, towels, and garbage bags.

Zoe Leonard, 1961, 2002-ongoing



1961, 2002-. Blue suitcases, dimensions variable
Collection of the artist; courtesy Galerie Gisela Capitain

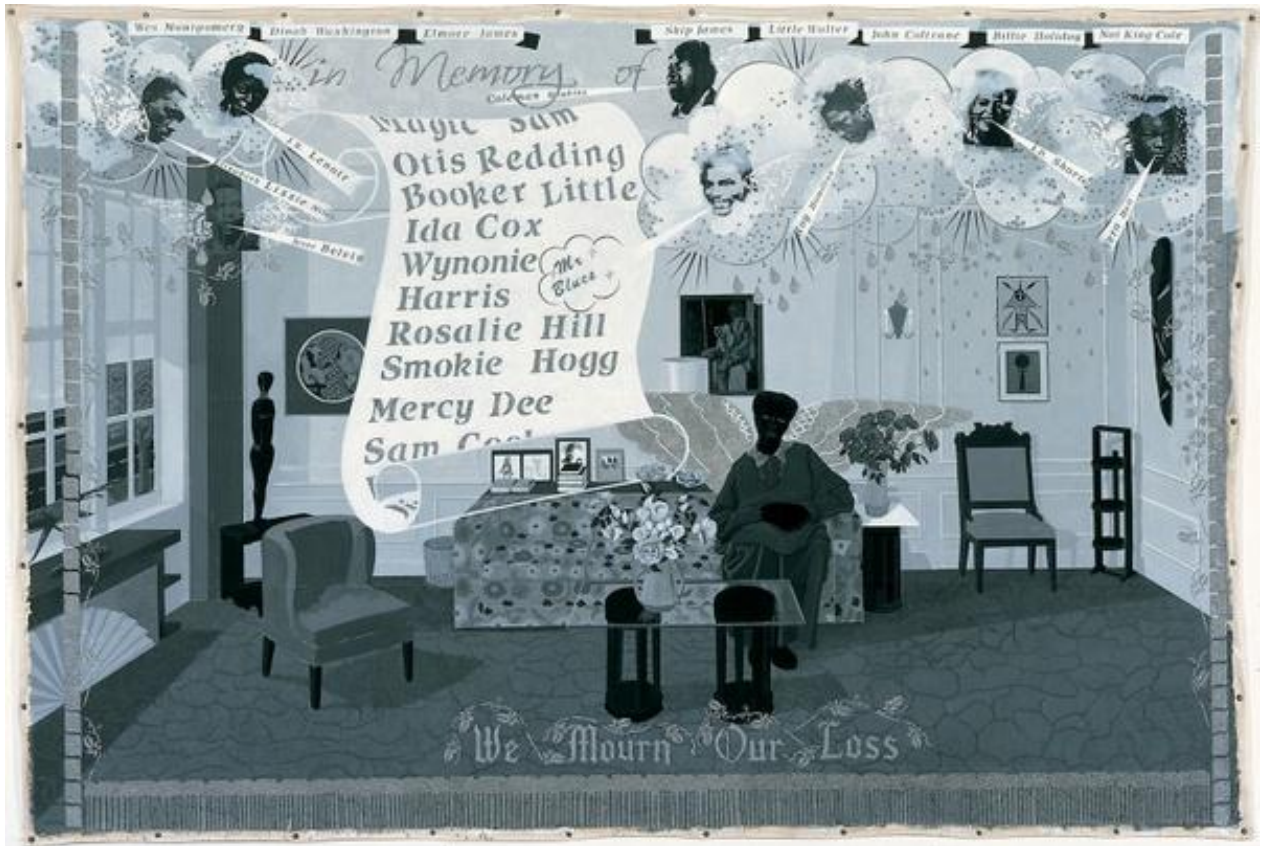
Zoe Leonard's sculpture is comprised of found blue suitcases that extend in a row along the floor of the gallery. Closer inspection reveals that each suitcase is unique, conveying a wealth of detail in design, varying shades of blue, distinctive marks, and remnants of airline labels to various destinations. Described by Leonard as an autobiography, the title of this ongoing piece refers to the year of her birth, and the collection of fifty-one suitcases mark each year of her life. Leonard adds a new suitcase every year. Serving as both object and container, each suitcase emphasizes the importance of the object in recalling memories, while also suggesting unknown contents—perhaps souvenirs, both treasured and forgotten. The sculpture also evokes themes of travel and displacement, transience and abandonment. Though the apparent wear-and-tear of each suitcase reveals a history of the object's (and perhaps the artist's) hardships, the steadfast line of suitcases imparts a lasting impression of endurance and survival.

About the Artist
Zoe Leonard
b. 1961

Born in Liberty, New York, Zoe Leonard grew up in New York City. At the age of fifteen, she dropped out of school and taught herself how to take photographs with her mother's camera. Her early images often reflect her peripatetic life travelling across the country, working at odd jobs, and encountering various landscapes. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Leonard continued to photograph urban scenes in cities such as Paris and Washington, D.C.; she also captured Niagara Falls and anonymous suburban housing developments. In addition, she began taking photographs exploring the representation of women. In one series, she shot catwalk models from a low angle, revealing their underwear; in others, she depicted anatomical models, wigs, chastity belts, and female dolls, alongside the bell jars, receptacles, and vitrines used to display them in medical, natural history, and art museums.

Beginning in the late 1980s, Leonard worked with Act Up and other artist collectives engaged in activist projects on behalf of HIV/AIDS and gay rights, including Gang and Fierce Pussy. After the 1992 death of her close friend and fellow artist David Wojnarowicz from complications of AIDS, Leonard mounted an exhibition entitled *Strange Fruit (For David)* (1995), in which she sewed together the skins of 295 pieces of discarded fruit and decorated them with wire, buttons, and thread. In 1995, Leonard travelled to Alaska, where she spent two years in solitude, and to which she has returned repeatedly. From these experiences, she produced works about endurance and survival, like *Tree and Fence, Out My Back Window* (1998), shot in New York, which shows a tree, bisected by a fence and strewn with litter, growing despite such unlikely circumstances. Leonard undertook an ambitious project that came to be known as *Analogue* (1998-2007) that she completed with a Rolleiflex camera. Comprising approximately 400 images taken in New York and places that she visited in Europe and Africa, *Analogue* documents the disappearance of local markets and individual businesses as the result of an expanding global economy. Leonard presented the project both in a book format, pared down to ninety-two images, and as a museum display, in which the New York pictures are paired with images of storefronts from around the world in a grid format. Leonard's more recent projects involve found photographs and postcards and a series of camera obscura installations that examine the processes of producing and looking at images.

Kerry James Marshall, *Souvenir IV*, 1998



Kerry James Marshall, *Souvenir IV*, 1998. Synthetic polymer and glitter on paper on canvas with grommets, 107 1/2 x 157 1/2 in. (273.1 x 400.1 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from the Painting and Sculpture Committee 98.56

The 13-foot-wide *Souvenir IV*, painted in grisaille on unstretched canvas and shown pinned to the wall like a ceremonial banner, is one of a series of four works dedicated to cultural figures and Civil Rights leaders who died in the 1960s, most but not all of them African American. At its center is a scroll listing important musicians; cloud-haloed heads above trumpet other artists, and additional figures are named in the banderoles at the upper margin. On a sofa in a well-appointed living room (based on those of Kerry James Marshall's relatives and friends) sits a dignified older woman, her bearing so calm that it is easy to overlook the massive pair of wings on her shoulders. If much of the text in *Souvenir IV* is elegiac—especially the message “We Mourn Our Loss” at bottom—the image of this woman adds a note of poignant celebration. Marshall's work sidesteps conventional or condemnatory summaries of African American experience. Instead, he explores the rarely acknowledged optimism that flourishes amid difficult circumstances and the pride that outlives mourning for fallen heroes.

About the Artist

Kerry James Marshall

b. 1955

By his own account, Kerry James Marshall's upbringing was crucial to his work, which comprises large-scale paintings, sculptures, and other objects. "You can't be born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1955 and grow up in South Central [Los Angeles] near the Black Panthers headquarters," he explains, "and not feel like you've got some kind of social responsibility. You can't move to Watts in 1963 and not speak about it. That determined a lot of where my work was going to go." In his work—which began with collages reminiscent of Romare Bearden and has been linked to the politically oriented paintings of Leon Golub—Marshall has focused on African-American life and history, specifically the legacy of the Civil Rights movement. Though much of his output is based on contemporary urban life, Marshall's art is also notable for its broad range of references to art historical precedents, including Renaissance painting, El Greco, black folk art, and Charles White, with whom Marshall studied at Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles.

As a youth, Marshall frequented the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and read about artists who studied anatomy—Leonardo da Vinci, in particular. To develop a mastery of the human body, Marshall spent his evenings drawing from a plastic skull and skeleton. After receiving his BFA from Otis College of Art and Design in 1978, he began producing figurative paintings that featured very dark-colored protagonists, which would become his signature style. In the 1980s, Marshall worked on series of paintings including the *Invisible Man* and *Lost Boys*, which examined racial stereotypes and notions of beauty while investigating social issues. The *Lost Boys* works, for instance, confront the deleterious effects of public housing, illiteracy, and poverty.

In the 1990s, Marshall based several pieces on actual events, such as *Voyager* (1992), which refers to the schooner *Wanderer*, the last ship that secretly transported African slaves to the United States in 1858. His subsequent projects have continued to examine different aspects of black history; the *Mementos* series (begun in 1997) focused on the legacy of the Civil Rights movement, and the *Vignettes* (begun in 2003) picture couples in romantic landscapes reminiscent of eighteenth-century Rococo paintings. Initiated as a way to insert the black figure into historical narratives from which it had been excluded, the *Vignettes* also led Marshall to explore themes of courtship in natural, urban, and suburban settings.

Kori Newkirk, *Yall*, 2012



Installation view of *Blues for Smoke* at The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, October 21, 2012-January 7, 2013, Photo by Brian Forrest.

Shopping carts similar to the one Newkirk uses in *Yall* are common sights among the homeless population of Los Angeles's Skid Row, not far from the artist's studio. This one follows—or perhaps has traced—a circle of blue glitter. The artist has attached bits of neighborhood junk, each with a hint of blue, to the cart. The elements of the work, which was commissioned for this exhibition, seem to tell an elliptical tale of getting the blues. The circle of glitter gestures towards blues aesthetics, while the dispossessed, forlorn shopping cart suggests the social reality that might produce the blues.

About the Artist

Kori Newkirk

b. 1970

Born in the Bronx and raised in Cortland, New York, Kori Newkirk employs diverse media—including painting, sculpture, photography, and video—to explore the intersection of race, popular culture, and his personal history through an innovative art practice that stems from his interest in the formal properties of materials. Newkirk’s work often incorporates found objects that he manipulates in order to transform them into simultaneously beautiful and potent signifiers..

Newkirk received his BFA from the Art Institute of Chicago in 1993 and his MFA from the University of California at Irvine in 1997. He also studied at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan, Maine in 1997. Newkirk describes himself as a “non-painting painter who sometimes makes paintings, but with absolutely no paint.” Instead he uses everyday images and objects to focus on the formal aspects of the medium, such as light and color. While Newkirk creates work that can be read on many different levels, he states “one of my major concerns is purely (the) visual.”

Drawing from the aesthetic vocabulary of Conceptual art and Minimalism, many of Newkirk’s works vacillate between representation and abstraction. In 1999, Newkirk began his beaded curtains, so-called “sculptural paintings,” composed of long strands of synthetic hair supporting beads arranged to compose an image—a Modernist house, an urban skyline, a rural landscape—when viewed from a distance. As well as beads and synthetic hair braids, Newkirk has worked with pigmented hair pomade. In a series of installations in 2003 he constructed scenes of overwhelming “whiteness” filled with artificial snow, great white sharks, icicles, and snowflakes. Continuing to investigate the formal qualities of materials and their potential for meaning, He inventively transforms these disparate materials and images into provocative symbols that compel viewers to reconsider African American culture as well as evolving art practices in contemporary society.

Thea Liberty Nichols. (2011) *Kori Newkirk*. Art21 Blog. <http://blog.art21.org/2011/02/21/kori-newkirk/>

Catherine Wagley. *Interview with Kori Newkirk*. ARTslant: Rackroom. <http://www.artslant.com/ny/artists/rackroom/991>

Alma Thomas, *Late Night Reflections*, 1972



Alma Thomas, *Late Night Reflections*, 1972. Acrylic on canvas, 28 3/4 x 44 inches.
Collection of the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, USA.
Purchase, Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University Fund for Acquisitions and bequest of Marjorie Pfeffer by exchange.
2010.13.1
Photograph by Peter Paul Geoffrion

By the mid-1960s, Alma Thomas had honed her skills in watercolors and experimented with textures, patterns and rhythms drawn from her observations of the natural world, paring down her paintings to geometric dabs and patches of vibrant color on monochromatic backgrounds. In *Late Night Reflections*, an irregular, all-over pattern of black rectangular brushstrokes obscures a solid golden-yellow ground, which shows through in webs and networks. Thomas's distinct, fragmented brushstrokes and rich color palette make reference to early twentieth-century paintings by European artists Wassily Kandinsky and Henri Matisse that served as inspiration for her early figurative works. When read as an abstraction of a night sky, the rhythm and tone of her composition conjure the sensation of star-gazing and contemplation.

About the Artist

Alma Thomas

1891-1978

Born in Columbus, Ohio, Alma Woodsey Thomas used local clay to make homemade puppets and sculpture in her childhood. In 1907 the Thomas family moved to Washington, D.C., where they settled in a house that Thomas would occupy for the next seventy-one years. After graduating from high school where she excelled at math and architectural drawing, Thomas enrolled at Miner Normal School, where she studied early childhood education and received a teaching certificate. After teaching art in Delaware for six years, Thomas returned to Washington, D.C. in 1921 to enroll at Howard University, intending to become a costume designer. But when James V. Herring founded the art department in 1922, Thomas became the first student to major in art. She graduated in 1924 with a BS in fine arts, becoming the first Howard University student to hold that degree. Thomas then graduated from Columbia University's Teacher's College with an MFA in art education in 1934, and taught at Shaw Junior High School until 1960.

For twenty-five years, Thomas worked in a representational style, incorporating elements from the work of Henri Matisse and Paul Cézanne. Thomas's inspiration for her work came from the natural world and recent discoveries in the sciences as well as her own observations of earthly and celestial phenomena. In the 1940s she joined the circle of artists known as the Washington Color School painters whose members included Kenneth Noland, Morris Louis, and Sam Gilliam. In 1943, Thomas had helped Alonzo Aden found the Barnett-Aden Gallery, where the first exhibitions of Washington color painters were presented. With her exposure to this group of artists, Thomas began to discover her own skills as a color painter while moving away from tight realist brushwork. She incorporated their strong sense of design, large-scale format, and pure colors into her abstractions, but she developed a more gestural style, drawing pencil lines and retaining active brushstrokes, both of which are usually visible in the finished work. Between 1955 and 1960, Thomas took courses in creative painting and color theory and studied with painter Jacob Kainen at the American University. Her brushwork loosened, and by the late 1950s she was patterning richly colored geometric shapes against solid backgrounds. When Thomas retired from teaching in 1960, she focused on painting full-time and was given her first solo show at Dupont Theater, an art cinema in Washington. In 1972, both the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Corcoran Gallery of Art held solo exhibitions of her work.

Bibliography & Links

Bennett Simpson. *Blues for Smoke*, exhibition catalogue. CA: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles & DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2012.

<http://www.pbs.org/theblues/classroom/essaysblues.html>

PBS essays about the blues.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O44IVoxdEwk>

Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art *Blues for Smoke* videos.

<http://www.loc.gov/jukebox/search/results?q=blues>

Early twentieth-century blues music on the National Jukebox.

<http://www.lyricsondemand.com/miscellaneouslyrics/blueslyrics.html>

Blues lyrics.

<http://www.last.fm/music/Jaki+Byard>

Information and music by Jaki Byard.

<http://www.last.fm/music/Henry+Flynt+&+The+Insurrections>

Information and music by Henry Flynt and the Insurrections.

<http://www.myspace.com/556983469/music>

Music by Othar Turner and the Afrossipi Allstars.

<http://www.last.fm/music/Joseph+Jarman>

Music by Joseph Jarman.

<http://sites.moca.org/thecurve/category/bennett-simpson/>

LA MoCA's blog: curator Bennett Simpson talks about the *Blues for Smoke* exhibition.

<http://whitney.org/Education>

The Whitney's website includes information about programs for teachers, teens, children, and families.

<http://whitney.org/ForTeachers>

The Whitney's collection and resources for K-12 teachers.

<http://whitney.org/ForKids>

A special area of the Whitney's website with resources and activities for artists ages 8-12.

<http://www.blurb.com/>

A site for creating online books.

<http://us.moo.com/>

A resource for creating all kinds of cards.

<http://pinterest.com/>

Pinterest is a virtual pinboard—a content sharing site that allows members to “pin” images, videos, and other objects to their pinboard. The site also includes standard social networking features.

<http://www.tumblr.com/explore>

A user-friendly micro-blogging platform for posting multimedia content.

<http://twitter.com/about>

Twitter is a free social networking and micro-blogging service where users send and read each other's updates, known as *tweets*.

Credits

This Teacher Guide was prepared by Dina Helal, Manager of Interpretation and Interactive Media; Heather Maxson, Manager of School, Youth, and Family Programs; and Ai Wee Seow, Coordinator of School and Educator Programs.

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