

**The Fabric Workshop and Museum**

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The New Temporary Contemporary

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Art and Society**Lesson 1: Look Again**

Source: <http://www.fabricworkshop.org/education/curriculum/society2009.php>

Throughout history, artists have created art in response to social ills such as war (e.g. Francisco de Goya, Pablo Picasso, Käthe Kollwitz, David Alfaro Siqueiros) and poverty (e.g. Vincent Van Gogh, Dorothea Lange, Diego Rivera). Contemporary artists are no exception. Today, artists explore and comment on a wide range of social issues, e.g. the environment, patriotism, drug abuse, poverty, and discrimination. The following activity can be a stand-alone lesson, or a part of a larger unit of study.

Objectives

- Students will look at, think about, and discuss contemporary art.
- Students will think creatively and critically about an example of installation art that addresses the issue of racism in antebellum America.
- Students will discuss and analyze images of social injustice from the past and the present.
- Students will create mixed media fabric designs that combine photographs and decorative elements in repeating patterns and comment on current social issues.

Materials and Resources

- Photographs of *Mise-en-Scène: Commemorative Toile*, an installation by Renée Green
- Photographs or photocopies of historical *toile* designs
- Background information on Renée Green. (See *New Materials as New Media* by Marion Boulton Stroud, 2002, The M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, MA, pages 114 - 117.)
- Magazines, newspapers
- Photocopy machine
- White drawing paper
- Pencils, colored pencils and markers, oil pastels
- White glue, Scissors

Activities

1. As a class, look at and discuss photographs of *Mise-en-Scène: Commemorative Toile*, an installation by Renée Green. (Start with photographs of the complete installation, and move on to details of the furniture and fabric.)

- What do you see?
- Is this a real parlor in someone's house? Why or why not?
- Who would have furniture like this? How can you tell?
- What events do you see depicted in the pictures on the fabric?
- What is surprising about this installation and fabric design?
- How do the floral designs in the fabric relate to the disturbing images they surround? Are the designs similar to camouflage? Why?
- What do the terms "mise-en-scène" and "commemorative" in the title mean? (See Vocabulary.) What clues do these terms provide about the artist's intentions?
- Why do you think the artist, Renée Green, created this installation?

2. In small groups, students compare *Mise-en-Scène: Commemorative Toile* with historical examples of toile designs. What is similar? Different? Have each group report back to the class.

3. Individually, students write one to three short paragraphs describing their personal responses to *Mise-en-Scène: Commemorative Toile*.

4. Guide students in developing unique designs for toile patterns that combine decorative elements and photographs in order to communicate concern about a current social issue:

- As a class, students brainstorm examples of social issues, e.g. discrimination, pollution, urban violence.
- In small groups, students search for photographs and drawings in newspapers, magazines, and books that depict people dealing with current social issues, then choose several to photocopy, varying the sizes.
- As a class, students brainstorm contemporary patterns and designs and discuss ways of combining them with the photocopied images.
- Students experiment with creating contemporary toile designs that combine contradictory images of people and decorative elements to make a surprising statement about a particular social issue.
- Students add a single color to their designs using colored markers or pencils, watercolors, and/or oil pastels.

Reflection and Evaluation

- What social issue is addressed? Do the images selected communicate the issue effectively?
- What type of installation would be appropriate for this toile design? How would the installation reinforce its message?

- Does the color enhance the overall impact of the design? How might its meaning change if a different color were used?
- Do the overall decorative aspects of this toile design serve to attract the viewer's eye and contradict the underlying message of the images? Explain.

Vocabulary

- *Commemorative*: Describes an object or ceremony that honors the memory of a person or event.
- *installation art*: An ensemble, or an environment, sometimes created for a particular gallery or outdoor site that provides the experience of being surrounded by art. Because many installations are temporary, often only photographs or videos remain to document their existence.
- *mise-en-scène*: A French term for stage setting or scenery. It can also mean surroundings or environment. (Pronounced *meez-on-sen*.)
- *toile*: A decorative fabric pattern produced in France in the early 19th century that consists of complex drawings of country scenes and decorative floral designs on a simple background. (Pronounced *twall*.)

Curriculum Connections

- Language Arts: Read *Invisible Man* (1952) by Ralph Ellison. Compare the theme of being invisible in Ellison's first person, fictional account of an African American man's journey from the Deep South to the streets of Harlem and the installation *Mise-en-Scène: Commemorative Toile* by Renée Green.
- Math: Calculate the wallpaper required for the installation, *Mise-en-Scène: Commemorative Toile* by Renée Green: if the dimensions of the room are 15 ft by 20 ft, and each panel of wallpaper is 54 inches by 15 ft, how many panels will it take to cover the entire room?
- Social Studies: Renée Green's goal is to "help people think about themselves in relation to different histories and alternative ways of seeing." (*New Materials as New Media* by Marion Boulton Stroud, The M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, MA, page 114). *Mise-en Scène: Commemorative Toile* encourages us to analyze and reflect upon the injustices of African American slavery and how these injustices have often been carefully and beautifully hidden by society. Brainstorm a list of current issues and discuss ways in which these issues may be covered over, dismissed, and forgotten. From the 16th century to the 19th century, between 9.4 and 12 million Africans were brutally taken from their homelands to the Americas to be used as slaves. Imagine what it would be like to be stripped of everything and everyone you cherish. What would you have left (e.g. your language, songs, stories, spirituality, memories)? Write about some of the things that you would still have and how you could use them to survive in your new environment.
- Science: Compare *Mise-en-Scène: Commemorative Toile* by Renée Green with camouflage in nature. How do animals blend in with their surroundings? How do

the images of slavery in *Mise-en-Scène* blend in with the surrounding toile pattern? (See <http://www.enature.com/articles/detail.asp?storyID=569>)

- Art: Learn about other contemporary artists who explore American slavery and its aftermath, e.g. Kara Walker, Willie Cole, Glenn Ligon, Faith Ringgold, Tim Rollins + K.O.S., Lorna Simpson, Bettye Saar, Allison Saar, and Gary Simmons.

National Standards

- Content Standard #1 (Understanding and applying media, techniques, and processes)
- Content Standard #2 (Using knowledge of structures and functions)
- Content Standard #3 (Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas)
- Content Standard #4 (Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and culture.)
- Content Standard #5 (Reflecting upon and assessing the characteristics and merits of their work and the work of others)