



## EDUCATOR GUIDE

# Texture Play

African American Artists in the Collection  
of the Chrysler Museum of Art



Whitfield Lovell (American, b. 1959), *Freedom*, 2001, Charcoal on wood with rifle, Gift of Paul and Susan Hirschbiel, Fran and Lenox Baker, Ashlyn and David Brandt, Roger and Marion Johnson Lidman, Mr. and Mrs. Frederick V. Martin, Dr. Robert and Judy Rubin, Edwin Epstein, Susan R. O'Neal, Lynn and Wayne Goodman, Ann Dearsley Vernon, Mrs. J. Paul Reason, and Museum purchase, 2002.14 © Whitfield Lovell courtesy of DC Moore Gallery



CHRYSLER  
MUSEUM of ART



## ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide is designed as a multidisciplinary companion for college-level educators interested in engaging their students in the collection of African American artists in the holdings of the Chrysler Museum of Art. Our intent is to offer a range of learning objectives and content to stimulate critical thinking, encourage dialogue, and foster understanding of the art presented. Educators should glean from this guide what is most relevant and useful to their students. Vocabulary words that appear in **bold** are defined at the end of the guide.

## ABOUT THE CHRYSLER

The Chrysler Museum has fifty galleries, a growing collection of more than 30,000 objects, an interactive space for families, and the only glass studio of its kind in the Mid-Atlantic region. Best of all, admission is free.

## INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS

African American and African Studies, American Studies, Art, Art History, Education, History, Women's Studies

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Students will think about texture, including the materials and techniques used to achieve the **texture**, as an expressive tool in artmaking.
2. Students will discuss artwork using atypical materials or techniques that differ from more traditional artmaking materials.
3. Students will consider works by African American artists working at different times and in different **media**.
4. Students will compare how artists use different materials and techniques to connote gendered artmaking practices and social experiences.

## BACKGROUND

Some artists use paint, clay, and stone to create their artworks, but others find that atypical materials can intensify or diversify the message they are attempting to communicate. Some of these materials and artmaking techniques are traditionally gendered (such as incorporating fiber and beadwork), others often are classified as craft (and therefore 'lesser' than art), and others bring to mind the physical act of creation much more than traditional media. The artists discussed below each take a unique approach to artmaking, and the resulting textures add visual interest and layered meaning to their art.



Loretta Pettway (American, b. 1942)

***Untitled (Block and Strip Quilt)*, 2003**

Cotton and polyester fabric

Museum purchase with funds provided by the Friends of African American Art and Walter P. Chrysler, Jr., by exchange, 2005.2 © Loretta Pettway

Loretta Pettway weaves the tale of her life as a mother, wife, and community member. She uses bold, asymmetrical designs and dramatic fabric contrasts to make works full of imagination and creativity. Her compositions display brilliant originality and balance that recall the very best of contemporary abstract painting. While standards of design and beauty were passed from one generation to the next, Pettway developed an individual technique unlike those of her predecessors or contemporaries at Gee's Bend.

Gee's Bend is a small insular community in rural Alabama that has developed a remarkable quilt making tradition over the past 100 years. Descendants of slaves who worked the Pettway plantation, the women of Gee's Bend have crafted quilts that not only keep them and their families warm at night but are also striking works of art. Pettway is one of the most talented of the current generation of Gee's Bend quilters.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Think about your family or community traditions. How do those shape your memories of people and places?
2. Imagine the texture of this quilt; think about the different types of fabric used here. What else might these fabrics have been used for? Why would the artist choose these fabrics?
3. Quilts are associated with warmth and comfort. How does this differ from other textile arts or other media?
4. What artists or art styles might have influenced Pettway in the composition of this quilt? Can you draw parallels to works in other media?
5. How does this work relate to other quilts you have seen? Why might this one be similar or different? Why do you think it has those differences?





Willie Cole (American, b. 1955)

***Untitled*, 1991**

Scorch on canvas in metal frame

Gift of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York;

Hassam, Speicher, Betts, and Symons Funds, 2011, 2011.5.1 © Willie Cole

Since 1988, Willie Cole has repeatedly returned to the iron to conjure multiple meanings and associations. His technique consists of scorching raw canvas with a steam iron until the surface starts to burn. The iron imagery suggests domestic labor and traditional femininity, perhaps honoring his mother's and grandmother's work as housekeepers. The scorched marks also speak to painful aspects of African American History. The hull-like shape recalls images of slave ships packed tightly with human cargo, and the burnt surface suggests the way enslavers branded their enslaved workers. Charred bits of the canvas seem to fall away like the identities of those individuals.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is there a performative quality to the artist's technique? Is it important to imagine how the artist made this work to understand the context and meaning?
2. How would you compare how Cole and Pettway look at gendered labor?
3. Compare the materials of canvas and metal. What do the different textures convey? How do both relate to the overall meaning of the work?
4. Is this work an act of creation or destruction? Can it be both? How does Cole use this dichotomy in his message?



Sam Gilliam (American, b. 1933)

### ***Norfolk Keels*, 1998**

Acrylic on canvas

Museum purchase with funds provided by Mr. and Mrs. Arnold B. McKinnon, Mr. and Mrs. Harry T. Lester, Bridget and Al Ritter, Leah and Richard Waitzer, Helen Gifford, and Daisy Dickson, 98.27 © Sam Gilliam

*Norfolk Keels* is not a traditional museum object like a painting or a sculpture. It is a **site-specific installation**. When installed it becomes a part of that space, changing it and at the same time helping us understand a familiar spot in new and exciting ways.

Sam Gilliam thinks of his works as a visual parallel to jazz music. Much as a jazz musician steps beyond the written notes on his page, Gilliam creates works that are “structured improvisations” or a careful balance of freedom and structure, chaos and control. Although each piece of canvas appears to drape at random, the organic composition is carefully orchestrated by the artist.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. This work is acrylic on canvas, like many contemporary paintings, but the canvas is not stretched. How does this affect the texture and appearance of the work?
2. Would you consider this work more like a painting or sculpture? Is it necessary to make a distinction?
3. Sam Gilliam designed *Norfolk Keels* especially for Huber Court at the Chrysler Museum. Imagine how you would fill this space with your own artwork.





Benny Andrews (American, 1930–2006)

***The Intruder*, 1964**

Mixed media on canvas

Gift of Walter P. Chrysler, Jr., 71.794 © Estate of Benny Andrews

In *The Intruder*, an African American woman is pressed uncomfortably into the foreground of a grand interior. With its expensive furnishings and exaggerated proportions, the palatial room signals a pretentious, whites-only realm of status and wealth. Benny Andrews combines painted and collaged materials. The blue chair and details of the room are in oil, but the woman's head is roughly sculpted paper and her dress is painted in fabric. Created one year after Martin Luther King, Jr. led the March on Washington and appealed to Congress for civil rights legislation, the work grapples with the social upheavals of the period.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Why does the artist differentiate the textures of the woman from her surroundings? What does this tell us about the woman?
2. What does this work tell us about some domestic spaces in the 1960s?
3. How can this work relate to the idea of gendered labor discussed with the works by Loretta Pettway and Willie Cole? Which work best conveys this theme in your opinion?



Elizabeth Catlett (American, 1915–2012)

***Ife*, 2002**

Mahogany

Gift of Walter P. Chrysler, Jr., by exchange, in honor of Andrew S. Fine in recognition of his outstanding service as a Museum Trustee and as Board Chairman, 1999–2002, 2002.3 © Elizabeth Catlett

Elizabeth Catlett's powerful sculpture refers to the ancient kingdom of Ife-Ife in the Yoruba-speaking region of Nigeria. The city, which still exists, was a central city-state in West Africa from the 1000s to the 1500s. It is still very prominent within contemporary Nigerian society as the place where life began. The mythology states that Yoruba peoples are descended from the *orisas* (deities) who came into being in Ife. Catlett interprets the Yoruba creation myth as a proud and powerful goddess. The artist took wood, a material used in many Nigerian carvings, and crafted it smooth. Thus, Catlett's *Ife* has a sensuous texture, and her curved forms embody the source of human life.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Why do you think Catlett chose to render the surface completely smooth? How does it compare to Nigerian wooden sculptures that inspired the artist?
2. Elizabeth Catlett stated, "When I carve, I am guided by the beauty and by the configuration of the material. For example, when I use wood, I might exaggerate the form to bring out a little more of the grain." Where can you see the artist's interest in material coming through in this sculpture? How does the material relate to the meaning of the work?
3. How does Catlett's *Ife* compare to other reclining nude women from Western art history such as Manet's *Olympia* and Ingres' *Grande Odalisque*?
4. How does Catlett's *Ife* compare to Andrews's *The Intruder*? How does the material of each affect your comparison?





Rashid Johnson (American, b. 1977)

### ***Black Hole***, 2015

Branded red oak flooring, black soap, wax and spray enamel

Gift of Paul & Dedrea Gray, Chicago, in memory of Amy L. Brandt (1978–2015), the McKinnon Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Chrysler Museum of Art from 2011 to 2015, 2016.21 © Rashid Johnson

Humble wooden flooring becomes a dynamic artwork at the hands of Rashid Johnson. **Black soap** and wax, a combination he refers to as “cosmic slop,” begins as a melting, liquid material that solidifies as a textured surface. This process allows for gestural mark-making similar to painting, such as the work of the **Abstract Expressionists**. Additional marks, resembling gun sights, are made through branding the wooden panel, a loaded symbolic act referencing the marking of enslaved workers as property and a practice of some contemporary African American fraternities.

Johnson’s materials come from a personal place. As an African American man, he understands and accepts that his work will be viewed within the larger context of the black experience in America, though he rejects the notion that this is a monolithic experience. However, the choice of wax, soap, and, in other works, shea butter comes from his own use and connections of the materials in everyday life.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you think is the black hole the artist refers to in the title? How does the title relate to the composition and your interpretation of the work?
2. Imagine the gestures of the artist as he creates this work: the act of branding and the application of the black soap and wax. Do you see the physicality of the process in the final creation?
3. Johnson uses materials that evoke the senses, especially texture and smell. How do you imagine the studio smells as the artist creates a work like this? Do you think it lingers on the artwork? How does this compare to other artmaking forms?





Whitfield Lovell (American, b. 1959)

***Freedom*, 2001**

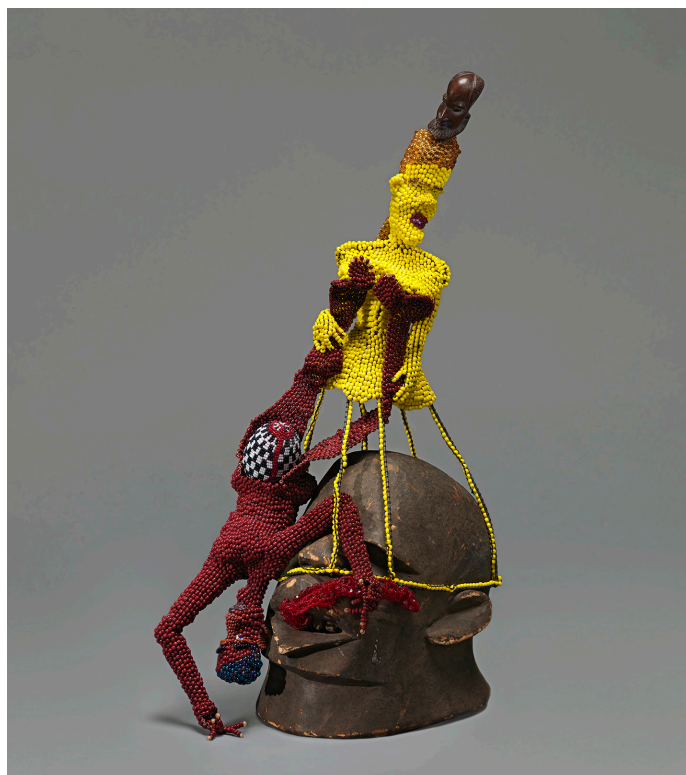
Charcoal on wood with rifle

Gift of Paul and Susan Hirschbiel, Fran and Lenox Baker, Ashlyn and David Brandt, Roger and Marion Johnson Lidman, Mr. and Mrs. Frederick V. Martin, Dr. Robert and Judy Rubin, Edwin Epstein, Susan R. O'Neal, Lynn and Wayne Goodman, Ann Dearsley Vernon, Mrs. J. Paul Reason and Museum purchase, 2002.<sup>14</sup> © Whitfield Lovell courtesy of DC Moore Gallery

Whitfield Lovell creates his **assemblages** from worn wallboards and floorboards that he finds in old houses and barns. He then draws life-size portraits of anonymous African Americans in charcoal, which he bases on nineteenth- and twentieth-century tintypes, photographs, and postcards that he discovers at flea markets and antique shops. The artist describes these figures as “poignant, familiar images...stand-ins for my own ancestors. These people were defining themselves through their ability to own and define their own space.” With its juxtaposition of the man and gun, *Freedom* raises questions about the status and position of the man depicted.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why might the artist choose to create his artworks on used architectural remnants? How does that affect your understanding of the piece?
2. How do you feel about the inclusion of the rifle? Who is the user? On whom is it meant to be used? How does the presence of an actual weapon in the gallery space make you feel?
3. Why do you think Lovell titles this work *Freedom*? Who is free and from what? Is it actual freedom? Aspirational freedom?



Joyce J. Scott (American, b. 1948)

### ***Yaller Girl*, 2006**

Beadwork, wood, and mixed media

Museum purchase, 2016.36.1

“My work is politically and socially oriented because that’s what keeps me up at night. It’s important to me to use art in a manner that incites people to look and carry something home—even if it’s subliminal—that might make a change in them.” Joyce Scott uses intricately stitched glass beads to tell difficult stories rendered beautiful. Her technique involves no internal armature, and she works intuitively without preparatory drawings. The delicate glass beads may also reference the long history of using beads as a bartering tool during the exploitive trade practices between Europe and Africa.

The title derives from the racial classification of “high yellow,” signifying a person of biracial ancestry with fair skin. This term is loaded in its connotations of racial hierarchy and relations among Americans of African and European ancestry. Through portraying charged subject matter, the artist hopes to encourage viewers to think critically about their beliefs and behaviors.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Beadwork is typically associated with jewelry making. How does the artist use it in a sculptural way? Why do you think she chooses beads as a common medium for her work?
2. Why do you think the artist incorporates the contemporary African sculpture? How does it contribute to the story or meaning presented? These objects were made for the tourist trade rather than as cultural artifacts. Does that change your interpretation?
3. What do you think of the artist’s use of color? Why do you think she selected these colors? Why is color such a powerful tool for an artist?



Nick Cave (American, b. 1959)

### ***Soundsuit*, 2010**

Mixed media

Museum purchase with funds from the Friends of African American Art and Walter P. Chrysler, Jr., by exchange, 2012.4 © Nick Cave. Photo by James Prinz. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, N.Y.

Nick Cave's soundsuits are made out of diverse materials—from twigs, sequins, and buttons to toys, metal birds, and flowers. They reference puppetry, suits of armor, and extreme fashion. Although his work is displayed as sculpture, similar works were worn by Cave in elaborate **performances**. Those soundsuits connect his practice with masquerade traditions across West Africa and Caribbean and Brazilian carnival customs.

The suits appear cheerful, especially because of the toys, but their exuberance often hints at more somber themes. Cave made his first soundsuit during the Rodney King trial and Los Angeles race riots of 1992, when the artist was reflecting on his own identity as an African American. He explained, "I built this sort of suit of armor, and by putting it on, I realized that I could make a sound from moving in it... It made me think of ideas around protest, and how we should be a voice and speak louder." While offering the wearer

protection, escape, and freedom from daily bias, the soundsuits also combine references to the visibility and invisibility of peoples.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What parts of ourselves do we project to the world and which ones do we hide? Why do we make these decisions? Are they conscious or subconscious?
2. Not only does Nick Cave use different textures and materials in his work, but he also includes the element of sound. How would this suit sound if it were in motion? How would the experience of this artwork be different?
3. Discuss the materials that the artist uses. What associations do you have with crochet and toys? How do those apply to this artwork? Why might an adult male artist choose materials linked to feminine artmaking (such as textiles and crafts) and children?





## SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES (RESPONSES)

1. Challenge yourself to create artwork with atypical materials. Gather supplies from around your home and try to create a work of art that tells a story. How does your choice of materials affect the story you are telling?
2. Find another work in the Chrysler Museum collection (search at [chrysler.org](http://chrysler.org)) that uses non-traditional materials. Compare and contrast this work with one of the pieces discussed in this guide. What similarities and differences can you find?

## VOCABULARY

**Abstract Expressionism:** an American art movement developed in the 1950s that is characterized by gestural mark-making (with or without a brush), the expression of emotion, and the impression of spontaneity

**Assemblage:** art made by assembling different elements – often everyday objects sourced by the artist

**Black soap:** a healing, plant-based soap mixed with ash; traditionally from the country of Ghana

**Medium (pl. media):** materials or techniques used for creating an art object

**Performance art:** artworks created through actions performed by the artist or other participants

**Site-specific installation:** a work of art designed by an artist in response to a unique space. The appearance or meaning changes when placed in a different space or context.

**Texture:** the look and feel of a surface. Artists can use physical texture (how an artwork actually feels) or implied texture (a visual representation of a physical texture).



## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### BOOKS IN THE JEAN OUTLAND CHRYSLER LIBRARY

[Gee's Bend: The Women and their Quilts](#)

[Sam Gilliam](#)

[Sam Gilliam: Of Fireflies and Ferris Wheels](#)

[Benny Andrews: There Must be a Heaven](#)

[American Icons: From Madison to Manhattan, the Art of Benny](#)

[Andrews Elizabeth Catlett: An American Artist in Mexico](#)

[Rashid Johnson: Within our Gates](#)

[Whitfield Lovell: Kin](#)

[Joyce Scott: Harriet Tubman and Other Truths](#)

### ABOUT THE ARTISTS

[Gee's Bend Quiltmakers](#)

[Willie Cole](#)

[Sam Gilliam](#)

[Benny Andrews](#)

[Elizabeth Catlett](#)

[Rashid Johnson](#)

[Whitfield Lovell](#)

[Joyce Scott](#)

[Nick Cave](#)

### OTHER MEDIA

[Re-installing the Norfolk Keels at the Chrysler Museum](#)

[Rashid Johnson on Art21](#)

[Joyce Scott Artist Talk](#)

[Nick Cave Brings Art, Sculpture to Life with 'Sound Suits'](#)



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