

CreativeConnections

Art Themes + Works

IDENTITY + MUTU

VIEW



Let us begin with careful looking. Using our eyes, let's spend one whole minute silently seeing what we notice. Scan the image. What stands out? What are you drawn to? Look for light, shadow, shapes, and lines. What can you identify? What appears mysterious? Is there anything you notice after looking for one minute that you did not see at first glance?

Wangechi Mutu

(Kenyan, active United States, born 1972)

Water Woman, 2017

Bronze

36 x 65 x 70 in., 400 lb.

Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;
Purchased with funds from the Edmundson Art
Foundation, Inc., 2017.25

Photo Credit: Rich Sanders, Des Moines
Copyright Wangechi Mutu Courtesy the artist
and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

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DIG

Looking at a piece of artwork makes our eye and brains notice and think many things. Look at the artwork again on page one and write down things that your eyes notice by answering the question, "What is going on in this work of art?" Then listen to what your brain thinks and answer the question, "What makes you say that?" to help you look for supporting clues and to help you understand what you see and think about this work of art.

What is going on in this work of art?	What makes you say that?

Which question was more difficult to answer? Why do you think that is?

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DISCUSS

Who do you think this creature might be? Identity is who you are, the way you think about yourself, the way you are viewed by the world and the characteristics that define you. How would you describe this sculpture's identity?

Describe the expression on *Water Woman's* face. How would you describe the body if you were talking to someone who has never seen it before? Describe her hair. Does looking closely or talking about these details change how you see this creature's identity?

If she was a character in a movie or story, what do you think is happening at this moment? Can you imagine her springing into action, or do you think she is relaxed and daydreaming? What might happen next?

The artist chose to create this sculpture using a luminous charcoal color. What would change if it was sculpted in gold, or in white marble, or a dull dark color?

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MATERIALS

Paper

Pencil

Crayons, Markers
or Colored Pencils

CREATE

ASSIGNMENT #1

My Identity as a Creature | Visual Arts

Think about your own identity and use your imagination to create a fantastical creature inspired by you!

INSTRUCTIONS

The first step in creating your identity creature is to spend some time thinking about your identity. Make a list of words that describe you and things that you love or are interested in. What is your favorite color? What are your hobbies? How would other people describe you? What do you like most about yourself? Try to make a list of at least five words.

The next step is to turn your words into pictures, images, or colors. In a column next to your list, think of how you could visually represent each word. For example, next to the word “caring” you could draw a big heart, next to the word “creative” you could draw lots of patterns, next to the word “smart” you could draw a book, next to the word “funny” you could draw a laughing mouth. Use your imagination and make a list of images that you will put together to create a creature.

Now that you have a list of pictures, images, and colors, find a creative way to put them together to create a wild creature! If you drew a basketball, could it be the creature’s head or body? If you listed your favorite color, will you color your creature’s hair, clothes, or body that color? Think of your list of words and pictures like puzzle pieces and the creature you are making is the puzzle. There is no wrong way to make your creature drawing.

Color your creature however you like, add whatever details that you think your creature needs — it’s okay if they are not on your list. Draw a setting around your creature. Where do you think they live or where would they like to travel? Keep drawing until your creature feels done.

Do you think that your creature symbolizes your identity? Do you think that your friends would be able to tell that creature is yours? Would it remind people of you or would it surprise them? Do you think you could draw an identity creature for someone else that you know very well? Was it easier or more difficult starting a drawing from thoughts and words before drawing?

MATERIALS

A Partner
or an Audio Recorder
Paper and Pencil

ASSIGNMENT #2

Oral Storytelling | Language Arts

Practice the art of oral story telling by sharing a favorite story.

INSTRUCTIONS

Humans have been telling stories throughout our entire history. In many cultures, stories are shared orally, generation to generation, which means that they are told outloud without being written down. The story of the *nguva*, which inspired Wangechi Mutu to create her sculpture *Water Woman*, was a story that many people in East Africa shared orally.

Oral storytelling is not just a thing of the past, or a thing that just takes place in other cultures. It is still something that we do, all over the world, all of the time. It is something that you can do too, and you are going to practice in this activity.

In this activity you will share a story that you already know. You can share this story with a partner, a family member, or record yourself telling your story.

The first step is to decide which story you would like to share. Will it be a story from your own life, something that you have experienced, or a memory? Will you share a fairytale or folktale that you know very well, like *Jack and the Beanstalk*, the *Three Little Pigs*, or *Little Red Riding Hood*? You could even tell the story that happens in your favorite book or cartoon.

Now that you have picked your story, think about the important parts that you need to remember when telling it. Who are the important characters? Where and when does the story take place? Is there an important lesson in the story? How does it end?

You are now ready to tell your story! When sharing with your partner or recording, use voices for different characters — this expresses the mood and action of the story. The more expressive our stories are, the easier they are for the listeners to remember and pass on to others. Great stories can live on forever!

How did it feel to tell a story that you knew well? Did any part of the storytelling surprise you? Now listen to your partner tell you their story or share your recording with someone else.

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RELATE

[Listen](#) to Wangechi Mutu's daughter, or [read](#) a story of Wangechi as an artist about how and why Wangechi created *Water Woman*, and about the cultural mythology that inspired the sculpture. Compare the nguva to mermaids in books you've read or movies you've watched. How are the two characters alike and different? What surprises you? What does this sculpture tell us about the culture in which it was created? What are the fantastical stories from your culture?

The artist was given the special honor to create several sculptures for display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. The link below will take you to an article about Wangechi's recent work. It includes both an audio and a video interview in which the artist talks about the relationship between her sculptures and her identity.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2019/facade-commission-wangechi-mutu>

What do the sculptures of African women reveal about the artist, Wangechi Mutu? What does the artist value? What does the artist consider to be beautiful? How can you tell?

Let's use our imagination and pretend to be this *Water Woman*. If you can, stretch out on the floor in the same pose. You can try to make the same face. Then think about the following questions.

What are you thinking?

What emotions are you feeling inside?

What are you looking at?

What might you care about or value?

Since *Water Woman* is a sculpture, it is three-dimensional and we can walk around it. It can also be placed in different environments. Look at the sculpture displayed in [different settings](#). How does the environment affect the sculpture? Do the different angles change how you see it?

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WONDER

Now that you have spent time viewing and thinking about Wangechi Mutu's sculpture *Water Woman*, what do you still wonder about this work? If you could ask the artist or the sculpture anything, what would you want to know most? Use the question starters below to write three questions.

Why is...	I am curious about...	What part....	Are we...
Who is...	How did you...	What if...	Is she...
Where...	Did you know...	Suppose that...	Do you...

My questions about Wangechi Mutu's *Water Woman*:

1.

2.

3.