

LESSON THREE: Translating Traditions



IMAGE TEN: Francis Alÿs (Belgian, born 1959). *Modern Procession*. 2003. Two-channel video (color, sound), 12 min. Gift of the Silverweed Foundation. Photo: Eric Weiss/ Matt Suib/Dennis Cowley. © 2009 Francis Alÿs



IMAGE ELEVEN: Cai Guo-Qiang (Chinese, born 1957). *Drawing for Transient Rainbow*. August 2003. Gunpowder on two sheets of paper, overall 14' 11" x 13' 4 ½" (454.7 x 405.1 cm). Fractional and promised gift of Clarissa Alcock Bronfman. © 2009 Cai Guo-Qiang



IMAGE TWELVE: Yinka Shonibare (British, born 1962). *How Does a Girl Like You Get to Be a Girl Like You?* 1995. Installation of three costumes of wax-printed cotton textiles, tailored by Sian Lewis, 66" high (approx.). Gift of Agnes Gund. Photograph courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York. © 2009 Yinka Shonibare

INTRODUCTION

The works in this lesson address how artists around the world adopt creative processes and subject matter from their own and others' cultural traditions into their artmaking practices. Francis Alÿs was born in Belgium and now lives in Mexico, culling inspiration from Latin American street **processions** as well as those of his native country, while Cai Guo-Qiang, who was born in China, lived in Japan, and now resides in New York, uses ancient Chinese materials and rites together with new technologies in his large-scale projects. Both artists have combined their native or adopted cultural traditions with other elements to make artwork celebrating The Museum of Modern Art's move from Manhattan to Queens, New York, in 2002. Yinka Shonibare, a British artist who grew up in Nigeria, examines the economic and social relationships of the colonial era as well as European and African fashion design to comment on contemporary life and politics.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will learn how artists explore personal, cultural, and national identity through materials, process, and tradition.
- Students will see how contemporary artists have adapted historic, culturally specific artmaking practices to the present day.
- Students will begin to consider the role of politics and religion in contemporary art.

INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

- Ask your students what tradition means to them. What are some of the traditions—cultural, religious, or personal—that are part of their lives? How have some of these traditions changed or been updated over the years, if at all?
- Ask your students to name some ways in which objects, events, or people are honored. Ask them to share what they know about different celebratory traditions. What kinds of objects, or props, are sometimes used?
- What are some of the holidays your students celebrate that are derived from their cultural or national heritages?

IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

- Ask your students to describe what a procession is. On what occasions do processions take place? What do they celebrate or honor? Have they ever participated in one?
- Show your students *Modern Procession*, by Francis Alÿs (Image Ten), and ask them to describe what they see.
- Ask your students if they can guess what Alÿs is paying homage to in *Modern Procession*.
- How does this procession differ from the processions they are familiar with?

Inform your students that processions often pay tribute to a religious figure, a national or cultural hero or cause, an event in the natural world, a religious or secular holiday (such as the Thanksgiving and Christmas parades in New York City), or a funeral or wedding. In Mexico, where Alÿs lives, the Virgin of Guadalupe is a venerated religious figure. Members of processions in her honor carry palanquins—structures that support an icon, effigy, body, or statue—and may be accompanied by a band, horses, dogs, or showers of rose petals. Some such rituals are associated with hunting, the seasons, or agriculture, while others are dedicated to military, patriotic, or athletic events or heroes. Carrying objects or effigies over a long distance through various communities and sacred sites is a common feature of processions around the world.

Alÿs was asked to create an event to celebrate The Museum of Modern Art's temporary move from Manhattan to Long Island City, Queens, New York, in June 2002, when the Museum was undergoing a large-scale renovation. Alÿs asked various artists and craftspeople in Mexico to replicate works of art from MoMA's collection, and the copies were carried on platforms by volunteers through the streets of Manhattan and across the Queensboro Bridge to MoMA's temporary home.

Draw your students' attention to the **replica** in the picture of the tall, spindly statue *Standing Woman* (1948), by Swiss artist Alberto Giacometti. *Standing Woman* is a well-known work of art in MoMA's collection.

- Ask your students to describe the difference between an original and a replica. Where are originals of an object often found? What is the purpose of a copy? Ask your students to name some examples of original and replicated objects that are part of their everyday lives.

- For *Modern Procession* Alÿs commissioned Mexican artisans to make replicas of works of art originally made many years ago, such as Giacometti's sculpture from 1948. Why might he have used replicas instead of the actual artworks in his procession?

Inform your students that the original works of art are too valuable and fragile to be carried outside in a procession.

Now show your students *Drawing for Transient Rainbow*, by Cai Guo-Qiang (Image Eleven), without telling them the title.

- Ask your students to describe what they see. Can they tell what materials the artist has used to create this work of art?

Tell your students the title of the work.

- Ask them in what ways, if any, this image resembles a rainbow. Discuss the meaning of "transient." How are rainbows transient?

Like Alÿs, Cai created a work in honor of MoMA's move in 2002. He exploded fireworks across the section of the East River that runs between the boroughs of Manhattan and Queens and thus between MoMA's home and its new temporary residence. *Drawing for Transient Rainbow*, created in 2003, is a record of the fireworks explosion (called *Transient Rainbow*) over the East River.

Show your students the video recording of the fireworks in the 2002 Projects section of Cai's Web site, at www.caiguoqiang.com/project_video.php?id=50&iid=355.

- Ask your students to name some things they associate with fireworks. Where and when do they see fireworks? What are some characteristics of fireworks? Under what circumstances are they used today?

Tell your students that in China, where Cai was born and studied until 1986, when he emigrated to Japan (he moved to New York in 1995), every significant social occasion—weddings, funerals, a new home, an important speech—is marked by the explosion of fireworks. Gunpowder was discovered in the ninth century in China, during alchemical experiments to make medicine, and since then it has been used to make fireworks.

For *Transient Rainbow* Cai paired tradition with contemporary life, history with transience, and fragility with destruction. He used one thousand multicolored peony fireworks fitted with computer chips, combining an old material with new technology. Cai culled thousands of years of historical tradition for an event that lasted a fleeting fifteen seconds.

To make *Drawing for Transient Rainbow*, Cai used paper, another Chinese invention, for a support, contrasting the fragility of the medium with the destructive power of gunpowder.

- Based on what they can observe, how do your students think Cai made *Drawing for Transient Rainbow*?

To make the drawing Cai placed a large piece of paper on a fireproof floor. Then he laid piles of gunpowder on top of the paper and laid another piece of paper on top. Next, he weighted it down and lit a fuse, which soon triggered the gunpowder to explode. When the smoke cleared, the artist and his assistants removed the top piece of paper and put out the sparks. The resulting marks show where the paper burned. At the top they arch upward like a rainbow, and at the bottom they arch downward, just as the rainbow colors of the fireworks had been reflected in the East River in the earlier outdoor event.

Show your students the short video *Drawing with Gunpowder* on the PBS Art:21 Web site, at <http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/cai/index.html#>.

Transient Rainbow was the first explosion project in New York since the attacks of September 11, 2001. Cai saw his public fireworks display as an opportunity to bring diverse traditions and people together. He acknowledges that, like gunpowder, fireworks have destructive power, but fireworks displays break down social barriers and create meaningful interactions between viewers.⁶

- Ask your students how both artists' works incorporate tradition in a nontraditional way.

- In what ways do the celebrations reflect the role of art in our culture?

- Ask your students to describe some of the ways they capture events in order to share them with people in the future.

These works by Alÿs and Cai were events. Next we will look at an artist whose work takes the form of **installations**.

Show your students *How Does a Girl Like You Get to Be a Girl Like You?* (Image Twelve), by Yinka Shonibare.

- Ask your students to describe the figures in the installation. What are they wearing? What time period do they appear to be from?
- Have your students focus on the colors and patterns of the fabrics as well as the style of the dresses. Can they tell by looking where these patterns come from? Where have they seen this style of dress before?

Shonibare presents three female mannequins wearing dresses with bustles (gathered skirts held above the women's buttocks with large coiled springs or even horsehair bags). This style was fashionable in the **Victorian** period in England (1837–1901). The design requires layers of expensive fabric, so only wealthy women wore them.

England began to establish colonies overseas in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and the Netherlands in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They took over territories in the Americas and Asia, then turned their attention to Africa.

Although printed fabrics like the ones on Shonibare's figures were not popular in Europe, the Dutch and the British began to manufacture them in the nineteenth century to chall-

6. Cai Guo-Qiang, "Interview: Octavio Zaya in Conversation with Cai Guo-Qiang" in *Cai Guo-Qiang*, by Cai Guo-Qiang, Dana Friis-Hansen, Octavio Zaya, and Serizawa Takashi (London: Phaidon, 2002), 14–16.

enge Indonesian **batik** production and sales to Africa. West Africa became the most profitable market for cloth from these European countries. Shonibare’s richly patterned costumes of **wax-print cotton** refer to the “Genuine Dutch Wax” or “Super Wax from Manchester” fabrics popular among West African women beginning in the nineteenth century.

- **What do your students think it means to use this cloth to make Victorian-style clothing?**

Today in West Africa women communicate their power, wealth, sex appeal, and political or social stances through the wax-print cotton dresses they wear. The colors and patterns communicate a code: some cloth signals authenticity, while other patterns comment on sexual, political, or social issues. Though the prints are associated with African aesthetics, the style is Victorian. Shonibare has dressed up African women to look like members of British aristocracy while acknowledging that he has invented a historically false role for them.

- **Ask your students how clothing can express an idea. What does clothing tell them about the wearer’s personality? How accurate is clothing in communicating its wearer’s character?**
- **What might Shonibare be trying to communicate by using mannequins with no heads?**

Inform your students that Shonibare has conceived of the headless figures in many ways. Incorporating humor into his work, he seeks to undermine stereotypes. He has said that he conceived of the headless figures as a joke related to the killing by guillotine of aristocrats in the French Revolution.⁷ By removing the heads, the artist also expresses how Africans and people of African descent have been objectified, like mannequins in a shop window. In addition, Shonibare shows that propriety, formality, and good behavior can be thrown off-balance—a person can look proper and then “lose his head” and become absurd.⁸ Humans construct and change their identities constantly. Through attitude, dress, cultural histories, and contemporary experience, they reveal themselves to be many things at once.

Inform your students that Shonibare is Yoruban, from one of the largest West African ethnic groups, predominately located in Nigeria. The artist was born in London and educated there, but he spent his childhood in Lagos, Nigeria. He resists identification as a “Nigerian artist,” and, like the other artists in this lesson, he creates work using elements from diverse aesthetic traditions. As art historian John Picton has noted, Shonibare attempts to make work about contemporary life in London, to challenge “stereotypes, most especially of black and African people in the so-called West.”⁹

7. Deborah Sontag, “Headless Bodies from a Bottomless Imagination,” *New York Times*, June 17, 2009.

8. National Gallery of Victoria, Australia, “Artists Interview: Yinka Shonibare,” Crossing Borders Online Education Resource (video), Yinka Shonibare, www.ngv.vic.gov.au/crossingborders/interview/yinka_interview.html (accessed June 6, 2009).

9. John Picton, “Understanding Ethnicity,” *African Arts*, Autumn 2001: 2.

ACTIVITIES

Fashion Plates

Ask your students to consider the clothes they are wearing. How do their outfits help define who they are? In what ways do their clothes fail to communicate or even contradict their personal identities?

Public Art

Divide your class into small groups and ask each one to conceive a public art project that acknowledges a significant occasion or holiday. Ask them to describe the occasion. How can they transform those characteristics into a memorable event? Where will it take place? Will they use traditional celebratory customs or invent new ones? How will these coexist?

Research an Artist

Ask your students to research Shahzia Sikander, a contemporary artist who combines **aesthetic** traditions with contemporary imagery. Have your students explore an interview with the artist featured on the homepage of Red Studio, MoMA’s site for teens, at www.moma.org/redstudio. Ask each student to choose a work of art by Sikander and describe the elements that represent tradition and those that address contemporary issues. Some elements might do both.

Cai Guo-Qiang designed the fireworks display for the opening ceremonies at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Show your students the video *Beijing 2008 Olympic Games Fireworks Rehearsal* on YouTube. Ask them to research how these fireworks are different from *Transient Rainbow*.