

## Themes in the Collection

A theme is a recurring subject or concern. In the arts, themes reveal a society's attitudes and values and help define tradition. Some themes are universal. Other themes are linked to a specific culture. Artists incorporate themes to have an impact on our understanding of art and the world.

In contemporary art, themes are essential to both the artist and the viewer because of the communicative nature of contemporary work. The environmental work of Andy Goldsworthy emphasizes themes of place, ecology, time, and the ephemeral nature of art. The sculptural work of Maya Lin focuses on loss, memory, and protest. In the work of photographer Cindy Sherman, one sees humor, paradox, and satire. The ready-made artworks of Jeff Koons tend to focus on consumption and identity. In other works, spirituality, romance, power, empathy, and the story appear as underlying themes.

On the following pages are themes addressed with the works in the *Art Speaks* Collection. These themes include: humor, a sense of place, the environment, story, identity, and spirituality. Through the consideration of some of these themes explored on the following pages, a deeper understanding of contemporary works may arise.



**Theme: Humor**

Artists create images with the intent of adding levity to a scene or situation.

**Art Speaks Artwork and Artist**

*James Gallagher as George Washington*, 1992, by David Graham

**Additional Contemporary Sources**

- Charles Atlas—An artist who reinterprets dance, theater, and performance on video using narrative and fictional techniques. ([the-artists.org/artist/Charles\\_Atlas](http://the-artists.org/artist/Charles_Atlas))
- Karl Baden—A photographer who creates images of juxtaposed everyday objects and faces: “I was interested in humor, but also in its opposite, and hoped my pictures were both funny and a little scary.” ([www.lightwork.org/exhibitions/past/baden](http://www.lightwork.org/exhibitions/past/baden))
- Christopher “Lucky” Leone—A painter, sculptor, and installation and video artist who is interested in experimentation and invention. ([www.tfaoi.com/aa/2aa/2aa495.htm](http://www.tfaoi.com/aa/2aa/2aa495.htm))
- Elizabeth Murray—Her boldly colored paintings show domestic themes with humorous elements, including floating eyeballs and cartoonish fingers, and express a fascination with dream states. ([www.pbs.org/art21/artists/murray](http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/murray))
- Jeffu Warmouth—A photo, video, and installation artist who combines images in unusual ways in pieces such as *Day of the Cabbage*, *Cereal Reef*, and *Kitchen Craze*. ([www.jeffu.tv](http://www.jeffu.tv))

**Essential Questions**

- How would you define “humor”?
- What are some of the components of humor?
- What art forms do you typically associate with humor?
- How is humor a means of expression?
- How does humor make a viewer of art more receptive to a work of art or an art exhibition?
- How can humor be used to deliver a serious message?
- What are some of the challenges in creating art that is humorous?

**Activities**

- Create a visual image combining a portrait of a famous contemporary figure with elements of humor. Be sure to express parts of the person’s personality and profession in a humorous way in the image. Use collage and mixed media.
- Find a newspaper or magazine article that tells a story that interests you. Depict the story in a humorous way, using the art medium of your choice. Incorporate words from the story in your final image.

## Theme: A Sense of Place

Artists communicate their connection to the natural world and express their relationship to their community.

### Art Speaks Artwork and Artist

*Early Light*, 1984, by Vincent Ceglia

### Additional Contemporary Sources

- Randall Exon—A painter who often represents landscapes in his evocative work.  
([www.swarthmore.edu/Humanities/art/Faculty/randy/rexon.htm](http://www.swarthmore.edu/Humanities/art/Faculty/randy/rexon.htm))
- Margaret Gerding—A New England landscape artist who explores natural light and the subtle color relationships in the natural world.  
([www.greenhutgalleries.com](http://www.greenhutgalleries.com))
- Ogden Museum of Southern Art—Nationally recognized artists represented in the Ogden Museum of Southern Art were selected to conduct four-week residencies at their neighborhood schools. By responding to their own surroundings, artists incorporated a sense of place in their work.  
([www.ogdenmuseum.org/education/artist-place](http://www.ogdenmuseum.org/education/artist-place))
- Celia Reisman—Her architectural suburban and imagined landscapes incorporate a rich sense of color and space.  
([www.celiareisman.com](http://www.celiareisman.com))
- Jose Torres Tama—An artist who creates multidisciplinary projects that explore the immigrant experience, the American Dream mythology, and the effects of media on our lives.  
([www.torrestama.com/](http://www.torrestama.com/))

### Essential Questions

- How do human beings connect with their landscape, neighborhood, or environment?
- How do we identify ourselves in relation to our surroundings?
- What is the relationship between folklore and a sense of place?
- How do visitors and residents view “place” differently?
- What are the differences in perceptions of place as viewed by artists, poets, musicians, politicians, and geographers?
- How do changes in modern technology affect our sense of place?
- Is there a place you feel a certain connection to, for which you feel a strong sense of place?
- What tools do we use to determine our sense of place?

### Activities

- Select a place that is special to you. It may be in or near your home, somewhere you have visited, or even a place you have seen in a dream or a story. Create a three-dimensional model of this place. Incorporate found objects in your model.



**(Activities Continued)**

- Use color in an abstract image to create a work of art that communicates the feelings you have when you are in a special place. Consider how line, shape, texture, overlapping, and blended colors will influence your design.

**Theme: The Environment**

Artists communicate the relationship between humankind and the planet and express concerns about environmental issues.

**Art Speaks Artwork and Artist**

*The Buffalo Jump Called Chugwater and an Irrigation Pivot near Wheatland, Wyoming*, 1991, by Emmet Gowin

**Additional Contemporary Sources**

- Christo and Jeanne-Claude—Artists who create monumental public works that are temporary installations, the most recent of which was *The Gates* in New York City.  
([www.christojeanneclaude.net](http://www.christojeanneclaude.net))
- Park Fiction—Leaders in environmental art and public space architecture based in Hamburg, Germany.  
([www.parkfiction.org](http://www.parkfiction.org))
- Amy Franceschini and the group Futurefarmers—These artists create exhibitions and discussions that pose a series of questions related to the issue of “Energy” and the 2008 U.S. presidential elections.  
([www.futurefarmers.com](http://www.futurefarmers.com))
- Andy Goldsworthy—An environmental sculptor whose use of natural surroundings creates a unique art form.  
([www.goldsworthy.cc.gla.ac.uk](http://www.goldsworthy.cc.gla.ac.uk))
- Aviva Rahmani—An ecological artist who focuses on environmental and social concerns through her work.  
([www.ghostnets.com/bio.html](http://www.ghostnets.com/bio.html))

**Essential Questions**

- What is our relationship with the natural world?
- How has humans’ relationship with the natural world changed over time?
- How do our lifestyles affect our relationship with the environment and what changes could be made in them to improve our environment?
- What current trends do you feel are the most critical in improving the ecology of the planet?
- How are politics related to the environment?
- What can artists do to help the environmental movement?

**Activities**

- Some people think that one of the best ways to help the environment is to curtail our consumption. Keeping this in mind, try to create a work of art that is aesthetically pleasing but uses materials that are completely sustainable, that is, use nothing new, and are environmentally friendly. Can you do it?
- Create an image that supports your views of contemporary environmental issues. Post your image on a website to share it with others.

**Theme: Story**

Artists add a narrative quality to a work of art.

**Art Speaks Artwork and Artist**

*Orpheus I*, 1997, by Paul Keene

**Additional Contemporary Sources**

- ArtsEdge at the Kennedy Center—This program supports the use of arts in K through 12 teaching curricula.  
([www.artsedge.kennedy-center.org](http://www.artsedge.kennedy-center.org))
- Rob Evans—His paintings and drawings of interiors, exteriors, nightscapes, landscapes, seascapes, still lifes, and flowers have a strong sense of mood and tell a story.  
([www.robevansart.com](http://www.robevansart.com))
- Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler—These artists collaborate to create short films and photographs using narrative elements, but without a traditional story line.  
([www.hubbardbirchler.net](http://www.hubbardbirchler.net))
- Kiki Smith—A sculptor and printmaker who incorporates nontraditional figurative work with mythology, folktales, and stories from the Catholic faith.  
([www.moma.org/exhibitions/2003/kikismith](http://www.moma.org/exhibitions/2003/kikismith))
- Nathaniel Stern—A South African artist who used multimedia art and photography as a means of expressing issues of identity in an exhibition in Johannesburg called *The Storytellers*, 2004–2005.  
([www.nathanielstern.com/2005/the-storytellers](http://www.nathanielstern.com/2005/the-storytellers))

**Essential Questions**

- How do artists tell stories through their work?
- What kinds of stories do artists tell?
- Why are stories an integral part of so many artists' works?
- How are the stories artists tell similar to the stories we read? How are they different?
- How do stories help us understand human history and culture?

## **Activities**

- Do you have a story to tell? Can you tell it without using words? Study contemporary and classical works of art that tell stories. Then, create a work of art that tells a story that is important to your life. Include details and symbols that will make it easy to understand all the complexities of the story you are telling.
- Interview a member of your family. Learn about the stories that have made his/her life more meaningful. Create Powerpoint or video images of these stories, incorporating language, still photographs, and moving images in your work.

## **Theme: Identity**

Artists emphasize the relationship between an individual or culture and an image.

### **Art Speaks Artwork and Artist**

*Jazz Series #4, Chicago Blues*, 1983, by Paul Keene

### **Additional Contemporary Sources**

- Tim Hawkinson—A sculptor who creates meticulously detailed drawings, minute constructions, inflated latex casts, and uncanny mechanical contraptions.  
([www.whitney.org/www/exhibition/feat\\_hawk.jsp](http://www.whitney.org/www/exhibition/feat_hawk.jsp))
- John Huddelston—A Middlebury College professor who photographs the American landscape, juxtaposing his new images with historical ones of the same places.  
([www.identitytheory.com/visual/huddleston.php](http://www.identitytheory.com/visual/huddleston.php))
- South Asian Visual Arts Collective—A group created to produce, present, and distribute contemporary art of the South Asian diaspora. It sponsors exhibits, talks, and workshops.  
([www.asianart.com/exhibitions/diaspora](http://www.asianart.com/exhibitions/diaspora))
- Sage Sohler—This photographer presents identity issues revolving around family, gender, travel, the surroundings, and growing up.  
([sagesohler.com](http://sagesohler.com))
- Karin Stack—A photographer whose scenes include models, paintings, and landscapes in a fabulist way, requiring the viewer to give them a second and third look.  
([www.wcma.org/press/07/07\\_Stack.shtml](http://www.wcma.org/press/07/07_Stack.shtml))

### **Essential Questions**

- What is “identity”?
- How can art depict identity?
- How does art shape identity?
- How does artwork about identity make a connection to larger world issues?
- Is identity a static or organic element in a work of art?

**(Essential Questions continued)**

- How do stereotypes relate to issues of identity?
- What are the connections between contemporary identity and history?
- How does the inclusiveness of contemporary art—that is, the inclusion of a variety of media and a variety of peoples—facilitate the presentation of identity in art work?

**Activities**

- Who are you? What are the qualities that most clearly identify you? What are the things in your life that most strongly identify you? Create a work of art in the medium of your choice that will tell as much as possible about your personal identity.
- Various groups around the world have a strong identity because of issues of age, race, gender, ethnicity, religion, and sexuality. Select a population that interests you and create a portrait of that group. Base your images on research and information, not on what you think you know about the people. Include issues that they feel are important to their identity.

**Theme: Spirituality**

Artists express their personal vision and belief systems.

**Art Speaks Artwork and Artist**

*The Journey*, c. 1990, by Selma Bortner

**Additional Contemporary Sources**

- Joseph Beuys—A performance artist who deals with the holistic and spiritual recovery of Germany after World War II.  
([www.artchive.com/artchive/B/beuys](http://www.artchive.com/artchive/B/beuys))
- Anselm Kiefer—A painter and mixed media artist who confronts spirituality and healing related to war.  
([www.artchive.com/artchive/K/kiefer](http://www.artchive.com/artchive/K/kiefer))
- Annette Messager—A European artist who transforms fragments of images and language into objects of potent expression with spiritual meaning.  
([www.moma.org/exhibitions/1995/messager](http://www.moma.org/exhibitions/1995/messager))
- Robert Smithson—His earthworks and writings have had a profound impact on sculpture and art theory for over thirty years.  
([www.robertsmithson.com](http://www.robertsmithson.com))
- Bill Viola—A video artist who produces installation art. “His works focus on universal human experiences . . . and have roots in both Eastern and Western art as well as spiritual traditions.”  
([www.billviola.com](http://www.billviola.com))

**Essential Questions**

- What does “spiritual” mean?
- How is spirituality connected to belief?
- How is spirituality connected to everyday life? How is it connected to art?
- How is making art a spiritual act?
- How can an artist depict spirituality?
- How can artists express their spirituality through their artwork?
- What are the connections in art between spirituality of the past and contemporary spirituality?
- What symbols of spirituality would you expect to find in an artist’s work?

**Activities**

- What do you believe? Create a collage using words and images to express your spiritual side.
- Define “spiritual.” Create a work of art, using the medium of your choice, incorporating elements of spirituality. Present the work to your class in a discussion format, focusing on spiritual beliefs and images that are easily recognizable and those that are unfamiliar.