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Using Art to Activate Learning in the Classroom, Part II

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Blog Series: Re/Kindling Creativity and Imagination
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In Part I of this series on "Using Art to Activate Learning in the Classroom," I discussed how the arts are powerful resources that can be used in the classroom to amplify and enhance our teaching-learning experiences. As social practices, the visual arts enable us to give language to how we are being *in* and *with* the world—for engaging meaning-in-the-making, to paraphrase Allan de Souza.[1] As witnesses to relationships, artworks expand our awareness of the complexities that give rise to our current contexts, thus opening up space to investigate, translate, decipher, reconfigure, and conjure new worlds. As educational tools, they allow for an "uncoercive rearrangement of our desires."[2] Used in the classroom, the arts give rise to speculative imagination, integration of embodied, affective, and intellectual knowledge.

I also explored some ways to introduce works of visual art into our pedagogical practices by discussing with teacher-learners the form, context, and content of the artwork. As we "enter" works of visual art, we will notice that they not only cross disciplines, allowing for connections, insights, and new meanings to emerge, but they also impact us sensorially. In other words, our intellectual, embodied, and emotional selves are activated as we engage with visual images. This is one of the reasons why using creative arts in the classroom is so generative: they let us dive into deep and integrative experiences, inclusive of nonverbal and preverbal ways of knowing, self-expression, participation, multi-sensorial connection, *conscientização*, personal and communal growth, and so much more. And to be able to absorb, discuss, and write about

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these experiences we need to practice sensing, probing, and staying with the images in order to reach such meanings with clarity and perceptiveness.

In what follows, you will read a fellow teacher-learner's response to Lorna Simpson's *Waterbearer*. Eruke Ohwofasa is a PhD student in Comparative Theology and Philosophy at Claremont School of Theology and she wrote this reflection within the context of the class "Visual Arts, Spirit, and Place." Here is how Simpson's work reverberated for her—notice how her analysis of the work's **form** gives rise to **interpretation:**

> *Waterbearer* by Lorna Simpson (1986), 5 gelatin silver prints in a frame, 15 plates engraved plastic, 24 ½ x 97 in (62.2 x 246.4cm) overall.
>
> Lorna Simpson's piece displays the back view of a woman in front of a black background. She is wearing a white sleeveless dress baring the back of her neck that show the pronounced bones in her spine. The subject's arms are bare and extended. In the left hand, she is holding a silver water pitcher level to her hip. In her right hand she is holding a plastic jug of water extended out at her shoulder's height. Both vessels are tilted over, pouring out a stream of water. Underneath the photograph are bold, black capital letters against a white background. They formulate a message in three lines that reads: "SHE SAW HIM DISAPPEAR BY THE RIVER/THEY ASKED HER TO TELL WHAT HAPPENED/ ONLY TO DISCOUNT HER MEMORY."
>
> The name of the work, *Waterbearer,* suggests that the central figure in this work is also a source of water. Like the two vessels, she too is a vessel of water. Here, the symbolism of water is multilayered. Properties often associated with water are lifegiving, soothing, and calm, yet water also possesses the power to move any element out of its way, even rearranging the earth if it so chooses. Waves, rain, waterfalls, and oceans contain water. Water cleanses, refreshes, hydrates, and provides elements for sustaining life. The subject in this artwork is captured pouring out water from different containers, simultaneously. Such containers are usually used to capture water to be used for consumption. Water from a plastic jug is poured into another vessel like a cup or a bowl. Water from a silver pitcher indicates an elegance or formal setting, where water may be poured into china or crystal glasses. The artist has decided to make the distinctions of the vessels very clear. We notice, however, that the water from each vessel is being poured onto the ground, invoking an interesting response from the viewer: we may tense up as we assume that water is being "wasted."
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> The boldness of the letters indicates they are congruent with the image and function strategically to convey the artist's intention. It is implied that the waterbearer is the "she" who witnessed the disappearance, the one asked to tell the story, and the same one who was discounted and ignored. The woman's water can be interpreted as what she has seen, heard, experienced, and witnessed: her

> memory. These elements contain the properties of water as life and power. Learning her water is discounted conveys a sense of grief and loss. The naming, caption, and motion of the piece indicates that the woman deserves to be listened to. The brightness of her dress against a black and muted background draws the eye straight to her. The artist's decision to hide her face can be read as a commentary on her invisibility; yet this pictorial configuration wants very much for the woman to be *seen* and more importantly, *valued*. Her strength is shown in her arms that carry the water. Her abundance is shown by the multitude of vessels displayed. Her generosity is shown by the multiple streams of water being poured out. Her water, memory, and value are dismissed, underutilized, and explicitly discounted. The water and the memory fall to the ground. The viewer, much like the words narrate, is left longing, contending with both the loss of her water, her memory, the disappearance, and the grief of one's inability to value her story. She is the waterbearer.

As Ohwofasa demonstrates in her writing, there are deep cross-threads that the image elicited to her. Her careful analysis confers visibility to a body that has been erased, discounted. By her looking, sensing, and writing, several layers of meaning have been unearthed to unsettle and reveal that which may be disregarded at first sight. As sites for world-making and choreographing new possibilities of being, the visual arts are capable of cultivating in us an orientation and openness toward that which we have othered, forgotten, disposed of, or lost. It is my hope that this two part-reflection on using art to activate learning has sparked a desire to co-weave imaginative webs within our teaching and learning practices.

[1] Allan de Souza, *How Art Can Be Taught: A Handbook for Change* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 25, 28.

[2] Gayatri C. Spivak as quoted in Allan de Souza's *How Art Can Be Taught,* 60.

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