

Craft Contemporary

IN-PERSON Lesson Plan Diorama Drama

Essential Question How can we use a range of materials to create a three-dimensional diorama artwork which tells a story including elements inspired by our own identity and culture?

Grade 6th - 12th (lesson plan will be scaled depending on grade level and lesson time)

Time 2 hours

Please note: Groups larger than 25 students may be divided into two. One group will start with the workshop and the other will start in the galleries. After 1 hour the groups will switch for the remaining hour.

Art Concepts Assemblage, sculpture, surrealism, diorama, collage

Materials Diorama box (a small shoe box), collage materials, model magic, tacky glue, pipe cleaners/wire, mixed media assemblage objects, string/thread or ribbon, fabric, scissors, pencils, tape (optional) coloring tools (markers, pencils, crayons, etc.)

Artworks/Exhibition in Focus *Lezley Saar: Diorama Drama* exhibition

Vocabulary

Installation - The term installation art is used to describe large-scale, mixed-media constructions, often designed for a specific place. Installation artworks often occupy an entire room or gallery space that the viewer walks through or around to engage with the work of art.

Diorama - a scene represented by objects in the form of people, animals, or things, often placed in front of a painted background. Dioramas can be miniature, like the ones we are going to make, or life size!

Assemblage - A work of art made by assembling or grouping found or collected objects – often everyday objects that are scavenged by the artist or bought specially.

Surrealism - The word surreal describes something that is very strange or unusual, it may have the quality of a dream and mix elements from reality and fantasy. Surrealism is an art movement from the 1920's (100 years ago). Surrealist artists often focus on taking inspiration from dreams and the unconscious mind. The strange, the weird and the wonderful!

Identity & Culture: Simply put – your identity is 'who you are'. Identity can mean different things to different people. It might include who you hang out with, what music you listen to, where you live or what ethnicity you are. Culture is a pattern of behavior shared by a society, or group of people. Many different things make up a society's culture. These things include food, language, clothing, tools, music, arts, customs, beliefs, and religion.

VISITING THE GALLERIES

Introduction

Who has been to a museum before? What are some of the do's and don'ts while we are in the galleries?

- **No touching artworks:** please help us to protect you (the students) and artworks on view by not touching artworks, or leaning against walls when visiting the galleries.
- **Look and be aware of the space around you:** we have artworks everywhere, on the walls, floor and ceiling so make sure you don't step on or bump into objects.
- **Listen to educators and each other:** we will be discussing our opinions and ideas about artworks and we want to make sure everyone's opinion is heard and respected.
- **Masks:** must be worn at all times by all students, teachers, and chaperones while indoors.
- **No food and drink in the galleries:** students must leave lunches, snacks and drinks in their bags which can be left on the bus, or stored at the front desk on arrival.

What is Craft?

Craft has been described as the skilled creation of objects, installations and other artworks using metal, fiber, glass, clay and wood. The artist we will look at today, combines many of these different materials in their art to create meaning. Craft is often collaborative and involves techniques, colors, patterns and ideas passed on between people in different cultures and communities.

We are going to look at some artworks by the artist Lezley Saar. She is an artist from Los Angeles who often creates story worlds in the form of dioramas.

What is a diorama? Have you ever seen the large dioramas at the Natural History Museum? What did they look like?

Lezley Saar was inspired by those dioramas because her father worked there when she was a child. Let's go and explore some dioramas!

Artwork 1: Lezley Saar, Diorama *The Fever Dream* (2022)

There are five large scale dioramas in this exhibition and the different wall colors and curtains define each diorama in the space. These yellow walls and green curtains frame this diorama called *The Fever Dream*.

What do you notice about this diorama? What objects/materials have been used? [Show NHM LA diorama picture] If you have seen dioramas before, how are these different? [More spaced out, people, other objects]

When creating these dioramas Saar was inspired by dioramas like the ones at the Natural History Museum but she is also inspired by the history of the diorama. Did you know that in Victorian times people displayed objects and artifacts in the form of dioramas and things called "cabinets of curiosity". During this time, objects were often taken by Europeans from colonized peoples, lands, and cultures and they were then displayed in overly simple and reductive ways which exoticized and misrepresented the cultures from which the objects and artifacts were taken.

Saar purposely allows people to interact with her dioramas; you can walk around the objects and figures. They are not closed off, and each diorama includes characters and settings that are strange, surreal, mystical and complex.

Let's take a closer look at one of the painted banners at the back of this diorama scene. Saar is often inspired by books and mythology in creating her characters and settings. Does this character remind you of a mythological character you know? Does the banner itself remind you of anything you have seen before?

This painting on fabric is shaped like a gonfalon, a flag often associated with coats of arms and special ceremonies such as graduations. Which makes the character seem important. The snake coiled high on

top of the figure's head suggests images of Medusa, a Gorgon of Greek myth, who had snakes for hair and could turn anything to stone.

Saar's artworks are given "names" rather than "titles" and typically include a short description of the character. The title for this work is: *Zerpenta Dambullah: born under the shade of a black willow tree in New Orleans in 1826 sat on a rock turning rain into tobacco smoke.*, 2019

[Partner talk] Saar often combines elements of her and her family member's identities with characters from books and mythology. If you were going to create an original character which elements of yourself, other known characters, or other people you know would you include? Together with a partner come up with a name for your character and a one sentence description similar to the way Saar has.

Artwork 2: Lezley Saar - From Diorama: *Soul Storm - Paonne, master of the direction of space and time, got blood out of a turnip yesterday from a stone he stepped on tomorrow* (2019)

This diorama is called *Soul Storm*. What do you notice about this diorama scene? What materials do you see? How is this one different/similar to the last diorama we looked at?

Lezley Saar is also inspired by outcast characters that appear in literature and different historical eras. She often uses clothing, colors, and patterns to create characters that remind us of Victorian era portrait paintings.

[Show image of Queen Victoria] Do you notice any similarities or differences between this painting and Lezley's Saar's diorama?

Saar's characters are inspired by her experience of growing up in a mixed race family, and being light skinned, which Saar describes as "outwardly white 'passing'" while some other members of her family have different skin tones. She represents many different characteristics and identities in her work. Her work challenges and defies what we (society) thinks of as "normal" by creating characters who don't fit into one category or another. None of us are just one thing. Who we are is complex and layered!

This time let's focus on the 3D characters in the diorama which Lezley Saar calls conjurers. A conjuror is similar to a sorcerer, a magician! Each of Saar's conjurers have specific abilities such as telling tales, creating illusions, possessing charms, communing with spirits and casting spells referencing voodoo and the paranormal.

Let's look at one specific character and try to figure out what their special abilities are? This conjurers name is *Paonne*. What can we learn about *Paonne* from looking at them?

Paonne is a master of the direction of space and time, so he can travel into the past and the future. Saar titled this artwork: *Paonne, got blood out of a turnip yesterday from a stone he stepped on tomorrow*.



[Drawing Activity - Students will receive a worksheet with a photo of Paonne]

Sketch a new setting for *Paonne, master of the direction of space and time*. Use your imagination to create a new story for the conjuror. You could take inspiration from other things you see in the galleries.

[Additional activity for students who finish quickly] On a separate piece of paper create your own conjurer character. Add objects, clothing and detail to tell us what their special abilities are.

[Transition - if there is time to visit the 2nd Floor - hand out crochet samples] We are going to visit an artist who uses crochet in their work. What descriptive words, moods, ideas, feelings come to mind when we think of crochet.

Artwork 3: Luis Flores [If time allows]

This is an installation artwork by Luis Flores. Can anyone tell me what they think installation art is?

The term installation art is used to describe large-scale, mixed-media constructions, often designed for a specific place. Installation artworks or 'environments' often occupy an entire room or gallery space that the viewer walks through or around to engage with the work of art.

What do you notice? What is happening?

What descriptive words, moods, ideas, feelings come to mind when we think about monster trucks? Why do you think the artist brought these things together?

Because of You, In Spite of You tells a bittersweet story with the artist's family as the main characters. Set up like a Monster Truck Rally, the exhibition begins with *Comienza en casa* (It all starts at home), a wide ramp held by mom and dad assisting their child, disguised as a monster truck, to start a bright and promising life journey.

He successfully incorporates the traditional technique of crochet to cover objects and create his figures' skin and hair, adding a soft and personable effect to the work.

The many sculptures populating the exhibition impersonate obstruction setups like those in monster rallies. In this instance, the obstructions are stagings of toxic masculinity—heavy drinking, physical and mental abuse, and a violent temper—erroneously believed to be accepted masculine attributes. Visitors can sit on the bleachers and contemplate how Flores's story plays out.

Coming into fatherhood has been a life-altering experience leading Flores to confront his childhood traumas head on, having come to the understanding that to let go of the past and to move forward is a stepping stone that benefits his children. Flores conveys his new-found optimism in works like *Triumphant Reckoning*, a trophy shaped like a monster truck covered in gold thread. It is a prize he can aspire to on the presumption that "because of you," or "in spite of you," he is free to determine what course his life and work can take.

[Sketching activity or partner talk] Sketch/imagine a design for your own installation inspired by yourself, your friends, and your family. Similar to the way that Flores represents his children as Monster Trucks you could choose other objects to represent the people in your life.

[For groups who are divided into two]

- Group 1 This may be used as inspiration for the diorama you will be making.
- Group 2 You could take inspiration from the diorama you created in the workshop.

VISITING THE WORKSHOP

Inspired by the way that Lezley Saar creates diorama scenes and characters using found objects, fabric, and other materials we will create our own miniature diorama artworks. Saar's surreal artworks are often inspired by poetry, literature and the artist's family and cultural identity. Students will create scenes inspired by themselves and their favorite books, movies, song lyrics, and dreams.

1. Start by transforming your diorama box into a place or setting using colored cardstock and paper. You can create an indoor or outdoor setting. Choose a color for your background and glue it to the inside back of your box. Now cut out details such as trees, mountains, a door, a window, etc to glue down on top of your background.
2. Create a character inspired by yourself, a member of your family, or characters from books or movies. Use your wildest imagination to select materials to make your character. You could use:
 - a. Wire - pinch, twist and bend wire into different shapes. Make a character by bending the wire (or two pipe cleaners twisted together at the ends) into the shape of a 5 point star and then twist each point of the star to make a head, two arms and two legs. Now bend and shape your character and see if you can make it stand up on it's own!
 - b. Wooden clothespins and other assemblage items - you can use a wooden clothespin to represent the legs of a character. Draw the torso and head on some cardstock and cut it out. Clip the top of your character into the clothes pin! Try finding other materials in your box to turn into different characters.
 - c. Model magic - model magic starts out squishy and moldable and dries hard. Try molding your model magic into the shape of a character. When it is dry it can be glued down inside your diorama.
3. Add details to create a narrative. How is your character interacting with the setting? Where will you place your character? What other details and objects can you add to tell your story?
4. Lezley Saar's dioramas often have many layers. There is a background and objects in the midground and foreground. Create depth in your diorama by adding details to the interior sides, top and bottom of your box. You could also hang lightweight objects by using glue or tape to secure string or ribbon to the top of your box.

Reflection

What story does your diorama represent? How does your diorama represent elements of your identity and culture? What materials did you use to create your diorama?

BEFORE/AFTER YOUR VISIT

Suggested Pre-visit / Post-visit Activity

Pre-visit

- Review vocabulary words listed in this lesson plan with students.

- Students could create an original story including setting, characters and action or write a dream journal which will inspire the diorama they create during the virtual visit.
- Students could also research their favorite books, movies, and songs and consider how they can inspire a narrative diorama project.

Post-visit

- Students may not finish all of the details during the visit and the project could be extended by giving the students an extra class to complete it and even paint the outside of the box in a way that further tells their story.
- Students could also write an original story based on the setting and character(s) in their diorama.
- Students could create an artist's statement about the artwork (including title, materials, date, description, etc.) and create a classroom diorama exhibition.

Curriculum Connections

California Arts Standards for Public Schools—Visual Arts

6.VA:Cr2.1 Demonstrate openness in trying new ideas, materials, methods, and approaches in making works of art and design.

7.VA:Re8 Interpret art by analyzing art-making approaches, the characteristics of form and structure, relevant contextual information, subject matter, and use of media to identify ideas and mood conveyed. *(Post-visit Activity)* 7.VA:Cr3 Reflect on and explain important information about personal artwork in an artist statement or another format.

8.VA:Re7.1 Explain how a person's aesthetic choices are influenced by culture, environment, and personal experiences that impacts the message it conveys to others. 8.VA:Re8 Interpret art by analyzing how the interaction of subject matter, characteristics of form and structure, use of media, artmaking approaches, and relevant contextual information contributes to understanding messages or ideas and mood conveyed.

Prof.VA:Cn11 Describe how knowledge of culture, traditions, and history may influence personal responses to art.

Acc.VA:Re8 Identify types of contextual information useful in the process of constructing interpretations of an artwork or collection of works. Acc.VA:Pr6 Make, explain, and justify connections between artists or artwork and social, cultural, and political history. Adv.VA:Cn10 Synthesize knowledge of social, cultural, historical, and personal life with art-making approaches to create meaningful works of art or design.

Adv.VA:Cn10 Synthesize knowledge of social, cultural, historical, and personal life with art-making approaches to create meaningful works of art or design.

NOTE: If you choose to do the suggested pre/post-visit writing activities, English Language Arts standards can also be incorporated.

Prepared by Billie Rae Vinson, Education Programs Manager, Craft Contemporary

ARTWORK INFORMATION

Lezley Saar, Diorama *The Fever Dream* (2022)

In **Diorama Drama**, renowned Los Angeles-based artist Lezley Saar reimagines her own artwork through a series of lush, large-scale dioramas. Throughout her career, Saar has created highly narrative, figurative works composed of multiple visual and textural layers. Here, Saar teases apart these various layers and recomposes them in the physical space of the gallery. Her painted banners and framed collages create multi-faceted backdrops for totem sculptures, which become actors in these settings. Saar's altered books and early miniature dioramas float throughout her invented environments.



Lezley Saar, *Zerpenta Dambullah: born under the shade of a black willow tree in New Orleans in 1826 sat on a rock turning rain into tobacco smoke.*, 2019. Acrylic on fabric with fringing, braided tassels, curtain rod.

<https://www.crockerart.org/collections/american-art-after-1945/artworks/zerpenta-dambullah-born-under-the-shade-of-a-black-willow-tree-in-new-orleans-in-1826-sat-on-a-rock->



This painting on fabric is shaped like a gonfalon, a flag often associated with coats of arms and ceremonies such as graduations. Elements of portraiture mix with mythology in the painting's title and in the figure's depiction. The snake coiled high on top of the figure's head suggests images of Medusa, a Gorgon of Greek myth, who had snakes for hair and could turn anything to stone.

Like her mother Betye Saar (born 1926), Lezley Saar imparts the titles of her artwork with significant meaning. Each piece, which is often a portrait, is "named" rather than "titled" and typically carries with it a short description of the figure. Lezley Saar is drawn to outcast characters that appear in literature and individuals who were forced to exist in two worlds during different historical eras. Often

working in collage and painting, she mixes mythology and literature into a visual narrative.



Lezley Saar, *The Sorcerers' Ritual* (2010)

Lezley Saar uses multiple mediums to create an imaginative and enigmatic environment inspired by the sensibility, perception, and reality of her 17-year-old Autistic daughter, Geneva. Influenced by 19th century illustrations of animals and nature, the work includes references to gothic literature, anatomy, biology, tattoos, cartoons, and Art Nouveau. Saar expertly blends symbol and allegory with imagination and wit. The artist's ethereal work questions notions of normalcy, perceptions of reality, modes of communication, and the veracity of emotions. The exhibition uses the body and soul approach of Aesop's Fables where the body is the story, and the soul is the moral.

In addition to paintings, Saar has created glass-encased dioramas resembling vintage dollhouses in which scenes from Saar's modern fables (based on things Geneva has said or done) unfold in miniature. With found landscape paintings serving as the backdrops for tales unfolding within, titles like "Sorcerer's Ritual" and "Bad Seed Boy" describe the scenes and characters inhabiting Geneva's imagination. In Saar's paintings, circular color photographs taken by the artist of vignettes within the dioramas are collaged into the paintings, as hand painted animal creatures (Geneva's numerous imaginary friends) are the ones telling the tales of humans, or the Autist's Fables.

Le Mystère de Geneviève, Saar's short film, or court métrage, is a fairy tale which is symbolically autobiographical as it relates to Geneva's journey.

In the words of Saar *"So much attention is focused on the problems of autism; the tragedy of it all, how to 'cure' it, how to ramrod these children into being 'normal.' But, I find autistic people fascinating. With Autist's Fables there's the body; my work which tells this story, and the soul; the moral which is that perhaps Autistic people should finally be accepted as they are."*



Lezley Saar, (Right) Diorama Soul Storm (Left - in center) Paonne, master of the direction of space and time, got blood out of a turnip yesterday from a stone he stepped on tomorrow (2019)

Conjurers: Typically refers to the large scale mannequins, though can also refer to her more mystical pieces as well. One of her exhibitions, a conjuring of conjurers, was all about creating the conjurers. “The concept for the exhibition was conceived after reading *A Rebours* (Against Nature) by the 19th century French author, Joris-Karl Huysmans. In this book the main character retires from society to build a fortress devoted to the exploration and worship of the senses and arts. Saar drew inspiration from this character to **create her group of conjurers, each with specific abilities such as telling tales, creating illusions, possessing charms, communing with spirits and casting spells referencing voodoo and the paranormal. The characters take their form as figurative paintings, sculptures and collages and are strategically placed within the context of the exhibition to entail different relationships and interactions.**”

EXHIBITION INFORMATION

[Lezley Saar: Diorama Drama](#)

“As a young child, I was always so fascinated by the large dioramas of animals in their wild habitat at the Natural History Museum in Los Angeles where my father worked. Come to pass, I found myself creating dioramas in the form of altered books and actual small dioramas in glass cases. The idea of creating a space, emotion, and story that one can be sucked into and hopefully transported somewhere has forever been my goal.”

*In **Diorama Drama**, renowned Los Angeles-based artist Lezley Saar reimagines her own artwork through a series of lush, large-scale dioramas. Throughout her career, Saar has created highly narrative, figurative works composed of multiple visual and textural layers. Here, Saar teases apart these various layers and recomposes them in the physical space of the gallery. Her painted banners and framed collages create multi-faceted backdrops for totem sculptures, which become actors in these settings. Saar’s altered books and early miniature dioramas float throughout her invented environments. These smaller pieces serve as visual bridges between the larger wall works and figures and amplify the complexity of Saar’s storytelling. By combining the narratives embodied in each of her works, Saar generates worlds within worlds within worlds, where the distinction between the illusional and tangible disintegrates.*

By presenting her work in this way, Saar takes on the roles of maker and collector, complicating her ongoing use of Victorian Era modes of display and aesthetics, such as dioramas and cabinets of wonder. These devices were used by European societies to exoticize, reduce, and easily categorize colonized cultures and their artifacts. Saar converts the confined structure of the diorama into a space of expansiveness. She questions the colonial legacy embedded in social constructs around race, gender, sexuality, and religion – depicting characters and places born outside of Western mainstream culture. Her figures cannot be categorized and live in her other-worldly landscapes, transcending earthly spheres. Saar's dioramas illustrate her belief in finding truth in the surreal and her agency as an artist and biracial woman to construct her own reality.

Unlike the natural history dioramas that inspired Saar as a child, there is no glass separating viewers from her various tableaux. You are welcome to enter and intimately explore Saar's settings. Just as Saar has reimagined her work through these dioramas, she offers you an opportunity to experience, reinterpret, and build your own worlds within the larger universes she has created.

This exhibition is supported in part by the Pasadena Art Alliance and Walter Maciel Gallery. Additional support is provided by the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs and the Los Angeles County Department of Arts and Culture. The museum would like to thank Shelby Lindsley for their assistance with this exhibition.

[Luis Flores: Because of You, In Spite of You](#)



*Luis Flores's reflection on themes of masculinity, fatherhood, and violence come together in his new installation, *Because of You, In Spite of You*. Not lacking humor, the installation is a rumination on the artist's internal struggle with the content and conceptual nature of his artistic practice, which is now transitioning into a form of aspirational ideology. He successfully incorporates the traditional technique of crochet to cover objects and create his figures' skin and hair, adding a soft and witty touch to address what can sometimes be painfully difficult to engage.*

Because of You, In Spite of You functions as a morality play with the artist and his family as protagonists in this bittersweet story. Set up like a Monster Truck Rally, the exhibition begins with

Comienza en casa (It all starts at home), a wide ramp held by mom and dad assisting their child, disguised as a monster truck, to start a bright and promising life journey.

*Drawing inspiration from science fiction, especially from the novel *He Who Fights with Monsters* by Shirlaloon (Travis Deverell) and its main character, Jason, Flores summons up courage and wit to battle his internal monsters while striving to turn himself from would-be victim to valiant adventurer. The many sculptures populating the exhibition impersonate obstruction setups like those in monster rallies. In this instance, the obstructions are stagings of toxic masculinity—heavy drinking, physical and mental abuse, and a violent temper—erroneously believed to be accepted masculine attributes. Visitors can sit on the bleachers and contemplate how Flores's story plays out.*

*Coming into fatherhood has been a life-altering experience leading Flores to confront his childhood traumas head on, having come to the understanding that to let go of the past and to move forward is a stepping stone that benefits his children. Flores conveys his new-found optimism in works like *Triumphant Reckoning*, a trophy shaped like a monster truck covered in gold thread. It is a prize he can aspire to on the presumption that "because of you," or "in spite of you," he is free to determine what course his life and*

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