

Monuments, Anselm Kiefer, and Reconciling our Histories

By Mark Graham

Overview

We often associate size with importance: saying something is *grand* could refer to its large size, or to its significance. Or both. The contemporary artists represented in *Monumental Matters: Experience and Introspection in Contemporary Art* use larger-than-life pieces to encourage viewers to consider the human experience more closely. This lesson explores issues of identity and history using *Untitled* by Anselm Kiefer (2016) as a catalyst for discussion, questions, and artmaking.

Learning Goals

- Through their study of the work of German artist Anselm Kiefer, students will understand how art might be a means of understanding and coming to terms with history and the construction of identity.
- Students will apply the artist Anselm Kiefer's practice by creating their own works of art that address events from their own history.
- Students will identify types of contextual information useful in the process of constructing interpretations of an artwork or collection of works.
- Students will describe how knowledge of culture, traditions, and history may influence personal responses to art.

Essential Questions

- Why do we make monuments? What purposes do they serve?
- Why do some artists create work that is difficult to make and to understand?
- What should we do with monuments to people or events that we now find troubling, such as Civil War monuments to Confederate leaders?

Materials

- Oil pastels
- Paper
- Pencils
- Cardboard or foam board
- Hot glue
- Unusual materials such as straw, mud, cloth pieces, rocks, pipe cleaners, batting, newspaper, etc.

Learning Procedures

Background

The German-born artist Anselm Kiefer often combines traditional art media (such as oil and canvas) with earthier materials like lead, straw, and shellac. Typically rendered on a massive scale, his art confronts the viewer with its uneasy balance of representational form and raw expressive emotion. Immersive spaces blocked by lead objects or seemingly degrading surfaces modify our expectations of an artwork as precious, luxurious, and beautiful. By forcing the viewer to face what they might think of as unrefined and even ugly materials, he symbolically encourages us to view human history with openness and honesty, to not shy away from our sometimes uncomfortable past.

As one of Germany's preeminent post-war artists, Kiefer directly engages with the tragedies of war, and in particular with German atrocities committed during the holocaust. Here with an unflinching eye focused on the past, he offers his viewer's dangerous books, histories written on and bound in lead. We must read the past to learn its lessons, even if at times it seems too poisonous to absorb, too heavy to bear.

To see Anselm Kiefer at work: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HaWt0tuPErU>

Viewing the Artwork

- Why do you think the artist chose to work with such difficult materials? How might the materials he used help convey ideas?
- What might a book signify?
- View the work from up far away and up close (details). Describe what you see. What types of materials appear to be used in these works? How does this work make you feel?
- What feeling does this work give you? Does art have to be beautiful?
- Discuss what the artist might have felt in creating this artwork, or what the piece might mean. Then, provide context about Kiefer's life including childhood in post-World War II Germany, silent shame, heaviness of history, playing as a kid in places ravaged by war.

Art Project

Part 1: Make a drawing of *Untitled* by Anselm Kiefer (2016) using oil pastel. This could be a sketch either of a small detail of the painting up close, or the entire painting. What does an artist or art student learn by making a copy or interpretation of an artwork?

Part 2 (In addition to or in place of Part 1): Before making any large, monumental piece, an artist usually makes a small model of the piece. Invite students to brainstorm an issue or question regarding personal, local, state, or national history (depending on grade level). Then, they will create a model or maquette for a monumental artwork inspired by that topic.

Optional Extension: As a class, make a monumental artwork together that commemorates an event, place, or person. This larger piece could be a quilt of smaller drawings, a mural, collage, or an assemblage.

Exhibit student work with explanatory labels.

Closing Discussion

How might these topics connect to other disciplines such as history, social studies, or ecology?

Learning Standards

This lesson plan is made with 6th graders in mind, but can easily be adapted to all grades.

- **Standard 6.V.CR.1:** Combine concepts collaboratively to generate an innovative idea for art-making.
- **Standard 6.V.CR.3:** Demonstrate openness in trying new ideas, materials, methods, and approaches in making works of art and design.
- **Standard 6.V.R.1:** Identify and interpret works of art or design that reveal how people live around the world and what they value.
- **Standard 6.V.R.3:** Analyze ways that visual components and cultural associations within images influence ideas, emotions, and actions.
- **Standard 6.V.R.4:** Interpret art by distinguishing relevant contextual information, and by analyzing subject matter, characteristics of form and structure, and use of media to identify ideas and mood conveyed.
- **Standard 6.V.CO.2:** Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding by analyzing how art reflects changing times, traditions, resources, and cultural uses.

Image



Anselm Kiefer (1945-)

Untitled, 2016

Oil, acrylic, emulsion, shellac, lead, metal and sediment of electrolysis on canvas

Courtesy of the Parker Foundation