

Art and Activism

September 2024 public tour

Tour description

Discover how art focuses on issues, communicates multiple perspectives, and asks challenging questions. Learn how artists use their voices and imagery to inspire activism and bring about social change. Examine how artists invoke empathy, which involves looking outside ourselves and trying to identify with the experiences of others.

Look for artworks that incorporate historical and contemporary looks at artists' activism.

Encourage participants to express multiple perspectives about the works, how they could relate to our lives today, and to share what role they think art and art-making can play in social activism. What follows are works still on view from when the tour was developed, and contains additional suggestions at the end.

Morris Topchevsky, [Strike Breakers \(Company Violence\)](#), 1937, Oil on canvas, 2018.69.2, Gallery 361

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Morris Topchevsky created art to forthrightly protest discrimination, oppression, poverty, and intolerance, conveying his conviction of the power of art to improve society.
2. His family emigrated to the U.S. to escape anti-Jewish violence; 4 of his siblings perished in massacres of Jewish people.
3. Many U.S. workers formed unions in the 1930s to improve working conditions that included long hours with inadequate pay and often a lack of safety measures. We have unions to thank today for many of the work benefits we enjoy: vacation and sick pay, federal safety legislation, living wages, etc.
4. This painting depicts a clash in 1937 between union workers occupying a factory in Waukegon, IL (outside Chicago) and police officers sent to break up the strike. The Fansteel Metallurgical Corporation refused to deal with the union. After a week-long standoff, the workers were gassed out of the building and arrested.

Suggested Questions/Activities (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. What type of mood has the artist created in this scene? How do the colors he used contribute to that mood?
2. Unions were formed to give workers some say about and control over their working conditions. Who do you think is in control in this situation? What do you see that makes you say that?
3. How do you react to what is happening in this picture?
4. What imagery would you use to convey your commitment to a social issue that you think needs examination?

Shahzia Sikander, [Arose](#), 2020, Glass mosaic with patinated brass frame, 2021.10, Gallery 243

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Shahzia Sikander wants to challenge and reinvent classical Indo-Persian miniature painting (show an example from Mia's collection) by changing the scale and materials used in such works. She challenges the strict formal rules of the genre by enlarging the scale and using various media including mosaics and metals. She sees herself informed by multiple voices from South Asian, American, Feminist, and Muslim perspectives.
2. Women in traditional miniature paintings typically are portrayed in roles designed to serve and please men, often by performing for them. Here, Sikander challenges that notion by depicting mirror versions of the same woman whirling around in a pinwheel that she says represents "the enormous possibility of the feminine spirit."
3. The lush skirts can be read as a poppy blossom, alluding to the opium industry in Afghanistan and the long-term U.S. intervention and conflict there. In this way, Sikander alludes to the power imbalances among countries related to migration, trade, and empire-building. (See below for more information.)
4. The ravishing circular composition "also looks like a bombed-out site to me," says Sikander, who likes to play with multiple meanings simultaneously and create tension between beauty and destruction.

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. What materials does Sikander use? How does her use of mosaic and brass change the way we look at this work, compared to a painting?
2. Show an image of a Persian miniature, a traditional form of painting that was used and adapted by Indian artists. How does Sikander's use of large scale change the way we think about this image?
3. What does the circular/pinwheel form suggest to you?
4. Women in Persian miniatures are depicted according to a stereotype—as dancers, as objects of desire. How has Sikander changed the way we look at these women?

Only a few species of poppies produce opium. A bud develops at the tip of the plant and blossoms into a flower with four petals in a variety of colors. The petals fall away to reveal a green pod that continues to grow to the size of an egg. Inside the pod is the ovary that produces opium. Opium can only be produced during the 10-12 day period when the pod is ripening. Many Afghan farmers choose to grow poppies, rather than the agricultural goods needed to feed the people. Poppy pods bring a better price on the market, based on the demands of the global drug trade.

Sources: US Department of Justice, "Opium: A History" by Martin Booth; "Unholy Wars" by John Cooley

Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, [Frankfurt Kitchen](#), 1926-1930, Kitchen cabinetry and stove, 2004.195, Gallery 378

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. After the First World War, an ambitious citywide housing project was carried out in Frankfurt, Germany. A young but experienced Viennese architect, Grete Schütte-Lihotzky (1897-2000) was hired to help design low-income housing for some two million soldiers returning to Germany following the 1918 Armistice, as well as thousands of war widows.
2. Schütte-Lihotzky studied home design reform to create a kitchen that was efficient, space-saving, and easy to clean. Versions of the design were installed in 10,000 integrated housing units during a four-year period. Each element of the kitchen was carefully determined to minimize unnecessary steps, provide labor-saving devices, and increase physical comfort.
3. The kitchen's many innovative features include integrated units, continuous work surfaces, and a worktable for preparing food under a large window next to the sink (both set at a convenient height for use while seated). Other features include labeled storage bins with handles and spouts for pouring dry baking staples, movable ceiling light and stool, built-in dish rack, concealed pass-through to the dining room, drop-down ironing board, and cabinets painted deep blue to naturally repel flies. The old-style, dirty wood-burning stove is replaced with a modern electric version.
4. Schütte-Lihotzky was one of the first female architects in Austria and was active in the anti-Nazi resistance. She was probably the first female student of the school now known as the University of Applied Arts, Vienna, studying under architect/designer Josef Hoffmann. These designers were dedicated to the artistic production of utilitarian items to modernize and improve home life. The Frankfurt Kitchen offers us insight into a design-based functional home workspace.

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. Think about the kitchen in your house. How is this kitchen different?
2. Watch some of the video next to the kitchen and notice improvements the kitchen's design brought to domestic chores. What do you notice that would save time and make those chores more comfortable?
3. Why do you think efficiency of time and motion was emphasized?
4. Pair share: Pick a room in your house and discuss with your partner how you would change it into a better living or working space. Have volunteers share their ideas with the group.

Christi Belcourt, [It's a Delicate Balance](#), 2021, Acrylic on canvas, 2021.30, Gallery 259

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Christi Belcourt is a Métis visual artist with Michif heritage who lives and works in Canada. For most Indigenous communities, all life—plants, animals, insects, microbes—are living relatives, and to be treated with respect and care. Most of the living beings that Belcourt depicts here are currently threatened, endangered, or at the edge of extinction in the Upper Midwest. Each of these species is critical for the balance of our ecosystem, interconnected to all of life, including humanity.
2. From far away, notice dozens of living creatures and plants reflected on both sides. Moving closer, you see the whole picture is painted with tiny dots of colorful paint. Belcourt paints these creatures as if she were beading them on hide, starting at the bottom and drawing upon designs and motifs found in Michif beadwork. Each dot is painted individually, representing a single bead. Her work shows careful observation of the natural world.
3. Belcourt wants us to see the interconnected nature of existence on this planet and treat all living things with respect, living sustainably with the resources we have. She states, “This wondrous planet, so full of mystery, is a paradise. All I want to do is give everything I have, my energy, my love, my labor—all of it in gratitude for what we are given.”
4. Belcourt believes that artists can play a role in social awareness and change: “I think art is a vehicle and it is powerful in its ability to communicate what, sometimes, plain words cannot. Art can be used to seek justice and raise awareness so that change can happen. So the role of the artist is not only as an artist, but as a leader.”

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. Look closely at the painting, *It's a Delicate Balance*. What is your eye drawn to first? Keep looking. How do your eyes move around the painting? What else do you notice?
2. Think about Belcourt's technique of using thousands of dots to emulate Michif beadwork. How do you think this technique relates to her theme of the interconnectedness of the natural world?
3. Belcourt uses her art to make people stop and think about the living environment around us and how to better protect it. What are some things you or your school does to protect and respect the environment?
4. Belcourt says, “This wondrous planet, so full of mystery, is a paradise. All I want to do is give everything I have, my energy, my love, my labor—all of it in gratitude for what we are given.” What does the earth provide for us? What are you grateful for? What concerns do you have about the future of our planet?
5. Belcourt believes that artists can be activists who use their work to seek justice and raise awareness so that change can happen. She focuses on endangered plants and animals to examine issues related to the environment, climate change, and potential species extinction. What type of art would you make to make people aware of social justice issues that are important to you?

Research resources:

There is a chart of all flora and fauna in the painting in the guide study.

Smithsonian artist profile: [Christi Belcourt's The Wisdom of the Universe](#)

YouTube video: [Metis Artist Christi Belcourt Discusses Painting "My Heart is Beautiful".mov](#)

Video from Art Gallery of Ontario: [Multisensory Moments: Christi Belcourt's Wisdom Of The Universe](#)

Monks of the Gyuto Tantric University, Tibet, [Yamantaka Mandala](#), 1991, Colored silicate and adhesive on wood, 92.44, Gallery 210--note, this will be moving into G255

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Sometimes activism takes the form of spiritual practice. The making of a mandala, a visual representation of the sacred Buddhist universe, is an active expression of a spiritual practice used in meditation and initiation rites. The act itself is believed to benefit all beings. It is created in a time and space of ritual prayer, music, and performance.
2. Making a mandala of this size requires people to work together with patience, resolve, and cooperation. A team of Tibetan monks-in-residence at Mia created the mandala in 1991 over a period of four weeks. They drew an outline of the design, then patiently filled in each small area with colored sand, slowly tapping the sand out of a metal funnel into the design.
3. This mandala is a blueprint of the heavenly palace of the deity Yamantaka, Conqueror of Death. The mandala is filled with symbolism relating to a person's journey to enlightenment. The blue square at the center represents the attainment of nirvana, the highest level of existence, with a vajra (thunderbolt) and lotus pedestal representing Yamantaka. The 4 colors radiating from the center blue square represent the 4 directions, ending in the 4 gates to the palace. The very outer rim represents our world, filled with violence and decay. The symbols in the 4 corners represent the senses: hearing, taste, smell, and vision.
4. Typically, at the completion of its making, a sand mandala is destroyed by sweeping away the sand into running water. This reminds everyone how nothing in life is permanent. This mandala was made with a special sand developed by 3M which could be fixed after it was applied. The Gyoto monks and Mia preserved it in order to honor the 1.2 million Tibetans who lost their lives to political-religious persecution during the 20th century.

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. Take some time to look at the mandala. What are some symbols or images you recognize? What are you curious about?

2. The Tibetan monks who made the mandala identify with the values and beliefs of Buddhism, helping them to work together as a team. In what ways does your faith or community influence or impact your actions and beliefs?
3. Tibetan monks believe that their thoughts, words, and actions influence the well-being of the universe and all living beings. How could you use your thoughts, words, and actions to help others?
4. Typically, a sand mandala is destroyed after it is made. Imagine you have spent weeks perfecting such a design. What is your reaction to having it all swept away?

Research resources:

From *Buddhism Info* website: [Buddhist Sand Mandalas – Why do Monks Create. Then Destroy Them?](#)

Yamantaka Mandala meaning: [Archived Arts of Asia](#)

Other possible works and brief explanation:

Kondō Takahiro, [Reduction I](#), 2013, Gallery 200

This work draws people in with the shimmering surface, but when visitors start to examine the pose and expression, questions arise on the meaning of the work.

“In 2013, Kondō created a series of five porcelain sculptures based on casts of his own body. The project was in response to the tsunami and nuclear disaster at Fukushima in 2011. This figure, one of the five, is intended to represent the archetypal Japanese in the timeless guise of a Buddhist holy man, seated in the meditative posture. In this case, Kondō’s beautiful “silver mist” glaze is intended to be a reference to the radioactivity that was released and that may well “drench” the people of Japan. Kondō’s choice of title, *Reduction*, suggests the dire results of the disaster—the diminishment of an entire race.”

Avis Charley, [Think Long, Think Wrong](#), 2021, Oil on canvas, 2021.80, Gallery 259

Dakota/Diné artist Avis Charley portrays resilient, independent Indigenous women in modern settings. While growing up, she yearned to encounter paintings made by and for Indigenous people in museums, instead of the romanticized and often inaccurate portraits she found painted by non-Native artists. This led Charley to paint authentic representations of Native people living in the contemporary American landscape. She has said she wants her work to inspire present and future generations and to broaden perspectives for general audiences. Charley says, “I create images that I wish I would have seen growing up—beautifully adorned Indigenous women carrying themselves with pride and grace, their dynamic figures coming alive and engaging us with their humanity.”

Jeffrey Gibson, [Know You’re Magick Baby](#), 2019, Gallery 259 and [Nothing Is Eternal](#), 2017, both in Gallery 259

Gibson, of Choctaw and Cherokee descent, is a queer artist who uses his art as a platform to support Indigenous and queer identities.

Nothing is Eternal: Gibson “clothed the bag in the beadwork, jingles, and nylon ribbons typical of powwow regalia. As a child, Gibson thought of powwows as conduits of tradition. Now, he sees them as a modern invention: “I define modernism as innovation or an invention responding to drastic changes in circumstances and environment, and powwow is one of those things; it evolved as a way to bring people back together.” The form of a punching bag has deep meaning: “Following his therapist’s suggestion in 2005, Gibson worked with a personal trainer who advised him to use punching-bags to vent his anger and frustration. The cathartic ritual of unleashing his emotions on the familiar gym accessory made him realize a disconnect between mind and body and led him to reinvent the punching-bag around 2012. The artifacts used to adorn the bags collectively symbolize Indigenous identities and pride in the face of pressure from dominant cultures.”

Know You’re Magick Baby: “Through these bright bold declarations, Gibson emphasizes the strength and vulnerability found within [queer] communities, and the revolutionary act of expressing joy within a challenging larger culture.”

See Smart History: [Jeffrey Gibson, I’m Not Perfect](#)

Gibson also had lots of media coverage as the [first Native American artist chosen to represent the US at the Venice Biennale](#).

Virgil Ortiz, [Jagg and Gage](#), 2020-2021, Gallery 259

Ortiz produces work within the vein of [Indigenous Futurism](#), but also introduces people to an aspect of North American history overlooked in textbooks.

“Multidisciplinary artist Virgil Ortiz draws upon Pueblo history to create futuristic worlds where Indigenous people continue their fight against intruders onto their lands so that their people can continue to thrive and preserve and protect their ways of life. This is a part of Ortiz’s 1680/2180 series. In 1680 Pueblo communities across the Southwest banded together to successfully execute the largest uprising in North American history. After decades of a Spanish regime of brutal violence, enforced servitude, and a ban on all traditional religious practices, Pueblo communities successfully revolted against colonizers and settlers. This uprising, under the leadership of Po’Pay allowed Pueblos to remain liberated for 12 years. In 1682, they signed a peace agreement with the Spanish Crown.

Each character Ortiz creates live in the year 2180, a part of Pueblo understandings of the cyclical nature of time and space. The two ceramic figures are Gage and Jagg, pilots of the Survivorship Armada, who are transported to the earth’s realm to aid Po’Pay in a revolt, and to preserve and protect their culture, language, and traditions from extinction. Gage and Jagg are hero twins. Ortiz creates Gage and Jagg in the traditional manner of pottery making of Cochiti Pueblo that has been used for millennia. He hand coils the figures, sculpting each into smooth and curved forms. He then fires the clay in an outdoor fire pit. Once dry, Ortiz uses local roots as the source for the black paint found in the figures’ body stripes and faces.”

Andrea Carlson, [Exit](#), 2019, Gallery 260

Andrea Carlson’s work also ties to the themes of Indigenous Futurism, as well as making Indigenous people visible within the dominant culture today.

“In Exit, Carlson lays bare the realities of the past—of cultural loss, change, destruction, removal, and erasure. Though the red Exit sign represents the fear of loss, Carlson includes references to two iconic works of ancient art—the mica hand/talon of the Mississippian peoples (in yellow and purple) and Mound Man, an earthen effigy figure in rural Wisconsin—as testaments to the creative genius of their makers. Mounds like these across the Upper Midwest have been sliced apart, destroyed by settlers, or hidden from view. Yet their presence, like Indigenous peoples themselves, has endured. Likewise, Carlson’s Exit honors enduring ancient Indigenous social and aesthetic systems.”

Also, check out this video from University of Michigan: [Andrea Carlson: Wholeness in the Future](#)
And this article, [In the Studio: Andrea Carlson](#)

Ruby Rumié, [Dominga](#), 2015, Gallery 275

We have a pair of portraits on display, Dominga and [Soledad](#). From the label: Ruby Rumie is a Colombian multimedia artist and photographer dedicated to exploring racial, economic, and social inequality through portraiture.” She does this by photographing marginalized figures in her native Bogota--and she confronts systemic inequality by illuminating the humanity and grace of her subjects. Spend some time looking at both portraits; how would you describe the women? Using a simple white dress highlights the weathered features of hardworking street vendors. “By working in collaboration with her subjects, many of whom descended from enslaved African people, Rumie’s portraits reject the enduring racial, social, and political hierarchies of her country’s colonial past. What remains are the indelible features of her sitters, who look into her lens with unflinching directness and invite a powerful encounter with the viewer.”

More info on the artist: [Ruby Rumie: Weaving Streets](#)

David Alfaro Siqueiros, Retrato de dama (Portrait of Olga Costa), 1949, Gallery 275 (on loan)

Both the subject and the painter fit the theme of art and activism. From Art Story: “Siqueiros was the youngest of “los tres grandes” (three greats) of Mexican muralism, along with Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco. He was also the most radical of the three in his technique, composition and political ideology. Informed by revolutionary Marxist ideology, his career was dedicated to fostering change through public art. Over the course of five decades, he integrated avant-garde styles and techniques with traditional iconography and local histories. He, like Rivera, firmly believed that technology was a means to a better world and he sought to combine traditions of painting with modern political activism.”

Olga Costa was German, but moved to Mexico, where she met and married José Chávez Morado, a painter, who encouraged her to develop her artistic talent, too. From Wikipedia, “She came from a leftist family and with other artists was politically active with the Mexican Communist Party for decades.” She was active as a promoter of Mexican culture throughout her lifetime.

Resources to learn more: [Mexican Modernism to the fore at the MALBA](#)
[Art Story: David Alfaro Siqueiros](#)

From the Art Newspaper: [Mexican émigré Olga Costa makes a fruitful return to her native city with Leipzig exhibition](#)

Jim Denomie, [Standing Rock](#), 2016, Gallery 280

Check out the background of this particular painting in this article from Hyperallergic: [An Indigenous Artist Captures the Racial Violence at Standing Rock](#). Through his art, Denomie presents “an emotional response to the violence of white supremacy that emerged during the DAPL conflict. Denomie connects this violence to historical atrocities, such as the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890, in which 250 to 300 Lakota men, women, and children were shot by US Cavalry after those with weapons had been disarmed. Denomie contextualized this body of work as part of his “ongoing dialogue” with American history.”

Henry Moore, [Warrior with Shield](#), 1954, Bronze, 54.22, Gallery 371

While serving in World War I, Henry Moore experienced the deaths of more than half of his London regiment in one battle, partly as a result of the use of mustard gas by German troops. His experiences changed his stance on military conflict and significantly shaped his subsequent work. The abstracted, mutilated body of a warrior fighting to the end creates an emotional response in us. Moore’s work comments on the horrors of modern life and the destructive power of humans; he includes aspects of war that are difficult to see and contemplate. He uses his art to reflect his opposition to war as a tragic means of resolving conflict among nations.

Claude Monet, [Grainstack, Sun in the Mist](#), 1891, Oil on canvas, 93.20, Gallery 355

Impressionist artists rebelled against the art establishment in making works of art that captured images of current life instead of historic and mythological subjects. With loose brushstrokes and many colored daubs of paint, Monet showed the effects of reflected light, atmosphere, and weather on surfaces, replacing the highly detailed and finished surfaces of Academic artists. The transformative work of the Impressionists, highly criticized in its time, has become one of the most beloved art periods in the world.

In the Design galleries, G378 and 379, several designers sought to improve the living conditions of people through their designs, providing designs to alleviate medical symptoms or provide a harmonious environment for better mental health.

Alvar Aalto, ["Paimio" chair](#), c. 1932, G378

Alvar Aalto, an architect and designer, is perhaps best known today for his furniture. He designed this relaxing armchair for the Paimio Tuberculosis Sanatorium in southwest Finland. One of his earliest designs, it uses laminated birch, an uncommon material for furniture at the time. The chair was extremely strong, comfortable, and attractive, and could be inexpensively and easily manufactured.

From the National Library of Medicine: [Humanizing the hospital: Design lessons from a Finnish sanatorium](#)

Josef Hoffmann, ["Sitzmaschine" reclining armchair](#), model no. 670, c. 1905, G378

Notice the frame of the chair: single pieces of beech wood have been carefully manipulated to form a continuous support. Originally designed for patients at a nursing home, this recliner can

be easily adjusted by moving a rod between the circular knobs on the back arms of the chair. Hoffmann created a chair that allows both its construction and function to be visible. This Sitzmaschine (Sitting Machine) embodies the Wiener Werkstätte's (Vienna Workshops') emphasis on clean craftsmanship, geometric form, and material integrity. From the Cooper Hewitt: [Josef Hoffmann's Notschrei](#)

Other designers who often had an activist agenda--to promote change and innovation--with their work include Charles and Ray Eames, Frank Lloyd Wright, Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Marcel Breuer (and other Bauhaus designers)