

Symbolism in Visual Art: Kiyan Williams

Overview

In this lesson, students will learn about Kiyan Williams, a Black queer multimedia artist. They will discuss the symbolism of their art piece *Reaching Towards Warmer Suns* and use these concepts to develop their own artwork that symbolizes a topic that they find interesting or empowering.

Grade Level

K-2

Time

Total: 60 minutes (5 minutes symbol warm-up, 10 minutes background, 15 minutes discussion, 30 minutes creation)

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Explain the meaning of the term “symbol” and provide examples.
- Describe visual elements, including colors and shapes, of art.
- Identify how the symbolism of art is connected to the artist’s background.
- Create art using symbolism based on their interest.

New Jersey Visual and Performing Arts Content Standards

1.5.2.Cr1b: Engage in individual and collaborative art making through observation and investigation of the world, and in response to personal interests and curiosity.

1.5.2.Re8a: Categorize and describe works of art, by identifying subject matter, details, mood, and formal characteristics.

1.5.2.Cn11a: Compare, contrast and describe why people from different places and times make art.

1.5.2.Cn11b: Describe why people from different places and times make art about different issues.

Resources Needed

- Printed copy of *Reaching Towards Warmer Suns*
- Paper
- Pencils
- Other art supplies as desired (colored pencils, markers, crayons, etc.)

Symbol Warm-Up

Share with students the definition of a symbol: a drawing, shape, or object that represents something else, such as an idea or another object. Ask them to name examples of symbols. For example, a heart might be a symbol for love, a red octagon might be a symbol to stop, and a skull might be a symbol for danger.

Background

Explain to students that artists use symbols to express ideas in their work. Today they'll be looking at a sculpture by an artist named Kiyan Williams and discussing the symbolism in that sculpture. Share background information about Williams and their piece *Reaching Towards Warmer Suns*.

Adapted from [“Bio,”](#) Kiyan Williams, and [“Kiyan Williams,”](#) Queer Newark Oral History Project

Kiyan Williams (they/them) is a visual artist from Newark, New Jersey and based in New York City. Kiyan graduated from Science Park High School and went on to earn a BA with honors from Stanford University and an MFA in Visual Art from Columbia University. They work with sculpture, performance, and video and create art that challenges ideas about history, power, and American identity. Their work has been exhibited around the world.

Adapted from [“Notes on Digging”](#) and [“Reaching Towards Warmer Suns,”](#) Kiyan Williams

This is a photo of a set of sculptures resembling long arms with upstretched hands that are made of earth from, and rise up out of, the banks of the James River in Richmond, Virginia, where some of the first enslaved Black people touched land in the United States. Williams finds touching, digging, and creating in soil comforting.

Discussion

Adapted from [“Symbolism and Place,”](#) National Gallery of Art

Show students *Reaching Towards Warmer Suns* (Appendix 1) and lead students in a discussion about the piece.

See

Take a deep breath in. As you breathe out and relax, let your eyes look slowly and carefully around this photo of the sculptures. Take a moment to notice all of its different parts.

- What colors do you see? How would you describe them?
- What lines and shapes do you see?
- What do you see in the background?

Wonder

This piece is called *Reaching Toward Warmer Suns*.

- What does that title make you think of?
- How do the colors, lines, shapes, and background symbolize this title?
- What do you think the hands in the image are reaching toward?

Reflect

Williams uses symbols inspired by the history of Black people in the United States. In an [interview with the Queer Newark Oral History Project](#), they say, “the first time that I took a Black history course...I felt really empowered, learning about my history and the history of Black people in the U.S.”

Think about what you have learned about in school.

- What topics do you like to learn about?
- What topics do you want to learn more about?
- What topics have made you feel empowered?
 - What does it mean to be empowered? Potentially share [Merriam-Webster's definition of empowerment](#)—"having the knowledge, confidence, means, or ability to do things or make decisions for oneself"—and some example sentences.

Creation

Using paper and a pencil, sketch symbols of the topics that you like to learn about, want to learn more about, and make you feel empowered. If you want to learn more about space, you might sketch the moon or stars. If a story you've read in class has made you feel empowered, you might sketch a book.

Pick one of these symbols. Create an art piece based on that symbol. Think about what you want to put in the background and what colors you are choosing, remembering the discussion about Williams. When you are done, give the piece a meaningful title like Williams did with his piece.

Appendix 1: *Reaching Towards Warmer Suns*

