

Bye Bye Kitty!!! Between Heaven and Hell in Contemporary Japanese Art **Discussion Topics**

How can I use these discussion topics in my classroom?

The goal of the following materials is to assist educators in facilitating open-ended dialogues with students about works of art and in a larger sense, ultimately, the world around them. This guide can be used as a framework and adapted for use with levels pre-K through 12th grade. Please adjust vocabulary as needed.

How will these discussion topics benefit my students?

Through inquiry-based learning, students build skills across the curriculum, including those valuable to literacy such as the ability to think critically, use descriptive language, observe closely and form hypotheses.¹

Additionally, inquiry-based learning can provide entry points into exploring a broad range of topics and can be adapted to any subject, including culture-specific information, artistic techniques, aesthetics, and art-historical and historical concepts.

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO USING INQUIRY

Select an image from the ***online image gallery*** that corresponds with one of the discussion topics provided below. Titles preceding each image credit refer to sections of the exhibition.

Choose an image and project it onto a screen or classroom wall. Begin the discussion simply by asking the students to look closely. Give them a few minutes to observe and reflect.

Create a relaxed environment by explaining that special knowledge is not needed to experience or understand the images you are presenting. Refrain from mentioning the title of the work or the media until the students have had a chance to consider the works for themselves. This method encourages the students to focus on what they can see rather than what they think they should see/perceive, to trust their senses, and to form a relationship and understanding of the work as a basis for inquiry.

Encourage students to comment on formal aspects such as shape, size, scale, color and texture and to use descriptive language. Once they have had time to discuss, move to a discussion of concepts such as mood or presence. Draw students out by asking them to support and elaborate on their observations and comments.

By presenting context-building information later in the discussion rather than at the start, you leave room for individual interpretations and discovery. Introduce information about media, techniques, artist's bio and history as is relevant to support and enrich understanding. Strive to honor the independent communicative powers of works of art and impact that collective statements and questions can have on students primed to be receptive viewer/thinkers. By honing the visual analytical and critical thinking skills of your students, you prepare them to become observant not only in exhibition settings but also in their daily lives.

What are some ways that I can create an optimal environment for open-ended discussion?

Ask questions that have a broad range of possible answers. Avoid yes/no questions. Repeat comments and provide a bridge linking other's comments and differing ideas to spur debate and to encourage students to support their assertions.

Accept comments neutrally and without judgment. If a comment seems inappropriate or off-topic, redirect focus to the image and ask the student to relate their comments to something evidenced in the artwork.

If you are asked a question you cannot answer, inform the student that you don't know. Discuss the best way to find the answer and agree to return to the question after you both have researched it.

Image Gallery

[#1] CRITICAL MEMORY

Miwa Yanagi (1967-). *My Grandmothers/GEISHA (AKIYO/MAI/HITOMI/ NORIKO), 2002.*

Click on the **Image Gallery**, select *My Grandmothers / GEISHA (AKIYO/MAI/HITOMI/NORIKO), 2002* and project it for the class to see.

INQUIRY

- What is going on in this scene?
- What is the relationship between the people?
- Are they friends? Colleagues? Family?
- Where does the action take place?
- Is this the past, present or future?

ASSIGNMENT

1. Pretend you are a detective. Look at the photo closely. What clues can you find to explain the scene? Write a short story describing the situation depicted in the photograph. Be creative and refer back to the character's gestures and expressions, the setting, etc.
2. What kind of life would you like to lead 50 years from now? What would a snapshot of your future look like? Describe the image of your future life, in detail.

INFORMATION FOR EDUCATORS

Miwa Yanagi (1967-). One of the leading feminist artists of her generation, Miwa Yanagi has described her grandmother and mother as frustrated actresses who projected their aspirations onto her, with the result that her work since the early 1990s has expressed the power of women and their desire for autonomy by means of staged fantasies or theatrical tableaux. The *My Grandmothers* series depicts the dreams and fears of a group of young women Yanagi asked to imagine where they wanted to be 50 years from now.

Geisha. In Japanese, a word composed of two characters meaning "art" and "person." A professional female companion for men in Japan, trained in music, dancing and the art of conversation.

[#2] THREATENED NATURE

Kohei Nawa (1975-). *PixCell Deer #24, 2011.* Taxidermized deer, crystal glass balls.

Click on the **Image Gallery**, select *PixCell Deer #24, 2011* and project it for the class to see.

INQUIRY

Describe what you see.

- What materials did the artist use?
- How do the crystal glass balls covering the deer change its appearance?
- Why do you think he choose a deer?
- Would the artwork have the same impact if was half the size? Explain.
- Can you imagine this artwork in another setting? Describe.
- How is this deer different from a deer at the Museum of Natural History or one that you see in the wild?
- What kinds of messages about nature and or animals might the artist wish to convey through this work?

ASSIGNMENT

Choose a nature/environment-related topic such as conservation, global warming, ecology or another curriculum-based subject and create an artwork that discusses an aspect of the issue. Present your artwork and discuss it with your classmates.

INFORMATION FOR EDUCATORS

Kohei Nawa (1975-). Kohei Nawa's work has developed out of an awareness of the spiritual intensity and power of natural forms or structures. *PixCell Deer #24* was constructed by covering the animal with a skin of crystal glass balls "that is sufficient to erase any deep sense of the objects and even the meanings and symbols they usually possess." The effect is shimmering yet disorienting-- the different-sized ball act like lenses, amplifying both the exterior gallery and what is caught inside. The artist invented the term "PixCell," which pairs a biological cell with the smallest unit of a picture in digital imaging.

[#3] THE UNQUIET DREAM

Motohiko Odani (1972-) *SP Extra: Malformed Noh-Mask Series: San Yūjo, 2008.*

Click on the **Image Gallery**, select *SP Extra: Malformed Noh-Mask Series: San Yūjo, 2008* and project it for the class to see.

INQUIRY

- What do you see?
- What is the basis for this artwork?
- How does the artist transform the mask? Tradition?
- Why does the artist choose to present a series of three?
- Discuss the variation in the three masks. Why do you think the artist chose to hang them in this order?
- Do the masks remind you of other artworks? Anything?

ASSIGNMENT

Conduct research on noh theater and noh masks. Choose two other types of masks from other cultures/traditions and write a short comparative report on the purpose and function of these masks in each cultural context.

INFORMATION FOR EDUCATORS

Motohiko Odani (1972-). During his short career Motohiko Odani has used a wide range of media to make art with a gothic, free-associative quality that combines ideas of myth, nature and deformation in startling and unsettling ways. His *Malformed Noh-Masks* (2008) examine aspects of the human face, starting with the idea that by unbalancing a traditionally symmetrical form such as a mask one can create a sense of *yūgen*, an eerie, otherworldly aesthetic associated with noh drama.

noh. A form of drama, developed in the medieval period, on highly poetic ghost and Buddhist subjects. Costumes are of brilliant brocade and the main performers generally wear masks of character types. Narration and music is provided by onstage musicians.

noh mask. A mask worn by performer of noh theater. Masks are carved from one piece of cypress wood. After the mask has been carved to the desired thickness, and holes for eyes, nose and mouth have been cut, it is then coated with layers of gesso mixed with glue. This coating is then sanded down, giving the mask its final shape. Finally it is painted in the colors prescribed for the particular character and some parts of it might be gilded. Some of the masks' eyes are inlaid with metal, leaving a tiny hole. The hair and the outlines of the eyes are traced with black ink. There are approximately 260 different kinds of noh masks. Basic masks (the ones used most often) number about 24 and are divided into five types: *okina* (divine old men), *kishin* (divine demons), *jo* (old men), *dan-jo* (women and men) and *rei* (ghosts).

yūgen. Meaning literally "dark" or "obscure," a term in noh aesthetics used to describe elegant, refined and elusive beauty.

For additional information on all participating BBK artists please visit <http://byebyekittyart.com/artists.htm>.

FOOTNOTE

1. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, *Teaching Literacy Through Art, Year One 2004-05 Study*.