

Fiber Futures: Japan's Textile Pioneers **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.

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.

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 the 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 others' 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 questions after you both have researched it.

Image Gallery

Machiko Agano (1953–). *Untitled*, 2011. Inkjet-printed mirror sheets. Each 98½ × 39¾ × 39¾ in. (250 × 100 × 100 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

Click on the **Image Gallery**, select ***Untitled***, 2011 and project it for the class to see.

INQUIRY

- What images do you see?
- Why do you think the artist chose these images?
- Notice the scale of the piece. How does the size affect the way you view/or would interact with the piece?
- What images surround you in daily life?
- How is this installation like advertising? How is it different?

ASSIGNMENT

1. Describe other types of experiences in daily life that allow you to see yourself reflected in strange and interesting ways. (Examples: a kaleidoscope, a fun house mirror, a car's magnifying mirror, the surface of a pond, aluminum foil, shop windows, etc.)
2. Create a self-portrait that represents a type of visual fragmentation. Start with a copy of an original image (one that you make yourself) or select a drawing or photograph taken by someone else. Make several copies with which to experiment.
3. Deconstruct the image and reassemble it on a larger sheet of white paper. Re-compose the image in a way that communicates an emotion you are feeling or an idea you have about yourself. Project an identity (yourself as a super hero) or embody a concept (such as "joy" or "freedom"). Try breaking down the image into geometric and/or organic shapes. For pixels, make a grid on tracing paper and place it over your portrait. Following the grid lines on the tracing paper, score your image with an Exacto knife. Cut the image along the score lines to make individual units. Reassemble the image in a way you find interesting. Alternately try deconstructing the image in a looser, more random way by tearing the image or cutting along spiraling lines. Consider how your choice of colors, materials, shapes, etc. communicates associations for the viewer.

INFORMATION FOR EDUCATORS

Machiko Agano, artist statement, 2011: *"Like it or not, we're all inescapably involved in contemporary life. In this piece I wanted to raise issues of mass production and mass consumption. I took snapshots of everyday scenes and ink-jet printed them onto cloth, which I pasted onto mirror sheet. I then cut out the sheets to create an environment where viewers of the work can see reflections of themselves alongside the images in the photographs, and get a vivid sense of the anxieties and inconsistencies inherent in the way we live today."*

As a young woman, Machiko Agano trained at Kyoto City University of the Arts in the art of weaving *kasuri* fabric using pre-dyed threads to create abstract patterns. In the 1980s she began to break away from traditional weaving and experiment with a range of natural and manmade materials to create large-scale, room-size installations. Often nest or web-like in shape, Agano's site-specific installations concern themselves formally with qualities of reflected light, buoyancy, the inherent characteristics of her chosen materials, and the colors and ambience of the site. Conceptually she addresses environmental pressures, the stresses of modern life, and the fragility and beauty of nature.

Yuh Okano (1965–). *Flower: Coming Events Cast Their Shadow Before*, 2010. Silk, partially felted with raw wool; hand-formed corsages. 71 × 20 in. (180 × 50 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

Click on the **Image Gallery**, select ***Flower: Coming Events Cast Their Shadow Before***, 2010 and project it for the class to see.

INQUIRY

- Describe what you see.
- List all the references/associations related to the natural world you recognize in Okano's work.
- Name the cool and warm colors. Why did the artist combine them?
- On what occasions do people wear corsages?
- Would you wear one of these? When?
- Go around the room and ask each student to choose a single word to describe the shape of the corsages or the way they hang. Use the words as the basis of a collaborative poem. Examples: tuft, cluster, starburst, fluff bomb, blossom, limply, vibrantly, drooping, bursting, creeping.

ASSIGNMENT

Imagine a world where these flowers grow. Write a short, three-page science fiction story or fable giving the context for *Flower: Coming Events Cast their Shadow Before*. Be sure to provide highly detailed information about the flowers' ideal growing conditions and their use. Do the flowers have special properties? Can they heal? Make wishes come true? Talk? Who tends them? Are they harvested to make tea? Only bloom at night? What events do their blossoming prefigure?

INFORMATION FOR EDUCATORS

Textile designer and artist Yuh Okano says of her work: "My goal is to embrace the intangible, to know the ephemeral, to be loyal to personal beliefs, and to be artistically consumed by nature."

Okano is a graduate of Rhode Island School of Design. In 2000, she started her company, Textiles Yuh. The designer divides her time between her home in New York and Kiryu, Japan, where her fabrics are produced.

For *Flower: Coming Events Cast Their Shadow Before*, 2010 Okano combined two felting techniques: wet and needle. Wet felting makes the fibers in wool fuse together into a shape, usually to make a felted fabric-like material. Needle felting takes smaller pieces of wool and bonds them to produce three-dimensional sculptures or flat appliqués. Fine details can be achieved using this technique.

Kyōko Kumai (1943–). *Toki [Time]*, 2011. Stainless-steel filament. 39 × 157 × 39 in. (100 × 400 × 100 cm). Photo: Mareo Suemasa.

Click on the **Image Gallery**, select ***Toki [Time]*** and project it for the class to see.

INQUIRY

- What are these sculptures made to look like?
- How are they rock-like? Different from rocks?
- What materials are they made from?
- How does the artist confound our understanding/expectations of stainless steel?
- Write a short description of the installation in a way that captures its unique qualities.
- How does the artist reflect the man-made or artificial?
- How is her use of stainless steel ironic?

ASSIGNMENT

1. Research *karesansui*, literally "dry landscape," commonly called Japanese rock gardens or sometimes "Zen" gardens
2. Identify the famous garden *Time* may be meant to evoke.
3. Create your own miniature version of a raked stone garden.

MATERIALS

Small saucer approximately 12 cm wide and 1 cm deep
Pebbles and sand
Bamboo skewers
Exacto knife
Glue

INSTRUCTIONS

Select a saucer color that you like, fill it with sand. Choose pebbles of varying sizes and shapes and arrange them in the saucer. Use one of the gardens you discovered in your research as a model or devise an original composition. Use the rake to create furrows in the sand.

Rake Instructions:

With a sharp knife or scissors cut a bamboo skewer into the following lengths:

- 6 cm for the handle
- 2 cm for the base of the fork
- 1 cm of the pointed tip × 4 for the rake teeth

Once the teeth are cut, blunt the pointy ends by slicing the tips off. Glue all four teeth to the 2 cm long base of the fork. When glue dries, glue the handle to the base of the fork so that it runs perpendicular to the teeth.

INFORMATION FOR EDUCATORS

Kyoko Kumai, artist statement, 2011: "Thin pieces of stainless steel filaments mass-produced in a factory are inorganic and monotonous by themselves, but when they are woven, knitted, sewed, twisted or bundled together they take on an organic appearance that serves to express various aspects of wind, air, and light. The richly expressive fabrics that result do not stand solidly, cleaving the air. They have their source in textiles, which have their own language, fluttering above the floor, breathing and melting into the air."

Kyoko Kumai was born in 1943. She studied at the Tokyo University of Art, Japan, graduating from the Department of Visual Design in 1966. Formerly a professor at Nagaoka Institute of Design in Japan, Kumai has exhibited all over the world.

Largely self-taught, Kumai has developed her own interlacing and knotting techniques to manipulate stainless steel filament, her primary media for nearly three decades. Speaking of this artistic independence, she has said, "I have made what I like most from the materials that I like. I have been dependent only on my own sensibility." She invokes her Japanese heritage as a major source of inspiration and credits artists Sheila Hicks and Magdalena Abakanowicz as influential in her development as an artist. Her oeuvre consists mostly of forms and phenomena inspired by nature including grass blowing in the wind, rocks, and cocoons, but also textile forms manifested in large-scale installations and intimate constructions. Concerned with subtle effects of light, density and transparency, Kumai's work evokes the natural world and the invention of hand craft.

karesansui. Lit. dry landscape. A common type of garden which suggests mountains and water using only stones, sand or gravel and, occasionally, plants. Water is symbolized both by the arrangements of rock forms and raked sand. Rocks shaped by the elements are used to symbolize mountains, islands, animals or shrubs. Often, islands of rocks are designed to resemble a tortoise or a crane, which are symbols of longevity and happiness. The sand used in *karesansui* is not beach sand; it is actually crushed or decomposed granite, small pebbles, or fine gravel. The basic designs of this kind of garden are described in *Sakuteiki*, written in the 11th century. Since ancient times in Japan there has existed the notion of a garden type denoting a sacred space amidst the secular world, distinct from utilitarian gardens. Ask students to consider what may be near equivalents in their own culture or what form that idea might take in your local area.