

# OCTOBER GALLERY EDUCATION RESOURCE

*Inspired by Naomi Wanjiku Gakunga*

*Created by Hannah Littlejones*

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## **Who is Naomi Wanjiku Gakunga?**

Naomi Wanjiku Gakunga is a Kenyan artist born in 1960. She studied art at the University of Nairobi in Kenya before continuing her studies at UCLA in the USA. Her work has been exhibited and collected globally by different organisations including the National Museum of Scotland and the Museum of Textile in Latvia. She currently lives and works in Texas.

## **What inspired Naomi to become an artist?**

As a young girl growing up in Gacharage Village, a small rural village outside Nairobi, Naomi was exposed to artmaking as an intrinsic part of daily life. Although it wasn't referred to as 'art' in her community, the women in the village would paint their homes with clay, construct granaries, weave baskets, and make nearly everything else they needed from string. It was her grandmother who taught her how to weave and spin yarn from native *migiyo* shrubs.

## **What are the main themes and materials of Naomi's work?**

Naomi draws on her childhood experiences and memories and blends traditional Kenyan practices with the materials of her choice; mostly steel, wire, in combination with textile and found objects working somewhere between sculpture, painting and installation.

The steel sheets that Naomi frequently returns to in her work are representative of her childhood memory of the grass thatched roofs in her village being replaced by sheet metals. It was through change that she began to observe how the weather could change the appearance of the sheets over time. In her practice, Naomi exposes her rolls of steel sheets to the elements for 2-3 months. What effects the sun, rain, leaves, and twigs will have caused on the galvanised sheets surface remains a mystery until she unfurls the sheets. These effects guide her in the design of the steel sheets: sometimes they are left whole, sometimes cut into smaller sections.

Naomi also describes her work as abstract with themes of identity, migration, borders, and barriers coming together within a piece. She deliberately leaves room for the viewer to engage imaginatively when viewing the work.

## Examples

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Naomi Wanjiku Gakunga, *The Unravelling*, 2014.

Texturing and dyeing on sheet metal, 264 x 224 x 74 cm.



Naomi Wanjiku Gakunga, *Magetha ma Mwere - The Small Harvest*, 2010.

Stainless steel wire, woven kiondo basket strips and Texas mountain laurel tree seeds, 214 x 91 cm.

# Hannah Littlejones

I am a multimedia artist with experience in working with a broad range of materials including found objects. I particularly enjoy working with clay, creating different tiles such as glass mosaic tiles and domestic ceramic tiles. The clay panels can be printed into, rolled, pressed and physically manipulated in many ways. The surfaces are then fired before being glazed with translucent glaze to enhance the richness of the clay's surface. These pieces often have a very tactile quality.

My own work can take many forms, but most of my large-scale pieces have been made in collaboration with other artists and communities. These pieces may have an overarching theme, but I like to be very open to how people work with the art materials and allow freedom for individual making styles to be very visible. The challenge then is to put individual works alongside others into a cohesive whole art piece.



'Give - 5 ways to Wellbeing', Clapham Park community project. Multimedia on plywood panels.



'Lowden road Mosaic.' Collaboration with LWT and 4 primary schools. Fabric painting workshop



'Holy Trinity', school project. Mosaic tesserae and ceramic panels on plywood.

# ACTIVITIES

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## Overview:

Below are examples of process-based making to inspire a hands-on practical exploration activity in the classroom or at home.

There is an emphasis on building observation and communication skills, which I feel is relevant to all ages from Early Years to KS4.

The two low tech, non-toxic marbling activities are suitable for early years onwards and the Brusho activities are more suited to KS2 onwards. The construction activities would need to be 'scaffolded' for early years and KS1. KS2 onwards might benefit from a focussed activity exploring different ways of joining/constructing before embarking on collaborative or solo construction projects.

# ACTIVITY 1

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Activity: **Witnessing the material (KS1 and above)**

Curriculum link: **Art & Design, Science**

Introduction to the activity:

In her practice, Naomi focuses on 'looking' at or 'witnessing' the material (like in her experiments with steel sheets) to allow the different material elements to 'speak' when they are assembled.

When collaborating, it is important to see the work as shared and to listen to each other's observations and ideas for problem solving as you progress. Ideally everyone contributes something and the end piece is a combination of ideas and feelings. The method or process of connecting different elements will also affect the final piece. Suitable as a warm-up activity that complements the other activities in this resource, this activity encourages everyone to engage with their choice of paper and appreciate the different changes that occur before, during and after the making process.

Guided questions:

- How does the paper feel?
- What changes can you see and how did they happen (e.g.: adding blotches of colour)
- What happens if you arrange your paper in a certain way?

Below are two lists of prompt words for students to consider:

<b>Words to describe the paper and colour</b>	<b>Words to Describe connecting the paper elements</b>
Drop	Overlapping
Splash	Attach
Spread	Link horizontally
Disperse	Loop
Mix	Bend
Scatter	Multiple
Run	Interval
Bright	Balance
Vivid	Connecting (with or without movement)
Blob	Hang and move freely
Seep	Link vertically
Bleed	Twist
Blend	Repeat
Creep	Space
Separate	Symmetrical
Dribble	Rhythm
Faint	

# ACTIVITY 2

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Activity: **Whole class collaboration! (KS2 and above)**

Curriculum Links: **Art & Design**

Introduction to the activity:

This activity is centred on observation and communication as key elements to successful collaboration! Participants will learn how they can respond to an artwork through experimentation. Although divided into three smaller activities, you may elect to do them altogether or borrow steps from different options.

## What you will need:

A2 paper, sponge, squeegee, cloth, brush, stick, acrylic or poster paints, scissors, clothes pegs, paper clips, wire, pipe cleaners and string.

### Option A:

1. As a class, observe Naomi's work. You may choose to discuss themes such as:
  - What colours and patterns does she use in her work?
  - How do these colours and patterns make you feel?
  - What type of material does she use in her work?
2. Divide the class into smaller groups. Each team will work together to fill an A2 piece of paper with paint using a tool (sponge, squeegee, cloth, brush, stick).  
**Top tip:** think about how you can use the tool to create similar patterns as in Naomi's work.
3. Once dry, cut the paper into as many sections as there are people. The paper could be cut into strips, squares or rectangles.
4. As a team, experiment with placing the pieces in different arrangements.
5. You may take photographs of the different arrangements.

### Option B:

1. As a class think of a memory and reflect on what emotions the memory makes you feel. What colours do you think represents this feeling?
2. Using the colours you have thought of, paint your section of paper.
3. Elect someone to peg their work to the washing line.
4. Once done, this student will elect someone else to peg their work to the line.
5. Continue until everyone has added their work and adjust as you see fit.

### Option C:

In her artwork, Naomi connects the 'flat sheet' using thread or wire in different ways: notice how are they arranged and how are they connected. What details can you see?

1. Working individually, create your own painting on a sheet of paper.
2. In a small group, experiment with ways of joining the sheets of paper together with different materials (have a selection of materials for the children to choose from e.g.: pegs, paper clips, wires, pipe cleaners, string, etc.) **Top tip:** you can experiment by creating different patterns by alternating materials or coiling the material before joining it with the paper.
3. Findings can be recorded in a sketchbook or combined into a wall display to showcase the experimentation and observations.

# ACTIVITY 3

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Activity: **Exploring creative processes with paper and colour (KS2 and above)**  
Curriculum links: **Art & Design**

Introduction to the activity:

Here is an activity to encourage experimentation, close observation and verbal communication. I also give a couple of examples of constructing multiple elements to make a whole art piece. These will be useful starting points for collaborative art making.

You might choose to make as a whole class or to work in groups of 5 or 6. Again, decide what works for your situation. In these activities, you can experiment working with different types/weights of paper (e.g.: sugar paper, tracing paper, watercolour paper, cartridge paper or printer paper)

Ask your students:

- How thick is the paper?
- What happens when you fold the paper?
- What about the surface? (Smooth, textured rough, bumpy)

This activity is accompanied by a video demonstration and image of how your work might look.

## Paper and Brusho crystals

This process encourages close observation of the creative effects of different combinations of water, colour, and concentration of pigment.

Here is the video demonstration of the activity:  
<https://youtu.be/1qtT8LT0tLE>

### What you will need:

A range of paper or card, Brusho Pigment crystals, dish trays, plastic droppers, small cosmetic spray bottles, lollipop sticks, table covering, latex/nitrile gloves

**Top tip:** You might want to wear latex or nitrile gloves as the Brusho ink can stain fingers. Cover tabletops with waterproof covers and work on top of newspaper to absorb runoff ink.



1. Spray or brush water onto the paper or card.

2. Take a small amount of Brusho pigment on the end of a lollipop stick and shake it over the paper. What do you notice? What happens to the water? What happens to the pigment?
3. Experiment with adding more drops or spray of water - notice what happens. Try shaking more pigment onto the paper, maybe a different colour and notice what happens.
4. Repeat this process with a range of papers.
5. Let the papers dry overnight on a flat surface such as newspaper or drying rack to preserve their individual characteristics.

**Bonus Activity: Construction (Suitable for KS2 and above)**

1. Paper arranging

When your papers are dry look at them and notice the various colours, the depth of these colours and the types of patterns. Experiment with arranging the papers in different groupings or orders. What do they look like? Do they remind you of anything?

Here are a few prompts to consider as you arrange the papers

- Do you want the pieces to be close together or further apart - this will help you decide what is the best connecting or linking material and method.
- Divide the task into sections so that everyone has a part of the assembling to do.
- Keep communicating - brainstorm as a group if you encounter difficulties. Tell each other if you like an idea and if something works - if you see someone doing something that looks good - tell them!

2. Wire and paper construction

Explore several different ways of linking paper together. Below are images of how this might look with the different materials you might use.

**What you will need:**

chicken wire, split pin fasteners, wire, treasury tags, pipe cleaners, thin wire (e.g.: florist wire), paper clips, hole punch

