

OCTOBER GALLERY EDUCATION ONLINE RESOURCES

Inspired by Nnenna Okore

Created by Ione Maria Rojas

Who is Nnenna Okore?

Nnenna Okore is an artist, educator and environmentalist who creates abstract sculptures and installations inspired by the forms and materials she observes in natural and man-made environments. Born in Australia, raised in Nigeria and now living in the USA, Okore is a Professor of Art at Chicago's North Park University and has a long career as an artist, researcher and teacher.

What influenced Okore to become an artist?

Okore was passionate about art from a young age, winning various art prizes and developing skills in printmaking, pottery and painting. Growing up in Nsukka, Nigeria, Okore was influenced by traditional women's craft techniques - such as weaving, sewing and dyeing - that she saw the rural community rely on everyday. In her early twenties she studied Fine and Applied Arts at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and by the time she graduated she was already experimenting with unusual materials: cloth, recycled newspapers, jute bags, leaves, rope and other found objects - forming what would become her distinctive inventive style. The textures, shapes and colours of the wild landscapes, dilapidated towns and discarded materials she saw around her would also make their way into her work.

What are the main themes and materials of Okore's work?

Okore explores environmental issues through her work, particularly looking at processes of aging, death, decay and transformation. Having lived in Nigeria and the USA, she questions modern society's culture of consumption and waste through using recycled and/or environmentally friendly materials, such as old newspapers, thread and other fibers, wax, clay, sticks, coffee, dye and found papers or fabrics. She mirrors and explores the organic shapes found in nature, often using the traditional repetitive techniques she was so inspired by to twist, fray, tear, weave and shape her pieces.

Deep dive: A common thread

All of the artworks pictured below are made using some kind of thread: string, fishing line, rope, wire, etc.

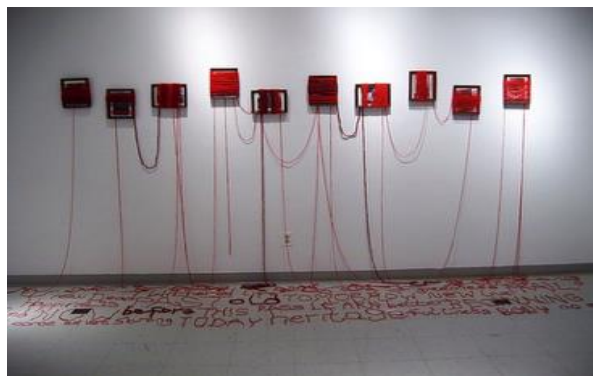
- How does Okore use this material in each artwork - is it functional, decorative or does it represent something (and if so, what)?
- Some of the artworks are suspended, hanging in the air or with parts that hang down, rather than flat and neatly contained. Why do you think this is?
- The artworks are placed in pairs. What are the similarities and differences within each pair?



Channels
Jute strings & wire
2018



Synergies II
Cheesecloth & wire
2018



Lost Memories
Framed photographs and yarn
2008



Falling Memories
Paper, wax & fishing line
2008

Ione Maria Rojas

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I am an English-Mexican social and ecological artist, working with land, plants and people. All of my work explores our relationship to our environment, to the natural world and to each other, and my projects are often participatory. As an interdisciplinary artist I use skills, techniques and ideas gathered from many different areas: printmaking, ceramics, horticulture, education, food and farming. Most recently I have been learning how to source, process and work with local clay dug from the earth, as a way in to environmental arts education.

I am drawn to the work of Nnenna Okore as much of my work centres around similar themes:

- our relationship with the earth and the materials that come from it
- reframing the unwanted and repurposing waste (recycled and found materials - both natural and man-made)
- the use of traditional craft techniques
- visual exploration of organic forms



¿Y Esto Para Que? (And this is for what?)

Mixed media installation

2019

I set up an installation in an abandoned grainstore at a hacienda in Mexico. Using printmaking and found materials, the piece created a visual archive of the site's complex history whilst also presenting a design for what its future might look like.



The installation also featured booklets of prints I'd made, again working with plants and materials found on the land. I like to catalogue materials in a style much more abstract way than typical plant identification resources.



From the booklet *Raices (Roots)*
 Monotypes
 2019



From the booklet *Mariposas (Butterflies)*
 Monotypes
 2019

Deep dive: A closer look

- What similarities and differences do you notice between the artworks above and those of Nnenna Okore on page 2?
- In the installation piece, *Y Esto Para Que?*, shown on page 4, thread has again been used. Why do you think this is? What might it represent?
- Both of the artists featured use found materials in their work: natural materials such as plants, clay and fiber, and also repurposed waste such as plastic, jute bags and old paper. Why do you think this is? Is there an underlying message to their choice of materials?
- What do you think of the titles given to the artworks? How do they connect to the artwork? What might you name them instead?

Activities

Activity: line doodles
Time: 10mins+
Materials: paper, pen(cil), imagination

'There are no straight lines in nature'

Is this true?

Can you think of any true straight lines in nature?

What kind of forms and shapes do you see in nature?

Method

1. Find some paper and a pen or pencil and draw some of the shapes and forms you might see in nature. Don't worry about trying to make it look like anything, just think about the types of lines or forms you might see outdoors. It could be the edge of a leaf, or the movement of bird's wings.
2. If you're lucky enough to get outside, take a walk and collect some things: leaves, flowers, feathers, pebbles. If you can't get outside, draw from your imagination or look up a nature video online and see what you find. You might also want to add colour as you experiment.
3. Doodle and doodle till you've filled a few pages.
4. Now look at the lines and shapes you've drawn.
 - Which ones do you like?
 - Which ones do you not like?
 - Why / why not?

Activity: floating creatures

Time: 60mins+

Materials: recycled materials (food & drink cartons, toilet roll tubes, paper etc.), string / thread, scissors, glue, sellotape / stapler

Method

1. Collect recycled and/or unwanted materials from around the house. The kitchen is a good place to look. You can use old food and drink cartons, plastic bags or packaging, crisp packets, old envelopes - anything that can be easily cut up and worked with. Make sure to clean everything before you start playing with it!
2. Lay out your chosen materials, then tear, rip and cut them up into smaller pieces. You might want to cut them into strips, or tear them into squares. Don't overthink it, just play and see where your hands take you.
3. Once you have a pile of deconstructed materials, get some string and start binding and tying your pieces together. What kind of shapes can you make? Can you use some of the lines and shapes from your line doodles?
4. Use your pieces to make an abstract creation that you can hang up. It could be inspired by a deep sea creature, a wild flower, or just an interesting shape from your imagination.
5. Once you've made your creature, find somewhere in the house to hang it up. Notice how it moves once it's hung up. If you hang it in a window, does it move in the wind? Does it have an interesting shadow?

Activity: falling poem
Time: 45mins+
Materials: old newspapers or magazines, string or thread, scissors, sellotape or stapler

Method

1. Decide how long you want your poem to be: 4 lines / 10 lines / 20 lines? It can be as short or as long as you want.
2. Find an old newspaper or magazine to flick through and cut out any words or sentences that catch your attention.
3. You could choose a theme or just choose words at random - they don't have to make sense or be connected, and you don't have to put them in any order yet.
4. Keep cutting till you have enough words to make the length of your poem.
5. Put all the words in a small bag and shake it up, then take the words out of the bag without looking at them.
6. Whatever order they come out in is the order of your poem.
7. Use string or thread to hang your poem from top to bottom, using Okore's Falling Memories as inspiration. Find somewhere to hang the poem.
8. *Alternative: Instead of shaking up the words and choosing them without looking, think about the order you put your words in and collage your poem together. Perhaps you want to express a particular message?*

Don't forget to take a photo or video of your creations and share it with October Gallery Education online!

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Email education@octobergallery.co.uk