

OCTOBER GALLERY EDUCATION RESOURCE

Inspired by Alexis Peskine

Created by Kelly Frank

Who is Alexis Peskine?

Alexis Peskine is a French contemporary artist. Born in Paris, Alexis grew up surrounded by different types of art, music and culture, which strongly influenced his creative interests from a young age. He later studied art and design, developing a strong interest in portraiture and how people are represented in art.

What influenced Alexis Peskine's work?

Alexis Peskine's work is influenced by his family and cultural background, especially his Afro-Brazilian heritage. His maternal family practices Candomblé, a spiritual tradition brought to Brazil by enslaved West Africans, and he is interested in how spirituality can be a source of strength and resistance.

He is also influenced by history, identity, and portrait painting. He is particularly interested in how people are represented in art, especially Black identity and heritage. His portraits have an energy similar to the Minkisi "power figures" from the Congo Basin, spiritual objects believed to hold special powers. All of these influences help him explore identity, culture, history, and resilience in his artworks.

What are the main themes and materials used in his work?

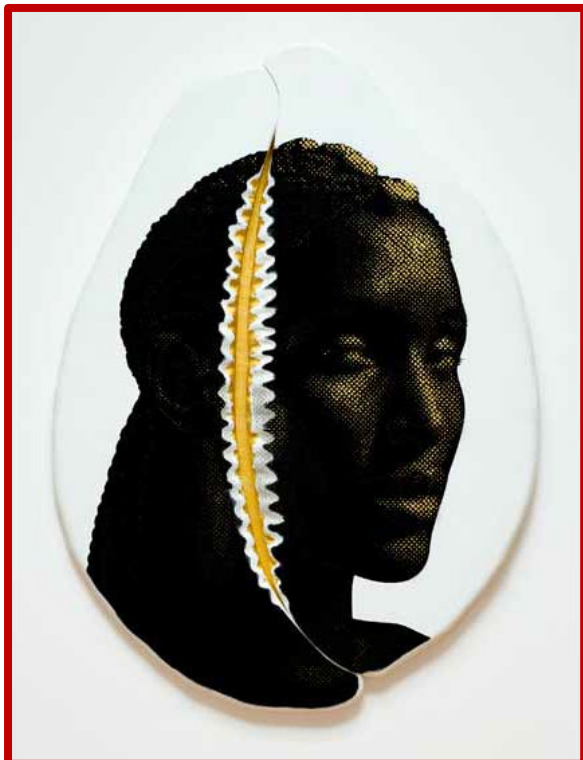
Alexis Peskine creates powerful portraits using materials such as wood, nails, and gold leaf. He starts with wood stained with coffee and mud as the background. Then, he carefully hammers nails of different sizes into the wood to create the shapes and details of the face. He is inspired by African and African diasporic cultures and often includes objects and ideas linked to cultural traditions and rituals.

His work explores themes of identity, spirituality, strength, and resilience. The materials he uses, especially the nails, can represent strength and endurance, while also sharing stories about culture, history, and pride.

Examples



Alexis Peskine, *Ndèm*, 2024.
Lacquer paint, moon gold and nails on wood, 150 x 197
cm. (AP120)



Alexis Peskine, *Kékéréké*, 2024.
White and black paint, archival varnish,
24k gold leaf and nails on wood, 150 x
110 cm. (AP118)

Art Information

In the exhibition, *Forest Figures* (2024), Alexis Peskine expands his creative process by using shapes and materials from the natural world—such as tree trunks, leaves, and shells—to make his portraits. The title refers to how the works feel alive, like figures emerging from nature itself, just as trees and plants grow from the forest.

Some of the artworks are shaped like cowrie shells. In traditions, such as the iFá divination ritual, cowrie shells are used to connect with the spirits. In this exhibition the shells also represent peace, renewal, and history. Cowrie shells were also once used in trade, linking them to cultural stories and past experiences.

Peskine carefully chooses colours and materials that connect to history and identity. For example, he uses indigo pigment, which is connected to the labour of enslaved people in the Caribbean. He also creates leafy shapes by staining the wood with herbs like rosemary, basil, and mint, which have spiritual meanings in many cultures. By layering these natural forms and materials together, *Forest Figures* creates powerful artworks that show stories about identity, nature, resilience, and shared history.

Guided questions for the classroom:

- What part of the portrait do you notice first? Why?
- How does this portrait make you feel? What do you like about it?
- What story or message might the artist be telling about identity or culture?
- Can you spot where the nails are placed close together or further apart? What effect does this create?
- What is a ritual?
- What objects remind you of your culture and identity?
- How do everyday objects carry personal or emotional significance for you?

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I am a freelance artist educator and community engagement coordinator. I have taught across a wide range of museums and galleries in London, and I draw on a variety of backgrounds, including architecture, design, and fine arts. I specialise in painting practices and working with vulnerable groups.

In my practice as a facilitator, I aim to explore new and innovative ways to experiment with materials, encourage artistic thinking, and support participants in developing their personal narratives and creative legacy based on the research of the artists we study.

Activity 1

Activity: **Pinhole Portraits (Key Stage 3)**

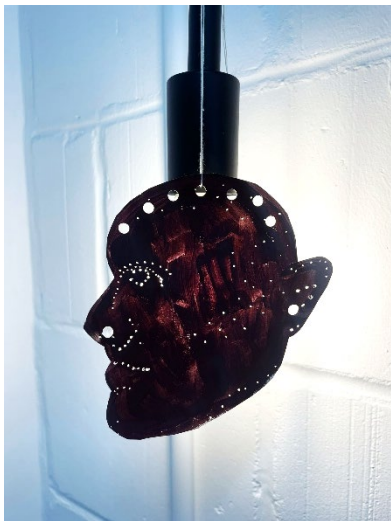
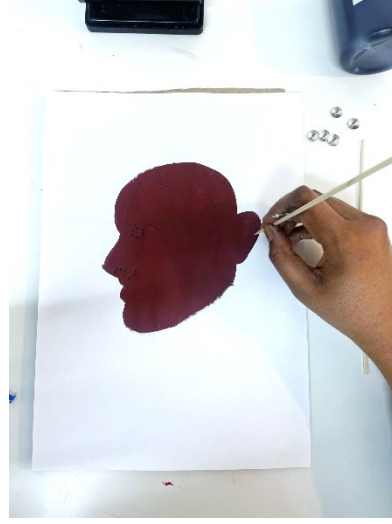
Curriculum Links: **Art & Design**

What you will need: Cardboard, A4 printer paper, pencils, black acrylic or dark colour, pins, press pins, skewers, scissors, hole puncher, string, brushes

Introduction to the activity:

Alexis Peskine often begins his artworks by creating silhouettes of his models. A silhouette is the solid outline of a person, filled in with one flat colour. He carefully paints large portraits onto wooden boards and then uses nails to bring out the facial features. His work explores the contrast between dark paint and shiny, sparkling nails to recreate a face. Peskine often covers his portraits with gold leaf, making the surface glisten and catch the light. He uses many different sizes and shapes of nails, placing them carefully to draw details such as the eyes, nose and mouth. By placing the nails close together, he creates lighter areas, and by spacing them further apart, he creates darker areas. This careful use of repetition and spacing helps bring his portraits to life.

1. Cut a piece of recycled cardboard to roughly A4 size. This will be your backing board.
2. Draw the outline (silhouette) of a face. It can be facing forwards or sideways. You could even ask a friend or family member to pose for you. If you are painting the silhouette, make sure the paint is applied thickly with no gaps.
3. Once the silhouette is completely dry, place your A4 paper on top of the cardboard backing.
4. Using a variety of pencils or pins, carefully press into the paper so that the holes go through to the cardboard underneath. You will be using these holes to draw your portrait.
5. Just like Alexis Peskine, make some holes close together to create darker, more solid areas, and space them further apart to create lighter tones. Use this technique to show details such as the eyes, nose and lips. **Top tip:** Ask an adult for help with this step, as some tools can be sharp.
6. You can also use a hole punch to add larger holes. **Top tip:** Using a range of different sized holes will add more texture and interest to your portrait.
7. When you have finished making your holes, carefully cut around the edge of your portrait. Hold it up to the light to reveal your finished pinhole portrait.
8. Try different shapes and poses for your portrait, you can even use different colours.



Activity 2

Activity: **Embossing Sculptures (Key Stage 2)**

Curriculum Links: **Art & Design**

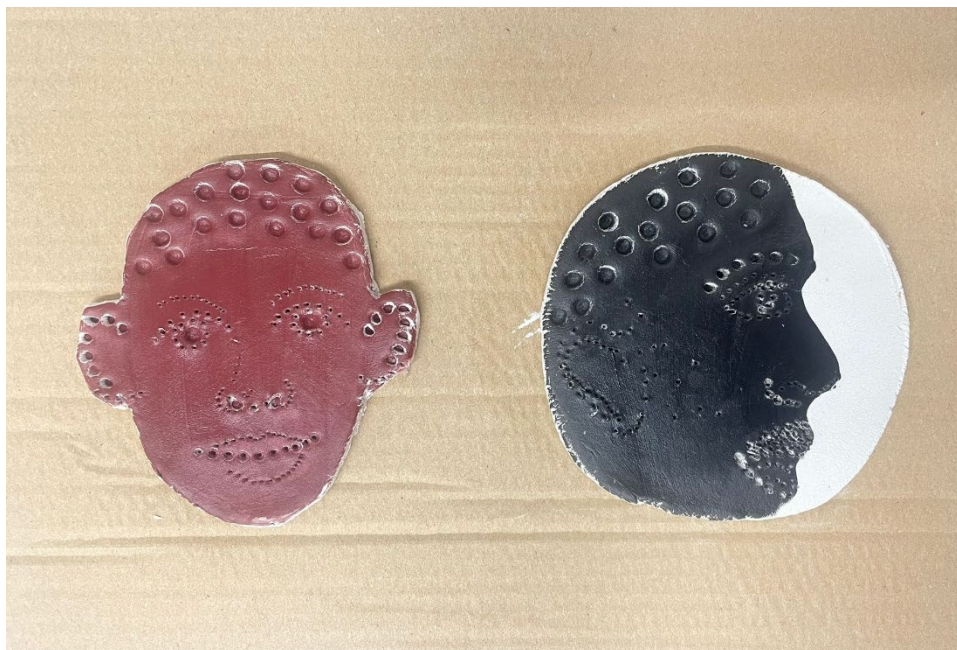
What you will need: Cardboard, air drying clay or homemade plasticine, pencils, pins, press pins, skewers, acrylic paint, brushes

Introduction to the activity:

Alexis often paints on wooden boards of different shapes. Some of his artworks are made using reclaimed timber, where you can still see the grain and lines of the wood. As part of his process, he experiments by combining different portrait photographs he has taken, mixing poses and faces with different shaped surfaces.

Some of these shapes are inspired by leaves, reclaimed wood, or symbolic forms, helping him connect his portraits to nature and meaning.

1. Place your clay on a piece of cardboard to protect your table or work surface.
2. Using a clay roller, rolling pin, or a clean can, carefully roll out the clay until it is about 1 cm thick.
3. Paint a silhouette design for your portrait onto the clay. Make sure the paint fills in any gaps and is smooth and even. Leave it to dry.
4. Using tools such as pencils, pens, or other blunt objects, press into the clay to create indents and draw in the facial features. Different tools will create different textures, and some marks may reveal the clay colour underneath.
5. Press the indents close together or further apart to create a variety of textures and tones.
6. You can use a ruler to trim the edges of your clay or leave it just as it is.



Activity 3

Activity: **Objects of Ritual (Key Stage 3)**

Curriculum Links: **Art & Design/PSHE**

What you will need: Cardboard, air drying clay or homemade plasticine, watercolours/inks/poster paint, brushes.

Everyday objects used as daily rituals: brushes, keys, makeup, chargers, buttons, laces, glasses.

Introduction to the activity:

Alexis uses cowrie shell shapes as backgrounds for some of his paintings. In Brazilian spirituality, cowrie shells are special and sacred objects that are used in rituals. They are believed to help people communicate with the spirits and are linked to protection, health, and success.

1. Place your clay on a piece of cardboard to protect your table or work surface.
2. Using a clay roller, rolling pin, or a clean can, carefully roll out the clay until it is about 1 cm thick.
3. Using the objects you have chosen from your daily rituals, gently press them into the clay. Look closely at the shapes and patterns they leave behind. Can you use these impressions to create facial features?
4. To finish, add colour using watercolours or inks. Use a brush to paint skin tones and paint in the details of the face.

