

OCTOBER GALLERY EDUCATION RESOURCE

Inspired by Naomi Wanjiku Gakunga

Created by Hannah Littlejones

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



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

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

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:

Words to describe the paper and colour	Words to Describe connecting the paper elements
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

Activity: **Exploring creative processes with paper and colour (Early Years and above)**

Curriculum links: **Art & Design**

Introduction to the activity:

Here are two art processes that encourage experimentation, close observation and verbal communication. I have also provided an example of how to construct these 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 such as:

- Sugar paper
- Tracing paper
- Watercolour paper
- Cartridge paper
- 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)

Each option is accompanied with a video demonstration and image of how your work might look.

Option A: Marbling with oil and food colouring

This is an activity for students to explore cause and effect with oil, colour and water.

What you will need:

Different types of thick paper - cartridge, sugar paper or watercolour paper vegetable oil, water, food colouring, plastic container (tray/drawer with 5 -10 cm of water), plastic dropper, blotting paper - paper towels or kitchen roll, small containers, lollipop stick

Here is the video demonstration of the activity: <https://youtu.be/7cn1NEIDMGo>

1. Prepare your work area with a waterproof table covering and newspaper to absorb any spills.

2. Pour vegetable oil into a small container and mix in food colouring.
3. Have a separate tray filled with water.
4. Using the dropper to add drops of coloured oil to the tray of water.
5. Swirl the droppings around in the water until you are happy with what you see.
6. Take a paper and lower it into the water. Lift it out and tilt to remove excess water.
7. Repeat this with different types of paper and notice what happens.
8. Let the paper dry overnight by hanging on a line.



Option B: Marbling with shaving foam and food colouring

This activity is ideal for sensory exploration as it invites play and experimentation.

What you will need:

Thick paper (cartridge, sugar paper, watercolour paper), shaving foam, food colouring, shallow tray - tea tray with 5 cm lip or baking tray, plastic droppers spray bottles, blotting paper (paper towels or kitchen towels), straight edge ruler, drawing tool - lollipop stick or end of a paintbrush.

Here is the video demonstration of the activity: <https://youtu.be/JlBv9y6nPV8>

1. Squirt the shaving foam into the shallow tray and smooth the surface with the edge of the ruler.
2. Drop food colouring into the shaving foam experimenting with how you drop or splatter the food colouring.
3. Move the end of the drawing tool through the mixture to create satisfying pattern combinations.
4. Take a piece of paper and lay it on the surface of the shaving foam
5. Apply gentle pressure to achieve an even contact.
6. Lift the paper off and using the edge of the ruler scrape off the shaving foam to reveal your design.
7. Let the paper dry overnight by hanging on a line.

Top tip: You can repeat this process – taking 3 or 4 prints from the same shaving foam, adding a little more colour and moving the mixture with the drawing tool. Recycle the shaving foam by scooping it and smoothing the surface again. Experiment with different colour combinations, dropping, spraying, or combining the way you add the food colouring.



1. Bonus Activity: Washing line display (Suitable for Early Years and above):

Experiment with creating a hanging display of your work.

What you will need:

wooden pole or broom handle, string, clothes pegs, ribbon, wool, fabric strips, paper clips, bulldog clips, staples

Hang the pieces of paper on a wooden pole or similar (e.g.: a broom handle) with string and clothes pegs. You might want to experiment with other hanging materials to see what differences they make. Below is an image of how this might look.

