

## ART ACTIVITY

*Empowerment through Art***Background**

During the Jim Crow era, Black Americans fought back against racist stereotypes by circulating imagery that depicted Black progress and success. Frederick Douglass, for example, believed that photography had the power to challenge prejudice. In the 1960s and 70s, Black Americans also conveyed messages of Black pride through the emerging Black Power and Black Arts movements. Black Power was a revolutionary movement that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, emphasizing racial pride, economic empowerment, and the creation of political and cultural institutions. The Black Arts movement explored these concepts through poetry, literature, visual art, music, and theater. Existing both at the intersection and on the margins of Black Power and the Feminist movement, artist Betye Saar began creating assemblages that spoke to the experiences and resilience of Black women, and that confronted racism in America. While early 20th century European and American artists used assemblages to create surrealist representations of the unconscious or to disrupt the values of commercialized galleries with everyday materials, Saar's assemblages reclaimed and recontextualized historical objects to create new symbols of Black strength and power.

**Task**

After analyzing assemblages created by Betye Saar in 1972 and 2017, as well as the Jim Crow era imagery that Saar reclaimed in her work, students will create their own assemblages using collage materials and found objects. They will consider the political statements that Betye Saar made with her artwork, and choose a social or political issue that women advocated for in the 1960s and 70s that still resonates today as the focus of their own pieces. Students will think

about the significance of each element of the assemblage, and how they all come together aesthetically to convey a larger message.

## Materials

- Cardboard bases (9" x 12")
  - For a sturdier base, you can also use [hardwood panels](#)
- Assorted found objects: Buttons, keys, bottle caps, tiles, tchotchkes, game pieces, shells, small figurines, beads, etc.
- Assorted collage materials: construction paper, magazines, printed images, tissue paper, catalogues, advertisements, etc.
- Super glue for 3D materials (Suggested brand: Elmer's Super Glue)
- Glue sticks for collage materials
- Scissors

## Art Vocabulary

- **assemblage:** A sculpture constructed by combining objects or materials not traditionally used in making art.
- **composition:** The arrangement of elements within a work of art.
- **collage:** A two-dimensional work of art made by layering and gluing pieces of pictures, paper, and/or found materials.
- **found objects:** An object—often utilitarian, manufactured, or naturally occurring—that was not originally designed for an artistic purpose, but has been repurposed in an artistic context.

## Steps

- Artist Betye Saar's work confronted racism in America by reclaiming imagery from the Jim Crow era to create new symbols of Black power and strength. Before introducing students to Saar's assemblages, they should understand what she was responding to. Begin by leading an inquiry with the image of the "Old Aunt Chloe" toy, ca. 1870-1900, and/or *Jim Crow Ten Pins* on page 117 of the [Black Citizenship in the Age of Jim Crow](#) curriculum using the line of questioning below.
  - What do you notice about this image?
  - How was this person being depicted? What message was this imagery sending to consumers about Black Americans?
  - What is significant about the fact that this kind of imagery was so widespread?
  - What effects might this kind of imagery have had on Black Americans? How was this imagery a form of oppression?
  - How might Black Americans have fought back against this type of imagery during the Jim Crow era and beyond?
- Next, give students a bit of background information on [Betye Saar](#) and her role as a figure of the Black Arts Movement. Then, lead an inquiry with *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, 1972 using the line of questioning below.
  - What do you notice about this piece?
  - What different elements make up this assemblage? What is the significance of each individual element?
  - Who are the women we see in this piece? What do each of them represent in the context in which Betye Saar has placed them?
  - What similarities do you notice between this piece and the Jim Crow-era image? What is different? How has Saar changed the message?
  - How did Saar use racist imagery to create a new symbol of Black power and resilience, specifically for Black women?

- How do all of the objects and images in her assemblage come together to form a larger composition?
- Finally, have students look at one of Saar's more contemporary assemblages, [\*Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroines\*](#), which she made in 2017. Discuss the following:
  - What do you notice about this piece?
  - What objects, images, and text did Saar choose to include here? What is the significance of each element of the assemblage?
  - In what ways does this piece resemble her work from the 1970s? How is it different?
  - What statement does this piece make? How has Saar's message continued to resonate over time?
  - What stories do these pieces tell us about Black women's experiences and activism throughout history?
  - What does this tell us about the issues that Saar has responded to through her work? What do her assemblages say about resilience?
- Much like the themes Betye Saar addresses in her work, many rights that women fought for in the 1960s and 1970s are still being fought for today. Students now have the opportunity to create their own assemblages to respond to and reflect on a social or political issue. Like Saar, students should aim to convey themes of empowerment and highlight the strength of women who have historically fought for equality.
- Before they begin, have students choose the issue that they will be addressing in their work of art by considering the following:
  - What is a social or political issue that women were involved in in the 1960s-1970s that still resonates today?
  - How might our work of art make a commentary on this issue, while also celebrating women activists of the past and present?
  - How can we create pieces that reflect on history from our own perspectives and experiences?

- What objects and imagery can we include in our assemblages that speak to these themes? How will they come together in a larger composition?
- Once students have decided on the themes of their work, pass out the assemblage bases, scissors, and glue.
  - Give students some time to select the found objects and collage materials that they will use for their piece, keeping in mind how intentional each element of Betye Saar's assemblages are.
  - Students should also consider how the objects will be assembled together to convey a larger message and a unified final piece.
- Once students have collected all of their materials, they can begin thinking about the orientation of their pieces. They can choose to stand their base upright and build out from it, the way that Betye Saar did in the pieces that the class discussed, or they can lay their base flat on the table and build upward. Students can look at other [examples](#) of [assemblage](#) art for inspiration.
- Next, have students design their base using the collage materials, emphasizing that the base can be just as important to the larger message of the piece as the objects assembled on it. They can reflect on the meaning of the washboard on which Betye Saar mounted her objects in *Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroines*, or the repeating image of Aunt Jemima in *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*.
- Once students have finished collaging, they can begin with the three-dimensional aspects of their assemblages. Encourage them to try a few arrangements to see which they like best before gluing everything down, and remind them that they should switch over to using super glue for this step to make sure that the piece holds together.
- When students have finished their assemblages, they should lay them flat until they have fully dried. Once their pieces are stable, students can add any final touches.
- When students have finished their assemblages, have them write an artist statement reflecting on the following questions:

- What was your process for choosing each piece of your assemblage? How did it feel to use everyday objects to create a work of art instead of more traditional art supplies?
- What was the meaning behind each of the collage and 3D elements you chose to include in your assemblage?
- How did everything come together in your final piece? What was the process like?
- How did you use your piece to make a statement and respond to a social or political issue? How is it in conversation with the history of that issue? How does the message of your piece reflect your personal perspective?
- How did Betye Saar's work inspire your assemblage?
- How can works of art serve as a form of activism?

### **Assemblage Tip:**

If possible, introduce the assignment the day before completing the art-making activity so that students have the opportunity to collect and bring in some of their own found objects, and consider the meaning of each to the larger message of their piece. The selection of objects by the artists is an important part of the assemblage process.