

***Witness: Themes of Social Justice in Contemporary Printmaking and  
Photography  
from the Collections of Jordan D. Schnitzer and His Family  
Foundation***

**Teachers Guide**

Hallie Ford Museum of Art  
September 15 – December 20, 2018

This guide is to help teachers prepare students for a field trip to the exhibition, *Witness: Themes of Social Justice in Contemporary Printmaking and Photography from the Collections of Jordan D. Schnitzer and His Family Foundation*; to offer ways to lead their own tours; and to propose ideas to reinforce the gallery experience and broaden curriculum concepts. Teachers, however, will need to consider the level and needs of their students in adapting these materials and lessons.

*Witness: Themes of Social Justice in Contemporary Printmaking and Photography from the Collections of Jordan D. Schnitzer and His Family Foundation* has been supported by funds from Jordan D. Schnitzer and His Family Foundation and the Hallie Ford Exhibition Fund, and by general operating support from the City of Salem's Transient Occupancy Tax funds and the Oregon Arts Commission.

**‘wɪtnəs/**

*noun*

1. one who sees an event take place
2. one who gives evidence
3. one who has personal or direct knowledge of something

*intransitive verb*

1. to testify to
2. to act as witness of
3. to furnish proof
4. to have personal or direct knowledge of

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## **INTRODUCTION**, by Elizabeth Anne Bilyeau, Exhibition Curator

To witness is to look carefully at the visual details, concepts in the prints and photographs in the exhibition. Witnessing involves listening to the voices of the artists in conversation, excerpts that you can find in the labels accompanying the works. When we pay attention to details, threads of social justice emerge in missing histories, in challenges to traditional representations of the figure, and in definitions of home. The strong visual qualities and creative techniques of the prints and photographs beckon us closer. Spending time discerning the artists' stories and identities and recognizing the personal connections – or oppressive misconnections – that they reveal is witnessing.

Most of the prints and photographs in this exhibition were made in the last twenty years and, although divided thematically, you will see messages that overlap and are threaded throughout. Individual stories meld with social histories to chronicle the history of war and politics from personal perspectives. Stories of childhood bring out recollections of family interactions and impactful educational moments in school, lending insight into life experiences. Memory becomes important, and the works raise awareness of events omitted from the canon of history. Artists traditionally marginalized based on the color of their skin embrace modernist traditions of abstraction. The prints and photographs take aim at stereotypes in popular culture, and the popular media provides substance for the works. With a nod to the traditions of portraiture, artists explore identity, reimagining the body through the fractured or absent body, mapping and layering. Explorations of place show nuances of home, ruptured definitions of land, urgency to attend to the environment, and ramifications of governmental and economic manipulations by those in power.

Social justice is defined here by individual artists creatively bringing their own stories and passions to us through visual elements, collaborations in printmaking and photographic processes, and in their lives beyond their art. We hear their voices translated through images giving us ideas that engage thought, discussion, and action.

We are living in volatile times socially and politically in the United States, and much of the upheaval is related to the abuse of power and to misunderstandings and ignorances around differences in our society. This exhibition is an opportunity to witness, to look at the prints and photographs, and to listen to the voices of the artists, whose own words are including in the labels accompanying the works. Their works and their words are generous, giving space that allows for vulnerability in recognizing differences and for finding empathy in all that we have inherited.

## WITNESSING: Looking at the Work of Marie K. Watt

Fig. 1



Marie K. Watt

(Seneca, born 1967)

*Witness (Quamichan Potlatch, 1913)*

2014

Ed. 10/10

Copperplate etching

7 x 8 in.

Collection of the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at the University of Oregon

Photograph by Aaron Johanson

Fig. 2



Marie K. Watt

(Seneca, born 1967)

*Witness* (not in the exhibition)

2015

71 × 180.5 in.

Reclaimed wool blanket, embroidery floss, thread

Photograph by Aaron Johanson

### About the work:

Marie Watt took the image in this etching from a one-hundred-plus-year-old photograph of a potlatch of the Quamichin, a Coast Salish First Nation on and around Vancouver Island, British Columbia (to view/download a detail of the original photograph by Reverend Tate from the collections of the Royal BC Museum and Archives go to:

<http://www.mariewattstudio.com/work/project/witness-2015>).

Watt writes:

A potlatch is a ceremonial tradition shared by Coast Salish Indigenous people who traditionally occupy the Pacific Northwest Coast of Canada and the United States. In Chinook jargon, “potlatch” (or *patchitle*) means “to give.” I like the vision of ecstatic giving, as some potlatches were rumored to have so many gifts, particularly folded and stacked blankets, that they actually would touch the ceilings of the longhouse.

Potlatches were and continue to be part of the Coast Salish economy and a means [of] displaying wealth and prestige in the community. In 1913, this was also a demonstration of civil disobedience, as potlatches were banned by the Canadian and US governments from 1885 to the 1950s. In this image, a blanket is literally flying in the air, as the host family casts gifts from a rooftop porch to the crowd below. I have come to think of blankets as transportation objects, both physically and metaphorically. When I look at

this image and think of others looking at the image, we inadvertently join the crowd and become witnesses to this ongoing tradition.

In an interview with exhibition curator Elizabeth Bilyeau, Watt reiterates her themes, tying them to the ways we contextualize historical cultural objects and to contemporary events:

That photo has been something that I continue to go back to, and what I loved about it is the blanket flying through space. There is a family on the rafters of these buildings, and the family is giving the blanket to the people below. When I found this photo, I was looking for photographs of potlatches that included blankets. I thought that this was amazing because it's a transportation object that's flying through space....It can physically transport, but, also, I like the idea of a transportation object as being something of our imaginations.

The longer I worked with the image, the more I started to think about the way that this...gathering is an act of civil disobedience. In the last couple of years, I've been thinking about how much that act of civil disobedience has resonance with movements today like Black Lives Matter or the protesting that's been going on with the Dakota Access Pipeline.

It's important to understand that this was a potlatch that was happening when they were banned. The image reveals this moment in history that has ongoing resonance. For all of the federal government's attempts, both in Canada and the United States, to ban potlatches, they, in many ways, are an uncut tradition. That's what I really love about that photo. And, in this print, the fact that the blanket is the one thing that's in color brings the past into the present.

Think of the people in audience as being witness to the event...we are all part of the audience. We are witnesses as well. As witnesses, we all have responsibilities to be active agents, too, in creating change. For me that image is about resilience and perseverance and connectedness. All these people are gathering and that is a way of demonstrating how they're related and connected.

## Suggested Discussion:

As a class, list the social justice issues students care about. As you list them, try to categorize them (e.g., racism, environment, violence, education, poverty, etc.) and how they might intersect.

- Discuss how art, and artists, can play a role in the social justice issues students care about. How can they be part of the solution?

Show students the image *Witness (Quamichan Potlatch, 1913)* (Fig. 1)

- Describe what you see here: your first impressions of subject matter, scene, mood, and atmosphere.
- How has the artist used the elements of art (lines, color, shape, form, texture, space, etc.) and the principles of art (the way it is organized, i.e., pattern, contrast, balance, proportion, unity, rhythm, variety, emphasis)?
  - Where does your eye go first? Why?
  - How does your eye move around the painting – is it led by color, line, pattern, etc?

Share information about the work, and Marie Watt’s own words, about *Witness (Quamichan Potlatch, 1913)* with students.

- Discuss the various definitions of the word “witness” and how they relate to Marie Watt’s *Witness (Quamichan Potlatch, 1913)*. Who is bearing witness? (the artist, the people in the photograph, the artwork’s viewers). What are they witnessing? (e.g. a cultural event, an untold or forgotten story, an act of resistance, etc.).
- Discuss *Witness (Quamichan, Potlatch, 1913)* as it relates to the act of resistance (and resilience and connectedness) and how Marie Watt’s use of an historical photograph in her work brings attention to events and struggles of peoples and cultures whose stories have been neglected or forgotten.
  - Discuss the original context and purpose of the image. (perhaps historic or anthropologic documentation)
  - How has Watt altered the image? Why do you think she chose to do so instead of creating a distinct new work about the subject matter?
  - How does Watt’s reimagining affect your understanding or interpretation of the image and its connection to contemporary events/issues?

## Suggested Activity:

Describing her greater body of work, Watt says:

My work explores human stories and rituals implicit in everyday objects. I am interested in the history of wool blankets and their heirloom-like quality. Sigmund Freud considered blankets as “transitional” objects, but I like to consider how these humble pieces of cloth are transformational. Blankets are a part of how we are received into the world and also how we depart this world. Blankets are used for warmth and shelter. Children use them for hiding and to construct impromptu forts. A blanket is a catcher of dreams and a ledger of secrets. Wool blankets are the pelts of our animal relatives, the sheep. Blankets are bodylike.

Show students *Witness*, from 2015 (Fig. 2, not in the exhibition).

- Describe what you see here.
- How has the artist used the elements of art (lines, color, shape, form, texture, space, etc.) and the principles of art (the way it is organized, i.e., pattern, contrast, balance, proportion, unity, rhythm, variety, emphasis)
  - Where does your eye go first? Why?
  - How does your eye move around the painting – is it led by color, line, pattern, etc?

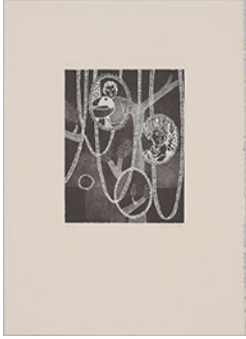
Share Marie Watt’s words about her body of work.

- Discuss how Watt’s interest in blankets as a motif led her to the historic photograph and ultimately to create both *Witness (Quamichan Potlatch, 1913)* and *Witness, 2015*.
- Compare and contrast with the print. How are they similar? How are they different?
- How does the media and technique affect the message and your experience of each work? Explain.

Marie Watt was inspired by a single photograph and continued exploring different processes and techniques using the same image.

- Find an image or cultural object – it could relate to your own family history or your community – that tells a forgotten or previously untold story about an issue of social justice or the experience of an individual/community.
- Create a work of art inspired by the image or object, using the medium you feel would best express the story and the message, and incorporating the original visually in some way.

**Fig. 3**



Marie K. Watt

(American, Seneca, born 1967)

*Loom: Betty Feves, Hilda Morris, and Amanda Snyder (off stage)*

2009

Lithograph printed off of limestone, hand-drawn by the artist, with chine collé

19 ½ x 14 in.

Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer, 2015.017

Photograph by Strode Photographic LLC

### **About the work:**

Art is both a form of communication and a practice. When we think of identity in art, we most often think of subject matter that addresses issues of race, gender, culture, etc. What may not be as obvious, but is also important, is artistic identity: how the artist engages with the artistic process – exploring form and technique and working through the problems and challenges they present – and how this practice informs his/her/their worldview. Many are in dialogue not only with other art and artists, both past and present, but also with the history of art.

In *Loom: Betty Feves, Hilda Morris, and Amanda Snyder (off stage)*, Marie Watt not only honors the women artists who have influenced her, but also matriarchal values. In doing so, she challenges the role of the patriarchy in the art historical canon, and by extension, in our culture:

I have to say the first part of Marvin Gaye’s song “What’s Going On” that really spoke to me were the words “mother, mother.” For me when I hear those words “mother, mother,” I think of the archetype of what a mother is and of my idea of what matriarchs are. I think of strong women, and I don’t necessarily think about people who biologically are mothers: women who are – and, well, it doesn’t necessarily have to be women – people who are strong role models with the kind of motherly attributes that we as a culture might associate with the word “mother.”

[Betty Feves, Hilda Morris, and Amanda Snyder] are all really important artists from...the Northwest, and by the nature of living here, I feel connected to them....I went to school at a time when there were so few women introduced in art history classes. I have always made an effort to locate women artists in my life.

Among the looping threads and woven textures, a nod to Watt’s focus on textile work in her larger body of work, she has framed portraits of her mentors: the Oregon artists Betty Feves and Hilda Morris. Amanda Snyder receives credit in the title, and the third frame surrounds an image of a budding branch, suggesting future possibilities.



## Suggested Discussion:

Show students *Loom: Betty Feves, Hilda Morris, and Amanda Snyder (off stage)* (Fig. 3)

- Describe what you see here: your first impressions of subject matter, and, mood, atmosphere, or associations.
- How has the artist used the elements of art (lines, color, shape, form, texture, space, etc.) and the principles of art (the way it is organized, i.e., pattern, contrast, balance, proportion, unity, rhythm, variety, emphasis)?
  - Where does your eye go first? Why?
  - How does your eye move around the painting – is it led by shape, line, pattern, etc?

Share information about the work, and Marie Watt’s own words, with students.

- How do the title and the composition of *Loom* reflect the relationship of Watt, the artists who inspired her, and future generations of artists?
- How does artistic identity intersect with other issues of identity, such as gender, equality, and inclusiveness?

Examine the concept of the art historical canon, which is the conventional timeline of artists who are often referred to as “Old Masters” or “Great Artists.”

- Have students research the representation in recorded art history (curricula, museums and galleries, visual culture, etc.) of art and artists overlooked and undervalued (e.g. women, artists of color, artists from non-western cultures), and discuss their findings. Ask them to consider:
  - Why were these artists absent or under-represented?
  - What progress has been made to correct this, and when?
  - Is this still an issue today? Explain

## AT THE MUSEUM

**NOTE:** The catalogue for this exhibition relies heavily on interviews with artists. Portions of interviews are included on the labels to emphasize both their ideas in relation to their work and their artistic practices that support and complicate the themes.

- Review with students what is expected – their task and museum behavior.
- Be selective – don't try to look at or talk about everything in the exhibition.
- Focus on the works of art. Encourage students to look closely at each work of art and consider beginning with the visual scanning they used in the classroom. A good way to start is by asking, "What is happening in this picture?" or "what do you see here?" Follow with questions that will help students back up their observations: "What do you see that makes you say that?" or "Show us what you have found."
  - Describe what you see here: your first impressions of subject matter, and where applicable, scene, mood and atmosphere, and any associations.
  - How has the artist used the elements of art (lines, color, shape, form, texture, space, etc.) and the principles of art (the way it is organized, i.e., pattern, contrast, balance, proportion, unity, rhythm, variety, emphasis)?
  - Is the artist telling a story, sending a message, making associations for the viewer, etc. or is the work about how the artist uses color, texture, contrast, space, etc.? Or both? Explain.
  - What materials and techniques has the artist used? Do they, along with the compositional elements (how the artist puts together the visual elements) contribute to the message or associations? Explain.
  - How does the work relate to the themes in the exhibition? Would it fit in more than one theme? Explain.
  - After spending some time with the work, have any of your first impressions changed? Explain.

## Suggested Discussion:

- Exhibition curator, Elizabeth Bilyeau says of *Witness*, “With its intimate scale and bold contrasts of black and white and red, the 2014 print *Witness (Quamichan Potlatch, 1913)* by Marie Watt invites us nearer to observe the moment. We are held by the subject matter, drawn by the group’s focused attention, to listen to the stories and to recognize their significances – to witness. The print becomes a metaphor for experiencing this exhibition.” As you engage with the works in the exhibition and the words of the individual artists:
  - Consider the many ways of bearing witness and how they relate to each work.
  - Consider the issue(s) of social justice the artist is addressing in the work. How does the work contribute to the conversation?
  
- Artists in the exhibition often use historic photographs and prints, or images from popular culture, physically altering them or creating juxtapositions to bring attention to an individual, community, or event that previously was overlooked; or to ask the viewer to reconsider accepted knowledge and/or preconceived notions.
  - Find examples in the exhibition. Consider the original context of the image, and its original message.
  - How has the artist created a new context or interpretation? How has the message changed? Explain.
  
- Find examples of artists who:
  - Discuss their artistic process and how it informs their work.
    - Spend time with the work and explore how process and subject matter create meaning or a message.
    - Consider how artistic identity intersects with other identities (e.g. race, gender, sexuality, culture, class).
  - Pay homage in their work to artists who have gone before them, and/or address the patriarchy of the art historical canon.
    - How do these artists question or challenge these rules of “greatness,” considering issues of gender, race, class, and geography among others?

## If time permits:

Look for other works by Marie Watt in the museum’s collection: *Stadium: Jim Thorpe and Relations* in the Carl Hall Gallery on the first floor, and *Blanket Stories: First Teachers, Wallamet, Crow’s Shadow* in the Grand Ronde Gallery on the second floor. Discuss how these works, as well as her works in the exhibition, relate to each other and to Watt’s larger body of work. What themes and motifs do they have in common? What processes and techniques?

## **RESOURCE**

### **Exhibition Catalog**

Bilyeau, Elizabeth, with an introduction by LeRonn P. Brooks, *Witness: Themes of Social Justice in Contemporary Printmaking and Photography from the Collections of Jordan D. Schnitzer and His Family Foundation*. The Jordan D. Schnitzer Family Foundation in association with Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Willamette University, Salem, OR, 2018.

## **CONTENT STANDARDS**

### **Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts – Grade 6-12**

#### ***College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading***

1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
7. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in word.
9. Analyze two or more texts addressing similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

#### ***College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening***

1. Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
2. Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

## **Social Science**

Note: The following standards may be addressed, depending on which works of art featured in the exhibition are selected.

Grade 8 (US History – 1765-Reconstruction)

8.4 Evaluate the impact of different factors, including gender, age, ethnicity and class on groups and individuals during this time period and the impact these groups and individuals have on events of the time.

High School (US History – Reconstruction to Present; World History – 20<sup>th</sup> & 21<sup>st</sup> Century)

HS.6 Analyze ideas critical to the understanding of history, including, but not limited to: populism, progressivism, isolationism, imperialism, communism, environmentalism, liberalism, fundamentalism, racism, ageism, classism, conservatism, cultural diversity, feminism, and sustainability.

HS.7 Analyze the history, culture, tribal sovereignty, and historical and current issues of the American Indian tribes and bands in Oregon and the United States.

HS.9 Identify historical and current events, issues, and problems when national interests and global interests have been in conflict, and analyze the values and arguments on both sides of the conflict.

## **Visual Arts Standards**

### ***Anchor Standard 1: Creating – Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work***

Grade 8

1. Collaboratively identify and elaborate on contemporary themes in the local and global community that could be explored in art making.
3. Individually and/or collaboratively design an object or art work that is based on a need, theme, or aesthetic that demonstrates technical skill.

High School

1. Identify and elaborate on themes in the local and global community that could be explored in art making.
3. Individually and/or collaboratively design an object or artwork that is based on a need, theme, or aesthetic that demonstrates developing technical skill.

### ***Anchor Standard 7: Responding – Perceive and analyze artistic work***

Grade 8

1. Describe visual imagery based on expressive properties (i.e. content, formal elements of art and principles of design.)

2. Using art vocabulary, analyze the components used in visual imagery to convey a message.
3. Compare and contrast different media and context in which viewers encounter images that influence ideas, emotions, and actions.

#### High School

1. Summarize and interpret how works of art or design can reveal cultural values, global contexts, and human experiences.
2. Explain how a person's aesthetic choices, responses to art, and methods of display are influenced by culture, environments, knowledge, and experience.
3. Identify, describe, and differentiate processes an artist uses to create a work of art orally or in a written form.



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*Witness, 2015 (detail)*



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