

María Magdalena Campos-Pons



Lesson Plan



Explore themes of migration, memory, and spirituality through the artist's multimedia art.

For the Teacher: How to Use This Resource

This packet is meant to provide a starting point for incorporating works of art from the exhibition into your adult literacy classroom. Below you will find information about the artist, select works of art in the exhibition, and some suggestions for how to facilitate a conversation with students about the artworks. While we have made suggestions for how the lesson might be adapted for specific adult literacy audiences (ESOL, high school equivalency, and adult basic education), this document can be tailored to your students' needs, levels, and learning styles.

Here are a few good rules of thumb for incorporating artworks into your classes:

- Ask your students to describe the work of art. Good starting questions tend to be “What’s going on here?”¹ “What do you see in this picture?” or “How would you describe . . . ?” This will let students begin to visually analyze the work.
- If a student gives an interpretation, ask them, “What do you see that makes you say that?” This will encourage them to provide evidence from the text (here, the work of art) to support their ideas.
- Be sure to paraphrase your students’ answers. This will allow you to check that you understood their intention as well as offer synonyms and additional vocabulary. Paraphrasing also helps validate your students’ observations and encourages them to continue exploring.
- Continue to ask your students, “What more can we find?” This signals that there is always more to uncover in an artwork.
- We recommend starting with these open-ended questions before offering any additional information about the work of art or before building up to more complex questions. If you start with questions that are open-ended and that prompt extended looking, students will be able to gather evidence and deeply examine the work, allowing them to better navigate the jump to more complex questions and interpretations.
- Give ample time for students to continue looking at the work of art. There is always more to discover! See if you can spend at least 10 to 15 minutes with a single artwork.

1 “What’s going on here?” “What do you see that makes you say that?” and “What more can we find?” are foundations of Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS). For more on VTS, visit <https://vtshome.org/>.

The extension activities listed after the lesson include writing and art-making components. Art-making allows students to synthesize what they have learned and to communicate it visually—a skill that connects both to core disciplines in the humanities and to STEM subjects (for example: political cartoons and graphs in social studies; models of theorems and diagrams in science and math). Placing the writing components of the lesson before the art-making activities offers students a chance to reflect on their ideas and to plan what they will create. Writing that takes place after art-making allows students to reflect on what they have learned through the process of creating. If your students seem reluctant to make art, try making art along with them: by participating in it, you are showing them that art is for everyone. If students protest that they cannot do it or are not good at it, remind them that everyone is an artist because everyone has something to communicate. Regularly setting aside time to create can help students more easily tap into their creativity and abstract-thinking skills. Furthermore, project-based learning and hands-on activities offer opportunities for authentic language learning and practice by engaging students in learning that relates to their interests or to day-to-day life. It also empowers them to conduct research and synthesize their ideas, skills that are needed in many fields and disciplines.

Finally, the extension activities are geared toward ESOL and HSE/ABE groups, but all the activities can be adapted for students in any class type. Feel free to play with writing assignments, too. Transferring ideas from one form to another—such as from visual art to writing—allows your students to see how different mediums and writing styles can communicate the same idea in new ways or uncover layers of meaning through different forms. For example, you might start with a writing assignment to get students thinking about the discussion, followed by art-making, and finish with reflective writing about what they learned. But you can also extend the assignment further and ask students to turn their writing about what they learned into a poem. Ask students how the information changed with each form.

About the Artist and the Exhibition

María Magdalena Campos-Pons

María Magdalena Campos-Pons was born in 1959 in the Cuban province of Matanzas and has lived in the United States since the 1990s. Campos-Pons is an important artist whose work is highly-experimental and incorporates a range of mediums, from photography to performance. She grew up in an apartment building that had once been a barrack for enslaved people and in which her father's grandfather had lived while enslaved on a sugar plantation. Campos-Pons's work is informed by her multiple identities: she is a woman descended from both enslaved Nigerians and Chinese ancestors, and she is resolutely Cuban. Her art explores these identities as well as the histories, memories, and traditions that have helped form them.

This exhibition explores the work of Campos-Pons and major themes that are part of her artistic practice. Campos-Pons's work includes photography, installation, and performance, and explores issues of migration, memory, diaspora, climate change, histories of enslavement, maternal care, community, and more.²

Feminist Artist Statement

"I am a sculptor, installation artist, videographer, and photographer. My work renders elements of personal history and persona that have universal relevance. I exploit a variety of photographic means— portraiture, landscape, and documentary photography—in an effort to create historical narratives that illuminate the spirit of people and places, past and present. My subjects are often my Afro-Cuban relatives as well as myself. My themes are cross cultural, and cross generational; race and gender expressed in symbols of patriarchy and maternity are thematic ideas. The salient tie to familiar and cultural history vastly expands for me the range of photographic possibilities."³

2 Layden, Emilia, et al. *María Magdalena Campos-Pons: Sea and Self*. Milwaukee: Haggerty Museum of Art, 2021. <https://www.marquette.edu/haggerty-museum/documents/campos-pons-gallery-guide.pdf>

3 Brooklyn Museum. Feminist Art Database: María Magdalena Campos-Pons. https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/about/feminist_art_base/maria-magdalena-campos-pons

Object Description

De Las Dos Aguas (Of the Two Waters), 2007

This object is composed of twelve Polaroid photographs arranged in a grid to create a single scene. The whole background is colored with shades of blue. On either end of the composition stands a woman facing the viewer. The woman on the left wears a blue dress and black-and-white patterned shoes and holds a paper bag in her right hand. The paper bag is tied with a blue ribbon and has a blue circle on it that reads, “this is not art.” The woman on the right is wearing a white dress with pale stripes and red-and-black patterned shoes and holds a similar paper bag in her left hand. Each woman extends her other hand, arm bent at the elbow, to support opposite ends of a wooden boat model. The faces of both women are partially covered by their braided or locked hair, some of which also extends toward the boat.

In the wooden boat are four individuals, also made of wood. They face each other and wear colorful patterned clothing in yellow, blue, and red. The women’s braided hair wraps around the boat and hangs over the sides. Tied in the long strands of hair are more paper bags, like the ones the women are holding.



María Magdalena Campos-Pons (born Matanzas, Cuba, 1959). *De Las Dos Aguas (Of the Two Waters)*, 2007. Composition of twelve Polaroid Polacolor Pro photographs. NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale, Florida; promised gift of David Horvitz and Francie Bishop Good. © María Magdalena Campos-Pons. (Photo: courtesy of the artist)

About the Object

Campos-Pons, whose own grandmother was a Santería priestess, often refers to Santería in her work. Santería is a religious tradition that developed out of Yoruba spiritual beliefs brought to the Americas, including to Cuba and elsewhere in the Caribbean, by enslaved African peoples, eventually mixing with other religious traditions present in the Americas (especially Catholicism). It has been passed down from generation to generation, despite being oppressed during the era of slavery and by later governments.

Santería includes a belief in orishas, or powerful spirits. Campos-Pons often uses the color blue to refer to Yemayá (also known as Yemoja and Imoja), the orisha associated with the ocean and who is also the mother of other orishas. It is possible that the woman wearing blue in the Polaroids represents Yemayá. Similarly, the woman on the right wearing white may represent Obatalá, the orisha of the sky, and who is often associated with the color white.⁴ The yellow may also indicate that the orisha on the right is Oshun, the orisha of rivers, love, beauty, and destiny. Together, the orishas in the image may offer protection to those traveling in the boat.

Yemayá and the ocean are often part of Campos-Pons's work. The ocean is an important part of the history of enslavement in the Americas. The Middle Passage refers to the transport of enslaved Africans from Africa to the Americas, where they were sold. Hundreds of enslaved people were packed into small spaces on boats, resulting in disease, the inability to breathe, and death for a large percentage of the Africans brought to the Americas in this way. Sometimes slave traders would throw sick Africans overboard during the voyage; some Africans also found ways to throw themselves overboard, preferring to die rather than experience slavery at the end of the voyage.

Who are the people in the boat in this artwork? What do the paper bags represent? Perhaps the people are orishas, journeying with African peoples across the sea, or maybe they represent ancestors who made the voyage. The paper bags might be offerings to the orishas, or perhaps they connect communities on either side of the ocean, symbols of Yoruba traditions that continue in Africa and the Americas.

The ocean continues to have a variety of associations today. It is a means of migration and immigration for people trying to leave their home countries. It can keep us apart, or it can bring us together as it connects us to new places and communities. For Campos-Pons, the ocean and the color blue are thus symbols of Yemayá, slavery, separation, memories, and the passing down of tradition.

4 Yomaira C. Figueroa-Vásquez. *Decolonizing Diasporas: Radical Mappings of Afro-Atlantic Literature* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2020), 191.

Lesson with Students

Related Vocabulary

Connector—Something that connects; something that brings two or more people or things together

Barrier—Something that is in the way; something that prevents movement or action

Deity—A god or goddess

Destiny—Fate; events that will definitely happen to someone and that are outside of that person's control

Diaspora—The community of people outside of their place of origin

Enslave—To take away someone's freedom or ability to make choices; to make a person a slave

Immigration—Permanent movement of a person or a group from one country to another

Oppression—Unjust treatment of someone or of a group; usually involves taking away the rights of others and sometimes physical harm

Orisha—A god or spirit in Yoruba religion and related religions, like Santería

Overboard—Having fallen, jumped, or been overthrown from a ship or boat into the water

Santería—A religious system that developed in Cuba based on Yoruba religious practices and some parts of Catholicism

Voyage—A journey, usually by sea or in space

Yoruba—An African people in Benin and southwest Nigeria

Facilitated Discussion

What's going on in this image? *Or:* How would you describe this image?

→ How would you describe the figures?

→ What more can you find?

María Magdalena Campos-Pons is a Cuban artist. She uses a great deal of the color blue in her work. What do you associate with blue?

For Campos-Pons, the color blue is linked to the ocean.

→ What do you associate with the ocean?

For Campos-Pons, the color blue is also linked to the orisha Yemayá, who is the mother of orishas and the orisha of the ocean in Santería. Santería is a belief system that developed from Yoruba traditions brought by enslaved Africans to the Americas. Yoruba traditions are now practiced on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean (in Africa and in the Americas).

Campos-Pons is interested in the way that oceans and water can connect us to history and memories. Her ancestors were enslaved Africans brought to Cuba, as well as Spanish and Chinese immigrants to Cuba. The ocean physically separated these ancestors from their homelands. For enslaved Africans taken to the Americas, the ocean voyage meant being packed into small areas of boats with hundreds of others; many died from disease or were thrown overboard when they became sick; others threw themselves overboard rather than being sold at the end of the journey.

→ What traditions connect you to your families or communities?

The figure on the right side of the artwork may be Oshun, the orisha of rivers. She is associated with love, beauty, and destiny.

→ Why might Campos-Pons have chosen these two powerful female deities—Yemayá and Oshun—to hold either end of the boat?

→ Are there powerful female figures in your own life? What roles do they play?

For Campos-Pons, the ocean is both a barrier and a connector—something that separates people but can also bring people together.

→ How does Campos-Pons show communities being divided in this image? How does she show communities staying connected?

→ How do you connect with your community? What brings your community together?

Extension Activities

Personal Response and Art-Making Activities

- What traditions keep you connected to your community or place of origin? Why are these traditions important to you and/or your community? Are these traditions important to your identity? Why or why not? Write about one or more traditions and their importance to you and/or your community.
- What role has the ocean played in your life? Write about the role of the ocean or other waterways in your life, family history, or community. Then, consider how you might represent this relationship to water through art. What symbols would you use? What materials? Create a work of art that represents your relationship to water, or that of your family or your community. Some suggestions for materials include collaging (cutting out images and words from magazines, newspapers, etc., and gluing them onto a paper in a new arrangement); photography; or sketching with pen and paper. You can even do a combination of these materials and create what is known as a “mixed media” work. Then, share your work with your classmates. Optional additional writing assignment: What did you want to communicate through your work? How did you choose your symbols and materials? How did the process of making this artwork cause you to think differently about your relationship to water, memories, and the passing down of tradition?

Research and Art-Making Activities

- Research the history of slavery in Cuba. How is it similar to or different from the history of slavery in the United States? How does the legacy of slavery continue to have an effect in the United States and Cuba today? For example, you might compare and contrast the types of plantations in the two countries, treatment and death rates of enslaved peoples, and histories of resistance and abolition. How can you represent these similarities, differences, and effects visually? Create a timeline, graph, or other visual representation of the information you gather.
- Spiritual practices, like Santería in Cuba, have been a source of identity, strength, and resistance for many peoples. What is the history of Santería in Cuba? What role does it continue to play in Cuban life? What symbols are important in Santería? Create an infographic sharing what you learned.
- Research a local waterway (ocean, river, lake, etc.). What histories and memories might this waterway hold? What symbols might help represent that history? Create a work of art that represents some of this history. Your work of art might be a photograph, a drawing, a graphic novel, or a collage—anything that allows you to use symbols to communicate the history you learned. Afterward, write about your process. How did you decide what symbols to use? Why did you choose the materials or images that you did to communicate this history? What do you want the viewer to learn by looking at your artwork?
- How has climate change impacted Cuba and other areas of the Caribbean? What is the impact of climate change on immigration to or from these places? What is being done in these regions to combat climate change? Write a newspaper article reporting on the climate crisis in the Caribbean.

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Selected Sources

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