TEACHERS AND STUDENTS NOTES

DOWNLOADABLE FULL COLOUR A4 IMAGES
WITH INTRODUCTORY INFORMATION, DISCUSSION POINTS, LINKS AND ACTIVITES

FOR USE IN THE GALLERY OR CLASSROOM SUITABLE FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS OF
KEY STAGE 3-5

Please note, this exhibition contains works of a sexually explicit nature. You may find some exhibits inappropriate for your group. They are not recommended for children under 16.

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Cover Image: Chris Ofili North Wales, Llanberis 17.9.96 1996 © Courtesy Chris Ofili · Afroco and Victoria Miro Gallery
INTRODUCTION

The painter Chris Ofili is well known for his references to his Nigerian heritage, his highly decorative style and his playful exploration of black cultural identity. Born in Manchester in 1968, he now lives and works in Trinidad. In 1998 he won the Turner Prize, and in 2003 he represented Great Britain at the Venice Biennale.

A research trip to Zimbabwe in 1992 inspired Ofili to include references to African music, culture, religion and textiles, and to experiment with unconventional techniques, materials and subject matter. He exhibited with other Young British Artists in the 1990s. His painting of the Virgin Mary shown in Charles Saatchi's Sensation! exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1997, notoriously included the use of non-conventional materials such as elephant dung.

Like many other contemporary painters, his exploration of new materials often appears to go beyond painting. As well as using paint in a more traditional way, he also builds it up in layer upon layer, often incorporating other materials. He also uses collage, including cut-outs from pornographic and music magazines, tiny mosaic-like dots of resin, glitter, pins, metallic surfaces and his trade-mark elephant dung. As well as applying the dung directly to the surface of the work, Ofili often uses it as a foot-like support for displaying the paintings and elevating their status. Although he has been compared to tribal witch doctors and to artists who use excrement to shock or relate to themes of the body, for Ofili dung links the paintings literally and psychologically to the earth.

Despite the multiple layers in Ofili's obsessively detailed artworks, he has a style that visually flattens his images. His body of work includes installations made from his paintings, prints, drawings and, more recently, sculptures.

Ofili makes many cultural, religious, sexual and racial references in his work, often questioning stereotypes in humorous ways. Using heavily decorative and intricate patterns he explores widely diverse themes, including sacred ideals, identity, black history, high and low culture and self-awareness.

ABOUT

This pack is intended as a brief thematical introduction to the work of Chris Ofili and covers four works in depth. It offers background information, starting points and practical activities for visiting teachers to use with all age groups, as well as for A-level and GCSE students to use on their own. Some of the activities and discussions can be used as preparation for a visit, some are for use in the exhibition itself, and others are more suited to class work after your visit. The works discussed are reproduced at A4 size so that you can print them out and use them as a resource in the classroom.

WHERE TO VIEW THE WORKS?

Online
All works mentioned in this pack are on http://www.tate.org.uk/collection: a database that can be searched by artist name or work title. You can also search the Tate art works database thematically for broader connections at http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/SubjectSearch

At Tate Britain
Our gallery displays regularly change so to check if a work is on display you can go to: http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/explore/etb.jsp.
Please note that from 24 February to 8 August 2010 some of the works in this pack are visible in the Chris Ofili temporary exhibition.

To view The North Wales series you can book an appointment with the Prints and Drawing Rooms by emailing: studyroom@tate.org.uk

Please call the Education Bookings line on 020 7887 8888 to make a booking for your visit, your school area lunch slot and locker spaces or your exhibition ticket.
Chris Ofili North Wales, Llanbedr 12.9.96 © Courtesy Chris Ofili - Afroco and Victoria Miro Gallery
In contrast to Chris Ofili’s large and vibrantly-coloured canvases, he has also produced several editions of etchings inspired by visits that he made. During trips to Barcelona, Berlin, New York and North Wales he worked methodically, drawing directly onto copper etching plates. He covered them with swarming abstract and textural patterns relating to his feelings and impressions of a particular place. Barcelona inspired cross-hatched drawings, Berlin – tiny dots, New York – concentric waves and the North Wales prints shown here were each built up of a mass of diamond patterning.

There is a written note in the bottom left corner of each print stating the place and date it was created. The text is written onto the plate backwards (rather than double-reversing), giving the prints a pure, diary-like quality.

The abstract and obsessively drawn patterns are obviously similar to the decorative backgrounds of some of his paintings, but the smaller format and absence of colour suggest a more private and reflective process. In a way, the prints act as a kind of diary for Ofili, which he uses as a way of recording place, pace and moment. In this sense, Ofili’s print series can be compared to Richard Long and Hamish Fulton’s exploration of ways to represent a journey. Ofili’s method of working directly onto copper on location enabled him to respond instantly and directly to his environment (not a traditional way of representing a location like Wales). The way these prints combine abstract and realist elements is strikingly different from more traditional landscapes.

FOR DISCUSSION

- How can pattern represent a place? Why do you think Ofili represents Wales with diamonds and angular shapes, but describes New York with waves? Ofili believes that being in different locations increases visual awareness. Consider how he makes these prints as a kind of diary of the places he has visited or things he has done on a particular day. Consider too how these prints are far-removed from the African references in many of Ofili’s other works. The landscapes of North Wales and European cities that he chooses for this series have a very different sense of place to his current home in Trinidad, for example.

- Think also about the lack of colour in these works. Usually Ofili’s paintings are very brightly coloured, but the prints are presented differently in terms of monochrome and line. Do you think they would have been very different works if they had been made in colour or if the background spaces had been filled with colour? How does this perception change the meaning behind the works?
ACTIVITIES

- Try using drawing as a way to represent a journey or a visit to a particular place. Perhaps make a drawing at set times throughout a daily visit to a new or unfamiliar place. You could even work directly onto etching plates or polyblock boards in a similar way to Ofili and then print them. Spend some time contemplating before you start a drawing – think about a shape that can be used to represent a place and try repeating it to cover a page or an area of paper. Do you think it makes a difference if you make these drawings while you are in the place you are describing or if you work on them after you have left?

- Alternatively let a pencil take you for a walk while you travel on a bus or in a car. Set up the pencil and a piece of paper so that the pencil records the movements of the journey without being dictated by you. Where your drawings create individual shapes, try coming up with rules to fill these shapes with different patterns. This activity could be explored on a variety of scales.

- Either of these drawing techniques could be developed further. Perhaps use mirrors to reflect sections of a drawing to create repeating patterns. Can these be photographed or developed in Photoshop or similar IT programmes to make a multiple repeat or to change scale?

- Simple kaleidoscopes are easy to make using small mirrors and cardboard tubing (look on the internet for simple techniques). The patterns they create could be used as a starting point for drawings.

- You could try developing your abstract pattern drawings or doodles into sculptures using small wooden sticks or card. Repeat and recreate small sections and fit them together into grids or small structures to make three-dimensional representations. Experiment with the scale of these structures.

- Look out for repeating patterns in your immediate environment. Once you start looking you will find them all around you. Record your findings in drawings or photographs. Perhaps try using carbon paper to repeat sections of the patterns and join them together.

1. Chris Ofili North Wales, Blaenau Ffestiniog 11.9.96 © Courtesy Chris Ofili - Afroco and Victoria Miro Gallery
This text-based drawing can be viewed on several levels. At first glance it is dominated by the word ‘afro’. Closer inspection shows that the word is made up of meticulously-drawn miniature pencil portraits. Ofili has made every head drawing different, in a satirical response to the racist view that black people all look the same. Ofili takes elements from black culture and re-presents them in a new context. He does this in a largely playful way, recognising that the reception and perception of a work by the viewer is part of the work itself. His work is almost like a social experiment in which he places the work out there to be received and reacted to.

FOR DISCUSSION

- Does meaning or interpretation vary depending on the viewer? How does our personal history, nationality, ethnicity, religion or social class affect how we look at and think about an artwork?

- Ofili is confronting us with our own cultural views. How does this work make you feel? How do you think Ofili wants you to feel when you first read the text? How do your feelings change as you look at the work more closely? Consider how Ofili hides meanings in this and other works. He often seems to use hidden meanings as a way of critiquing society. Can you think of other examples, perhaps in literature or other artists’ work, where meaning is layered in a similar way?

- Think about your own cultural and social background. Where were you born and what is your family history? What does it mean to be born in the Western world? What stereotypes and clichés are associated with ‘Britishness’ – both good and bad?

ACTIVITIES

- Ofili has said that he sees true self as existing below the surface. Think about how he presents ‘self’ in this artwork. Can you think of five objects that represent Chris Ofili? Now pick five objects that represent you. A quick way of doing this might be to take five objects that you find in the bottom of your bag or pocket, but you might want to spend time choosing items that are important to you. Make a list of the objects and display them as text. Or you could photograph the real objects - or place them on a small plinth or sheet of white paper. If a group of you works on this in secret, can others recognise you from your selection? Discuss together how you see yourself and how others perceive you. Is there a difference? Can you now make an artwork that identifies you without using portraiture? Are there elements of your own personal history that you could incorporate into your artwork? This might be using image or text. How can you represent yourself without using an image of you as a person?

- Try using collage or miniature drawings to build up an image or a word made up of smaller elements. Perhaps collect together found media images of the same thing – faces, heads or something completely different. The more you collect, the greater the visual impact your work will have. Use the collection of images to make up a large artwork. Think about how people will view your artwork, both from a distance and close up. Like Ofili, try to change the viewer’s perception of something by using different layers in your work.
The Upper Room installation is one of Chris Ofili’s best-known works. It explores the nature of belief systems, imagery and ritual, raising questions about the relationship between civilised man and nature, religious and atheist thinking.

The installation comprises thirteen paintings in a darkened, chapel-like space made of veneered wood that suggest Jesus and his disciples seated for the Last Supper. The detail in the paintings is obsessive and complex, incorporating layer upon layer of precise brushwork. Each painting stands on two elephant-dung supports and is dominated by a different colour. Each shows a rhesus monkey. The Christ-like painting is more abstract. It still shows a monkey, but the monkey has a ghostly presence.

The incorporation of glitter, pins and bright colours in the paintings adds to their luminosity in the dark space. The colours Mono Blanco, Mono Rojo, Mono Negro, Mono Marron etc. (White Monkey, Red Monkey, Black Monkey, Brown Monkey) written on the dung supports in pins, may be a play on the word ‘monochrome’ – and ‘mono’ is also Spanish for monkey.

Replacing Jesus and his disciples with psychedelic monkeys has been considered taboo by some, but Ofili has stated clearly that the installation is not intended to be offensive. Cheeky, loud, and intelligent, rhesus monkeys are highly respected by certain religions. A biologist writing about the first showing of The Upper Room also pointed out that rhesus monkeys show more compassion for each other than we do for our fellow humans.
FOR DISCUSSION

• The Last Supper has been widely represented in the history of art. Look for other examples and compare them to Ofili’s installation. What do you think the different artists are trying to say about the event? What does it represent for them historically and religiously, and how do the different works portray this? Compare old master representations of the Last Supper with more contemporary examples. Are there any other famous events (perhaps in other religions) that have been repeatedly represented by artists?

• Installation art depends on the presence of the audience and changes the feel of an environment. Have you been able to visit The Upper Room and experience the space? How do you think it changes the meaning of the work if you experience it through a reproduction image? If you can’t visit The Upper Room perhaps you can visit another installation and think about how a space affects an artwork. How would Ofili’s paintings in The Upper Room be different if they were shown individually - or on the walls of a gallery? How much does the space alter your perception of the work?

ACTIVITIES

• You might want to recreate an event as a performance artwork. First, try describing your experience of visiting Ofili’s Upper Room installation to someone who hasn’t seen it. Then describe a different – real or imagined - event to someone else. Think about the people who are there. Describe exactly what happened and how it looked, with as much detail as possible. You might want to draw the space and event as you talk, but don’t look at the page - concentrate on talking to your partner. The drawing may help you think as you talk. It doesn’t matter how it turns out. When you have finished, swap roles and listen to someone else’s description.

• Think about how you can create an installation in your classroom or another space. Can you change the atmosphere so it feels different when you enter – even if it is a room you are familiar with? Try projecting images into the space, changing or blacking out the light source or moving objects into unexpected places. Perhaps even use a cupboard as an installation environment that people can view or enter through the cupboard door.

Chris Ofili Mono Azul 1999–2002 © Courtesy Victoria Miro Gallery Photograph by Stephen White
Borrowing its title from a Bob Marley song, *No Woman, No Cry* is a tribute to Doreen Lawrence, the mother of the London teenager Stephen Lawrence who was murdered by a racist gang. For Ofili the murder and its largely mishandled investigation mark a point when issues of racism and justice were at the forefront public consciousness, and attitudes began to change. The tears of the woman in the painting contain collaged images of Stephen’s face and the words ‘RIP Stephen Lawrence’ in phosphorescent paint (more visible if the painting is viewed in a darkened space). Ofili also wanted the painting to represent grief and sadness in general.

This painting is a powerful example of Ofili’s physical and metaphorical layering: he builds up materials on the canvas as well as layering meanings. It is also an example of the way that he plays with pattern, decoration and symmetry.

In *No Woman, No Cry* Ofili uses elephant dung to make two feet on which to display the work. A third ball of dung represents the jewel in the crying woman’s necklace. The dung balls are studded with pins, at once attractive and repulsive, irritating and alluring. The collaged elements refer to specific events in British culture, and the work prompts viewers to interpret the moral and political issues hidden between the layers.

**FOR DISCUSSION**

- Choose an issue that you feel strongly about. This might be something that touches you personally or something more public, perhaps in the political, religious, social or cultural realm. Use this issue as a starting point for a classroom debate or stage a mock protest event.

- Consider how this image compares with other representations of black people in art. Discuss positive and negative images of cultural difference in other paintings with your class. How does this relate to current media and social representations of cultural difference?

- *No Woman, No Cry* represents a particular event in British social and political history, a time when things began to change. Can you find other artworks in the Tate collection that represent significant public events or points in social history?

- Think about your own perception of reality and world events. Look at the news coverage on 24-hour news channels and websites. Whose perspectives are represented and whose stories are left untold?

**ACTIVITIES**

- Create an archive of images of current and past events from newspapers, magazines and the internet. Try to make the collection as diverse as possible. You could also include images from more personal family histories – perhaps images of events from your own past. Experiment with basic photography and IT techniques to incorporate these images into a simple animation which jumps between events. Perhaps add single words layered over or alongside each image. Try cutting words out of headlines and see how this might alter the meaning of the film or image. Can you use this activity to present the issues you discussed in your debate?

- Consider working with collage and layering, like Ofili. Incorporate found images from newspapers and magazines into paintings and play with layered meanings. Add dots of paint, or perhaps beads or pins. Ofili never hangs his work directly onto a wall. Think about how your painting should be displayed. Try creating wooden blocks or using found objects for your work to stand on, and lean it against a wall. You might also think about how these objects are decorated or incorporated into the painting. Does displaying your work in a different way change its meaning?