ANNA VON MERTENS Glass, Metal, Thread: Building Our Observable World

Educator Handout: Grades 7-12

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

Encompassing astronomy, history, materiality, attention, and labor, <u>Glass, Metal, Thread: Building Our Observable</u> <u>World</u> presents drawings and textiles made by artist <u>Anna Von Mertens</u> from 2015 through 2022. She writes, "I think objects can absorb time, absorb our physical presence. That is why I make detailed drawings; that is why I sew quilts by hand." The artist's close observation and meticulous making are evident in the three discreet (yet in dialogue) series on view: <u>Remnants</u>, <u>Measure</u>, and <u>Objects (100 Emojis)</u>.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Anna Von Mertens is based in Peterborough, New Hampshire. She received her M.F.A. from California College of the Arts and her B.A. from Brown University. Her work has been exhibited at Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University; Berkeley Art Museum, Berkeley; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College; Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland; and National Museum of Art, Architecture, and Design, Oslo, Norway, among others. Her work is included in the collections of Smithsonian American Art Museum's Renwick Gallery, Washington, D.C.; RISD Museum, Rhode Island School of Design; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Berkeley Art Museum, Berkeley; Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, New York; and International Quilt Study Center and Museum, Lincoln, Nebraska, among others. Von Mertens has been awarded a Smithsonian Artist Research fellowship, United States Artists fellowship, and a Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Biennial Award.

VOCABULARY

- Cyanotype: a light-sensitive photo emulsion (chemical mixture) that produces a blue image
- Glass plate negative: an image that is created when light is focused through a lens and lands on the surface of a glass
 plate coated in light sensitive materials.¹ This process creates a reverse image-areas in highlight become darkened and
 areas in shadow appear as white or light shades of gray.
- Medium: refers to the type of art (such as drawing, quilting, or photography), as well as the materials an artwork is made from (such as graphite, fabric, or colored pencil)²
- Research-based art: artwork created in response to research
- Techniques: methods used to create an artwork-such as hand-sewing, cyanotype photography, or observational drawing

¹ Texas State University Archives. (n.d.). A Brief History of Glass Plate Photography. <u>https://exhibits.library.txstate.edu/univarchives/exhibits/show/cen-tex-glass-plates/mystery-deliv/glass-plate-negs</u>

² Tate (n.d.). Art Term: Medium. https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/m/medium.



Left to right: Remnant (Gold), 2022. Metallic pencils on black paper, framed: 50 3/4 x 39 inches. Courtesy of the artist. Negative and Positive Plates B20667 and D16409, Nebula in Orion, Oct. 26, 1897, 2018. Pencil on paper. Collection of Arlie Stern and Matt Tsang, Oakland, California. The stars returning into view on the evening of Henrietta Leavitt's death, December 12, 1921, Cambridge, Massachusetts (detail), 2018. Hand-stitched cotton. Courtesy of the artist. Photo credits: Jade Nguyen.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

CONNECT - VA:Cn10 - Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.

Provide students the following information and hyperlinked resources. Explore Von Mertens's work as a class or in small groups.

How can an object or an artwork tell a story? This question is central to Anna Von Mertens's approach to artmaking. In <u>Measure</u> and <u>Artifacts</u>, Von Mertens responds directly to her research about the astronomer <u>Henrietta Leavitt</u>. Working at the Harvard College Observatory in the late 1800s and early 1900s, Leavitt studied glass plate negatives of the night sky. Her discoveries provided astronomers with the tools to accurately measure the distance to faraway stars, paving the way for further astronomical breakthroughs. While Leavitt's work has made a massive mark on our understanding of the universe, it also left behind material traces, such as her notes on the surface of the glass plates she so closely studied.

Von Mertens's interest in deep space and storytelling is evident in her *Remnants* series. Created in response to her research on <u>dark matter</u> and the supernova remnant <u>Cassiopeia A</u>, this series explores the fact that elements such as gold and silver have origins in the core of stars. When stars explode, they send these elements out into the universe. To mimic the cosmic dust cloud of Cassiopeia A, Von Mertens arranged metal necklaces obtained from friends onto the surface of **cyanotype** paper (light-sensitive photo paper). After exposing the paper to sunlight, Von Mertens projected the resulting photographic images onto black paper. She then drew the images with gold and silver metallic colored pencils. Von Mertens's use of metal necklaces, metallic pencils, and black paper references the cosmic origins of metals, connecting the necklaces and their wearers with the history of the universe.



Remnant (Silver), 2022. Metallic pencil on black paper. Courtesy of the artist. Photo credit: Jade Nguyen.

CREATE - VA:Cr1.2 - Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work. - VA:Cr3.1 - Refine and complete artistic work.

Inspired by Von Mertens's work, prompt students to select an item or items of personal significance. Provide them with the following instructions:

- 1. Research the origins of the materials used to make your item(s).
- 2. Document how the item(s) came to be in your possession. Where was the item made? Where has it been since? Whose hands have held it? How was/is the item used?
- 3. Reflect on ways that you carry this item's story. How does it carry yours?
 - What experiences have you had with this item? Does it represent a shared experience with someone else?
 - Are there traces on the surface of your item that suggest its history, such as Leavitt's notes on the surface of the glass plates she studied?
 - What does this item say about you?

Then, prompt students to create an artwork (or series of works) in response to their research and reflections.

Before students begin their projects, have them brainstorm a variety of **mediums** and **techniques** to convey their stories. They might be interested in projecting an image of their object and drawing enlarged details as Von Mertens did for *Remnants*, or creating observational drawings, as seen in *Artifacts*. Inspired by Von Mertens's use of **cyanotypes**, projection, drawing, and quilting, encourage students to combine multiple **mediums** and **techniques**.

Engage students in peer critique throughout the creative processes to examine, reflect on, and plan revisions for their work. Encourage them to refer to their prior research and reflections to guide their discussions.

Educator resources are available on the exhibition webpage.

You can find <u>University Galleries</u> on <u>Facebook</u>, <u>Instagram</u>, <u>Twitter</u>, and <u>Vimeo</u> and sign up to receive email updates through the <u>newsletter</u>. Please contact gallery@IllinoisState.edu or call (309) 438-5487 if you need to arrange an accommodation to participate in any events related to this exhibition.

