

KAMBUI OLUJIMI

Topic/Theme: Memory

Grades: 9-12

Subject Areas: Visual Arts, Psychology

Lesson Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Describe systems of memory involved in drawing from memory including observational skills and the ability to recall and retain information.
- Engage in making without having a preconceived plan.
- Hypothesize ways in which art influences perception and understanding of human experiences.

National Learning Standards

Visual Arts

- VA:Re.7.1.1a: Hypothesize ways in which art influences perception and understanding of human experiences.
- VA: CR2.11a: Engage in making without having a preconceived plan.

[National Standards for High School Psychology Curricula](#)

(Cognition Pillar) Standard Area: Memory

Content Standard 1 - Processes of memory 1.2: Describe systems of memory (i.e., sensory, working, and long-term memory).

Essential Questions

- What role does memory play in the artistic process?
- Are memories of an event or person always accurate?
- In what ways do emotions influence memories of a person, place, object, or event?
- Are there any challenges or benefits to relying on memory when making artwork?

Materials Needed

- [Photo](#) of Ms. Arline, paper, pencils, crayons, markers, oil pastels, or other dry media

Vocabulary

- **Short-term memory:** the brain's capacity to store a small amount of information and keep it readily available for a short period of time. It is also known as primary or active memory.
- **Long-term memory:** the transfer of information from short-term to long-term storage in order to create enduring memories. This [type of memory](#) is unlimited in capacity and stable—lasting for years or even a lifetime.
- **Photorealism:** an art style that attempts to achieve the same level of detail and realism as a photograph.
- **Abstract art:** art that does not attempt to represent an accurate depiction of a visual reality but instead uses shapes, colors, forms, and gestural marks to achieve its effect.

Activity

Read the following quote from Kambui Olujimi aloud.

For over five years, I have created more than 100 paintings. The world engages in the process of remembering, forgetting, and mythologizing. These portraits slide in and out of fidelity and accurate rendering, alternating between gestural watery movements and tight "faithful" renderings. The collection offers no truths. Their origin remains elusive...leaving us to build and rebuild each memory in between each retelling.

- <https://kambuiolujimi.com/walk-with-me>

Discuss Olujimi's *Walk With Me* series with the class. Share that Ms. Arline was an important member of Olujimi's community. He considered her his "mentor and guardian angel." After Ms. Arline's death in 2014, Olujimi began creating these portraits to process his grief and to spend more time with her.



Kambui Olujimi, *Walk With Me*, 2015- 2020. Ink on paper. 11 x 14 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

KAMBUI OLUJIMI

Ask students the following questions about the *Walk With Me* series:

- How are the portraits similar?
- How are they different?

Discuss the definitions of **photorealism** and **abstract art**. Then ask students:

- Why do you think some of the portraits are more **photorealistic**? Why are others more **abstract** (such as the portraits with two or more heads or those that are faded and ghostly)?
- Select two portraits to focus on. How do you think Olujimi was feeling when he created these two portraits? What do you see that makes you say that?
- Considering that Olujimi painted these portraits over the course of five years, which portraits do you think he created earlier vs. later in the project? What makes you think that?

Introduce students to the difference between the functions of **short-term** (or “working memory”) and **long-term memory**.

Discuss how **short-term memory** and **long-term memory** relate to Olujimi creating *Walk With Me* over a period of 5 years. Share that Olujimi used a photograph as a reference for some portraits, while others were drawn from memory. Based on students’ observations, which portraits do they think Olujimi created while referencing the photograph? Which do they think he created from memory?

Engage students in a memory drawing activity.

- Post Ms. Arline’s high school yearbook photo where students can see it.
- Prompt students to study the photo for one minute. Ask students to look at her posture, facial expression, clothing, hair, and jewelry.
- Have students return to their desks and draw Ms. Arline’s portrait from memory.
- Every 5 minutes, instruct students to return to study Ms. Arline’s photo for an additional minute before returning to their drawings to add details. Continue this process for 20 minutes.

Arrange students’ finished portraits in a grid—similar to Olujimi’s portraits of Ms. Arline.

Use the following questions to reflect on the activity.

- Which type of memory do you think you were accessing for this activity and why?
- How easy or difficult was it to work from your **short-term memory**?
- How did the experience of drawing from memory compare to drawing from a photo reference?
- Did emotions influence elements of your drawing? If so, how?
- How did your drawing change over the course of the activity?
- How do you feel about the finished portraits?



Catherine Arline. Retrieved from <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/250158218/catherine-laburn-arline>. Photo added by Mary Gummere.

Extension Activity

Encourage students to repeat the exercise with a portrait of someone to whom they have an emotional connection.

Selections from the press release:

The Rock that Cuts the Night in Two features [Kambui Olujimi’s](#) expansive and diverse output, including videos, drawings, paintings, photographs, silkscreens, sculptures, installations, and textiles made by the artist from 2005 through 2023. Embedded with a sense of duration and exploration of memory, the exhibition demonstrates Olujimi’s long-term interest in both the construction and deconstruction of mythic spaces, via memories, monuments, and other forms of memorials.

Artist biography:

Kambui Olujimi was born and raised in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn and is currently based in New York City. Olujimi received his M.F.A. from Columbia University. His work has been screened or exhibited at Sundance Film Festival; The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; MASS MoCA, North Adams, Massachusetts; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid; Kunsthal Rotterdam, Netherlands; Para Site, Hong Kong; and on the screens in New York City’s Times Square, among others.