

AJ WESTLEY

Educator Handout for Grades 8-12



2026 Marshall Dulaney Pitcher Award Winner

The Wonsook Kim School of Art is pleased to present the 2026 Marshall Dulaney Pitcher Award to BFA student AJ Westley. This award honors outstanding students in the visual arts who demonstrate exceptional artistic talent, dedicated studio practice, and academic excellence.

About the Artist

AJ Westley (he/him) is an artist from Central Illinois. He is currently a junior at Illinois State University and is pursuing degrees in painting and art history. His work uses humor, familial connection, and the interaction between painting and **textiles** to explore constructs of masculinity. Westley is particularly interested in the ways that ideas of masculinity are passed down, maintained, and changed over time. Through close looking and sustained engagement with the **subject** of older men in his family and in society, Westley asks complex questions about power and vulnerability.

Vocabulary

Medium: the materials used in an artwork (such as acrylic paint or a suit jacket).

Subject matter: people, places, or things represented in an artwork.

Technique: method used for creating an artwork.

Textile: an item made by combining fibers through methods such as weaving, sewing, knitting, and embroidery.

Theme: recurring ideas, materials, or subject matter.



AJ Westley, *Mike*, 2025. Oil and acrylic on canvas. Diptych: 36 x 60 inches each. Courtesy of the artist.

THE FOLLOWING ACTIVITIES ARE ALIGNED WITH THE NATIONAL VISUAL ARTS STANDARDS.

RESPOND: Engage students in analyzing Westley's work using the following prompts.

- What do you think about or feel when viewing artworks in the exhibition? What prompts your responses?
- What do you associate with the **mediums** and **techniques** used in the artwork?
- How do the labels impact your understanding of the work?
- What **themes** can you find in Westley's work?

CONNECT: Contextualize Westley's work by sharing the following information and prompts with students.

Westley grew up in a conservative rural town. As a trans man, his values often conflict with those held by the people he was raised around. Westley's work deals with the mixed emotions—like love, frustration, comfort, and even disgust—within these relationships.

After sharing this information, revisit works in the exhibition. Ask students to share if the context changes their understanding of the work. Do they notice anything new?

CREATE: Inspired by Westley's work, prompt students to create an artwork in response to a person, place, or thing with which they have a complex relationship.

Share with students that complex relationships are not always serious. They can also be humorous or benign. Examples include, "I love my cat, but he wakes me up at night," or "Coffee is my favorite drink, but it makes me jittery." Prompt students to consider how different **mediums** and **techniques** connect to ideas or emotions they want to convey through their artwork. What **subject matter**, colors, or patterns could they include that address their chosen relationship?

Optional: Like Westley, students could choose to cut up and reconfigure an article of clothing that connects to their **subject(s)**. They could paint or embroider details on the surface of the fabric. Alternatively, students could cut the fabric into strips and create a weaving.

After completing their artwork, guide students in writing labels to accompany their work. Encourage students to consider how the title and list of materials can add meaning to their work.



Left: AJ Westley, *Buying a Suit*, 2026. Silhouetted swagger from an Amazon reviewer, reconstructed second-hand suit jackets, red thread, and acrylic paint. Right: AJ Westley, *Profile Picture*, 2026. Yarn, 197 friends, 47 mutuals, and cut pillowcase. Both images courtesy of the artist.