



Nancy Mladenoff (American, b.1957), [Vortex](#), 2005, oil and acrylic aerosol paint on canvas, gift of the artist, 2019.39

Nancy Mladenoff, *Vortex*

Key Idea

An important part of sustainability is understanding that the natural environment and man-made world are not two separate things and that they are connected in many ways.

Objectives

Students will be able to:

1. Closely examine *Vortex* by Nancy Mladenoff
2. Consider the relationship between humans and nature
3. Work individually and in groups on a learning activity

Lesson

1. Choose a close-looking prompt (from the introduction page) to encourage students to study the artwork.
2. Next, provide the class with some background information using the “About the Artist” and “About the Artwork” sections below.
3. Engage the class in conversation using the suggested discussion questions.
4. Follow up the class discussion with a recommended learning activity.

LEARN

About the Artist

Nancy Mladenoff is a local artist who has examined issues of gender, nature, science and the environment. Mladenoff grew up exploring the woods, rivers and prairies of northern Wisconsin and considers herself a naturalist. From 2005 to 2006, Mladenoff created a series of five paintings inspired by the city of Madison, Wisconsin, shown together in the 2006 exhibition *Between the Lakes: Artists Respond to Madison at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art*.

About the Artwork

A vortex is a mass of whirling fluid or air, especially a whirlpool or whirlwind. In *Vortex*, Mladenoff created a swirling painting filled with everyday objects such as drinking glasses, pots and pans, furniture, boots, and a pearl necklace. Also swirling among the everyday objects are animals and pairs of native and invasive plants. The painting is specific to Madison, as the artist researched the history of Madison to select the animal and plant species seen in the artwork. In *Vortex*, Mladenoff shows that the human world and the natural world are connected, and one cannot exist without the other. She invites us to step into the painting and consider how we connect to nature.

DISCUSS

1. If you could step inside the painting, what do you think it would be like? What could you hear, smell, and feel?
2. Some of the objects seen in the painting are already listed in the paragraph above. What other objects or animals can you find?
3. How does *Vortex* relate to sustainability? What do you see that makes you say that?
4. Mladenoff's artwork focuses on the connections between humans and nature. In what ways are you connected to nature?
5. What does it mean for a plant or animal to be invasive? Are invasive species always “bad?”

CONNECT IDEAS

Write It!

Viewpoints—To build upon observations and link ideas, ask students to select a viewpoint—or perspective—from which to view the artwork, such as one of the individuals or objects depicted in the artwork. Then ask them to write a letter from this person or thing’s perspective describing the artwork to someone seeing it for the first time. The letter should address details that individual or object might care about, believe in, or wonder about. Examples of alternate perspectives can include the viewpoint of a person such as a scientist, naturalist, artist, child, adult or from the perspective of an inanimate object contained in the artwork.

Write It!

Sustainability and You—To build relevance for students, ask students to write about a time when they did something that they considered “sustainable.” What did they do? Did they encounter any challenges? What was the outcome? Alternately, make a list of ways in which sustainability is demonstrated in your classroom. Then, create an action plan with your students on how to maintain or implement new sustainability practices in the classroom space.

GO FURTHER

Books

The Tomorrow Book by Jackie French

The World that We Want by Kim Michelle Toft

Teaching Resources and Lesson Plans

Center for the Living City, “Exploring our Connections to Nature”

<https://centerforthelivingcity.org/exploring-our-connections-to-nature-youthcity-speak>

STANDARDS

Art and Design

3-5 A.A.Pr.4.i: Develop Meaning: Explore and make connections through comparison of artwork from personal, historical, and contemporary artists.

3-5 A.A.R.8.i: Interpret: Use details, subject matter, and context to interpret an artwork’s mood or meaning.

Environmental Literacy and Sustainability

ELS.C1.A.i Explain how one’s understanding of how the world works is developed from experience, and identify personal experiences that have shaped one’s own mental models.