

Activism through Art: Grades 9-12



Samuel Levi Jones, *Joshua*, 2016, mixed media, law book skins on canvas, 61 1/2 x 77 in., Chazen Museum of Art General Endowment Fund and Alice Drews Gladfelter Memorial Endowment Fund purchase, 2018.5

Joshua, Samuel Levi Jones

Content Warning

The content of this lesson plan engages in themes of police brutality, racism and gun violence.

Key Idea

Artists can engage in activism by highlighting issues of representation and systemic injustice.

Objectives

At the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

1. Closely examine *Joshua* by Samuel Levi Jones
2. Critique their sources of information and consider whose voices are excluded
3. Explore the theme of activism by working individually and in groups on select learning activities.

Lesson

1. Choose a close-looking prompt (from the introduction page) to encourage students to study the artwork. You may also ask suggested questions under “Look” in the section below.
2. 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 activity in the “Connect Ideas” section below.

LOOK

Take a moment to closely examine *Joshua* by Samuel Levi Jones.

1. What words stand out to you? Why do you think the artist chose to highlight these words?
2. Examine the materials that make up this work of art. How would you describe the materials? Why do you believe the artist chose to work with such materials?

LEARN

About the Artist

Samuel Levi Jones (American, b. 1978) was born and raised in Marion, Indiana, in a biracial household. Growing up, Jones would go to the public library to do research for school assignments using the

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encyclopedia and other reference books. He soon observed a dominant white narrative in those books and the lack of representation from people of color. Throughout his career, Jones has consistently focused on creating work that engages with issues of representation, documentation of history, the nature of information, structures of authority, struggle for racial equality, and the ongoing protest against racial injustices.

About the Artwork

Joshua is created from the covers of discarded Illinois law books, which are sewn together and mounted onto canvas. Levi Jones has used the persistent occurrence of racially biased police shootings of African American men in the United States as the subject matter for this artwork. The piece is named for Joshua Beal, a 25-year-old Indianapolis man who was fatally shot by two plainclothes white police officers on November 5, 2016 in the majority white Chicago neighborhood of Mount Greenwood. At the time of the incident, Beal and family members were participating in the funeral procession for a cousin. A heated confrontation arose between the officers and the group and Beal was shot eight times and killed. The officers involved were not criminally charged for the shooting.

In choosing to make this work using law books, Levi Jones calls attention to a racially biased criminal justice system. The artist further articulates the message by selectively revealing the gold-embossed words on the covers in this order if read from top left to bottom right: “End/Assault and/Homicide/Criminal/Officers and Public Employees.” The act of ripping off the covers of law books and discarding the contents challenges the viewer to question sources of knowledge and authority in today’s society.

DISCUSS

1. Samuel Levi Jones uses book covers as a material but intentionally refers to the covers as “skins” when discussing the work. In what ways are the covers like skin and why might this distinction be important to Levi Jones?
2. Levi Jones calls upon viewers to question their sources of information. Levi Jones specifically works with encyclopedias and hard-bound books. How can this practice apply to resources on the Internet?
3. Levi Jones used law books to create the abstract rectangular painting titled *Joshua*. How might the impact of the artwork be different if it more closely resembled Joshua Beal?

CONNECT IDEAS

Activist Art—To help students consider meaning and message, ask them to select a contemporary work of art (song, poem, video, visual artwork) that they consider to be an example of activist art and critique the artwork. Why do they consider it an example of activist art? What are the messages? Who is the intended audience? How does the work relate to them personally?

Examine Voice—To examine perspectives, ask students to compile a list of resources around a specific social issue in their community and then ask them to evaluate their resources. Work with students to

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come up with a list of criteria for evaluating a resource. This could include factors like evaluating biases, considering whose voices are left out, and validity of their resources. Once the criteria are established, ask the students to evaluate a set number of resources.

GO FURTHER

Resources about Samuel Levi Jones:

“Samuel Levi Jones Artist Talk,” Black White Thread, Papillon, Los Angeles, CA, 2014:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3x2brzqisvc>

Seph Rodney, “An Artist Gives Us a Vision of the Future Through Books,” Hyperallergic (January 6, 2017), <https://hyperallergic.com/348748/an-artist-gives-us-a-vision-of-the-future-through-books/>

Resources about Joshua Beal shooting and police brutality:

Asraa Mustufa, “Chicago officer cleared of shooting Joshua Beal has history of racially charged violent encounters,” Chicago Reporter (June 20, 2019), <https://www.chicagoreporter.com/chicago-officer-cleared-of-shooting-joshua-beal-has-history-of-racially-charged-encounters/>

Katie Nodjimbadem, “The Long, Painful History of Police Brutality in the U.S.,” Smithsonian Magazine (July 27, 2017), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/long-painful-history-police-brutality-in-the-us-180964098/>

STANDARDS

Wisconsin Standards for English Language Arts

SL.8.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher led) with diverse partners on topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing one's thinking clearly.

Wisconsin Standards for Social Studies

SS.Inq4.a.h Communicate conclusions while taking into consideration that audiences from diverse backgrounds (e.g., gender, class, proximity to the event or issue) may interpret the information in different ways.

Wisconsin Standards for Art and Design

A.A.R.19.h: Inquire: Hypothesize the intent behind a work or a collection of art works and cite evidence to support an interpretation.