

# MEMORY IS A STRANGE BELL

THE ART OF WILLIAM CHRISTENBERRY



EDUCATOR GUIDE



OGDEN MUSEUM  
OF SOUTHERN ART  
EDUCATION DEPT



## ABOUT THE OGDEN MUSEUM OF SOUTHERN ART

Located in the vibrant Warehouse Arts District of downtown New Orleans, Louisiana, the Ogden Museum of Southern Art holds the largest and most comprehensive collection of Southern art and is recognized for its original exhibitions, public events and educational programs, which examine the development of visual art alongside Southern traditions of music, literature and culinary heritage to provide a comprehensive story of the South. Established in 1999 and in Stephen Goldring Hall since 2003, the Museum welcomes almost 85,000 visitors annually and attracts diverse audiences through its broad range of programming including exhibitions, lectures, film screenings and concerts, which are all part of its mission to broaden the knowledge, understanding, interpretation and appreciation of the visual arts and culture of the American South.

The Museum is located at 925 Camp Street, New Orleans, Louisiana 70130. For more information visit [ogdenmuseum.org](http://ogdenmuseum.org) or call 504.539.9650.

On the cover

**Fruit Stand**, 1963, Oil on canvas, courtesy of the Belger Foundation.

The Educator Guide has been made possible by the generous support of The Hearst Foundation and the MaggieGeorge Foundation.

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# INTRODUCTION

Dear Educators,

We are pleased to present the exhibit *Memory is a strange Bell: The Art of William Christenberry*. This exhibition highlights the rich and diverse breadth of works created by William Christenberry throughout his life, spanning from Hale County, Alabama to New York City to Memphis, Tennessee and finally Washington, D.C. His media range from drawings, paintings, sculptures, constructions and photography. The title of the show harks from an Emily Dickenson quote, “Memory is a strange bell -- Jubilee, and Knell.” The recognition that memory can reveal both sublime beauty and a painful reality is a key paradox in Christenberry’s oeuvre.

Christenberry’s work is one of a familiar landscape, both ordinary and hauntingly expressive. He explored and employed a broad range of artistic styles from Abstract Expressionism, Surrealism, Dadaism, Pop Art and Photography. His work was deeply influenced by the book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, by James Agee and Walker Evans, first published in 1941. This book featured the raw and noble lives of tenant farmers from the very county where Christenberry was raised. Both Agee and Evans later became friends and mentors to Christenberry, encouraging him to continue his documentation of the South, particularly through photography. The artist is arguably one of the preeminent trail blazers of modern color photography as an art form, alongside his contemporary William Eggleston. From Christenberry’s bright abstract paintings of houses, gravesites and fruit stands, to the more somber palette of his closely cropped photographs and challenging explorations of white supremacy, the artist portrays his homeland with both a reverie and blatant perspective.

This guide investigates specific themes and techniques explored by Christenberry included in the exhibition, providing step-by-step lesson plans, discussions and writing extensions and a brief artist biography. Also included is a glossary of artistic terms which can be implemented in discussions and projects. Why is Christenberry’s work relevant to students today? Students of all ages can appreciate and learn from the range of artistic media that Christenberry employed, while simultaneously examining the artistic practice of focusing on one subject matter for an extended period of time. What intrigues students today about their everyday landscapes? Asking these questions encourages students to look around at their neighborhoods and vistas, to notice with a deeper eye of investigation what makes them curious, what stays the same and what ages with the passing of time.

Additionally, the Ogden Museum seeks to provide an opportunity for educators and students to connect with one another, with their community and with others across the nation. With this goal in mind, the Educator Resource Center (ERC) was launched to be an online clearinghouse for all educational resources. You can access the ERC through the Ogden website. Here you can quickly view and download lesson plans based on subject matter, theme and media to use in your classrooms. Please make sure to explore the ERC at [ogdenmuseum.org/erc](http://ogdenmuseum.org/erc) and post your students' creations.

Sincerely,

**Mikhayla Anderson**

Museum Educator



**Green Warehouse, Newbern, Al., 1973, Dye transfer print.**



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ARTIST’S BIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>ACTIVITES AND EXTENSIONS</b>	
GRADES 1-3	
<b>Variety and Abundance: a mixed-media     exploration of William Christenberry’s fruit stands</b>	<b>3</b>
GRADES 4-6	
<b>Myself Constructed: a mixed-media, low relief, painterly     sculpture based on Christenberry’s constructions</b>	<b>7</b>
GRADES 6-8	
<b>Ghost and Memory Homes: creating monochromatic     sculptures from recycled materials and found objects</b>	<b>11</b>
GRADES 9-12	
<b>Flipping the Narrative and Color Relationships: creating     abstracted “paintings” from site specific Polaroid photographs</b>	<b>15</b>
GRADES 6-12	
<b>“Memory is a strange bell -- Jubilee, and Knell: decoding the     meaning and intent of Christenberry’s more challenging works</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>GLOSSARY OF TERMS</b>	<b>21</b>

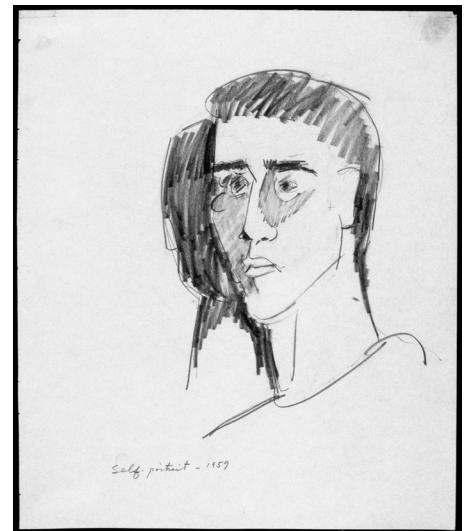
## ARTIST'S BIOGRAPHY

**“When I discovered painting, when I discovered brush to canvas, that was to me maybe the most exciting thing in my life. Certainly, the most exciting thing up to that point. I could not get enough of it. I could not work too hard.”**

William Christenberry was born in Tuscaloosa, Alabama in 1936. His interest in art was supported by his family, regardless of the Depression era and their humble beginnings. At the University of Alabama, he was encouraged by a teacher to transfer his drawings into paintings which led to a lyrical exploration of abstract expressionist works. He was blind in one eye and underwent multiple eye surgeries throughout his life to improve the condition. This challenge most certainly effected his sense of color, composition and light.

Christenberry began his artistic career deeply inspired by the Abstract Expressionist movement that was sweeping the nation. After earning a painting and sculpture BFA in 1958 and MFA in 1959, at The University of Alabama, Christenberry was urged by a professor to leave the South while he was young. He spent a little over a year in New York City where he studied the art, jazz and quotidian experiences of a vibrant metropolis. From there he headed south once again to Memphis, taking a teaching position he held for six years at Memphis State University. He landed in Washington D.C. in 1968, accepting a position at the Corcoran College of Art and Design, but continued annual summer pilgrimages to Hale County to capture photographs, procure old signs and feed the narrative of his work for the remainder of his life. His photographs were initially used to document the color and composition of his subjects for future paintings and sculptures. Later he chose to use his photographs as pieces of fine art, thus becoming one of the leaders in the development of color photography, alongside his contemporary William Eggleston.

From the beginning, Christenberry was interested in documenting the passage and impressions of time, of family histories, through the stark, realist landscapes of country living. His dedication to documenting this area was furthermore inspired when he came across the work *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by James Agee and Walker Evans, a book of photographs and writings originally published in 1941 that followed two tenant farmer families. When he discovered the book in 1960, it had a profound influence on Christenberry, specifically the narrative of abandoned and forgotten houses and people of the area. Later when he met Agee and Evans, he was informally mentored by both artists and urged to incorporate his Photographs into his body of



**Self Portrait, 1959, Pencil on Paper, courtesy of the Belger Foundation.**



work, not just as color and light guides for his paintings. His photographs, originally taken with a small Brownie Kodak camera, are uncanny, often banal, glimpses into the side of the road vernacular of the deep South.

The scale of the photographs is strikingly smaller than the majority of Christenberry's paintings, constructions and sculptures, and yet their eerie presence is formidable, like a stranger that will not drop their gaze.

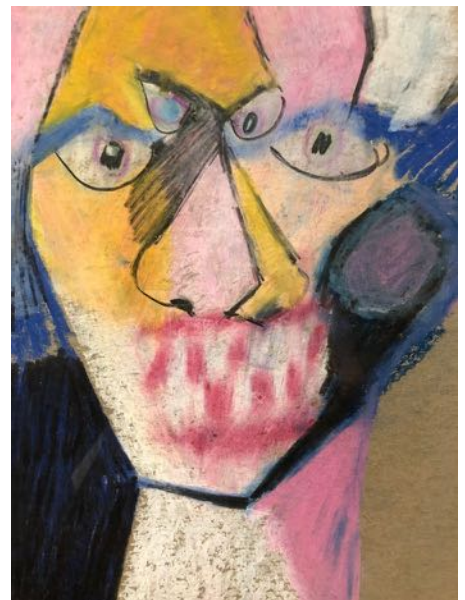
The confluence of the Civil Rights Movement and the KKK in the South was a topic that both fascinated and horrified Christenberry. He explored and grappled with the paradox that both good and evil could exist simultaneously in a single place in a series of haunting paintings, sculptures and installations about the Klu Klux Klan. Christenberry also struggled with his own experience of creating and exhibiting this series.

*"Some people have told me that this subject is not the proper concern of the artist or the art. On the contrary, I hold the position that there are times when as artist must examine and reveal such strange and secret brutality."* William Christenberry

Although challenging, these pieces could be considered a historical record of the Artist's spiritual examination of the fears about a specific time and place that was so dear to him. Is it the responsibility of an Artist to raise onerous topics for contemplation? The challenge for contemporary viewers, educators and students then is to ask themselves questions about the works and observe, discuss and question as their responses arise.

Riffing from an ever-increasing personal collection of dilapidated signs from Hale County, Christenberry began creating autobiographical mixed-media assemblages called Constructions. These playful, two-dimensional relief works incorporate found objects including some of the signs Christenberry procured over the years. The tension between the surface of these works and the vibrant color palette creates a dance of juxtaposed shapes, harmonies and contradictions. The surface quality also harks back to the textures of the buildings that he photographed revealing a deep patina of weather and time.

Christenberry was an artist consumed with the memory and reality of a place and self in time. His broad and fastidious works have inspired others to closely examine the places that sustain them over and over again. If memory truly is the expanse of Jubilee and Knell, Christenberry worked tirelessly to represent both sides of that experience with a bricolage of everything hauntingly real in-between. Christenberry explored Hale County with a personal and authentic lens that yielded a total collage aesthetic of drawings, paintings, photographs and construction compositions.



**Head**, 1960, Oil pastel and pencil on paper, courtesy of the Belger Foundation.

# ACTIVITIES AND EXTENSIONS

## Art Activity for Grades 1-3

### Variety and Abundance: a mixed-media exploration of William Christenberry's fruit stands

William Christenberry's *Fruit Stand* is a monolithic representation of an everyday market scene. The photograph, *Fruits Stand, Sidewalk, Memphis, TN.*, was taken after the painting was made, but is the subject matter that the artist continued to return to. After observing, drawing, and discussing the large painting and photograph, students will create an elongated horizontal composition using mixed medias of oil pastel, pencil, and watercolors to depict the fruit they love to eat or see being grown or sold in their neighborhoods. Special emphasis should be placed on the scale of the paper they use, allowing for more freedom of movement and expression on a larger than normal work surface.

#### Materials

Large watercolor paper 22" x 15"  
Watercolor paint  
Oil pastels  
Paper towels /wipes  
Watercolor brushes  
Water  
Pencils

#### Vocabulary

Scale  
Shape  
Form  
Oil pastels  
Overlapping  
Layering  
Color  
Line  
Balance  
Repetition  
Resist

#### Observe & Discuss

Ask the class to look closely at *Fruit Stand*. Prompt students:

- What kinds of shape, color, pattern, texture and movement do you notice?
- How do you think the artist made this piece?
- Read the title. What do you think the artist was trying to communicate?
- Have you ever seen a fruit stand like this in your city or neighborhood?

# ACTIVITIES AND EXTENSIONS

## Art Activity for Grades 1-3 (continued)

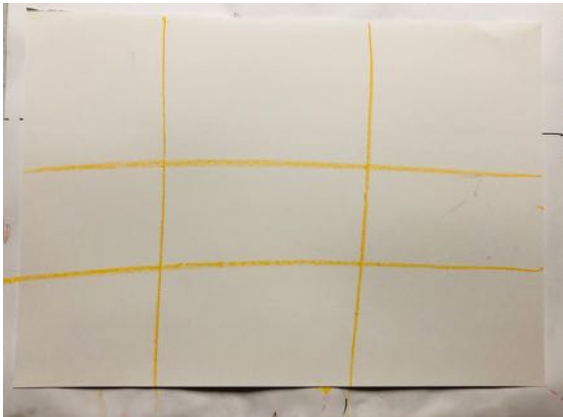
### Create

1. Pass out large watercolor paper and oil pastels to students.
2. Have them select a light or warm color oil pastel and draw 9 quadrants across their paper, emphasizing the difference between horizontal and vertical lines.
3. Ask students to create basic shapes of fruits that they love scattered throughout the different quadrants. Encourage them to repeat shapes and colors in little groups. Have them use other colors to fill in some background areas. Once the composition has enough fruits and vegetables shapes, pass out the watercolor paints, brushes and water. Have students fill in any remaining white areas of their paper with watercolor paint. The oil pastels will resist the water, and create layers of transparent color.
4. You can stop here or let the work dry and then allow the students to return to the piece once more with oil pastels to add more colors, shapes, and patterns derived from the source materials.
5. Create an Artist's label for the work including the Title, Artist's Name, Media, and Year.

### Extend and Explore

Bring in fresh fruits and vegetables. Arrange them on a central table and encourage students to use them as source material for their fruitstand artworks.

Discuss *Mr. Okra* and his role in New Orleans providing fresh fruits and vegetables to neighborhoods throughout the city. How does the student's art connect to what they may see on Mr. Okra's truck?





**Fruit Stand, 1963, Oil on canvas, courtesy of the Belger Foundation.**



Fruit Stand, Sidewalk, Memphis, Tenn. 1966, Dye transfer print Estate of William Christenberry, courtesy of Hemphill Fine Arts

# ACTIVITIES AND EXTENSIONS

## Art Activity for Grades 4-5

### Myself Constructed: a mixed-media, low relief, painterly sculpture based on Christenberry's constructions

After observing, drawing and discussing the large constructions by Christenberry, (specifically *Construction Drawing 1*, 1967. Mixed Media and *Advertisement*, 1964. Acrylic on Canvas Construction.), students will create an elongated vertical assemblage of their own. Incorporating found objects and oil pastels, students will depict their own abstracted personal narratives. Artists are encouraged to use objects that symbolize something special to them in their lives, ranging from a gum wrapper to a specific shape or color.

#### Materials

Cardstock, chipboard or old flat cardboard 11" X 17"

Scissors

Oil pastels

Elmer's Glue

Lightweight found or recycled objects (cardboard scraps, juice tops, etc.)

Paper towels or wipes

Circular shapes to trace

\* Optional

- white and black tempera or acrylic paint
- paint brushes
- paper plates for paint palettes
- water containers

#### Vocabulary

Abstraction

Construction

Assemblage

Overlapping

Composition

Emphasis

Balance

Harmony

Line

Shape

Form

Low relief

High relief

#### Observe, Discuss & Record

Ask the class to look closely at *Advertisement* and *Construction Drawing I*. Prompt students:

What kinds of shape, color, pattern, texture, balance and movement do you notice?

How do you think the artist made this piece?

Read the title. What do you think the artist was trying to communicate?

Are these artworks realistic or abstract? Why or why not?

# ACTIVITIES AND EXTENSIONS

## Art Activity for Grades 4-5 (continued)

### Create

1. Students select large cardboard sheet, then collect 5-7 scrap items for their collage.
2. Encourage time for students to arrange and rearrange the pieces on the background board several times before distributing the oil pastels and the white glue. Refresh ideas like overlapping, composition, and collage.
3. Students will choose a particular color palette for their artwork.
4. Students choose a few pieces to color with oil pastels before adhering them to the background. Students should consider filling in some or all of the background with color before gluing.
5. Glue down objects with white glue in the decided order and composition. Press and hold each object down for 30 seconds for optimal adhesion.
6. Use oil pastels and white and black paint to go over areas of the construction to create emphasis, balance and harmony.
7. Make sure all aspects are secured on the surface of the work.
8. Create an Artist's label for the work including the Title, Artist's Name, Media, and Year.

### Extend and Explore

Show students *Bed* by Robert Rauschenberg and *Bicycle Wheel* by Marcel Duchamp.

Discuss why found objects were incorporated into artwork by these three artists.

What found objects do students see around their homes? How would they incorporate one or two of these objects into a sculptural work of art?

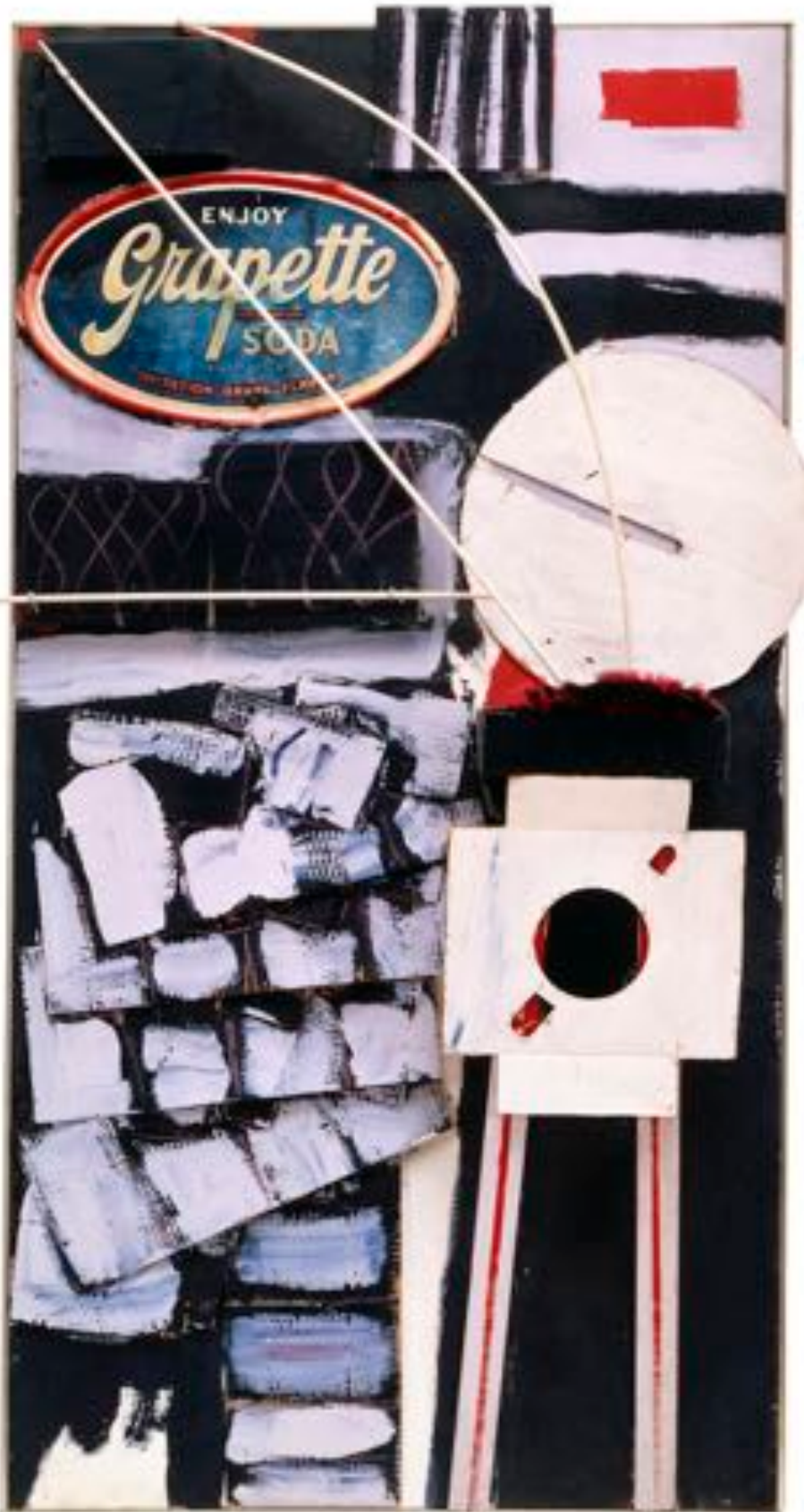


Sample artwork

**Construction Drawing I.** 1967, Acrylic and charcoal on paper mounted canvas, courtesy of the Belger Foundation.







Advertisement, 1964, Mixed media wall construction, Courtesy of the Belger Foundation.

# ACTIVITIES AND EXTENSIONS

## Art Activity for Grades 6+

### Ghost and Memory Homes: creating monochromatic sculptures from recycled materials and found objects

After observing, drawing and discussing the sculptures *Ghost Form* and *Dream Building XII*, students will create a rectangular three-dimensional house form that emphasizes textural surface patterns and patinas. They will enhance these details with oil pastels and acrylic paint.

#### Materials

Cardstock or chip board, 11" X 17"

- Precut pieces with a cutting board. Per student: 2 @ 4" x 4.5", 1 @ 4.5" X 5.5", 4 @ 4" X 5.5"

Tempera or acrylic paint

Oil pastels

Paper towels/wipes

Paint brushes

Water

Water containers

Pencils

Rulers or T-Squares

Scissors

1/2"-1" Masking tape

Paper plate palettes

#### Vocabulary

Form

Texture

Space

Overlapping

Flush

Perpendicular

Parallel

Vernacular

Architecture

Patina

#### Observe & Discuss

Ask the class to look closely at *Ghost Form* and *Dream Building XII*. Prompt students:

What kinds of shape, color and texture do you notice?

How do you think the artist made this piece?

Read the titles. What do you think the artist was trying to communicate?

# ACTIVITIES AND EXTENSIONS

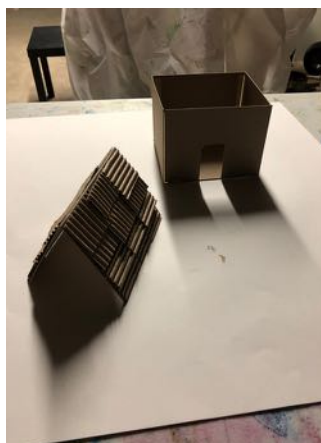
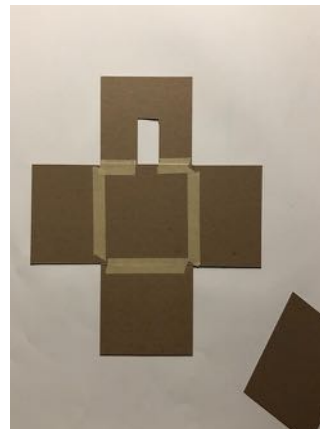
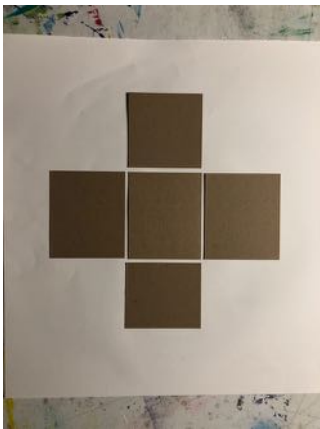
## Art Activity for Grades 6+ (continued)

### Create

1. Have students organize 5 pre-cut rectangles in a flat house shape (see below).
2. Use a t-square or ruler to measure the opening for a simple door. Cut out door with scissors on one panel.
3. Use masking tape to connect the five pieces by abutting the pieces close together and creating a hinge with each piece of masking tape. Rub all seams well with fist or finger nail for longevity of adhesion.
4. Tape two more pieces of pre-cut cardboard together to create the roof. Collect scraps of corrugated cardboard to cut out rectangles for the roof tiles.
5. Choose one color to use throughout the sculpture.
6. Use oil pastels to go over roof panels to add patina and colorful textures.
7. Use acrylic paint to cover the house form and the roof. Let dry.
8. Connect the roof to the house form using the masking tape hinge technique on the inside edges of the roof.
9. Use white glue to add on any small found object elements to the house.
10. Place the completed house on a separate piece of cardboard or cardstock as a base for the finished project.
11. Create an Artist's label for the work including the Title, Artist's Name, Media and Year.

### Extend and Explore

Look at *House* by Rachel Whiteread. Talk about positive and negative space in her work. Compare and contrast how Christenberry and Whiteread chose to represent house forms in their work.





**Ghost Form, 1994, Mixed Media sculpture with Hale County red soil, gift of the Roger H. Ogden Collection**



**Dream Building XII**, 1990, Balsa and bass wood, red soil, tempera plywood, blue dry pigment, courtesy of the Belger Foundation.

# ACTIVITIES AND EXTENSIONS

## Art Activity for Grades 9+

### Flipping the Narrative and Color Relationships: creating abstracted “paintings” from site specific Polaroid photographs

William Christenberry’s “perfect little poems” or photographs were initially used as guides for researching and re-creating place for his paintings, but later became a fundamental part of the artist’s body of work. From visual records to abstract expressionistic painting the artist wanted to document a place in the South that intrigued him and held stories of his family heritage. What places near your home inspire or interest you? What do you see every day that can transcend its stark reality into an abstract expression of your experience? How can you transform a photograph into a painting or expressionistic art piece?

#### Materials

Medium weight cardstock or watercolor paper 9.5” X 11”  
Masking tape  
Oil pastels  
Paper towels or wet wipes  
T-square or ruler  
Masking tape  
Pencil  
Eraser

#### Vocabulary

Composition  
Color  
Color Photography  
Abstraction  
Balance  
Foreground, middle-ground, background  
Polaroid  
Mood  
Repetition  
Horizon Line  
Landscape

#### Observe & Discuss

Ask the class to look closely at *Warsaw*, *Cuba*, *Hulls*, *McIntosh, AL*, and *Tenant House V*.

What kinds of shape, color, texture and balance do you notice?

How do you think the artist made these pieces?

Read the titles. What do you think the artist was trying to communicate?

# ACTIVITIES AND EXTENSIONS

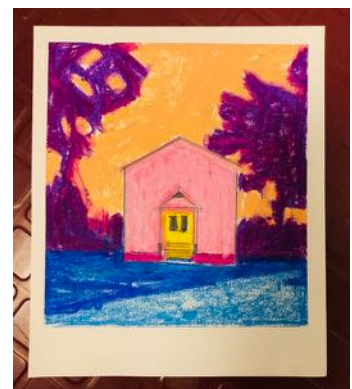
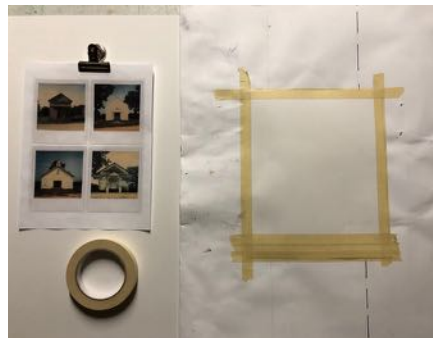
## Art Activity for Grades 9+ (continued)

### Create

1. Have students select one piece of paper and a Polaroid from the series by Christenberry.
2. Using a t-square or ruler, lightly draw out the perimeter lines to frame the paper: 1/2" on three sides of the paper and 1.5" on one side (this will be the bottom).
3. Tape the paper around the perimeter lightly with masking tape onto a drawing surface (table, drawing board, another larger sheet of paper or cardboard, etc.)
4. Sketch the selected Polaroid composition LIGHTLY on the paper. Include all details such as horizon line, the house form, foliage, etc.
5. Examine the chosen photograph to identify warm and cool colors. What colors will you use to reverse or flip the color dynamics of this photograph? Use oil pastels to fill in the background of the drawing with the inverse of the color in the photo. Do the same for the house and details. Fill in the entire drawing with oil pastels.
6. Go over the final oil pastel "painting" with a sharp pencil and a ruler to pull out harder and darker lines for emphasis.
7. Create an Artist's label for the work including the Title, Artist's name, Media, and Year.

### Extend and Explore

Have students create Polaroid photographs or alternatively draw "little snapshots." of houses that are important to them.





Warsaw, Al., 1974, Cuba, Al., 1974, Hulls, Al., 1974, McIntosh, Al., 1974, courtesy of Hemphill Fine Arts





Tenant House V, 1964, Oil on canvas, courtesy of the Belger Foundation.

## ACTIVITIES AND EXTENSIONS

### Art Activity for Grades 6+

**“Memory is a strange bell -- Jubilee, and Knell”:** decoding the meaning and intent of Christenberry’s more challenging works

#### Observe

**Observe** *Beale Street* below. What images, symbols, or colors stand out to you? Why? Do you notice anything unusual about the mixed media painting? Read the text about the work below.



*Beale Street*, 1964, Mixed Media on canvas, courtesy of the Belger Foundation

## ACTIVITIES AND EXTENSIONS

### Art Activity for Grades 6+ (continued)

*Beale Street* (1964) marks a major transition in Christenberry's approach to the painted surface. Inspired by the patina of urban decay that covered this storied Memphis street, Christenberry added an assemblage of found objects to the foreground. Reflectors, event posters, advertisements and masks retrieved from the streets blend with the painted representations of actual Beale Street storefronts – an ever-present barber's pole, an ubiquitous liquor store horseshoe and clover, and the painted crescent and star of the burgeoning Black Muslim movement of the 1960s.

The masked figures at the bottom of the composition were inspired by the costumes of Patricia Zipprodt for the 1961 stage production of *The Blacks* by Jean Genet. Christenberry attended the play in New York during its American debut. In *Beale Street*, these masked characters evoke the pomp and circumstance of a Memphis Mardi Gras and the fearful hooded figures of the KKK. But like the characters in Genet's play, the individuals beneath the white masks are black.



Much like Genet's play, this painting confronts supremacist suppositions and pushes the viewer into deeper, and often uncomfortable, considerations surrounding race, place and colonial preconceptions of power. This painting marks not only a major turn in compositional concerns for the young painter, but also a major shift in his narrative focus.

Bradley Sumrall  
Curator of the Collection  
Ogden Museum of Southern Art

### Extend and Explore

“Memory is a strange Bell -- Jubilee, and Knell.” *Emily Dickinson*

Upon the death of her mother, Dickinson professes in a letter to her sister how a single memory can evoke both celebration (Jubilee) and mournfulness (Knell). A student of Imagist poetry, William Christenberry's exploration of this paradox can be seen in his complex work documenting Hale County.

Think of a place that invokes both Jubilee and Knell, happiness and sorrow, and then share it in your own words or drawing.

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

**Abstract** is a style of art that does not attempt to represent an accurate depiction of a visual reality, but instead uses color, line and shape to communicate a feeling or idea.

**Acrylic** is a type of paint that is a quick drying plastic polymer pigment used with water.

**Balance** refers the distribution of visual weight in a composition. Each part of the composition works with other parts of the composition to appear equal and harmonious in balance.

**Color** is produced by the way an object reflects or emits light. By placing colors next to each other in different ways, artists can create a variety of effects.

**Color Wheel** is a circular diagram of the spectrum used to show the relationships between colors (primary: red, blue, yellow, secondary: orange, green, purple).

**Composition** is the overall placement and organization of elements of a work of art.

**Construction** is the arrangement of mixed media materials mounted on a flat surface (also known as Assemblage).

**Emphasis** refers to the area of an artwork that dominates attention or draws interest. It is often what the viewer looks at first.

**Fine Art Photography** generally refers to scenes that have been set up or manipulated to reflect the artist's vision.

**Focal Point** is the place in a work of art where attention is focused.

**Genre** is the representation of people, subjects and scenes from everyday life.

**Harmony** is the principle of design that creates unity in a work of art.

**Landscape** is an image of the land, nature or outside; a genre of art.

**Line** can be described as the path of a point moving through space. In an artwork, there are many types of line. We can look for the direction of the line, the feeling of the line, the quality of the line, and how the line moves our eye through artworks.

**Mood** is the general atmosphere, or state of mind and feelings, that a work of art generates. For example, the mood of a painting could be disturbing or tranquil, dark or energetic.

**Motif** is an element of an image that may be repeated in a pattern or design, often many times, or may just occur once in a work.

**Movement** can be thought of in two ways – the first refers to how an artist depicts movement using the elements and principles of art. The second way refers to the visual flow of an artwork, indicated by the path a viewer's eyes take as they look at the artwork.

**Oil** is a type of paint that is a slow drying and mixes heavy amounts of pigment with oil thus creating rich, deep hues.

**Photography** the practice of using a camera to take and process film to create 2-dimensional images.

**Rhythm** is a principle of art that refers to the movement or action of a composition, usually achieved through repetition of lines, shapes, colors and more. It creates a visual tempo in artworks and provides a path for the viewer's eye to follow.

**Scale** and proportion in art are both concerned with size. Scale refers to the size of an object (a whole) in relationship to another object (another whole). In art, the size relationship between an object and the human body is significant.

**Shape** is an enclosed area of space created through lines and other elements of the composition. Shapes can be geometric or free form.

**Sculpture** is a three-dimensional work of art.

**Texture** refers to the tactile qualities of a surface – the way the objects actually feel or the way they look like they would feel.

**Unity**, also known as harmony, refers to the cohesiveness of an artwork – how whole, consistent, and complete it appears. Unity is the pleasing combination of elements to create a harmonious composition.

**Variety** refers to the elements of a composition that differ from one another. Variety creates visual interest and energy.