Background Information

Annie Mae Young grew up working in the fields of Gee’s Bend, Alabama, where the practice of quilt making goes back generations. One of the first quilters, Dinah Miller, arrived at Gee’s Bend as a slave in 1859. She was brought to the United States on an illegal slave ship and purchased for a dime.

This work-clothes quilt is made in the “Bars” style, which can be traced back to the 1800s, when slaves in Gee’s Bend made bedcovers out of cloth strips to keep their families warm. Young used pieces of cloth cut from worn-out work pants, capturing the history of a community shaped by countless seasons of hard labor.

“I started cutting and piecing cloth when I was about thirteen, fourteen, something like that . . . I used the old pants legs from my brother Gaston’s clothes. That was about all I had back then, old dress tails and pants legs . . . I didn’t know how to make no fancy quilt, so I just did it my way.”
—Annie Mae Young

Discussion Questions

o What might the texture of this quilt feel like? What do you see that makes you say that? What might it feel like to be under the quilt?

o What materials were used to make this artwork? What signs do you see of how the materials were used before they became a quilt?

o If this quilt were a story, what events would it include? Why?

**Background Information**

Ronald Lockett created this artwork to commemorate the 1995 terrorist bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. *Conspiracy* is made of sheets of recycled tin siding, a material he scavenged from weathered outbuildings once owned by his family.

Lockett was raised by his aunt, Sarah Dial Lockett. As his aunt’s health began to fail, Ronald Lockett became interested in her quilts, many of which were improvisations using found fabric squares. He considered the quilt to be a magic heirloom that tied together generations in a shared language and process.

**Discussion Questions**

- Describe the texture of this artwork. How would it feel to touch?

- Where have you seen metal like this before?

- Lockett was interested in his aunt’s quilts. What similarities do you see between this object and a quilt? What is different?

- This work of art commemorates (or remembers) a terrorist bombing. Based on this work of art, how did Lockett feel about this event?

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Background Information

Joe Minter’s famous yard show in Birmingham, Alabama, tells the history of Africans and African Americans through sculpture. Yard shows are outdoor galleries of carefully arranged assemblages made from found materials. The sculptures are made to memorialize people or events and to protect the home.

Between 1877 and 1950, 326 African Americans were lynched in Minter’s native state, Alabama. The title The Hanging Tree refers to the trees that were used to lynch African Americans in many Southern towns. The last recorded lynching in America, in 1981, occurred in Alabama.

The title of the sculpture recalls the 1937 poem, “Strange Fruit,” made famous by the singer Billie Holiday. It reads: “Southern trees bear strange fruit / blood on the leaves and blood at the root / Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze / Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.”

Discussion Questions

- Make an list of the materials. Where might one find these materials?

- What might this artwork sound like if jostled or pushed against?

- What is the emotional impact of the composition and context of this work?

- Is a work of art able to challenge injustice? Why or why not?

Joe Minter, The Hanging Tree, 1996. Welded found steel, 83 1/2 x 49 1/2 x 49 1/2 in. (212.1 x 125.7 x 125.7 cm). Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Museum purchase, and gift of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation from the William S. Arnett Collection, 2017.1.41
Background Information

Lonnie Holley’s assemblage includes a pair of discarded, empty rocking chairs. Together the chairs support a large tree root. The root represents the “family tree,” elders remembering their roots, and the many Africans who were uprooted from their homes due to the slave trade.

There is an ancient tradition in many cultures of creating objects to memorialize people who have died. The objects may remind us of a specific person or family who used them or they may symbolize an idea about the afterlife or spirituality.

“My work is especially for the children so they can see how to make art out of things, understand how art clean up the world, and realize that all we do on earth becomes a form of art. What is art? Art is everything that we have used, waiting to be used again. That’s all art is.” —Lonnie Holley

Discussion Questions

- The title of this artwork is *Him and Her Hold the Root*. What might be “Him” or “Her” represent?

- What might be the relationship between “Him” and “Her”? What do you see that makes you say that?

- What are your “roots”? How do you learn more about them? How do you or your family celebrate them?
Background Information

Purvis Young was inspired by Chicago’s Black Arts Movement (1965–75), which promoted politically engaged works of art. He believed art could affect social change. In the Overtown neighborhood in Miami, Florida, where he lived and worked, Young created hundreds of mural paintings about urban life and spirituality, and installed them outdoors on a deserted street called Goodbread Alley.

_Talking to the System_ shows three young people confronting six elders. The painting recognizes the role of young African Americans in challenging the system during the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Many sit-ins and protests of the era were led by students.

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“I paint them all kinds of ways . . . some people protesting, some happy, some white, some are black, green or purple. People that think like me. Different kinds of people trying to straighten up the world.” —Purvis Young

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Discussion Questions

- Imagine if you could hear the voices of these figures. What is the tone of their conversation?

- What conversations do you have with your elders? What important stories have your elders shared with you?

- Young believed art could change society or “straighten up the world.” Do you agree? Why or why not?
Background Information

After over 250 years of slavery in the US, sharecropping became one of the only means by which African Americans could earn their livelihood. Thornton Dial’s grandparents sharecropped on the same plantation where his great-grandparents had served as slaves. As Dial told it, “Every year the Man always say, ‘You just about come out of debt this time but didn’t quite make it.’”

The title of this artwork comes from a song made famous in 1956 by the singer Odetta, who was considered by many to be the “voice of the Civil Rights movement.” The lyric “When I lay my burdens down” references death, but also the burden of Jim Crow laws that the Civil Rights movement labored to “put down.”

“It ought to be a whole lot in my art to help change things. If we going to change the world, we got to look at the little man. All them little folks out there—black peoples, poor white peoples—got big minds. We got to use them minds.”
—Thornton Dial

Discussion Questions

- How does the title of this artwork help us understand the composition?

- Where in the composition do you see a burden? Does it appear heavy? Why?

- What burdens does your community carry? What can you do to lessen that load?