SONYA CLARK: WE ARE EACH OTHER TEACHER RESOURCE

“The more common an object, the more interconnected it is in our lives, the more power it has to be used as a catalyst or a metaphor.” —Sonya Clark, We Are Each Other catalogue

EXHIBITION OVERVIEW
For thirty years, multidisciplinary artist Sonya Clark has focused her work on the African diaspora in the United States to confront, elucidate, and reframe its history. Within her practice, she often undertakes this exploration through everyday fiber materials—most notably hair, flags, found fabric—and craft practices. In her work, craft and community are intertwined; her participatory projects promote new collective encounters across racial, gender, and socioeconomic divisions. Sonya Clark: We Are Each Other is a major traveling exhibition focused on the artist’s community-centric and participatory projects.

The title We Are Each Other is inspired by the poem “Paul Robeson” (1970) by Gwendolyn Brooks, who wrote it about the famed actor and activist. The poem closes with the following: “we are each other’s harvest/we are each other’s business/we are each other’s magnitude and bond.” Through her work, Clark asks us to acknowledge our individual responsibility to the collective whole and to consider such questions as, “How do we address and challenge our shared colonial past, and how do we hold ourselves accountable for and claim agency in what happens next in the future of our society?” We Are Each Other is both a declaration and an invitation, a battle cry and an embrace.

THEMES
The following themes are explored in this exhibition. Educators can use them as a guideline when introducing Sonya Clark to students.

HAIR
- Hair holds particular significance within Clark’s body of work; she has worked with Black hair as a medium for over thirty years, elevating the inherent artistry of Black hair practices to a textile and sculptural art form. From using her own hair (as in Constellations and Hairbows for Sounding the Ancestors) to braiding cotton fibers as part of a series of crown-like sculptures (as in Wig Series) to collaborating directly with Black hairstylists (as in The Hair Craft Project, slide 3 of the exhibition Key Image Resource), Clark explores the relationships between hair and DNA, hair as a means of community and ritual, and hair as a representation of tradition surviving across forced diaspora. In addition to celebration, Clark’s work confronts the history of discrimination that Black Americans have experienced in the workplace because of their hair—as recently as 2022, when the Senate blocked the Creating a Respectful and Open Workplace for Natural Hair (“CROWN”) Act.

FLAGS
- Working with flag forms is another significant branch of Clark’s practice. Through flags, Clark explores the social significance that fabric can hold. For Many (slide 8 of the Key Image Resource), part of the Monumental Cloth series, Clark expands upon the lesser-known history of the Confederate Flag of Truce, a white linen dish towel that effectively ended the Civil War when it was raised in surrender in 1865. In the series as a whole, Clark plays with the idea of this cloth and what it embodies (e.g., the fall, in one form, of White supremacy) and the multitude of ways it can be manifested, re-created (as in Reconstruction Exercise, slide 7 of the Key Image Resource), and monumentalized. By calling into question why we are not as familiar with the Confederate’s surrender flag as we are with the battle flag, Clark creates an environment in which the latter and all that it represents can be confronted and deconstructed, as in the series Unraveling (slide 11 of the Key Image Resource) and Unraveled.
COLLABORATION

- Many of Clark’s works are interactive and rely on community collaboration and participation. *Finding Freedom* (slide 9 of the Key Image Resource) is one of these works, in both the sense of its creation and its activation. Clark collaborated with students, researchers, friends, and a group of incarcerated men to create constellation-like patterns on cyanotype fabric squares with seeds and to then sew them together to create a giant, quilted canopy. When installed, it turns the gallery ceiling into a mappable fabric sky that visitors are invited to activate by using black-light flashlights to search for the Big Dipper—thus connecting with the history of the Underground Railroad, the history of American slavery, and the Black American tradition of quilting. This work, in addition to works like *The Beaded Prayers Project* (slide 10 of the Key Image Resource), exemplifies how Clark uses her work to invite members of various communities to share space together and exchange constructive dialogue.

ARTIST HIGHLIGHT
Born in Washington, DC, 1967
BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, MFA from Cranbrook Academy of Art
Artist and professor of art and art history at Amherst College

VOCABULARY HIGHLIGHT
*Medium and Materials:* fiber arts, textiles, weaving, loom, braiding, hair
*Key Words and Ideas:* African diaspora, DNA, Civil War, Flag of Truce, confederate flag, Underground Railroad

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
Encourage students to look and discuss the following:

[PRE-VISIT]
- What kind of importance does hair and hairstyle hold in your life? What can it represent?
- What is a monument? Who gets to choose what is monumentalized? What monuments are you familiar with, and what do they symbolize?
- In 1950, Gwendolyn Brooks was the first African American to receive a Pulitzer Prize. The title of Sonya Clark’s exhibition *We Are Each Other* is inspired by Brooks’s poem “Paul Robeson,” shown in part below:

  Warning, in music-words
devout and large,
that we are each other’s
harvest:
we are each other’s
business:
we are each other’s
magnitude and bond.

What is this poem about? Why do you think Clark and her artistic practice might resonate with it?

[DURING VISIT]
- Read the following quote from Sonya Clark: “*The more familiar the material is, the more that people potentially have a relationship to it, and therefore we can have discourse. The artwork can be in conversation with the viewer.*” What everyday objects do you see in this exhibition, and how have they been altered to represent something larger? Think of an everyday object that you could use to represent a bigger topic; if you have a pencil and paper, draw it!
- Clark visited Atlanta in 2013 to attend the Bronner Bros International Beauty Show, the world’s largest African American beauty industry event, as research for some of her hair-based artworks. Considering
the history of the city of Atlanta and of the American South as a whole, how does the location of this exhibition interact with or add an additional layer to the body of work itself?

- The confederate battle flag was historically and is still used as a symbol of White supremacist propaganda. Sonya Clark is interested in restoring historical imbalances and highlighting injustices through her artistic practice. With her Monumental Cloth series, she asks us to consider, what if the Flag of Truce was used as a symbolic monument of the South instead of the confederate battle flag? How would this shift our collective remembrance and framing of the Civil War? What do you think?

[POST-VISIT]

- Respond to the following quote from Sonya Clark: “Hair is power; it is a composite of all the ancestors who have gone before you. It is a fiber that you grow . . . [and] can tell a story . . . It indicates something about how we take care of both our culture and our souls.” How does Clark show this in the exhibition of her work? What does this quote make you think about regarding your own experiences?

- **Art activity:** To create Finding Freedom, Clark worked with community members to think about freedom quilts while re-creating constellations on cyanotype fabric squares with seeds. Using cyanotype paper as an economical alternative, try replicating this process! How does connecting to Clark’s artistic practice impact your understanding of the original work?

**GEORGIA STANDARDS:**

**Social Studies**
SSSocC1 Explain the development and importance of culture.
SSSocC2 Evaluate how cultures evolve over time.
SSSocC3 Analyze social structure and interaction within society.
SSSocSC4 Analyze the function of social institutions as agents of social control across differing societies and times.
SSSocC1 Analyze forms of social inequality.
SSUSH1 Compare and contrast the development of English settlement and colonization during the 17th Century.
SSUSH2 Describe the early English colonial society and investigate the development of its governance.
SSUSH7 Investigate political, economic, and social developments during the Age of Jackson.
SSUSH8 Explore the relationship between slavery, growing north-south divisions, and westward expansion that led to the outbreak of the Civil War.
SSUSH9 Evaluate key events, issues, and individuals related to the Civil War.
SSUSH10 Identify legal, political, and social dimensions of Reconstruction.
SSWH10 Analyze the causes and effects of exploration and expansion into the Americas, Africa, and Asia.

**Visual Arts**
VAHSFI.CN.1 Develop personal artistic voice through connecting uses of art within a variety of cultural, historical, and contemporary contexts.
VAHSFI.CN.3 Utilize a variety of resources to understand how artistic learning extends beyond the walls of the classroom.