Visual Vocabulary

Puryear has returned to similar forms, shapes, and ideas throughout his career. As you explore the exhibition, look for the repeating forms found in this guide.

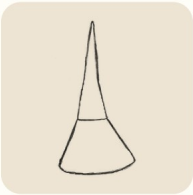
What do you believe they represent? When do the shapes connect with each other? When do they contradict each other?



01 Spiral

Puryear is inspired by spirals and uses the shape in many of his works. However, in some works, the form changes slightly. The artist has said, “I feel like my path is like a spiral in that you’re coming back at a different time to a familiar place.” Drawing on his use of the word “spiral,” we can also see literal spirals represented throughout many of his works. Where do you see a spiraling shape curling back on itself? Where do you see it changing?

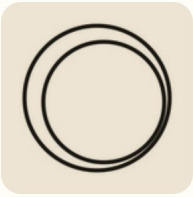
Find it in: *Untitled* (ca. 2003) · *This Mortal Coil* drawing · *Big Phrygian*



02 Cone

One of Puryear’s earliest forms is the cone. To make *Bound Cone*, he split a wooden cone and bound it back together with rope. He returns to the cone again and again, molding it from rawhide in *Rawhide Cone* and stacking it slightly off-balance in *Noblesse O*. Compare the two sculptures. What adjectives would you use to describe how they are different?

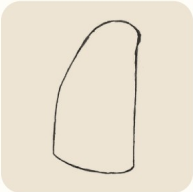
Find it in: *Bound Cone* · *Rawhide Cone* · *Noblesse O.*



03 Ring and Arc

From 1979 to 1985, Puryear made wall-hanging rings by bending tree limbs. From across the room, they look like lines painted on the wall. Up close, they twist like giant amulets or trophies. Look for the same types of curves in other works of art, like the 1966 print *Gate*.

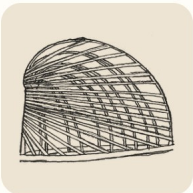
Find it in: *Nexus* · *Untitled* (1982) · *Gate* · *Night and Day* · *Bodark Arc* drawing



04 Domed Shapes

Puryear uses domed forms in several works. What does the shape remind you of? These forms are inspired by many different things, including runestones from the Viking era that the artist saw while studying in Sweden. *Rune Stone* (1966) shows a rounded, heavy-looking shape that Puryear often returns to in his work. According to the artist, *Self* offers the idea of “the self as a secret entity, a secret hidden place.”

Find it in: *Rune Stone* · *Self* · *Big Phrygian* · *Looking Askance*



05 Woven Structures

Puryear learned traditional basket-weaving techniques and has used them throughout his career. In *Bower*, loosely woven strips outline an open volume, inspired partly by a Renaissance drawing of a chalice. *Aso Oke*—based on the fila gobi, a ceremonial cap worn by Yoruba men in Nigeria—and the chain-link skin of *Big Bling* also let you see inside. How would you compare these “open” structures to “closed” sculptures where you can’t see the inside, like *Alien Huddle*?

Find it in: *Bower* · *Aso Oke* · Maquette for *Big Bling* · *Happy Jack*

Visual Vocabulary



06 Shelter

After a 1977 fire destroyed most of his work, Puryear turned to themes of migration and shelter. His shelters vary, from the birdhouse-like form atop *Sanctuary* to *Lookout*, a twenty-foot brick dome made using a technique called Nubian vaulting and inspired by other masonry traditions, including roofing practices in Mali.

Find it in: *Sanctuary* · Maquette for *Lookout* · *Lookout* film · *Night Flight / Sleeping Mews*



07 Wheel and Cart

Wheels, pushcarts, and wagons carry Puryear's themes of mobility and migration. They also recall histories of colonial commerce, the transatlantic slave trade, and the westward expansion of the United States by colonialists. In *C.F.A.O.*, a found wheelbarrow from France carries a scaffold holding a ngil mask, a ritual object for the Fang people of Gabon in Central Africa.

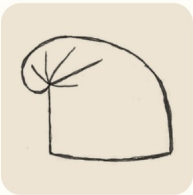
Find it in: *Sanctuary* · *Black Cart* · *C.F.A.O.* · *The Load*



08 Falcon

Puryear first saw the gyrfalcon as a child in John James Audubon's book *Birds of America*. The species' feathers can be white or black depending on habitat. "At a very young age I was fascinated to discover what seemed like a parallel in the natural world to racial differences in the human species," Puryear says. Later in life, he became a trained falconer. Look for watchful falcons throughout the exhibition. How many can you find?

Find it in: *On the Tundra* · *On the Tundra (Winter)* · *Night Flight / Sleeping Mews*



09 Phrygian Cap

The Phrygian cap is Puryear's representation of the Roman pileus, an ancient cap worn by people freed from slavery. It became a symbol of freedom during the American and French Revolutions. Puryear returns to the shape, with its forward-curling tip, to emphasize its historical connection with freedom and emancipation.

Find it in: *Big Phrygian* · *Phrygian (Cap in the Air)*



10 Shackle

A restraint used in slavery, the shackle is the counterweight to the Phrygian cap's freedom. A cast-iron stake and shackle pierce the marble of *A Column for Sally Hemings*, named for an enslaved woman who was the mother of at least six children by Thomas Jefferson. A gilded shackle crowns *Big Bling*.

Find it in: *A Column for Sally Hemings* · Maquette for *Big Bling*

11 Your Turn

Think of a shape or form that has meaning to you. What does it represent? Sketch it here and give it a name. Like Puryear's forms, what ideas or stories does it carry?

Name: _____