

Teacher Guide

Nari Ward: We the People

August 16–November 30, 2019



Glory, 2004. Installation view: *Nari Ward: We the People*, New Museum, New York, 2019. Courtesy the artist; Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, and Seoul; and Galleria Continua, San Gimignano, Beijing, Les Moulins, and Havana.

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Exhibition Overview

- The artist Nari Ward was born in St. Andrew, Jamaica and moved to New York, New York as a child.
- Ward collects humble and discarded materials from his neighborhood, Harlem, and repurposes them in surprising ways.
- He is inspired by art history and folk traditions.
- He creates work that addresses topics such as historical memory, political and economic disenfranchisement, racism, and democracy.
- *We the People* (2011) is both the name of the exhibition and the title of an artwork. This familiar phrase is taken from the Preamble to the Constitution of the United States. Ward spells this phrase out in Old English lettering outlined with thousands of multi-colored shoelaces.
- Ward’s work often refers to the migratory and diasporic experiences so many United States citizens share. One work in the exhibition, *Naturalization Drawing Table* (2004) is a participatory experience that offers museum visitors the opportunity to engage with the bureaucratic environment that mirrors the potentially intimidating process of applying for citizenship.
- A large installation included in the exhibition is *Amazing Grace* (1993)—first created in a deserted Harlem firehouse that is now the artist’s studio. The work includes approximately 280 abandoned strollers, encompassed by a pathway made of flattened fire hoses. A recording of the song “Amazing Grace” accompanies the work and fills the space.



Spellbound, 2015. Installation view: *Nari Ward: We the People*, New Museum, New York, 2019. Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin; Purchase through the generosity of an anonymous donor.

- Ward's *Breathing Panels* series (2015–ongoing) are punctured by Kongo cosmograms—African prayer symbols composed of a diamond bisected by a cross—into large sheets of copper. The artist first encountered this pattern in holes cut into the floorboards of the First African Baptist Church in Savannah, Georgia, an eighteenth century church founded by formerly enslaved people, which served as a stop on the Underground Railroad. The holes allowed people fleeing to the North to breathe as they hid under the church's floor; they also serve as a reminder of African cultural practices that the transatlantic slave trade sought to erase.
- In Ward's work *Iron Heavens* (1995) he uses both cotton and sugar as materials, which both have the weighty association of their historical ties to the brutality of chattel slavery.

Key Questions

- How do objects tell stories?
- What everyday objects do you associate with a memory, historic event, or person? What happens when you see large quantities of this object in one place?
- How does where an artist is from impact their artwork?
- How do you feel looking at and being around discarded objects you might find on the street? How do those objects change once they come into the museum?
- How does the musical element of an installation change the experience of viewing the artwork? How does it make you feel?

Curriculum Connections

History | Nari Ward makes many associations to historical events and objects through his work. His *Breathing Panels* (2015–ongoing) reference the Underground Railroad and the materials in *Iron Heavens* (1995) reference chattel slavery. How do you feel looking at these artworks? What other artists use history as inspiration and material in their artwork? Does this art make you think about history and historical figures in a new way? Is there a work of art you would create to represent a time period that you find interesting?

Political Science | Nari Ward created a work called *We the People* (2011) which depicts the first three words of the Constitution. Why do you think he used shoelaces in this artwork? Who is the “we” referred to in the piece? Read through the Constitution. Can you create a work of art from a word or phrase? What resonates with you? What do you not understand? Are there parts of the Constitution that you disagree with or would rewrite?

Language Arts | The participatory work *Naturalization Drawing Table* (2004) offers visitors a way to imagine the bureaucratic environment involved in the process to apply for citizenship. Do you have someone in your family who has come from a different country? Do you know someone who has moved here from another place? Can you write a short story imagining what it is like to be in a place where everything is new?