The History of All: Whitfield Lovell’s *Kin XXXII* and Maya Angelou’s “Still I Rise”

**Overview**

Students will analyze and discuss Whitfield Lovell’s work *Kin XXXII (Run Like the Wind)* in tandem with a poem by another contemporary African American artist, Maya Angelou. They will then use their ideas to write imaginary journal entries for the woman in Lovell’s work.

**Age Group**

Secondary (Grades 9-12, adaptable to 6-8)

**Length of Lesson**

Two 45-minute lessons

**Rationale**

By discussing Lovell’s piece and Angelou’s poem together, students will learn to draw connections between disciplines and modes of creative expression, as required by the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. Detailed analysis and imaginative writing will help them understand, from a human as well as intellectual point of view, a crucial but neglected aspect of American history.

**Objectives**

*Students will be able to:*

- Discuss and offer interpretations of the meaning(s) and purpose of Lovell’s *Kin XXXII (Run Like the Wind)*
- Discuss style and themes in Maya Angelou’s poem and connect those themes to Lovell’s work
- Write a 1-2 page creative piece based on Lovell’s work and their own knowledge of pre-Civil Rights America
Massachusetts Arts Curriculum Framework Connection

Visual Arts:
- **Standard 6: Purposes and Meanings in the Arts**
  6.5 (grades 9-12): “Interpret the meanings of artistic works based on evidence from artists’ biographies, autobiographies, or videotaped or written interviews.”

English Language Arts:
- **Standard 8: Understanding a Text**
  8.29 (grades 9-12): “Identify and analyze patterns of imagery or symbolism.”
  8.30 (grades 9-12): “Identify and interpret themes and give supporting evidence from a text.”
  
  *Note: Also connects to Standards 11 (Theme), 14 (Poetry), and 15 (Style and Language)*

- **Standard 19: Writing**
  19.9 (grades 7-12): “Write stories or scripts with well-developed characters, setting, dialogue, clear conflict and resolution, and sufficient descriptive detail.”

Materials
- Image of *Kin XXXII (Run Like the Wind)* and a way to display it to the class (or 1 color copy for every 4 students)
- Copies of *Still I Rise* by Maya Angelou, one for each student
- Lined paper for writing
- Writing utensils

Lesson

**Day 1: Discussion and brainstorming**

1. **Warm-up:** Ask students what they know of their heritage. Do they/their family keep any records of their ancestors? Any photos, heirlooms, family recipes? Then discuss what students already know about the conditions for African-Americans between the Civil War and the Civil Rights movement, particularly in the south. What rights did they have or lack? What problems did they face in getting work, education, in day-to-day life? Make a list of issues on the board.

2. Show Whitfield Lovell’s *Kin XXXII (Run Like the Wind)*. Discuss the picture first without introducing the title or artist. Try questions like: What do you notice about this work of art? How do you read this woman’s expression? What do you think the circular object symbolizes? What are some ways that the circle and face could be connected?

3. Tell students the title and provide information about Lovell’s work and sources, using the *About the Art* sheet. If you wish, show the YouTube video of Lovell. How does the title connect to the picture? What might it mean and how does it change the way they
think about the picture? How might their attitude change, if this was a portrait of a known woman rather than an anonymous photograph? Tie the picture into the discussion about African-Americans in the pre-Civil Rights era. How does Kin XXXII reflect the issues on the board?

4. Read and discuss Angelou’s poem. Consider tone and imagery as well as themes like identity, self-esteem, and attitudes towards history and heritage. Who might the speaker be? Like Lovell’s work, the subject is anonymous yet claiming (or being helped to claim) her presence in history. Then tie the poem into Lovell’s concerns and Kin XXXII. Why are Lovell and Angelou, both contemporary artists, interested in the past in this way? What kind of past is it (personal, communal, forgotten/suppressed)? What do they hope to accomplish?

5. Divide the class into small groups and have each group brainstorm about the woman in Kin XXXII. Who was she? What was her life like? Use Angelou’s poem as inspiration. Have them come up with a list of adjectives describing her personality and a list of details about her life.

Day 2: Imaginative writing

1. Have each student write a 1-2 page imaginary journal entry or memoir introduction by this woman, where she describes the day when this picture was taken. It should introduce us to her character—her personality, background, etc.—and include as many details as possible about the event. Encourage them to think carefully about what life might have been like in the early 20th century: What things did people have or not have? Also encourage them to use multiple senses in their descriptions like smell, touch, and sound as well as sight.

2. Call on students to share parts of their work aloud and have them explain their choices of details.

3. Discuss the historical accuracy of their entries. For example, if some students mentioned cars, modern cameras, or women wearing jeans, explain about living conditions or dress in the early 20th century.

4. As a possible homework assignment, have students revise their work based on the class discussion and their own research. This revision could also take place after the teacher has read and commented on the pieces, noting what needs fact-checking.

1 Note: Angelou’s poem contains a sexual reference. If this seems inappropriate, try using “Women” or “Outcast” by Alice Walker instead.
About the Art

*Kin XXXII (Run Like the Wind)* by Whitfield Lovell. 2008. Conté crayon on paper with attached barbed wire. Ca. 2.5 ft. x 2 ft. x 3.75 in. Purchased with the Dorothy C. Miller, class of 1925, Fund, SC 2008:58. Smith College Museum of Art.

The artist: Whitfield Lovell

Whitfield Lovell is an African-American artist born in the Bronx in 1959. He developed an interest early on in photography and family history, and soon afterwards he started collecting anonymous portraits of African Americans found in flea markets and antique shops and using them as portrait subjects. He often combines vintage paraphernalia, such as pitchers, boxing gloves, and books, with these portraits. By depicting anonymous people, Lovell creates an open-ended narrative for their lives and calls attention to individuals who were never acknowledged and have been forgotten—but individuals whose existence nonetheless shaped the history of this country as well as Lovell’s own heritage.

Lovell works primarily with images of African Americans from the early 20th century in order to shed light on a neglected time in African-American culture, between the Civil War and the Civil Rights movement. He highlights the ordinary lives of African Americans. As for the objects he pairs with the drawings, Lovell is compelled by “the fact that they have been held and used in daily rituals by people who may or may not be here anymore but who somehow imbued those objects with their essence.” Rather than prescribing meaning to his pairings, he prefers to allow the viewer to draw his or her own conclusions about the images he creates.

The work: *Kin XXXII (Run Like the Wind)*

Lovell is best known for his installations and tableaux, drawings on weathered wooden planks or cream paper. *Kin XXXII (Run Like the Wind)* from 2008 is part of Lovell’s *Kin Series* of drawings on paper. Only the heads of his subjects appear in the series and are usually paired with one or two objects that Lovell has collected. He thus begins to suggest a story behind the image, but leaves it to the viewer to invent the rest. Lovell chooses his subjects from mug shots, identification photographs, and photo-booth photographs—but he removes any surroundings that could reveal the specific setting. He compels the viewer to focus on the expressions of the figures and ponder the possible connections between the object and person. For this series, Lovell prefers using the “less idealized” identification photographs for their stark lighting and directness.

The title of *Kin XXXII* juxtaposes the word “kin,” with its connotation of family and close human bonds, with the anonymity of the numerals XXXII. The viewer is at once distanced from the subject and asked to step closer, to imagine this forgotten woman as a relation and fellow human being worthy of love, respect and remembrance. The barbed wire and the lack of information invite us to reach out and create a story for her, making her into a full, complex person. In addition, the sub-title *Run Like the Wind* evokes flight, while the barbed wire...
suggests imprisonment and punishment (amongst many other possibilities). In a single image, Lovell recalls the long and painful history of African Americans during a time in which they were denied basic human rights—and by extension, denied their place as kin and fellow members of humanity.

**The text: Maya Angelou and “Still I Rise”**

Maya Angelou is a contemporary African American poet, writer and autobiographer especially famous for the first part of her autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.* In her own words, she writes “for the Black voice and any ear which can hear it.” Although she deals with trauma and the oppression of African Americans, her work often promotes the positive, life-affirming values, particularly courage, of the African-American community in which she grew up during the pre-Civil Rights era.

Born in 1928, Angelou spent a difficult childhood shuttling between St. Louis, Missouri, and Stamps, Arkansas, where her paternal grandmother lived. The racism that Angelou experienced in Arkansas during the pre-Civil Rights era shaped her views and identity for the rest of her life. That trauma was further compounded when she was raped at age eight by her mother’s boyfriend. The subsequent trial and then murder of her rapist by her uncles convinced Angelou that her words could kill and she stopped speaking for five years. Healing came gradually through the strength and support of two strong black women: her grandmother, who managed to keep her general store in Stamps solvent despite racism and sexism, and Mrs. Flowers, the “aristocrat” of black Stamps who introduced Angelou to the literary classics.

Angelou documents these experiences in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), which was followed by five other autobiographies of her later life, works for stage and screen, and numerous poems. “Still I Rise” was written in 1978, after Angelou had achieved national fame. In it, Angelou speaks to her favorite themes: courage and defiance in the face of oppression and disapproval, and gaining power and hope from within. The speaker uses metaphors of material wealth (oil wells, gold mines, diamonds) to describe her hidden source of confidence, but metaphors of nature (dust, tides, air) to describe her hope and identity as a “black ocean.” Hope is like the air you breathe; it cannot be suppressed. Equally, this black woman cannot be suppressed forever. An anonymous speaker directly addresses an anonymous audience; Angelou thus implies universality, in which the speaker can represent all black women and the audience can represent the silent, judging majority against which the speaker rebels.

This work of art may not be currently on display at the Museum.
Still I Rise by Maya Angelou (1978)

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries.

Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own back yard.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear.