

EDUCATOR GUIDE

Story Theme: Looking East
Subject: Thai Bui
Discipline: Visual Art

SECTION I - OVERVIEW	2
EPISODE THEME	
SUBJECT	
CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS	
OBJECTIVE	
STORY SYNOPSIS	
INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES	
INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES	
EQUIPMENT NEEDED	
MATERIALS NEEDED	
INTELLIGENCES ADDRESSED	
SECTION II – CONTENT/CONTEXT	3
CONTENT OVERVIEW	
THE BIG PICTURE	
THE BIG PICTURE	
SECTION III – RESOURCES	5
TEXTS & ARTICLES	
RESOURCES – WEB SITES	
VIDEO RESOURCES	
BAY AREA FIELD TRIPS	
SECTION IV – VOCABULARY	7
SECTION IV – ENGAGING WITH SPARK	8



Artist Thai Bui with a piece from his series
"Don't Pressure Me" from 2004.
Still image from SPARK story, 2005.

SECTION I - OVERVIEW

EPISODE THEME

Looking East

SUBJECT

Thai Bui

GRADE RANGES

K-12 & Post-secondary

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Visual Arts & Language Arts

OBJECTIVE

To introduce students to the work of Vietnamese sculptor Thai Bui and the issues of cultural identity and displacement the artist explores and how these manifest in a unique aesthetic

STORY SYNOPSIS

Vietnamese born sculptor Thai Bui makes haunting works of art that speak to a sense of displacement and longing that has characterized the artist's own turbulent life. Bui's extraordinary objects combine references to his experiences of both the United States and Viet Nam, simultaneously communicating a witty humor and penetrating sense loss. In "Looking East," SPARK visits with Bui as he installs a major public commission for the city of Palo Alto in Northern California.

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Group oral discussion, review and analysis, including peer review and aesthetic valuing
Teacher-guided instruction, including demonstration and guidance
Hands-on individual projects in which students work independently
Hands-on group projects in which students assist and support one another
Critical reflection on personal expressions and how they are seen and received by others

INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES

To introduce students to the sculpture of Thai Bui
To provide context for the understanding of personal ideas and emotions in visual artwork
To inspire students to consider the broader context of cultural identity and the exploration of this within art

EQUIPMENT NEEDED

SPARK story about Thai Bui on DVD or VHS and related equipment
Computer with Internet access, navigation software, speakers and a sounds card, printer
Cassette player, CD player, or computer audio program

MATERIALS NEEDED

Access to libraries with up-to-date collections of periodicals, books, and research papers
Pencils, pens, and paper

INTELLIGENCES ADDRESSED

Bodily-Kinesthetic - control of one's own body, control in handling objects
Interpersonal - awareness of others' feelings, emotions, goals, motivations
Intrapersonal - awareness of one's own feelings, emotions, goals, motivations
Spatial - ability to manipulate and create mental images in order to solve problems
Logical-Mathematical - ability to detect patterns, reason deductively, think logically



See more information on [Multiple Intelligences](http://www.kqed.org/spark/education) at www.kqed.org/spark/education.

SECTION II – CONTENT/CONTEXT

CONTENT OVERVIEW

Vietnamese born sculptor Thai Bui makes haunting works of art that speak to a sense of displacement and longing that has characterized the artist's own turbulent life. Bui's extraordinary objects combine references to his experiences of both the United States and Viet Nam, simultaneously communicating a witty humor and penetrating sense loss. In "Looking East," SPARK visits with Bui as he installs a major public commission for the city of Palo Alto in Northern California.

Growing up in Hanoi in the middle the war in Viet Nam, Bui's childhood was marked by uncertainty and terror. In 1981, at the age of 21, Bui immigrated to the United States, studying art at the San Francisco Art Institute and later completing an MFA at Stanford University. The transition was difficult for the artist, who has had to deal with language and cultural barriers. In addition, as a Northerner Bui often feels like an outsider within the Vietnamese community in the Bay Area, a community largely composed of Southern Vietnamese.

Much of Bui's work deals these experiences, making reference to both childhood games as well as feelings of displacement. Spark visits the artist in his studio as he makes a series of shallow clay bowls mimicking those commonly used in Vietnamese game. While they are still wet, Bui slams the bowls onto the floor, blowing a hole in the base of pot and making a loud sound. The activity references a simple childhood game, wherein the participant that makes the loudest sound wins. The remnants are then gathered and incorporated into an installation.

In several other works, Bui creates odd juxtapositions that suggest his own experience of being a cultural and linguistic outsider in the United States, mixing diverse materials, forms, and cultural references. In *Twins*, Bui pairs wood and concrete two materials--one natural, one manmade--in a diptych. Though the

title suggests that the two objects are identical, in fact they are opposites of one another, each alternating the others arrangement of wood and concrete blocks. For Bui, these combinations connect his own experience with the opposing but harmonious cosmological forces of yin and yang that help to form the basis of Zen philosophy.



Thai Bui,
Twins, c. 1995.
Mixed media.

Thai Bui received a BFA from the San Francisco Art Institute in 1988 and an MFA from Stanford University in 1992. He has taught sculpture at Stanford and the University of California, Santa Cruz. Bui is the recipient of Skowhegan Scholarship, a SOBEL scholarship, a Stanford University scholarship, and the Harold E. Weiner Memorial Prize. His work has been shown in locations across California and in galleries in the city of New York.



Thai Bui's studio. Still image from SPARK story, 2005.

THE BIG PICTURE

Thai Bui's work is visually simple and intellectually complex. His forms and intentions reflect the artist's upbringing in Viet Nam, drawing on Eastern cultural practices and philosophies. Formally Bui's works are highly eclectic and unique, share characteristics in common with work made by artists of the Bay Area Funk and Conceptual art movements of the 1960s and 70s as well as early Minimalism.

Bay Area Funk art is characterized by irreverent, sometimes surreal juxtapositions of everyday objects that can be alternately playful and disturbing. Artists of this period cultivated a whimsical, handmade quality in their productions, often assembling unlikely objects in single works, such as ceramicist Richard Shaw.¹ Though funk artists habitually use readymade objects in their works, Shaw's pieces are elaborate works of trompe l'oeil,² hand-fashioned ceramic pieces that closely mimic their real, often mass-produced counterparts. Like Bui, Shaw's pieces combine objects and references not typically found together to create provocative, often darkly humorous assemblages.



Richard Shaw with an unfinished ceramic assemblage sculpture, 2005. Still image from SPARK story, 2005.

Many Bay Area Conceptual artists emerged from a similar aesthetic, drawing on everyday, readymade objects to create playful, often absurdist works of art, such as David Ireland.³ In his 1991 assemblage Good Hope Ireland employs such unlikely materials as toilet paper rolls, used paper towels, and toenails to create strange and penetrating works of art. Like Thai Bui, West Coast conceptual artists were deeply

¹ See the SPARK story on Richard Shaw in Episode #306 - "Evaluating the Everyday" at <http://www.kqed.org/spark/artists-orgs/>.

² French term literally meaning "trick the eye," tromp l'oeil is also called Illusionism and Photo Realism and is a style of painting in which objects are given the appearance of being three-dimensional.

³ See the SPARK story on Ireland in Episode 206 - "The Grey Eminences" at <http://www.kqed.org/spark/artists-orgs/>.

influenced by Eastern philosophies including Zen Buddhism, which provided a theoretical framework for their productions.



David Ireland, Good Hope, 1991.

Bui's use of natural materials and simplified forms also prompts association to the work of Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988), a sculptor expressly interested in the formation of a unique aesthetic borne out of the union of Eastern and Western thought. Born in the US of Japanese parents, Noguchi visited Japan a number of times and was deeply impacted by its Zen gardens, Noh theatre, and ancient sculptures, the ideas of which he sought to integrate into his work. After a period of figurative sculpture, Noguchi's explored sleek, refined forms and shapes combining rough and smooth textures in surprising sizes and relationships.



Isamu Noguchi, Small Practices, 1979. Aji granite.

In Small Practices from 1979, Noguchi has created two massive pod shapes with rough, uniform surfaces. The shapes rest comfortably, but as with Bui's work, the large size and heaviness of the stone contradict the deft simplicity of the forms, appearing to be both precarious and calming simultaneously. This duality is provocative and slightly unsettling, calling attention to all aspects of the forms.

SECTION III – RESOURCES

TEXTS & ARTICLES

Connor, Bruce. 2000BC: The Bruce Connor Story Part II. Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2000.

Foley, Suzanne. Space/Time/Sound: Conceptual Art in the San Francisco Bay Area. San Francisco: SFMOMA, 1980.

Godfrey, Tony. Conceptual Art. London: Phaidon Press, 1998.

Hamill, Pete. Tools as Art: The Hechinger Collection. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995.

Paoletti, John T. From Minimal to Conceptual Art: Works from the Dorothy and Herbert Vogel Collection. Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1994.

Shaw, Richard. Richard Shaw: Illusions in Clay 1971-1985. Corpus Christi, TX: Museum of South Texas, 1985.

Suzuki, D. T. An Introduction to Zen Buddhism. New York: Grove Press, 1991.

Tsujimoto, Karen. The Way Things Are: The Art of David Ireland. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

RESOURCES – WEB SITES

Art and Culture - An overview and listing of Conceptual artists -
<http://www.artandculture.com/arts/movement?movementId=1022>

Art In Context - A list of conceptual artists with links to images of their works -
www.artincontext.com/listings/artist/genre/conceptual.htm

Asian Art Museum (The) – One of the world’s premier collections of art from Asia in San Francisco, which also exhibits contemporary art -
<http://www.asianart.org>

Asian Art Now – Web site dedicated to art from Asia, including information on Thai Bui -
<http://www.asianartnow.com>

Asia Pacific Research On-Line - A large virtual library of Zen Buddhism with many resources -
<http://www.ciolek.com/WWWVL-Zen.html>

Humanity Through Art -
http://www.humanitythroughart.com/view_bio.php?artist=16

Green Rice Gallery – Professional gallery in San Jose that features work by Vietnamese artists, including Thai Bui -
<http://www.greenricegallery.com/ThaiBui.html>

VIDEO RESOURCES

Stream stories about artist on SPARK at
<http://www.kqed.org/spark/artists-orgs>.

Conceptual Artists
David Ireland, Richard Shaw, and Paul Kos
Visual Artists Who Immigrated from Asia
Hung Liu, Lu Huan, and Li Huayi

BAY AREA FIELD TRIPS

Edward-Dean Museum of Decorative Arts
Cherry Valley, CA
909/845.2626
<http://www.artscenecal.com/EdwardDeanMsm.html>

Institute of East Asian Studies
University of California at Berkeley, Berkeley, CA
510/642.2809

<http://ieas.berkeley.edu>

Richard L. Nelson Gallery & Fine Arts Collection
Room 124 of the Art Building
University of California, Davis
Davis, CA
530/752.8500

<http://nelsongallery.ucdavis.edu>

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco
200 Larkin Street
San Francisco, CA 94102
415/379.8800

<http://www.asianart.org>

Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco
San Francisco, CA
415/986.1822

<http://www.c-c-c.org>

Asian American Curriculum Project
San Mateo, CA
800/874.2242

<http://departments.weber.edu/mbe/clearinghouse/A/AsianAmerCurrProj.htm>

Center for East Asian Studies at Stanford University
Stanford, CA
650/723.3362

<http://www.stanford.edu/dept/CEAS>

Green Rice Gallery
300 S. 1st Street, Suite 310
San Jose, CA 95113
408/691.6489

admin@greenricegallery.com

<http://www.greenricegallery.com>

Pacific Bridge Contemporary Southeast Asian Art
452 Rich Street
Oakland CA 94609
510/654.3212

<http://www.asianartnow.com>

San Francisco Zen Center
300 Page Street
San Francisco, CA 94102
415/863.3136

<http://www.sfzc.com>

SECTION IV – VOCABULARY

VOCABULARY & CONCEPTS IN THE SPARK STORY

Viet Nam

A country located between China and Laos, Thailand and Cambodia on the Gulf of Tonkin with history extending back to the 3rd century BC (Bronze Age). Ruled by China for over 1,000 years until 938 AD, Viet Nam has been occupied by many other countries. From 1858 to 1884, Viet Nam was occupied by France and made part of French Indochina in 1887. Viet Nam declared independence from France after World War II and then Japan invaded. By the end of the war, the pro-independence Communist north of the country which had led the resistance movement against the Japanese, declared the country's independence from Japan, beginning the French Indochina War which lasted until France conceded in 1954. The peace agreement, called the Geneva Accords divided the country into North and South Viet Nam.

In the 1960s, the US became the primary ally of the anti-Communist government of South Viet Nam. Tensions increased between the Communist North and South until war broke out in 1964. From 1964-1972, hundreds of thousands of troops became involved in the conflict with the US sending in the greatest number. Under a cease-fire agreement in 1973 the US withdrew, and in 1975 the South Viet Nam capital Saigon fell to the North. With the fall of Communism and the collapse of the Cold War in 1991, many countries re-established relations with Viet Nam, including the US who formally reinitiated relations in 1995. In the 2000s, conversations about economic incentives for Viet Nam in the world economy have fueled further US-Viet Nam relations.

Ha Noi (Hanoi)

The capital city of North Viet Nam, the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam. Given by King Minh Mang in 1831, meaning “within the river” (Ha means river and Noi means within), the city is on the Red River in the southwestern part of the North and has a population of 3.5 million people.

Displace

To move out of position; to vacate or leave a usual or proper place

Whimsy

The quality of state of being fanciful or light

Yin Yang

A cornerstone of Taoist thought, yin yang is a concept explaining the metaphysical workings of the universe. Also called the Five Agents school of thought, the concept extends that the universe is run by a single principle, the Tao, or Great Ultimate. This principle consists of two principles that oppose one another in action – yin and yang. All opposites in the universe can be reduced to yin or yang. All change in the universe can be explained by the workings of yin and yang and the progress of the five material agents – wood, fire, earth, metal, and water - as they either create or overtake one another.

Commission

Requested service or work; agreement to produce an artwork for a specific place, time or person(s)

Minimalism

A style of art and music characterized by simple forms and sparse elements that achieved popularity in the 1960s and 70s

Fabricated

Made, constructed or manufactured

Immigrate

To enter a country of which one is not a native for permanent residence

Ambiguity

Doubtful; a state of uncertainty characterized by a lack of sufficient clarity, purpose or structure

SECTION V – ENGAGING WITH SPARK

STANDARDS-BASED ACTIVITIES & DISCUSSION POINTS

Engaging with Conceptual Art

Thai Bui is an artist who makes sculpture that is both conceptual and highly personal. Introduce the ideas underpinning the Conceptual Art movement of the 1960s and 70s, such as the premise that art should be mainly about ideas instead of objects, and that artists should focus on what they think, not on how things look. Conceptual artists usually set aside the traditional processes of art like painting or sculpting, and their work can be challenging because it does not fit the conventional definitions of “art.” Usually Conceptual Art is not exhibited in traditional spaces, such as galleries or museums. It can be an attitude toward making art as opposed to a movement defined by a style, and it can be applied to many artists and approaches.

Play the SPARK story on Thai Bui and ask students to focus on one of the pieces featured in the story. Consider the following to help students get started:

- Describe the piece and identify the different materials and technologies
- Describe your response to the piece
- What deeper levels of meaning are suggested?
- What is the artist saying? How does he say it?
- Does the work belong in an art gallery?
- Does it sustain your interest? Will it have staying power? Why?
- How does the piece reflect the Conceptual Art attitude?

Invite students to discuss their responses to these questions as a group.

Ask students to choose one artist from the 1960s or 70s to research and introduce to the group. It is helpful if slides are available or Web pages can be projected to illustrate the research presentations. Suggest that students choose well known artists or

artists whose work is often exhibited or another artist featured on SPARK such as Paul Kos, Marcel Duchamp, Louise Bourgeois, Ed Ruscha, Eva Hesse, Gerard Richter, etc.

As a basis for the presentations, have students write 500 words about their chosen artist including:

- An overview of the artist’s life
- A summary of main works
- Description of one piece of work
- Brief (art) historical contextualization articulating the primary aesthetic, group, or movement with which the artists is typically associated
- Short personal opinion

Allow time for students to engage with each artist.

RELATED STANDARDS

VISUAL ARTS

Grade 6

2.0 CREATIVE EXPRESSION

2.1 Use various observational drawing skills to depict a variety of subject matter.

Grade 8

Develop Perceptual Skills and Visual Arts Vocabulary

Use artistic terms when describing the intent and content of works of art.

4.0 AESTHETIC VALUING

4.1 Students analyze, assess, and derive meaning from works of art, including their own, according to the elements of art, the principles of design, and aesthetic qualities.

Derive Meaning

4.2 Develop a theory about the artist’s intent in a series of works of art, using reasoned statements to support personal opinions.

4.3 Construct an interpretation of a work of art based on the form and content of the work.

Grades 9-12 Proficient

3.0 HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Diversity of the Visual Arts

3.3 Identify and describe trends in the visual arts and discuss how the issues of time, place, and cultural influence are reflected in selected works of art.

SPARKLERS:

- * Compare Conceptual artists, allowing students to choose their pair, or assigning them. One interesting comparative pair would be Thai Bui and Eva Hesse, two artists working in time different time periods, and using differing materials and cultural referents.

Three Dimensions

Show slides or pictures of a range of different types of sculpture from different time periods, including allegories and historical pieces, figures, religious icons, and portrait busts, as well as examples of modern and contemporary sculpture. Any reasonable art history text will provide a range of images of Greek and Roman statuary, and sculptures from the middle ages through the 1800s. For modern and contemporary artists, consider: Auguste Rodin, Constantin Brancusi, Pablo Picasso, Giacomo Giacometti, Louise Bourgeois, Donald Judd, Isamu Noguchi, Medardo Rossa, Anish Kapoor, Barry La Va, Henry Moore, Moore, Richard Serra, Jeremy Wafer, Danisile Ncube.

Ask students to think about the way they view each work of art. Working in small groups, have students describe at least one piece in detail and then list the factors that influence the way they view and respond to art. Give students sufficient time to fully engage with this activity and then discuss the factors they have identified. Address personal and social influences as well as factors such as knowledge of artistic conventions and form, familiarity with tradition, cultural context, historical period etc. Ensure the discussion focuses on the elements that inform aesthetic response, using the following prompts.

Is it important to be knowledgeable about an art form to appreciate it?

What factors influence the way we view art?

What role do objective standards of beauty and quality play in the creation of art work?

Show a small selection of slides of sculptural pieces from diverse cultures and periods in history. Include pieces from well-known artists from the US, Europe, African and Asia.

What informs the appreciation of a piece of artwork?

*Does culture shape the way art is ascribed meaning?
Are there accepted notions of beauty in art?
Do audiences have expectations? What are they? Why?
Are there other objectives? What are they?
What role does aesthetic pleasure play?
Does Conceptual Art depart from traditional ideas of beauty? How?*

Invite students to think about these issues that are fundamental to aesthetics and notions of pleasure.

RELATED STANDARDS

VISUAL ARTS

Kindergarten

1.0 ARTISTIC PERCEPTION

1.1 Recognize and describe simple patterns found in the environment and works of art.

2.0 CREATIVE EXPRESSION

2.1 Use lines, shapes/forms, and colors to make patterns

Grade 1

5.0 CONNECTIONS, RELATIONS & APPLICATIONS

Career and Career-Related Skills

5.4 Describe objects designed by artists (e.g., furniture, appliances, cars) that are used at home and at school.

Grade 3

3.0 HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS

3.2 Identify artists from his or her own community, county, or state and discuss local or regional art traditions.

SPARKLER:

- * Invite students to think about how personal and cultural identity is expressed in art. Review Thai Bui's works on SPARK and on-line. Discuss his personal and cultural identity. Can an artist express one without the other? Can you tell where an artist is from or what nationality they are by looking at his/her artwork? How?
- * Consider the way in which Thai Bui refers to and incorporates nature and natural forms in his sculptures and in the contexts into which he places them. Watch the SPARK story and discuss 2-3 pieces. How does Bui symbolize or refer to nature? How does Bui use nature as a backdrop? What other artists have used nature in this way? What are the effects? Why does Bui choose to use nature and natural materials?

For more information about the Visual & Performing Arts Standards, visit the SPARK Web site at <http://www.kqed.org/spark/education> or the California Department of Education at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/index.asp>.