

## EDUCATOR GUIDE

Story Theme: West Oakland  
Subject: Bruce Beasley  
Discipline: Visual Art (Sculpture)

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Still image from SPARK episode “West Oakland,” 2006.

## SECTION I - OVERVIEW

### EPISODE THEME

West Oakland

### SUBJECT

Bruce Beasley

### GRADE RANGES

K-12 & Post-secondary

### CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Visual Arts & Language Arts

### OBJECTIVE

- Understand the development of personal works of art and their relationship to broader social themes and ideas, abstract concepts, and the history of art.
- Develop basic observational drawing and/or painting skills.
- Develop visual, written, listening and speaking skills through looking at, creating and talking about visual artworks.
- Develop an expressive visual vocabulary with which to address personal and/or social themes and ideas.
- Develop observational and representational skills by looking at and reproducing images of people, places and things accurately and thoughtfully.

### STORY SYNOPSIS

Since the mid 1960s veteran Bay Area artist Bruce Beasley has remained at the forefront of modern sculpture. Spark visits Beasley at his West Oakland studio to catch a glimpse of one of America's best known sculptors at work.

### INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

- Group oral discussion, review and analysis, including peer review and aesthetic valuing as a group
- 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 work of Bruce Beasley and the history of modern sculpture
- To provide context for the understanding of figurative art
- To inspire students to think critically about art

### EQUIPMENT NEEDED

- TV & VCR with SPARK story about Bruce Beasley
- 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



## SECTION II – CONTENT/CONTEXT

### CONTENT OVERVIEW

Since the mid-1960s, veteran Bay Area artist **Bruce Beasley** has remained at the forefront of modern sculpture. Beasley's large-scale geometric pieces articulate a powerful visual language that has won the artist critical acclaim and sustained a career that so far has spanned more than four decades. **Spark** visits Beasley at his West Oakland studio to catch a glimpse of this sculptor at work.

Beasley's work enjoyed critical success very early on. In 1962, when the artist was only 22 years old, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City acquired one of his sculptures, making him the youngest artist ever to have work in the museum's collection. Not one to rest on his laurels, Beasley has continued to challenge himself, experimenting with new materials and forms.

Whereas his early pieces were executed in cast aluminum, Beasley began experimenting in the late 1960s with molded transparent acrylic. Because he was working with a relatively new material, largely unexplored by artists, Beasley began research on the substance, eventually discovering new techniques for working with the medium. He developed a casting technique that was eventually adopted by NASA to use in its development of the first acrylic undersea submersible.

With each new material, Beasley strives to find forms appropriate to the medium. As he began working with cast bronze, the fluid organic forms characteristic of the acrylic pieces gave way to intersecting geometric volumes. Beasley now designs his sculptures on a computer, planning, rotating and moving sculptural elements until he finds the right composition. Beasley's computer model is then reduced to a pattern with which to make accurate cuts into sheet metal.

Throughout his career, Beasley has been guided by organic forms readily found in nature. His extensive collection of animal skulls has been an unending source of inspiration and instruction, outlining elegant forms, transitions and textures. The bones provide a basis for all of his sculpture, suggesting a set of solutions to formal problems.



Still image of Bruce Beasley with his skull collection from SPARK story, 2006.

Born in Los Angeles, Bruce Beasley attended Dartmouth College before completing his B.A. at the University of California at Berkeley in 1962. His work can be found in museums and public collections internationally, including the Museum of Modern Art (New York City), the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (New York City) and the Djerassi Foundation (Woodside, Calif.) and in the collection of Kleinewefers GmbH (Krefeld, Germany). His sculpture garden is open by special appointment and available to arts and cultural groups for tours. He plans to have the complex turned into a West Oakland outpost of the Oakland Museum of California after his death. It will be a home for his work as well as a resource and workspace for the sculpture community.

## THE BIG PICTURE

Bruce Beasley's work falls firmly within a tradition of modern sculpture pioneered by artists such as Auguste Rodin, Constantin Brancusi, and Umberto Boccioni. Though all of these artists began working in a figurative mode, each strove to reduce figurative sculpture to essential expressive forms. As with Beasley's work, one can often detect an abstract work's origins in figurative representation in the work of these artists.

Auguste Rodin is perhaps the best known sculptor of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Rodin rebelled against the prevailing principles of Beaux-Arts academicism, dominant in France and throughout Europe in the period. Rodin opted for a more expressive use of his medium. Rodin's work remained figurative, but pushed the boundaries of the tradition, as with his *Burghers of Calais*, of 1888. Here Rodin has represented a historical scene of heroism in which five leaders of the French city of Calais offer to sacrifice themselves so that their city would be spared by the conquering English King Edward III. But unlike traditional representations of historical events, Rodin has forsaken naturalism for a more emotive means that communicates the humanism and suffering of the figures.



Auguste Rodin, *The Burghers of Calais*, 1888  
<http://www.answers.com/topic/rodin-burghers-of-calais-jpg>

Another key figure in the development of modern sculpture is Constantin Brancusi, a Romanian

carpenter and stonemason-turned-artist who established himself in Paris at the turn of the century.

Brancusi revolutionized sculpture, tackling traditional subject matter in through the most unorthodox formal means. Though works such as *Bird in Space* (1924) mark a radical departure from earlier modes of sculpture making, retaining only the barest relationship to naturalism, Brancusi insisted that his work was far from abstract, claiming that, "The people who call my work 'abstract' are imbeciles; what they call 'abstract' is in fact the purest realism, the reality of which is not represented by external form but by the idea behind it, the essence of the work" (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brancusi>).



Constantin Brancusi, *Bird in Space*, 1924  
<http://www.msubillings.edu/art/images/Abstraction/Constantin%20Brancusi%20Bird%20in%20Space%201928.jpg>

Like Brancusi, many of the works of Italian sculptor and painter Umberto Boccioni deal attempt to describe the movement of objects through space. Boccioni was associated with the Italian Futurist movement, a group of loosely affiliated radical artists and writers that emerged in the period between the world wars who celebrated speed, violence, and industrialization. Boccioni's seminal *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* of 1913, takes a pseudo-scientific approach to representing movement, imagining the vectors of energy that surround a striding figure.



Umberto Boccioni, *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, 1913.  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Moma\\_boccioni\\_03.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Moma_boccioni_03.jpg)

The influence of these artists dominated American and European sculpture until, in the mid 1960s, a group of artists that came to be known collectively as Minimalists rejected the tenets of modern sculpture. Criticizing the emphasis on internal compositional principles, Minimalist artists began thinking about their sculpture as part of a total architectural situation, pushing sculpture into more expansive areas.

## SECTION III – RESOURCES

### RESOURCES – TEXTS

Elsen, Albert and Peter Frank. *Sculpture by Bruce Beasley*. The Oakland Museum of California, 2005.

Foster, Hal et al. *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Anti-Modernism, Post-Modernism*. Thames & Hudson, 2005.

Frank, Peter, ed. *Sculpture by Bruce Beasley*. Oakland Museum of California, 2005.

Krauss, Rosalind. *Passages in Modern Sculpture*. MIT Press, 1972.

Potts, Alex. *The Sculptural Imagination*. Yale University Press, 2001

Read, Herbert. *Modern Sculpture: A Concise History*. Thames & Hudson, 1985.

Selz, Peter and Manfred Fath. *Bruce Beasley/Sculpture*. Mannheim Museum of Art, 1994.

White, Ian McKibbin, ed. *Bruce Beasley: An Exhibition of Acrylic Sculpture*. M.H. de Young Memorial Museum and the California Palace of the Legion of Honor. San Francisco, California. 1972.

### RESOURCES – WEBSITES

<http://www.brucebeasley.com/>  
Bruce Beasley's personal website.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sculpture#Modernism>  
Page from Wikipedia.com about the development of modern sculpture.

<http://www.musee-rodin.fr/welcome.htm>  
Website of the Musée Rodin in Paris with information on the artist and the collection.

<http://www.brancusi.com/>  
Official Constantin Brancusi site.

[http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist\\_bio\\_22.html](http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist_bio_22.html)

Biography of Brancusi from the Guggenheim Museum.

<http://www.sculpturesite.com/>

Sculpturesite - a good resource for modern sculpture in the Bay Area

<http://www.diacenter.org/bindex.html>

Website for DIA:Beacon, a provocative collection of art housed in Beacon, NY along the Hudson River.

### VIDEO RESOURCES

“Donatello: The First Modern Sculptor”

Docu-biography about the artist, with a rich historical context. Available for purchase on Amazon.com.

### BAY AREA FIELD TRIPS

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art  
151 Third Street at Mission  
San Francisco, CA 94103  
(415) 357 4000  
<http://www.sfmoma.org>  
Closed Wednesdays

DeYoung Museum Sculpture Garden  
Golden Gate Park  
50 Hagiwara Tea Garden Drive  
San Francisco, CA 94118  
Phone: 415.863.3330  
Tuesday through Sunday, 9:30 am to 5:00 pm  
Friday: Open until 8:45 pm  
<http://www.thinker.org/deyoung/index.asp>

Stanford University  
Cantor Center for the Arts  
Rodin Sculpture Garden  
328 Lomita Drive & Museum Way, off Palm Drive,  
Stanford, near Palo Alto.  
<http://museum.stanford.edu/index.html>  
Phone: 650.723.4177  
Closed Mondays and Tuesdays

## SECTION III – VOCABULARY

### DISCIPLINE-BASED VOCABULARY AND WORDS AND CONCEPTS IN THE SPARK STORY

#### **Abstraction**

An abstract concept, idea, or term. The selection of a certain aspect of a concept from the whole.

#### **Acrylic**

Resin made up of chemical compounds that contain the acryl group derived from acrylic acid

#### **AutoCAD Software**

Initially a general-purpose 2D drafting program, AutoCAD has evolved into a family of products which provide a platform for 2D and 3D CAD. Today, it is used by civil engineers, land developers, architects, mechanical engineers, interior designers and other design professionals.

#### **Casting**

A process by which a material is introduced into a mold while it is liquid, allowed to solidify in the shape inside the mold, and then removed producing a fabricated object or part.

#### **Complex**

A collection of buildings with a common purpose.

#### **Gestural**

To show, express, or direct by gestures.

#### **Hot Rod**

A car modified to run faster, especially one based on a pre-1960s model.

#### **Laureate**

One honored or awarded a prize for great achievements especially in the arts or sciences.

#### **Mig Welder**

A machine which joins two pieces of metal together by melting with a high voltage spark. MIG stands for Metal Inert Gas.

#### **Modernism**

The deliberate departure from tradition and the use of innovative forms of expression that distinguish many styles in the arts and literature of the 20th century.

#### **Representational**

Of or relating to representation, especially to realistic graphic representation.

#### **Submersible**

A vessel capable of operating or remaining under water.

#### **Zoning**

Government (usually municipal) laws that control the use of land within a jurisdiction.

## SECTION IV – ENGAGING WITH SPARK

### STANDARDS-BASED ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION POINTS

#### **Bruce Beasley: Shape in Space**

Bruce Beasley is described as a modernist sculptor. He is interested in artistic expression through the exploration of abstract shape and form, rather than through representation and narrative. But he is also deeply interested in the expression of feelings and issues, and in the beauty of form as inspired by nature.

Play the SPARK story on Bruce Beasley without the sound, freezing the frame on the sculptural pieces exhibited in the Oakland Museum of California, so that students can look carefully at the work. Allow students time to reflect on each piece.

Ask students to explain what they understand by Beasley’s comment:

“The thing that intrigues me and excites me about abstraction is to evoke feelings completely exterior to context..... If I can evoke feeling from you with something that has no context, then somehow I’ve managed to get to some core issue that to me is very profound.”

During this discussion, point out to students that they are indeed viewing Beasley’s work in a museum, without context, other than the gallery space.

- Does the work evoke feelings? What feelings?
- Can they sense an emotion or issue from the shape alone? What core issues are there?
- Can shape and space communicate powerfully in the way that representational artwork does? How does this visual language differ?

Suggest that students take a few minutes to write freely in response to these questions.

Ask students to look again at the work, this time playing the sound track. Suggest that they trace the development of Beasley’s work as described in the story. How has his work changed?



*Cast acrylic sculptures 1968-86  
Photo Courtesy of Joan Leonard*

Move on to focus on the materiality of each piece. How do the different materials create a different effect? For example, ask students to compare the aluminum, acrylic and bronze pieces and discuss how the use of different materials changes the visual language and viewer experience.

Conclude this close looking activity by asking students to think about the effect of viewing sculpture on television. What is the impact of mediating three-dimensional work on television? Does it matter that the camera moves around the piece rather than the viewer exploring three-dimensionality? Does the surface come alive in the same way or differently on television? How do light and the surrounding space interact with the work?

## SPARKLERS:

\*Encourage students to make enquiries about visiting Beasley's Oakland studio and sculpture garden, or to arrange to view a sculptural piece in a museum or gallery space. Revisit the previous question. Is the real life experience of viewing sculpture different from viewing work on television? How?

\* Beasley expresses concepts such as flight, solitude or freedom through his artwork. Ask students to think about a powerful emotion and draw a shape to represent that emotion. How do shapes convey emotion?

### Tracing Beasley's Roots

Bruce Beasley is located within a tradition. He identifies this tradition as beginning with Wassily Kandinsky, and Vladimir Yevgrafovich Tatlin and aligns himself closely with the New York School of Abstract Expressionism. He also aligns himself with Eduardo Chillida.

Working in small groups, have students research these artists and the Abstract Expressionism movement and write a short descriptive account to share with the larger group. Guide students to locate Beasley's work within these artistic traditions.

Show slides of the work of these artists to explore the roots of modernist art. Include the work of David Smith and Anthony Caro, key Modernist sculptors.

Ask students to choose one of these sculptors and to compare their work with the work of Bruce Beasley.

### RELATED STANDARDS -VISUAL ARTS

Grade 8

4.0 Aesthetic Valuing

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, Advanced

4.0 Aesthetic Valuing

4.2 Identify the intentions of artists creating contemporary works of art and explore the implications of those intentions.

5.0 *Connection, Relations & Applications*

5.2 Compare and contrast works of art, probing beyond the obvious and identifying psychological content found in the symbols and images.

### RELATED STANDARDS -VISUAL ARTS

Grades 9-12 Proficient

3.0 Historical And Cultural Context

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.

Grades 9-12 Advanced

3.0 Historical & Cultural Contexts

3.2 Identify contemporary artists worldwide who have achieved regional, national, or international recognition and discuss ways in which their work reflects, plays a role in, and influences present-day culture.

For more information about SPARK and its educational content, including the Visual & Performing Arts Standards, visit the Web site at <http://www.kqed.org/spark/education>.



For more information about the California Visual & Performing Arts Standards, visit the CA Dept. of Education at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/standards/vpa>.