

## EDUCATOR GUIDE

Artist: Mitra Fabian  
Discipline: Visual Art (Sculpture)

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Artist, Mitra Fabian in her studio.  
Still image from the Spark story, 2007.

## SECTION I - OVERVIEW

### SUBJECT

Mitra Fabian

### GRADE RANGES

K-12 & Post-Secondary

### CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Visual arts, language arts, math, social studies, media literacy

### OBJECTIVE

To provide a forum for students to explore the meanings and ideas behind artists' selections of specific materials. To provide an opportunity for students to derive their own meaning from artwork.

### STORY SYNOPSIS

Mitra Fabian creates complex forms from everyday materials such as tape, glue, and window blinds. Her sculptures are reminiscent of biological shapes such as growths or tumors and are inspired by personal meaning. Spark checks in with Fabian as she prepares for an exhibition at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art.

### INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Hands-on group projects, in which students assist and support one another

Hands-on individual projects, in which students work independently

Group oral discussion and analysis, including peer review and aesthetic valuing

Teacher-guided instruction, including demonstration and guidance

### INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES

- To introduce students to the work of Mitra Fabian and the process of making art from everyday materials
- To provide historical and cultural context of work that uses everyday materials and artists that create work about the human body, cells and growths.
- To inspire students to begin to think of art as a medium for meaning

### EQUIPMENT NEEDED

SPARK story about Mitra Fabian on DVD or VHS and related equipment or a computer with Internet access, navigation software, speakers and a sound card.

### MATERIALS NEEDED

Exacto knife, scissors, masking tape, scotch tape, glue, found objects, paper, pencils.

### INTELLIGENCES ADDRESSED

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](http://www.kqed.org/spark/education).

### MEDIA MATTERS

The following Spark stories can be used for compare/contrast purposes:

Casteneda/Reiman, a duo of female sculptors  
<http://www.kqed.org/arts/people/spark/profile.jsp?id=5240>

Catherine Wager, photographer inspired by Science  
<http://www.kqed.org/arts/people/spark/profile.jsp?id=4274>

Jonathan Keats, conceptual artist  
<http://www.kqed.org/arts/people/spark/profile.jsp?id=4504>

Laura Splan, mixed media artist inspired by anatomy and medicine  
<http://www.kqed.org/arts/people/spark/profile.jsp?id=4580>

## SECTION II – CONTENT/CONTEXT

### CONTENT OVERVIEW

Mitra Fabian works with everyday materials to create sculptural forms that mimic, or at least, hint at organic growths. Often resembling organs or tumors, these “growths” are seductively grotesque, tactile, beautiful and playful. Spark checks in with Fabian as she prepares for an exhibition at the San Jose Institute for Contemporary Art and creates complex forms from everyday materials such as tape, glue and window blinds.

As a child in Boston, Mitra recalls a fascination with the physical properties of glue. She also confesses a long-time obsession with tape. As with many artists, childhood fascinations become the fuel for artwork as adults.



Mitra Fabian, 2006. *Ventilate Series*.  
[www.mitrafabian.com](http://www.mitrafabian.com)

Working in a pseudo-scientific manner, Fabian painstakingly pieces individual lengths of tape together to create bulbous forms reminiscent of growths or cancerous mutations. Her impeccably clean studio is full of small, seemingly surgical instruments and looks more like a doctor’s office than a typical artist’s studio. Her fascination with mysterious biological forms is a reflection of her personal relationship to loved ones who have battled cancer. Although she doesn’t intend for every viewer to connect on this level, her work does leave an eerie sense of isolation and contemplation.

Fabian’s latest sculptural experiment, “Multiplicity,” resembles hatched insect eggs and is made up of cast white glue. She aims to shift viewers’ relationships to a common material, leaving a new understanding of what that material can do. Fabian’s sculpture, “Ventilate” is featured in an SJICA exhibition titled “Propagation” and highlights Fabian’s signature awareness of how materials relate to the human body. Fabian’s studio is in San Jose, and her work has been exhibited internationally. She teaches sculpture at Sacramento City College.



Mitra Fabian, 2005. *Proliferation Series*.  
[www.mitrafabian.com](http://www.mitrafabian.com)

### THE BIG PICTURE

Mitra Fabian’s organic sculptures reside somewhere on the trajectory of work that addresses issues of the body, and work about material culture. When placing Fabian’s work within a context of other contemporary artists, one needs to consider those artists working within these two art camps.

The human body is one of the most represented subjects within the art world. From Eva Hesse’s minimalist sculptures that mimic membranes to Kiki Smith’s obsession with the human figure and its functions, Fabian’s work fits squarely within this critical dialogue. Materiality is a second major question in Fabian’s work. Artists like Tara Donovan,

Peter Callesen, Brain Jungen, and Tim Noble and Sue Weber, are just a few artists that repurpose everyday materials into complex commentary about culture. Although each of these artists addresses varying issues in their work, all provide a contextual backdrop for understanding Mitra Fabian's beautifully crafted sculptures.

### *Connecting with the Body:*

Fabian talks of her artwork as being playful "growths," picturing the forms as mutations that are growing smarter, figuring out ways to adapt to the environment, while seducing the innocent bystander.

In a culture with an ever-increasing obsession with beauty, Fabian's organic sculptures speak to the very heart of our disconnection and obsession with the body. Fabian's exploration of materials as they relate to humanlike forms place her within a spectrum of several other female artists examining similar issues including Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, Hannah Wilke, and Kiki Smith, to name a few.



Eva Hesse. *Repetition Nineteen III*. 1968  
[www.moma.org](http://www.moma.org)

Considered the artist who was most successful in humanizing Minimalism without sentimentalizing it, **Eva Hesse** created an expansive collection of work that married non-traditional materials (cloth, resin, latex) with Minimalist strategies of repetition and seriality. Creating work that evoked emotion, eros and a sense of absence, her work referred to bodily functions combining the grotesque and pathetic aspects of the human condition. Even in its absence, there is no doubt that the human body inspired her work.

Similarly, Fabian creates sculptures that reference the body without creating one. Translucent forms that remind one of stomachs or lungs inhabit the floor,

coagulated pink eggs grow on walls and cell-like corrugated paper is spread on the floor, acting like a giant Petri dish. Fabian deliberately leaves the human figure out of her work, creating organisms instead of bodies.

**Kiki Smith**, speaking about her creative process has said, "I like that feeling when you're making art, that you're taking the energy out of your body and putting it into a physical object." Certainly one of the art world's most prolific experimenters with materials, Kiki Smith has spent her career exploring how to represent the micro and macrocosms of the human body. This journey has moved her from inside the body to outside of it, creating works that metaphor our relationship to nature, myth and spirituality, and have materialized the human condition and its mortality. Works made from Thai tissue like her *Untitled* pair of cast, crumpled, legs and the similarly titled collection of hanging cast paper bodies, empty out the body of its vital organs, leaving the vacant remains of a soulless body. These forms, although more directly related to the human figure, create a similar visceral experience of living/non-living creatures as in the work titled *Life Support* by Fabian. Here, Fabian creates a series of stomach-like forms interconnected by medical tubing. As in Smith's work where the viewer is often left asking about the relationships between material and concept, Fabian has created a piece that makes us wonder about the life of an artificial organ made from tape.

Fabian creates beautifully transparent membranes that resemble skin or connective tissue by painstakingly layering scotch tape. This creates a surprisingly animated object, one that almost breathes with life. This makes the viewers consider whether it is the material itself that creates this illusion, or the performative process of creating the work that gives it life.



Mitra Fabian, from the *Life Support* series, 2005  
[www.mitrafabian.com](http://www.mitrafabian.com)

### **Material and Nature**

Perhaps the artwork most visually similar to Fabian's work is that of **Tara Donovan**, who also uses everyday objects like Styrofoam cups, drinking straws and buttons. Donovan takes these materials and "grows" them through accumulation and repetition. The results are large-scale installations that mimic growth patterns found in nature. By responding to a specific installation space and examining the architecture and lighting, Donovan is able to create work that is site-responsive. She often uses transparent and translucent materials that cover gallery lighting or windows. This gives the illusion of billowing cumulus clouds or enlarged molecules.



Tara Donovan. *Untitled (Styrofoam Cups)* 2003.  
[www.acegallery.net](http://www.acegallery.net)

### **A Question of Culture:**

To some people, the U.S. is an object-based society where social status, in large part, is derived from the things we buy not by the things we do. In other words, our consumer-driven culture teaches us to measure success by what kind of car we drive, what we wear, where we live, and what kind of phone we carry. For youth, this often results in a social disconnect to a cultural foundation rooted in the past and creates a focus on "new-and-improved" trends. This drive for material success has not only left a mark on our connection to one's heritage and each other, it has left a mark on the environment and our health. Artists around the world are making work that responds to the pressure material production is putting on our lives, our cultures and the environment.

**Brian Jungen**, a Vancouver artist, uses common everyday objects as source material for his inventive works of art that comment on the line between

materials goods and culture, and challenge the influence ethnography has in forming cultural identity. His repertoire of materials includes plastic lawn chairs, wood pallets, and most recognizably, Nike Air Jordan athletic shoes. He has painstakingly transformed these materials into simulations of Northwest Coast Indian masks and an enormous, suspended whale skeleton. Like Mitra Fabian, Brian completely transforms the raw material, repurposing the material into a completely new meaning.

Considered Britain's *enfants terrible*, **Tim Noble and Sue Weber** are fascinated with the mechanics of media and advertising. Employing a number of visual strategies, the collaborative team creates works that challenge the notion of good taste, calling their work, "the worst nightmare of what art can be." One of their most notable bodies of work is a series of sculptures created from rubble including garbage, dead animals, and metal scraps. Upon first sight these abstract pieces have no recognizable form. It is only when a light is shown on them that the cast shadow brings to life amazing detailed portraits of the artists in various poses.

Although Fabian's work doesn't visually resemble the aesthetics of Noble and Weber, her work does share a similar obsession with repurposing materials and attention to detail.



Brian Jungen, *Prototype for new Understanding #5*, 1999.  
(made from Nike Air Jordan shoes)  
<http://www.catrionajeffries.com>

## RESOURCES – TEXTS

Piranio, Michelle, Kiki Smith: A Gathering, 1980-2005.  
Walker Art Center, 2005.

## RESOURCES – WEB SITES

Mitra Fabian's Web site provides a great image resource gallery of Fabian's work.

[www.mitrafabian.com](http://www.mitrafabian.com)

Artist, Tara Donovan, is represented by Ace Gallery in New York.

<http://www.acegallery.net/artistmenu.php?Artist=8>

Web site showcasing the estate of Eva Hesse

[www.evahesse.com](http://www.evahesse.com)

New Museum Web site showcases contemporary artwork, including the work of Brian Jungen.

[www.newmuseum.org](http://www.newmuseum.org)

## BAY AREA FIELD TRIPS

East Bay Depot for Creative Reuse

4695 Telegraph Avenue

Oakland, CA 94609

Store phone: 510-547-6470

<http://www.east-bay-depot.org/contact.html>

Urban Ore

900 Murray St. Berkeley, CA

Phone: (510) 841-7283

Open Monday - Saturday 8:30am - 7:00pm

Sunday 10:00am - 7:00pm

Mills College Art Museum/Aron Art Center

5000 MacArthur Blvd

Oakland, CA 94613

Tuesday 11:00 am-4:00 pm

Wednesday 11:00 am-7:30 pm

Open Thursday - Saturday 11:00 am-4:00 pm

Sun 12:00 pm - 4:00 pm

Admission is free

P: 510-430-2164

San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art

560 South First Street, San Jose

408-238-8155

<http://www.sjica.org/>

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

151 Third Street

San Francisco, CA

Open 11:00am - 5:45pm

Closed Wednesdays

Open late on Thursdays

<http://www.sfmoma.org/>

Oakland Art Museum

100 Oak Street

Oakland, CA

Open Wednesday-Saturday 10:00am-5:00

Sundays Noon-5:00

[www.museum.ca.org](http://www.museum.ca.org)

## SECTION III – VOCABULARY

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

#### **Anthropomorphic**

Resembling or made to resemble a human form

#### **Found Object**

A natural or manufactured object that is perceived as being aesthetically satisfying and exhibited as such

#### **Repurpose**

A term referring to the action of taking materials goods and transforming them into a new form

#### **Everyday materials**

Those materials used by artists that can be found in our everyday lives

#### **Organic**

Developing in a manner analogous to the natural growth and evolution characteristic of living organisms; arising as a natural outgrowth

#### **Cast**

Something formed from a material poured into a mold in a molten or liquid state; casting

#### **Mold**

A hollow form or matrix for giving a particular shape to something in a molten or plastic state

#### **Enfants terribles**

A French word describing an incorrigible child, as one whose behavior is embarrassing, an outrageously outspoken or bold person who says and does indiscreet or irresponsible things, or a person whose work, thought, or lifestyle is so unconventional or avant-garde as to appear revolutionary or shocking

#### **Repetition**

An Element of art that describes the process of repeating a visual element to create interest

#### **Seriality**

The quality or state of succession in a series; sequence

#### **Minimalism**

A chiefly American style in painting and sculpture that developed in the 1960s largely in reaction against abstract expressionism, shunning illusion, decorativeness, and emotional subjectivity in favor of impersonality, simplification of form, and the use of often massive, industrially produced materials for sculpture, and extended its influence to architecture, design, dance, theater, and music

#### **Eros**

The ancient Greek god of love, identified by the Romans with Cupid, often associated with love or passion

#### **Installation**

A type of artwork where the piece is created especially for a specific location

## SECTION IV – ENGAGING WITH SPARK

### STANDARDS-BASED ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION POINTS

#### Critical Writing

After viewing the Spark story about Mitra Fabian, have students discuss why she might have chosen to use everyday materials to create her art work. In many ways, creating artwork out of tape or glue pokes fun at the idea of “high art” because the materials are inexpensive, they can be easily found, and may seem easy to construct. Discuss why artists choose specific materials.

All materials have multiple connotations that go beyond their face value. For instance, a shell is not just a shell. It makes the viewer think about the shell’s relationship to other things in which the viewer has experienced. So using shells, sand and water in an artwork might make the viewer think of the clean, fresh ocean, while shells dripping in black paint might make one think about oil spills or the endangered environment. Mitra Fabian uses several interesting materials in her sculptures including medical supplies, fuzzy pom-pom balls, tape and glue. Discuss what Mitra says about her experience with glue as a child and how it informed her current work. Did any of the students have a similar experience with an everyday material such as glue? Why is it important that this material reminds her of her childhood?

Ask students to discuss in a 1-page essay how the materials an artist chooses to work with helps build meaning in the work. The students’ responses should include the following:

- A thesis statement defining their ideas about materials and concepts.
- What are the inherent meanings that inhabit a particular material? Students should discuss whether they believe these meanings are universal or culturally dependant.
- Site 3 examples of artists who also work with everyday materials that inform the concept of the work.

#### RELATED STANDARDS

##### Grades 9-12

##### Critical Writing

1.1 Establish a controlling impression or coherent thesis that conveys a clear and distinctive perspective on the subject and maintain a consistent tone and focus throughout the piece of writing.

1.4 Develop the main ideas within the body of the composition through supporting evidence (e.g., scenarios, commonly held beliefs, hypotheses, definitions).

#### Reviving Historical Objects

After viewing the Spark story about Mitra Fabian, discuss how she transformed the unusual materials of tape and window blinds into seemingly familiar shapes. Take a look at examples of work by the artists Tara Donovan, Brian Jungen, Tim Noble and Sue Weber. All of these artists transform everyday objects into sophisticated works of art that comment on consumer culture. Pay especially close attention to how the works transform everyday materials into objects that resemble something from the artist’s past, their culture or something in which the artist has a personal relationship.

For this two-part assignment, students will complete a research component and a creative component.

*Research Component:* In step one, ask the students to research an object from their culture. This object can be contemporary or something with cultural relevance to the past. Provide students with examples that model how to complete this task. For example, Native American students might research basketry or other textile work. Students from Central America might have a connection to Mayan ancestry. Descendents from Korean heritage might research traditional drums or clothing. Then, ask the students to create an image catalogue from the Internet, magazines and newspaper clippings of the

object or bring the actual object to school. Working in small groups, the students will share their examples with their classmates. Ask the students to write a 2-paragraph statement explaining the important of the object to his/her life and how it is culturally relevant. Make sure to explain how the object is used and describe any especially important aspects of the object.

*Creative component:* Using their image catalogue as a reference, first ask the students to create an illustration of the object they would like to recreate. The objective of this step is for students to begin thinking about how they might construct their object. Now ask students to think of an everyday material they use that can be used to recreate the object they researched. After working in groups to discuss technical problems that might arise, students will create their object with their everyday materials in the same manner as the artists we discussed. You may want to limit the materials the students have available to use, for instance, provide newspapers or old magazines and tape. This will help focus their ideas and limit expenses.

When the students have finished their artwork, ask the students to type the 2-paragraph description of the original artwork, then glue the writing and a picture of the original object on an 11" X 17" poster. Finally, assemble the posters and the artwork created by the students in a "Reviving History Museum" display for the school to see.

**Related Standards**

**Visual Arts**

Grade 8

2.5 Select a medium to use to communicate a theme in a series of works of art.

3.1 Examine and describe or report on the role of a work of art created to make a social comment or protest social conditions.

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

**Seeing and Building Form: Math and Art**

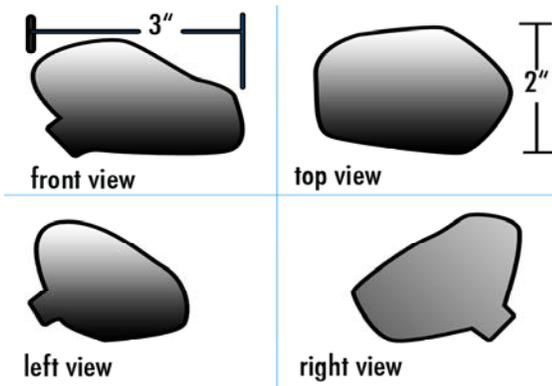
This assignment works well with grade levels 4 and up. For this assignment, students will examine the work of Mitra Fabian, paying close attention to her

creative process. Students will write about her work and then create a 3-dimensional form out of scotch tape.

*Looking and Writing:* First, watch the Spark story about Mitra Fabian. Ask the students to make a two-column list that describes the artist's work. In the first column ask the students to analyze the forms themselves. What are their shapes? What do they remind them of? Are they old looking, wet looking, space-age looking? Use the thesaurus to collect 20-40 words that describe the forms. At the bottom of the column ask the students to draw several of the shapes they remember seeing in the video. In the second column, the students should list the materials Fabian uses to create her work. Ask the students to write a 1-paragraph statement hypothesizing why they believe she uses these materials and ask them to explain their reasoning. Ask the students to share their responses with the class and create a class list of descriptive words. Make sure to define any unusual words that may come up in this activity. This SDAIE method helps both English speaking and ELD students develop a wider vocabulary base around the subject.

*Drawing and Building:* Then, replay the video asking the students to pay close attention to the construction of the sculptures. Discuss how she keeps the tape from becoming too sticky. How does she connect the small pieces she works with? Does she use the same technique for every piece or is she using more than one technique? Are the vessels totally enclosed? Why or why not? If possible, give each student a roll of scotch tape and ask them to experiment and see if they can figure out how to replicate Fabian's technique.

Next, pass out a new sheet of paper to the students. Ask them to divide the sheet into 4 quadrants. They will use each of these quadrants to draw a front, top, left-side and right-side of a form they would like to create using tape. Using rulers and a pencil, make sure the students draw the object they will be creating to scale and indicate the size of their object on their drawings using draftsman lines (see next page for a diagram).



When the students are building their sculptures, make sure they use their drawings as a guide. The primary objective is for the students to build their objects to scale. Because the students' drawings are to scale, they can hold the tape sculptures up to their drawings to see if they are going in the right direction.

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/be/st/ss/>

### Related Standards

#### Visual Arts

Grade 4

1.5 Describe and analyze the elements of art (e.g., color, shape/form, line, texture, space, value), emphasizing form, as they are used in works of art and found in the environment.

2.3 Use additive and subtractive processes in making simple sculptural forms.

#### Language Arts

Grade 4

1.5 Use a thesaurus to determine related words and concepts.

Relate ideas, observations, or recollections of an event or experience.

#### Math

3.6 Visualize, describe, and make models of geometric solids (e.g., prisms, pyramids) in terms of the number and shape of faces, edges, and vertices; interpret two-dimensional representations of three-dimensional objects; and draw patterns (of faces) for a solid that, when cut and folded, will make a model of the solid.