



## *Donovan Widmer: Small Metals*

September 10 – December 22, 2011

### University of Wyoming Art Museum 2011 Educational Packet for K-12 Teachers

**Purpose of this Packet:** To provide K-12 teachers with background information on the exhibition and age appropriate suggestions for exploring the concepts, meanings, and artistic intent of artwork before, during, and after the museum visit.

**Curricular Unit Topic:** Teachers and students examine the ideas, styles and techniques of artist Donovan Widmer, whose small metal sculptures are constructed from found materials and fabricated elements.

The focus of this educational packet and curricular unit is to **observe, question, explore, create and reflect.**

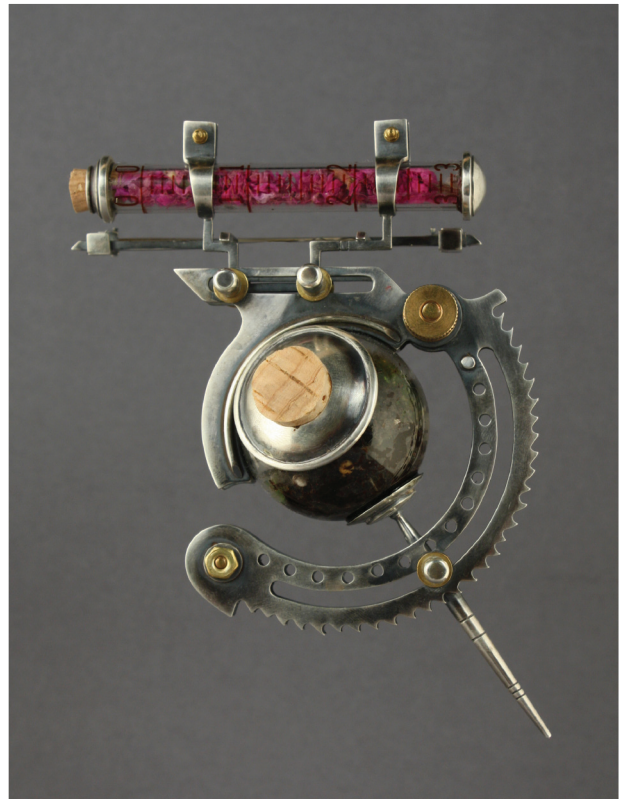
**Observe:** Students will closely observe the art work of Donovan Widmer, exploring the ideas and themes presented and/or the formal qualities of the work: the materials and processes used; subject matter and context; intent; style and techniques.

**Question:** Students will have an opportunity to read, write, sketch, listen to teachers and museum educators, and then, to come up with questions about the work they see, and the concepts behind the artwork and the artist who created it. Students will question the materials and techniques used and their own responses to the art work in the exhibition.

**Explore:** They will explore the ideas presented by the artist, and their relationship to current events, literature, science and more. They will be encouraged to research vocabulary words and related aspects of the exhibit.

**Create:** Students will be given time to practice sketching and drawing, and may create their own small sculptures utilizing found and fabricated materials, either in the Shelton Studio or in their school art room.

**Reflect:** Students will evaluate their final art products with other students from their classes and with teachers and museum educators. They will receive feedback on the art work and the concepts behind the making of the art work. After this process, each person may write an essay about his or her art, the artist, or his or her museum experience.



Donovan Widmer (American), *The Cycle Has Been Completed*, 2008, sterling silver, brass, cork, glass, moss, flowers, 5 x 5 x 2-1/2 inches, courtesy of the artist'

*Donovan Widmer: Small Metals*

**Introduction:** Walking into the Donovan Widmer exhibit is like entering a parallel world that combines past with present, fact with fiction, and science with art. Steampunk, Harry Potter, the Borg, and alchemy come to mind. Mystery, humor, and fanciful ideas are imbedded with layers of thought-provoking concepts.

Widmer's work often represents the institutions of science, religion, or philosophy, thereby questioning the assumptions each make. Widmer explains, "The images and objects are meant to be amusing, sardonic, and peculiar... to examine the causes and effects that the progression of new knowledge has on our ideologies."

Widmer's work is both whimsical and slightly sinister. As a contemporary artist using traditional metalsmithing techniques, he furthers the investigation by blending old with new. The objects he creates are small in scale yet highly detailed. He uses found objects and appropriated images to further investigate culture and new ideas.

*Donovan Widmer: Small Metals* presents work from his four current series. *Chainmail* are recreations of the historically prevalent form of armor. The chainmail objects on view here are utilitarian, with armor that is meant to protect the user from everyday attacks.

The *Transcience* series are sculptures constructed to prolong and examine that which is fragile and temporal.

Small glass globes hold a range of items from moss and dirt to mysterious liquids and vapors. They act dually, preserving and also presenting their contents. Widmer raises issues of the process of replacing old knowledge, yet maintaining a record of the degenerated.

The *Ornamentation* series explores ornament as both subject and object. Widmer explores the identities that people create either as a result of cultural influence or personal decision. For example the *Rhinology Studies* from this series presents highly imaginative eyeglasses that are scientific in design, raising questions of who would wear such glasses and what they might be trying to convey about themselves.

The *Production* series is jewelry that incorporates found objects, like animal quills with handmade silver and brass details. The title of the series implies the mass-production and availability of today's jewelry but instead presents one-of-a-kind pieces that demonstrate his craftsmanship and creativity.

Widmer is an Assistant Professor of Metalsmithing at the University of North Dakota. His degrees in metalsmithing are from Illinois State University (2002) and Edinborough University of Pennsylvania (1996). His work has been featured in the Philadelphia Inquirer and the Pittsburgh Post Gazette. He has exhibited nationally in solo, two-person, and group exhibitions.

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**Artist Statement:** My current artworks examine how ideologies evolve. I am interested in the ways belief systems are impacted, modified, and negated by external institutions such as philosophy, science, and religion. The individual artworks are an assemblage of appropriated images and materials that are deconstructed and combined with fabricated elements. These elements are constructed through traditional metalsmithing processes—a practice as significant as the end product.

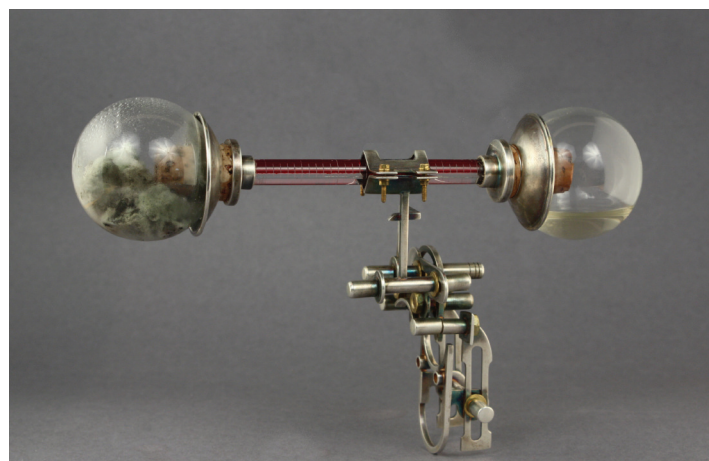
Within all of my work I attempt to strike a balance between our moral and social flaws, as well as the persistence and integrity that constructively advances our culture. The images and objects are meant to be amusing, sardonic, and peculiar. It is my intention to examine the causes and effects that the progression of new knowledge has on our ideologies.

– Donovan Widmer  
([http://www.donovanwidmer.com/artist\\_statement.html](http://www.donovanwidmer.com/artist_statement.html))

**Lesson Overview:** Students will learn about the artist Donovan Widmer and his work, considering the formal qualities and themes of his art. They will investigate the materials and techniques used by the artist to create work. Discussions and explorations will be tailored to students' ages and developmental levels, in consultation with their classroom teachers. Older students may be asked to spend in-depth viewing time with just one of Widmer's pieces – the student's choice – as a way to develop their ability to make connections between personal experience and artistic intent.

In the Shelton Studio students will be given the opportunity to define and explore the idea of a creating small, inventive sculptures that have personal meaning. Students will be encouraged to incorporate their own ideas into their work.

Before arriving at the art museum, students and teachers may research and engage in conversations about the artist. They may view images of his work online and compare and contrast the work to the steampunk movement, or explore science fiction and fantasy stories that incorporate the familiar with the unknown. While at the museum they will spend time in the galleries closely observing the work, discussing it, writing about it, and sketching it. They will begin conversations about the ideas and methods used to create the artwork, and the unique combinations of materials used by the artist, which will lay the groundwork for future opportunities to pursue inventive ideas in their home classrooms and schools.



Donovan Widmer (American), *A Possible Contamination*, 2008, sterling silver, brass, cork, glass, water, mold, 4-1/2 x 6-1/2 x 12-1/2 inches, courtesy of the artist

## Essential Questions:

### Grades K-6

- What do you see?
- What do you think these are?
- Do you think they have a function? Why or why not?

### Grades 6-12

- What does this work remind you of or make you think about? Why?
- Does everyone have the same interpretation of the work? Why or why not?

## Art Questions to Consider:

### Grades K-6

- What are these objects made from?
- Why do you think the artist chose to use these materials?
- Have you ever seen artwork made from materials like these before?
- What other unusual materials could you use to create art?

### Grades 6-12

- How important are the materials selected by Widmer to the ideas he is trying to convey?
- What skills does he need to have in order to create this work? What knowledge?
- What are some of the “formal artistic qualities” inherent in the work?



**Pre-visit Activities:** In order to prepare students and extend learning, we suggest the following activities:

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**Prerequisite Skills/knowledge:** Museum educators will work with teachers to ensure all projects are age and skill appropriate. At the very minimum:

- Students should have some familiarity with sketching and drawing objects.
- Students should be encouraged to investigate unusual materials.

Teachers may also wish to review the following terms with students:

**Grades K-6:**

**Grades 6-12:**

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## **Museum Activities:**

**Part 1** – Time frame: 45 minutes

- Students will closely observe the works on exhibit in the art museum.
- They will identify shapes, forms, patterns, materials, technique and style in the existing work.
- They will look for the familiar and the strange in Widmer’s work.
- Students will discuss what they see with museum educators.
- They will explore the artwork in relationship to the idea of creating or inventing something new by combining unusual materials.
- They will explore the concepts and ideas behind the artwork in the exhibit.
- Using worksheets, students will respond in writing or drawing to the work they see by recording their observations and their own thoughts about the work.
- Students will engage in discussions about their observations and their answers and sketches with one another and with the teachers.

**Part 2** – Time frame: 45 minutes (minimum)

The following projects may be considered individually, or combined, or museum staff will work with teachers to develop specific projects that support ongoing classroom work.

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**Post visit activities:** We have found that students achieve maximum benefit from a museum visit when time is scheduled for post-visit activities. Here are some suggestions:

- Students discuss or write about their museum experiences, reviewing what they learned, what has special meaning for them, how they will use new information and skills.
- Students continue to research the works of other artists who create mysterious or fanciful and inventive work (an essay, art work, research paper).
- Students create their work to investigate new ideas and materials, while building on the ideas and methods explored at the Art Museum.
- Students explore the work of scientists, inventors and artists, and the inspiration for what they do.

**Suggested use in the curriculum:** The study of the artwork, including historical and scientific references inherent in the work, the association with cultural memory and more ties to multiple curricular areas including art, history, social studies, writing, reading, math, geography, and political science. Museum staff will work with teachers to address specific Wyoming Teaching Standards and to align museum projects and studies with ongoing classroom curricular units.

**Some recommended resources:** These are just a few of the many resources available. We welcome other suggestions that teachers and students find helpful which can be added to this list.

- UW Art Museum website: [www.uwyo.edu/artmuseum](http://www.uwyo.edu/artmuseum)
- Exhibition descriptive materials (contact the museum education program for more information).
- Research on the Internet about Donovan Widmer.
- Donovan Widmer's website, <http://donovanwidmer.com/>
- Literature that encourages students to think creatively and inventively, such as Harry Potter, The Sorcerer's Apprentice, Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, and science fiction that melds the old with the new.
- The Art of Steampunk: Extraordinary Devices and Ingenious Contraptions from the Leading Artists of the Steampunk Movement by Art Donovan

**Materials to be supplied:** The Art Museum provides selected materials for Shelton Studio projects.

**Assessment and Documentation:** In order to ensure that our museum tour program is meeting the needs of teachers and students, we ask participants to complete evaluation surveys. Surveys may be distributed to teachers and students, but they are also available on-line as a pdf file to be downloaded, or they may be requested via e-mail ([wbredehft@uwyo.edu](mailto:wbredehft@uwyo.edu)).

1. Students may self-assess using a quick survey that asks them to consider their response to the gallery discussions and research, and their studio experience.
2. Teachers may assess the overall visit by completing a quick survey that asks for their observation and assessment of students' experiences, as well as assessment of the overall process of the museum visit.
3. Museum staff and artists/teachers will record their observations and assessments.
4. When studio time permits, we will ask students to briefly discuss their art work completed in the Shelton Studio visit.
5. Museum staff may take photographs of students and teachers to document the learning taking place and the work produced during a museum visit. These are available upon written request to teachers who would like to use them as art of teaching and student portfolios.