

# EDUCATIONAL PACKET

## DEVELOPED FOR K-12 TEACHERS

UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING ART MUSEUM 2009



## James Surls: Flowers

### PURPOSE OF THIS PACKET:

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To provide K-12 teachers with background information on the exhibitions and suggest age appropriate applications for exploring concepts, meaning, and artistic intent of work exhibited, before, during, and after the museum visit.

### CURRICULAR UNIT TOPIC:

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Explore how humans express their relationship with nature through art and writing. The focus of this educational packet and curricular unit is to **observe, question, explore, create, and reflect.**

### OBSERVE:

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Students and teachers will observe *James Surls: Flowers*. Students will look at the different organic shapes created by positive and negative space, surface texture, shadows, and use of materials in the artist's works.

### QUESTION:

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Students will have an opportunity to read, write, sketch, and listen to teachers and museum educators, and, then, to come up with questions about the art work depicted, and the artist's concepts behind the work. Students will question the materials and techniques used and their own responses to the art work in the exhibition.

### EXPLORE:

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Students will consider the shapes and forms created by Surls. How do these shapes mimic those found in nature? How are they different? What are the industrial influences in these artworks? Students will also explore the background of the artist and how that contributes to his art work. They will be encouraged to research the vocabulary words and related aspects of the exhibit.

### CREATE:

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Students will be given time to practice sketching and drawing, and will create their own flower and plant forms.

### REFLECT:

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Students will discuss and evaluate their final art products with other students from their classes and with teachers and museum educators. They will be given feedback on the art work and the concepts behind the making of the art work. After this process, each person may then write an essay about their process of making art and the concepts behind the work. This portion of the museum experience can be carried out in the student's home school and classroom.



James Surls (American, b. 1943), *Six and Ten Wall Flowers*, 2006, Cherry, painted steel, 69 x 124 x 18-1/2 inches, Lent by the artist

## INTRODUCTION

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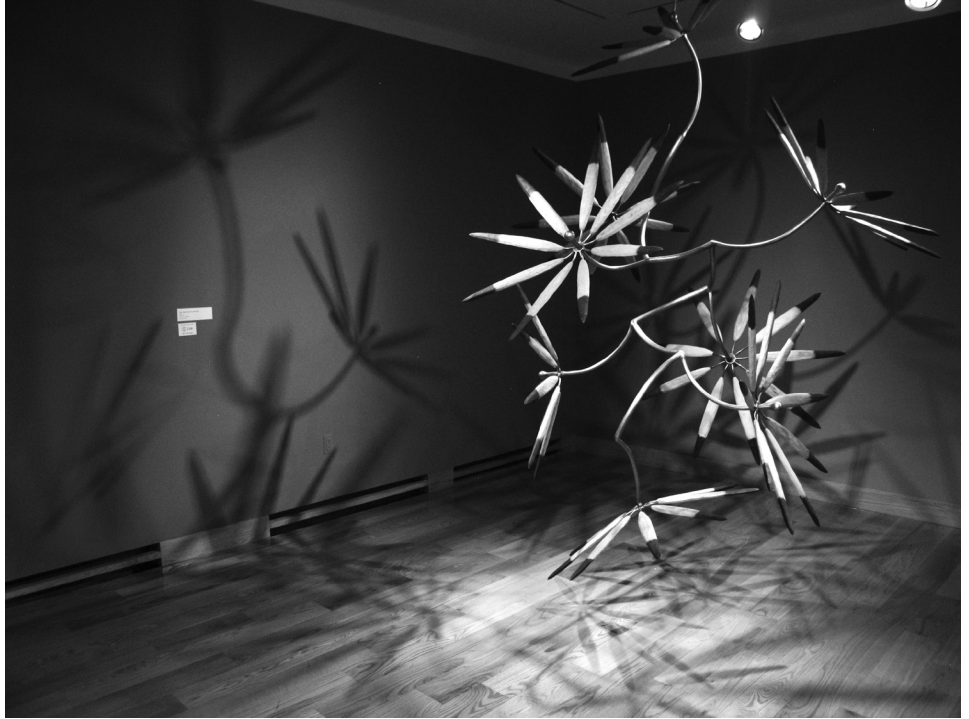
James Surls (American, b. 1943) is known primarily as a sculptor, and throughout his extensive career his creative process has continued to evolve as he incorporates themes, ideas, and concepts that have been at the core of his art for the past forty years.

The work featured in this exhibition sets the framework for Surls' most recent installation on the University of Wyoming campus, *Rolling Flower*, now permanently hanging in the upstairs

atrium of the William Robertson Coe Library. As precursors to *Rolling Flower*, the works presented here demonstrate Surls' ongoing development of the flower form – a recurring symbol of life and beauty in his work.

These large-scale pieces of wood and steel reflect both universal and personal ideas for Surls. His hanging sculptures, especially these flower pieces, demonstrate his quest for balance and his acknowledgement of paradox – concepts that can be applied broadly to human nature, or on a smaller scale to Surls' life and his work. Behind the

James Surls (American, b. 1943), *Black-Tipped Flowers from the Garden*, 2005, Bass, steel, 117 x 71 x 71 inches, Lent by the artist



conceptual aspects of Surls' work is his exquisite craftsmanship. The hand of the artist is visible through the fine detail and wrought forms that gracefully balance the physical immensity of the whole.

Surls began working with wood as a primary material in the 1970s, marking an important transition in his work as he moved from an emphasis on the process of creating to a greater focus on content. His use of wood is also reflective of his own history. Since his childhood and throughout his career, Surls has positioned himself apart from the mainstream art centers by living and working, essentially, in rural areas. Whether it was the Piney Woods in Texas or the open plains and mountain views of Carbondale, Colorado, Surls situates himself where he can connect with nature, and therefore his materials and inspiration.

Surls' work has been exhibited widely on a national level and his works can be found in public and private collections around the world. He has acted as a curator, teacher, arts administrator, and advocate of the arts for over forty years. He is

represented by Barbara Davis Gallery, Houston, and Gerald Peters Gallery, Santa Fe and New York. Formerly based in Texas, where he was honored with the "Living Legend Award" by the Dallas Contemporary Art Center, he now lives and works in Carbondale, Colorado.

## POETRY

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### Poetry:

Though James Surls sees himself, first and foremost, as a "maker of objects" he is also an accomplished writer. His poetry often inspires or is inspired by his artworks. A selection of his poems has been published in various books about his art. Several of those poems are included here:

### *What a Difference?*

*What difference to Wind is Dust?*

*What difference to Snow is Hawk?*

*What difference to Rock is Sky?*

*What difference to Path if Rain falls,  
or Water cuts deep the Dirt,  
sending Mud and Stone and Plant,*

*through walls and barriers,  
as old as Earth itself?  
What difference to River is Log,  
that lodges at its edge,  
or White Foam,  
that churns on rising Wave?*

*Wind is Wind and Dust is Dust.  
Snow is Snow and Hawk is Hawk.  
Rock is Rock and Sky is Sky.  
And Path cares not  
Of what crosses its way,  
And River looks only to Sea.*

*What difference to any or all,  
is Time, and Time again,  
except for me as traveler,  
passing from end to end.*

James Surls  
December 26, 2005  
Published in *James Surls From the Heartland*

***From the Heartland***

*Now I must ask questions of myself.  
What do I do with what I feel, sense, or believe?  
Where do I slot my belief in a truth that has no  
proof other than  
what I give it from my own experience?  
Why am I confident in the reliability of something  
that cannot  
be touched or seen, yet is upon me as surely as the  
air I breathe?  
How can the actual states of matter vary so from one  
to another?  
Or does “paradox” live with us always?*

*Are we so unique and alike at the same time that our  
thoughts can hold  
the contradictory and absurd within a reality, and  
doing so, express*

a possible truth?  
There are those in the world in the highest of  
learned positions who would ask,  
“Of what truth and of which truth and of whose  
truth do you speak?”  
As an artist I answer all by saying simply, “My truth.”

**James Surls**  
Published in *James Surls From the Heartland*

**LESSON OVERVIEW**

James Surls is strongly influenced by nature and sees wilderness as an expression of personal freedom. Students will use various shapes as well as organic and inorganic materials to express this concept.

**ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS**

Here are some questions to consider when looking at the exhibition *James Surls: Flowers*.

- How can wilderness be used as an expression of personal freedom?
- How is art a vehicle for communication?
- Which comes first ... writing or art?
- How do materials inform the artist’s concept?
- How does an artist select materials to best express a concept?

**GRADES K-6**

- What materials are used to make this art?
- What is the subject of these artworks?
- What shapes can you see in these pieces?
- Do these sculptures look heavy? Why? Why not?
- How are these sculptures similar? Different?
- What skills and knowledge does the artist need to create this work?

**GRADES 7-12**

- How important are the materials to Surls’



Left: James Surls (American, b. 1943), *Me and Two Black Flowers*, 2006, Bass, pine, steel, 125-1/2 x 31 x 42 inches, Lent by the artist Right: James Surls (American, b. 1943), *Me and Five Six Petaled Flowers*, 2005, Pine, bass, steel, 79 x 82 x 78 inches, Lent by the artist

sculptures?

- Describe the shadows cast by the art. Do you think the artist intentionally uses shadows for effect?
- How is texture used in these works?
- How has nature informed Surls' sculpture?
- Art Questions to Consider
- Describe the challenges and benefits of working with the materials used to create these artworks.
- What carving techniques are used?
- How is the metal formed?
- How is balance and composition expressed in these sculptures?
- How are shape and repetition used to create movement?

teachers and students consider the following activities:

- Students may tour James Surls website and discuss his background.
- Students may research the geography and natural resources available to the artist in Colorado.
- Teachers and students may view *Rolling Flower* in the Coe Library at the University of Wyoming and *In Circle* on Prexy's Pasture at UW.
- Students may read and discuss examples of James Surls' poetry.
- Students may research flower characteristics and patterns, considering similarities and differences within flower families.

## PRE-VISIT ACTIVITIES

In order to prepare students for their museum visit and extend learning possibilities, we suggest

## PREREQUISITE SKILLS/KNOWLEDGE

Museum educators will work with teachers to ensure that all projects are age and skills appropriate.



James Surls (American, b. 1943), *Me and the Black Flower with the Needle and Thread*, 2009, Poplar, spruce root, painted steel, 105 x 59 x 62 inches, Lent by the artist

Teachers may select words from the following vocabulary word list for students to look up and understand:

- Organic
- Inorganic
- Botany
- Balance
- Harmony

## MUSEUM ACTIVITIES

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These activities are suggestions. Museum educators will work with teachers to carefully tailor all classes to their students' needs, in support of classroom goals and district and state education standards.

### PART 1

TIME FRAME: 30 - 45 MINUTES

(IN THE GALLERIES)

- Students will closely observe the objects in *James Surls: Flowers*.
- Students may be given worksheets or journals so that they may respond to the exhibit by recording their observations and impressions through sketching and writing.
- Students will create word lists about the exhibit that help them describe the art work or explain how they feel about it.
- Students will identify the materials used to create each work in the exhibit.
- Students will examine the purpose of each example of flowers in this exhibit.
- Students will discuss what they see with museum educators.
- Students will engage in discussions about their observations, sketches, and reflections with one another, teachers, and museum educators.

### PART 2

TIME FRAME: 45 - 60 MINUTES

(IN THE SHELTON STUDIO)

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

- Students will explore artistic devices that are also found in nature, and in other areas of study, such as pattern, repetition, and shape. They will create their own floral design using these artistic devices. This design should take into account their individual expressions and students should be able to reflect on how their perceptions of and interactions with nature influenced their designs.
- Students will examine the concept of nature and how that can be portrayed in poetry. Each artistic work should have a poetic piece that either inspired or was inspired by the artistic work. They should be prepared to discuss their art and poetry with their peers, teachers, and museum educators.

## POST VISIT ACTIVITIES

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To achieve maximum benefit from a museum visit it is important to schedule time to complete post-visit activities. These allow for deeper understanding as well as provide opportunities for assessment of standards. Here are some suggested activities:

- Research and observe indigenous flowers of the region in which you live.
- Examine Surls' concept that wilderness/nature equals personal freedom. How have environmental movements captured this idea?
- Write a poem that conveys the student's individual concept of personal freedom.
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## SUGGESTED CURRICULUM USE

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*James Surls: Flowers* will tie into a variety of curricular areas including, but not limited to the

following:

- Ecology
- Poetry
- Botany
- Vocational Arts

Museum educators will work with teachers to address specific Wyoming Standards and align museum projects and activities with classroom lessons and assessments.

## SOME RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

- <http://.jamesurls.com>
- <http://www.uwyo.edu/artmuseum/>
- James Surls In the Meadows and Beyond, Ed. Jeanne Lil Chvosta. Meadows Museum Southern Methodist University Press, 2004.
- James Surls From the Heartland, The Grace Museum, 2009.
- James Surls: The Splendor Years, 1977-1997, University of Texas Press, 2005.
- Visions: James Surls, 1974 – 1984, Dallas Museum of Art, 1984.
- Finding Balance: Reconciling the Masculine/ Feminine in Contemporary Art and Culture, by Leonard Shlain. Houston Center for Contemporary Craft, 2006. Leonard Shlain (Author)
- [Visit Amazon's Leonard Shlain Page](#)
- Find all the books, read about the author, and more.
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## MATERIALS TO BE SUPPLIED TO EACH STUDENT

Materials for selected Shelton Studio projects are provided by the art museum.

## ASSESSMENT & DOCUMENTATION

In order to ensure that our museum tour program is meeting the needs of teachers and students, we may ask that participants help us assess the activities and learning that take place. Examples of evaluation tools include:

1. Students will self-assess using a quick survey that asks them to consider their response to the gallery discussions and explorations, and their studio experience,
2. Teachers will 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 educators will record their observations and assessments.
4. When studio time permits, we will ask students to briefly discuss their art completed in the Shelton Studio.
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 to teachers upon written request for use in teaching and student portfolios.