

CONFRONTING RACISM

Betye Saar (United States, born 1926, active Los Angeles), *I'll Bend But I Will Not Break*, 1998. Mixed media including vintage ironing board, flat iron, chain, white bedsheet, wood clothespins, and rope. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of Lynda and Stewart Resnick through the 2018 Collectors Committee (M.2018.76.1-5). © Betye Saar



“My purpose in creating these works is to remind us about the struggle of African Americans and to reclaim the humiliating images of how these workers were once portrayed. I feel that, however painful, there is honor in re-presenting the past. Racism should neither be ignored nor satirized, as it is a form of bondage for everyone, regardless of color. Racism cannot be conquered until it is confronted.”

—Betye Saar, in conversation with Carol S. Eliel
at the artist’s studio, Los Angeles, March 19, 2018.

WHAT DO YOU SEE?

In *I'll Bend But I Will Not Break*, how does Saar use objects and images to evoke thoughts and emotions about African American workers and racism?

What do you think is the meaning of the title of this work of art?

RECOMMENDED FOR AGES 14 AND UP

For this project, you will select objects that represent work and add images to them to express your thoughts and feelings about racism.



INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Spend several minutes looking closely at the work of art *I'll Bend But I Will Not Break*. Make notes on the feelings you experience as you look. Write down words and phrases that you think of as you look.
2. Look around your house. Saar made works of art out of everyday objects like an ironing board — and the ironing board lends meaning to the art. Find an everyday object that is used for work. Look at its surfaces, its structure; try to see it as sculpture rather than a tool. What kind of work is it used for? How are its shape and form determined by the work it is used for?
3. Do a little research. Ask family and friends about their experiences of work and racism. Look up images of work and race. Consider the phrases you wrote while looking at Saar's work of art to help in your search. Think about who in our society does what work and the tools they use. What are some ways work and race are related in America?
4. You can do this project in several ways:
 - Use actual physical objects, and add images to the object's surfaces by gluing them down (if possible and if the object will no longer be used as a tool).
 - Sketch the object on a piece of paper and add your image(s) to the drawing.
 - Photograph an object and digitally edit images onto it.
5. Once you have decided what image will go on which surface of your objects, clip or print an existing image, or sketch your images and add them to your object. How did adding an image(s) change the feeling and meaning of the object?
6. Try adding a different image(s) to your object. How does the meaning change?
7. Try pairing your object with another object, and add images to both.

Supplies:

paper, glue, pencil, a household object of your choice, a digital camera and photo-editing software (optional)