



LET'S LOOK & LEARN

JUST IMAGINE! DREAMING UP A LIFE PUZZLE

Black Elk's Little Sandman

Star Wallowing Bull, 2002

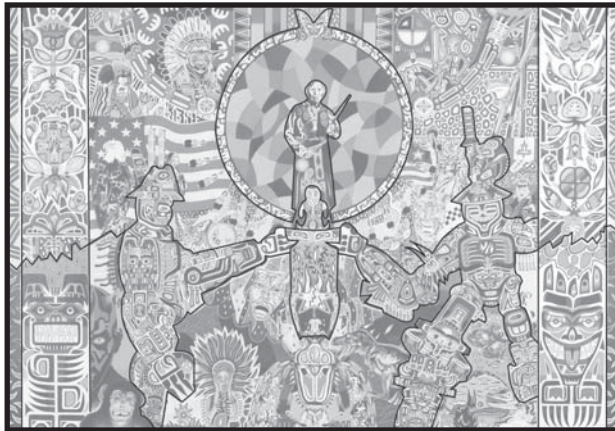
Prisma color pencil on paper, 36 x 50"

Plains Art Museum Permanent Collection

NATIONAL STANDARDS

The activities in this educational resource address the following National Standards for Arts Education, Visual Art Content Standards:

1. Using structures (e.g., organizational principles) and functions of art.
2. Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas.
3. Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures.
4. Reflecting upon and assessing the characteristics and merits of [the students'] work and the work of others.



"To me dreams and imagination are in the same category. The images I imagine have meaning, but like dreams, I don't always understand what the images represent. Maybe later in life I'll understand what they mean."

~ Star Wallowing Bull

ABOUT THE ART

The images in *Black Elk's Little Sandman*, as for much of Star Wallowing Bull's work, came from the artist's dreams, his imagination, and life events. In the middle of the artwork, Wallowing Bull presents himself as a small child with a black eye and a question mark above his head. He is standing with Black Elk, a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux Nation, who lived from 1863 to 1950. Black Elk towers over Wallowing Bull inside a colorful dream catcher, which according to Ojibwe tradition, filters out the bad dreams and allows the good dreams to come through. Wallowing Bull uses the bright colors to attract and welcome the viewer. He includes Black Elk in his drawing because when Black Elk was a child, he fell very ill and had a dream about the difficult future awaiting his people. With the knowledge and understanding granted him in the dream, Black Elk became a great leader.

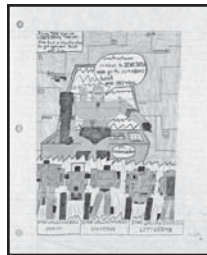
Outside the dream catcher are images from Wallowing Bull's life, dreams, and imagination. Some images are from the past and some from today; some represent traditional Native American culture and some are from art history and popular culture; some symbolize good and some evil. Many images are derived from two or more eras or cultures. Wallowing Bull made a literal and symbolic "crack" in the drawing, a horizontal zigzag line that separates the bad images in the bottom fourth of the drawing. Some of these images came from a dream he had in which he was attacked by a chimpanzee army so massive they blackened the landscape. Two Native American Pacific Northwest Coast giant figures came to his rescue. If you look closely, you will see the two giants holding Wallowing Bull up above a pit of fire. By juxtaposing and combining all these images from their various sources, Wallowing Bull invites the viewer to discern new meanings and relationships.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Star Wallowing Bull was born and grew up in Minneapolis, Minnesota, except following his parents' divorce when he and his sister moved away with their mother. Wallowing Bull remembers that time as his "lost childhood" due to his mother's alcoholism. At five years of age, he and his sister returned to Minneapolis to live with their father, Frank Big Bear, Jr. While Wallowing Bull was not brought up in the traditional ways of his Arapaho and Chippewa culture, he is eager to learn about his heritage. Chippewa is the French word for Ojibwe. Wallowing Bull prefers to be called "Chippewa" because he has both French and Ojibwe ancestors.

Wallowing Bull's father was a great inspiration for him. Big Bear was a struggling single parent, working both as an artist and a taxi driver to support his family. Wallowing Bull says, "When I was just a year old my father set me in his lap, put a pencil in my hand, and started me drawing...it is his art that has had the greatest influence on me." Big Bear always encouraged Wallowing Bull to develop his artistic talent. If, when working on a drawing, Wallowing Bull would say, "Dad, I'm done!" Big Bear would tell him to continue until he had filled the whole page. By the time Wallowing Bull was 10 years old, he was filling his paper with very detailed drawings. One of his favorite subjects was robots and Transformers®.

At age 13, Wallowing Bull became distracted by the usual teenage activities, and he quit drawing. In order to fit in with his friends, he began to drink and smoke. He dropped out of school when he was 17, and as he grew older, his drinking became a method to deal with personal problems. However, at the age of 25, Wallowing Bull's father got him drawing again. This time Wallowing Bull began using Prisma color pencils, and the vibrant color palette has come to define his style. Having overcome his dependence on alcohol, Wallowing Bull is determined, like his father, to dedicate his time and talent to the making of art.



Star Wallowing Bull drawing created at age 10

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Teachers: This curriculum is written as a guide for the adult educator. We encourage you to adapt the material to your students' ages and ability levels.

LIFE IS A PUZZLE

In this work, Wallowing Bull presents a kaleidoscope of images that are organized on the page like pieces in a puzzle. These puzzle pieces are not random shapes; rather their shape and placement on the page create a symbolic landscape of Wallowing Bull's dream and waking life. The result is a visual statement that bombards the senses with the confusing imagery of life in the 21st century. Wallowing Bull says his work is like a cryptic code, full of images that are symbolically important, but, like a puzzling dream, not always easy to understand. However, if we look at the images and their positions within the puzzle landscape as illustrated to the left, we can begin to see a story unfold.

Art Connection: Puzzle Shapes

Think about how you could create your life in a symbolic landscape puzzle. What would it look like, and how would you divide the landscape into puzzle shapes? There are two kinds of shapes: **geometric** and **freeform**. These shapes can be abstract or actual forms such as letters, religious symbols, or figures. What kinds of shapes would you prefer? What images would be in the center shape(s), on the sides, top, or bottom of the picture? If you create a border, what would it look like?

With a pencil, lightly draw/trace your puzzle shape design on a sheet of heavy-grade paper or cardstock. (For younger students, teachers can create pre-cut geometric pattern pieces, including rectangular border pieces, for the students to trace.) Cut along the lines to create a puzzle.

SELF IMAGE: A "PUZZLED" WALLOWING BULL

Wallowing Bull's work often depicts himself as a small child. The "little Sandman" in this drawing symbolizes Wallowing Bull's lost childhood as well as the Sandman character, which is the person from several children's stories who brings good sleep and dreams by sprinkling magic sand onto the sleeper. Wallowing Bull, however, has portrayed this "little Sandman" looking beat up, bewildered, and puzzled. Wallowing Bull says that drawing himself as a child releases his inner child out into the world. "I draw myself quite a bit as a child, I've noticed," Wallowing Bull explains. Then, with a grin, he adds, "As time goes on, I get better looking and don't look so beat up."

Art Connection: Self Portrait

Carefully choose the puzzle shape that will represent you in your artwork. As you choose, think about how big you will be and where you'll be located in the puzzle landscape. Once you have chosen a puzzle piece, think about what you will look like and what you'll be doing and wearing. Draw or collage a picture of yourself on the puzzle piece.

CULTURAL DESIGN

Wallowing Bull has created a beautiful Ojibwe floral pattern, using the repetition of plant forms, in the borders on each side of the artwork. He included this design to show his roots.

Art Connection: Pattern and Repetition

Choose images or symbols that are special to you. Make a pattern on your border pieces by repeating your special image(s) or symbol(s) until you have filled the border.

CULTURAL IMAGERY

Wallowing Bull's drawing is filled with many images from both popular and Native American cultures. Which images are from American popular culture? Which images are Native American? Can you find imagery where Wallowing Bull has combined the two cultures? What do you think the images in Wallowing Bull's drawing might symbolize? Do all your classmates agree on the same meanings?

Art Connection: Visual Culture

Images from your visual culture are all around you. These images can be from your heritage, from your everyday experience, from news events, or from what you have seen in magazines, movies, and on television. Draw or cut out the images that are important to you. Incorporate them into your life puzzle. Ask your family and friends what they think the images symbolize. Do their interpretations match yours? Art historians sometimes differ in their interpretations of artwork. Why do you think people sometimes have different ideas about the meanings of images?

DREAMSCAPE

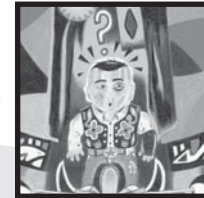
Black Elk once said, "Sometimes dreams are wiser than waking." Wallowing Bull knows this is true and is trying through his art to decipher his dream messages.

Art Connection: Imagine!

Have you had a dream that you can't forget or a recurring dream that won't leave you alone? Have you ever tried to make sense of your dreams? Discuss your dreams in class or create a dream journal by writing down your dreams as you remember them first thing in the morning. Make drawings or cut out pictures from magazines of some of the images in your dreams. You may have to rely on your waking imagination to actually create the images. Place these images on the puzzle pieces where you feel they belong.

VISUAL ART PRODUCTION: SOLVING YOUR LIFE PUZZLE

Once you have filled in all your puzzle pieces with drawings and/or collaged images, put the pieces of your life puzzle together. You may choose to glue your assembled puzzle on to foam core or cardboard, or leave the puzzle pieces loose. Follow up your art making with a class discussion of the concepts and images in your resulting artwork. Create an artist statement to describe your artistic process and intent. Collaborate with your fellow artists to create an exhibition of your work in your school and/or community.



A puzzled Wallowing Bull



Ojibwe floral pattern



Between two cultures

VOCABULARY

FREEFORM

Having or characterized by a flowing asymmetrical shape or outline, such as clouds or trees.

GEOMETRIC

Simple forms such as circles, triangles, and squares in design and decoration.

PATTERN

A recognizably consistent series of related shapes or images.

REPETITION

A principle of design that refers to a way of combining visual elements so that the same elements are used over and over again.

VISUAL CULTURE

Predominant presence of the visual and the image in contemporary culture.

SUGGESTED READING:

Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Sioux

by Black Elk as told to John G. Neihardt
University of Nebraska Press, 1932

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