

MONUMENT VALLEY

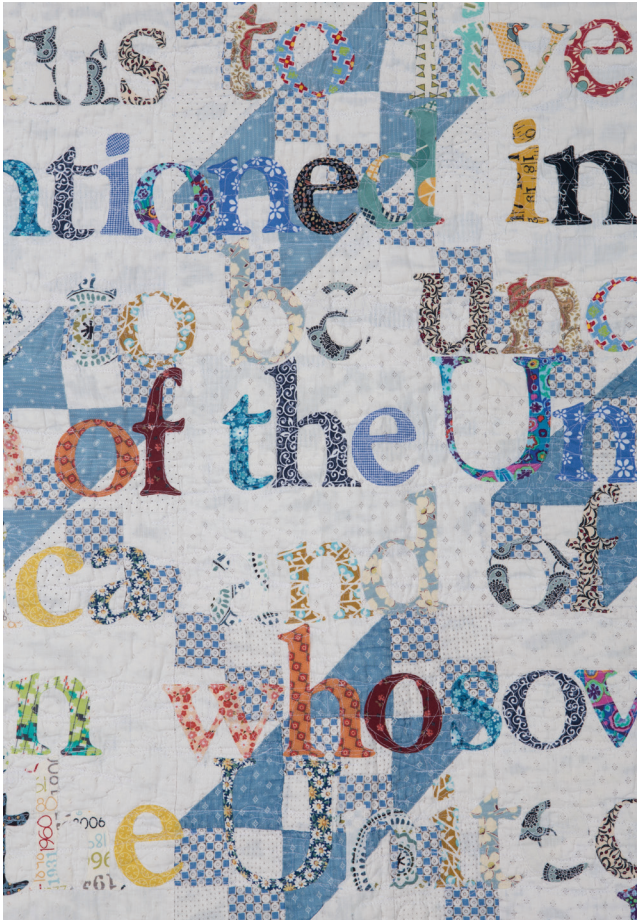
Suggested topics for further
thinking, questioning, and reflection



Anja Niemi (Norwegian, born 1976) / *The Imaginary Cowboy*, 2018

Monument Valley questions and deconstructs the imagery and mythology of the American West, confronting how “Wild West” concepts prevalent in our country’s past and popular culture continue to define American identity into the present day. Taking its title from the geologic formation featured in many Hollywood westerns, *Monument Valley* presents the work of twelve artists from various cultural backgrounds whose work raises questions about how false histories and stereotypical tropes continue to inform the political debates and social concerns of contemporary life.

Land Acknowledgment



Gina Adams (American Ojibwa/Irish, Lithuanian descent, born 1965)

Treaty with the Choctaw 1786, 2019 (detail)

Antique quilt with hand-cut calico letters / Front and back each 79 x 72 inches

Work and image courtesy of the artist and Accola Griefen Fine Art, Brooklyn

Photo: Aaron Paden

A land acknowledgment recognizes the removal of land from Indigenous peoples by colonial governments, often through treaties signed under deceptive, coercive, or violent means.

Many organizations and museums across Australia, Canada, and the U.S. have written land acknowledgments to share with the public at events, in signage, and online.

This image is a detail of one of Gina Adams' *Broken Treaty Quilts*, three of which are included in *Monument Valley*. Like these works, land acknowledgments highlight how colonialism continues to harm contemporary Indigenous peoples through processes like unrecognized treaty rights and eminent domain.

Using a guide from the U.S. Department of Art and Culture, a grassroots action network, and the research of regional historians, the Des Moines Art Center created the land acknowledgment below which is on view at the entrance of the museum and is included in introductions of public programs.

**The Des Moines Art Center acknowledges
the land on which we gather is the traditional, ancestral,
and unceded land of the Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska,
the Iowa Tribe of Oklahoma, and the Meskwaki Nation
of the Sac and Fox Tribe of the Mississippi.**

Questions to ponder

Think back to the history you learned in school. From whose point of view was it told? Which racial and cultural identities were not taught in your American History class? How did this inform your story of America? Has your thinking evolved? If so, what caused your story to change?

How are people who look like you represented in art, history, and popular culture? What informs who we are and how we are perceived? What undermines or unites us?

How do you define American culture?
Do others have the same definition of America?

Think of the name of the place where you live or the name of your school mascot. Do these names reference Indigenous peoples' language or bodies? Do you know the history of how these proper names came to be? Do you know the specific tribe or language where these words originated?

Who or what do you visualize when you think of "Westerns"? Can products and businesses associated with western themes be aimed at a certain race or gender? If so, how?

What is the history of the land on which you live? Who may have owned or cared for the land? How has it been used? What plants or animals may have lived there?



John Jota Leños (American, born 1969) / Video still from *Destinies Manifest*, 2017

Support for *Monument Valley* is provided by
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Want more? Find these works of art with similar themes.

- 1 Edwin Howland Blashfield (American, 1848–1936)
Westward, 1905
Oil on linen canvas mounted on panel
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections;
Gift of Robert Brady, 1963.4.



From whose point of view is history told?

This is a study for a massive painting housed in the Iowa State Capitol. In the artist's words, "The main idea of the picture is a symbolic presentation of the pioneers led by the spirits of Civilization and Enlightenment to the conquest by cultivation of the Great West." This work shows a visual representation of how Manifest Destiny was the viewpoint of European settlers of the 'new world.' This philosophy and painting ignores the lives of the many Indigenous Nations already living in the Americas.

- 2 Kara Walker
(American, born 1969)
Untitled, 1996
Cut paper on canvas
Des Moines Art Center Permanent
Collections; Purchased with
funds from the Edmundson
Art Foundation, Inc., 1999.31.



Do historical stereotypes still exist in regard to the inequitable treatment of certain marginalized groups? What does it mean to have your identity define you? What identities are ignored or receive more privilege?

At first glance, Walker's work appears to depict historical antebellum themes, but her subversive silhouettes show the violence and complexity of race relations from the past to today.

- 3 Danh Vo
(Danish, born Vietnam,
active Germany, born 1975)
Cuaubtémoc Moctezuma, 2013
Cardboard boxes with gold
leaf. Des Moines Art Center
Permanent Collections;
Purchased with funds from
the Edmundson Art
Foundation, Inc., 2016.4.



How does commercialization of names reflect how history treats the conquered? In what ways are Indigenous names and narratives preserved, repurposed, or forgotten all together?

For Vo, this gilded commercial cardboard box is a nod to the long lasting effects of colonialism and the economic disparities that resulted. Cuahtémoc Moctezuma is a major brewery situated in Mexico where the ruins of the Aztec empire also lay. Moctezuma is the name of two former Aztec rulers, and Cuahtémoc is the name of the last emperor.

- 4 Anselm Kiefer
(German, born 1945)
Untitled, 1987–1988
Oil, acrylic, emulsion, ash, lead
objects, ballet shoes, and treated
lead pieces on canvas. Purchased
with funds from the Coffin Fine
Arts Trust; Nathan Emory Coffin
Collection of the Des Moines
Art Center, 1988.12.a–b.



How do we grapple with a shared traumatic history?
What is the legacy that is left behind?

Kiefer creates art in attempt to reckon with the past, and question what it means to be a German, whose country's government and its people committed atrocities against Jewish people and other marginalized groups. This painting points to art and poetry while still acknowledging large-scale loss and trauma.

Find the works of art
above from the
permanent collections in
the lower level of the
Richard Meier building.

