



Signature Style in Art and Album Covers

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How have visual artists worked with musicians without compromising their style?

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students consider how the work of visual artists can complement the work of musicians. Students will first consider the role album covers play in giving added meaning to a musical artist's work. They then investigate the collaboration between music producer Malcolm McLaren and visual artist Keith Haring, as well as the collaboration between visual artist Mickalene Thomas and musical artist Solange on her EP True. In their analysis, they consider the ways Haring's and Thomas's work on album covers relate to their other artistic work, as well as how Haring and Thomas's contributions help supplement the music of Malcolm McLaren and Solange.



Solange, *True* album cover

While music consumption has moved from the physical to digital realm, the visual aspects of a musician's work remains as, if not more, important to an artist's career, image, or persona. Album art remains as prolific as ever—its presentation has simply moved from the paper and cardboard of an album to a digital thumbnail displayed on a music streaming service. Music videos have expanded into complete visual albums, ready to be watched at any time with a click of a button. And performances, whether live or live-streamed, have only grown more spectacular, incorporating choreography, sets, costuming, even virtual reality.

This lesson encourages students to consider what the visual arts in particular bring to the publication of music by examining two visual artist's collaborations with musicians.

Born in 1958 in Reading, Pennsylvania, Keith Haring became one of the most globally prominent artists in the 1980s. After graduating from the School of Visual Arts in New York City, he began creating art in subway stations, spray painting his outlined figures. Haring soon moved from subways to murals, and began mingling with Downtown New York socialites such as Andy Warhol, Madonna, and fellow street artists such as Jean-Michel Basquiat. As he grew more prolific, his work evolved, becoming more political and serving as social commentary as the AIDS and Crack epidemics came to head in the 1980s. Haring's own AIDS diagnosis influenced his work and philanthropic efforts, and he became a member of ACT UP in the late 1980s. His life and career were cut short in 1990, when he passed away from AIDS complications. Several of his murals have been preserved and his work resides in the collections of major institutions.

It was likely Haring's association with the New York City art scene that caught the attention of impresario, manager, and music producer Malcolm McLaren, who collaborated with Haring for his 1983 *Duck Rock*, an album many critics believed brought the then-emerging art forms such as DJing, graffiti, and breakdancing to a wider public attention.

Mickalene Thomas is a contemporary artist whose work has appeared in various forms and in places that go beyond the expected museum gallery wall. Known for her vibrant use of collage to center and celebrate Black women, Thomas's work has existed in mediums such as film, installations, public murals. She has also been featured in editorials, such as Cardi B's 2018 *W* magazine cover and *Time* magazine's March 2020 cover celebrating 100 years of influential women, in which Thomas was selected to honor trans rights activist Marsha P. Johnson. Thomas's work has even appeared as a limited handbag, when she collaborated with French luxury brand Dior to re-envision their iconic Lady Dior bag in 2019.

Thomas's influences are aplenty as they include French modernists, Édouard Manet and Henri Matisse, Harlem renaissance artists Jacob Lawrence and collagist Romare Bearden, and the notable photographer Carrie Mae Weems, who Mickalene Thomas has photographed for *T* magazine in 2018.

For her EP *True*, musical artists Solange commissioned Thomas for the cover. Thomas created a collage-like image that features the Solange, outfitted in a stripe blazer and blue and pink printed pants, laying on a multi patterned floral sofa amongst a collage of other bold patterns and objects.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- Discover the work of visual artists Keith Haring and Mickalene Thomas
- Explore how artists establish their distinct styles with their work
- Examine how Haring's and Thomas's work has been used for album covers by musicians Malcolm McLaren and Solange

2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- Students will be able to draw connections between music and visual arts by examining collaborations between Keith Haring and Malcolm McLaren, as well as Mickalene Thomas and Solange.

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Before class begins, print out **Album Cover Gallery Walk** and place the images around the classroom. (*Alternatively, teachers can project the document to the class as a slideshow.*)
2. Tell students that in the class today they will be drawing connections between visual artists and musicians. Ask students to walk around the room and choose one of the album covers displayed. Then, ask them to think about what the music might sound like, based on the cover. If students are already aware of one of the albums featured, ask them to think about how the imagery of the album cover matches the sound and style of the artist's music.
3. Ask students to share their thoughts on the album covers with the class.

PROCEDURE

1. Tell students that in class they will be specifically examining the work of two visual artists, Keith Haring and Mickalene Thomas, and discovering how their work was used by musicians.
 - What are some similarities you notice between this work and the previous piece you analyzed? (*If needed, show **Image 2** once again to students.*)
 - What are some recurring motifs? Where do you see Haring creating his work?
 - As mentioned Haring's work featured themes of love, community, and social justice. How are those themes represented in the images displayed?
 - How would you describe Haring's work in your own words?
2. Show **Image 1, Photograph of Keith Haring**. Tell students that Haring was born in Reading Pennsylvania in 1958. By the 1980s, he was living in New York City and was one of the most well-known contemporary artists of his time. He regularly worked with artists in New York City such as pop artist Andy Warhol and neo-expressionist Jean-Michel Basquiat.
3. Show **Image 2, Keith Haring, "We The Youth."** Tell students that Haring's work focused on themes such as love, community, critiques of media, and social justice issues such as the AIDS epidemic. Haring passed away due to complications from AIDS in 1990. His work resides in major art museums around the world, as public murals, and on clothing and other merchandise.
4. Show **Image 3, Keith Haring, "Pop Shop."** Tell students to examine the displayed example of his work. Then ask students:
 5. Display **Image 4, Duck Rock Album Cover**. Tell students that in 1983, Keith Haring's illustrations were featured on the cover of British performer, manager, and entrepreneur Malcolm McLaren's first album, *Duck Rock*. The album cover was designed by famed graffiti artist Dondi White and visual artist and director Nick Egan. Ask students:

- What are some objects or words that you notice on the album cover?
 - How do the Haring illustrations on the album cover compare to his work you saw earlier?
 - What are some words, phrases, or descriptions that come to mind when looking at the album cover?
 - What do you expect the music on *Duck Rock* to sound like based on the album cover?
6. Play the video for Malcolm McLaren's "Buffalo Gals" (*Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HCBN7lyLT4w>. Note this is a YouTube link which may also feature advertising. We suggest loading the video before class.*) Ask students to pay attention to the music, location, and activities taking place in the video. After the clip, ask students:
- What aspects of the video stood out to you?
 - How would you describe the song? What sounds do you hear? What instruments are used? What does it remind you of?
 - What words would you use to describe the video and song? Any similar words to ones you used to describe Haring's work and style?
 - Do you think Haring's work and style was an appropriate choice for the album cover of Duck Rock? Explain, comparing the styles of the art and music along with any emotions or connections both evoked for you.
7. Show **Image 5, Mickalene Thomas**. Tell students that Thomas is a visual, multi media artist born in Camden, New Jersey. Her work ranges from paintings, collages, photography and to video art. Thomas' influences include French modernists such as Édouard Manet and Henri Matisse along with Harlem renaissance artists Jacob Lawrence and collagist Romare Bearden.
8. Show **Image 6, Mickalene Thomas, "Portrait of Mnonja."** Tell students that photographer Carrie Mae Weems is also another major influence on Thomas' work due to Weems' predominant focus on Black women as the subject, along with exploring themes of sex and gender, which Thomas has adopted in her work.
9. Show **Image 7, Mickalene Thomas, "Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe- Les trois femmes noires."** Tell students to examine the displayed examples of the work. Then ask students:
- What are some similarities you notice between this work and the previous piece you analyzed? (*If needed, show **Image 6** once again to students.*)
 - What are some recurring motifs or details?
 - How would you describe Thomas' work in your own words?
10. Show **Image 8, True Album Cover**. Tell students that in 2013, singer-songwriter and artist Solange released the limited-edition version of her 2012 EP *True* featuring a commissioned portrait done by Mickalene Thomas. Ask students to examine the album cover, then ask:
- What are some objects or patterns that you notice on the album cover?
 - How does the album cover compare to Thomas' work you saw earlier?

- What are some words, phrases, or descriptions that come to mind when looking at the album cover?
- What do you expect the music on *True* to sound like based on the album cover?

11. Ask students to watch the video for Solange’s “Losing You” directed by award winning director Melina Matsoukas (Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hy9W_mrY_Vk. *Note this is a YouTube link which may also feature advertising. We suggest loading the video before class.*) Pay attention to the fashion, color grade, setting, and extras in the video. Then ask students:

- What are some things you noticed from the video? Do you notice any

similarities between the video and album cover or Thomas’ work?

- How would you describe the song? What sounds do you hear? What instruments are used? Does the song remind you of anything?
- What words would you use to describe the video and song? Any similar words to the ones you used to describe Mickalene Thomas’ work and style?
- Do you think Thomas’ work and style was an appropriate choice for the album cover of *True*? Explain, comparing the styles of the art and music along with any emotions or connections both evoked for you.

SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Split students into groups. In groups, ask students to brainstorm the ways the visual arts might add to the sound, identity, or persona of a musical artist. Ask student groups to then share their discussion with the class.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Create a playlist of songs that you feel best represent you. You may choose the songs yourself or ask friends, family members, or other people in your life to suggest songs that remind them of you. After curating your playlist, design an album cover that reflects who you are or what you’re known for.
2. Choose one of your favorite musical artists. Then, conduct research on visual artists, and select a visual artists whose work you feel best represents the musical artist. Write a short essay introducing both the visual and musical artist, and discuss why you feel their work is connected. Below are a few visual artists from which you can begin your search:

- Dondi White
- Alma Thomas
- Carmen Herrera
- Ellsworth Kelly
- Jean Michel Basquiat
- Yayoi Kusama
- Takashi Murakami
- Sol Lewitt
- Jasper Johns
- Kerry James Marshall



- Raymond Pettibon
- Lynette Yiadom-Boakye
- James Turrell
- Dan Flavin
- Deana Lawson
- Pipolotti Rist
- Frida Kahlo
- Lady Pink
- Nam June Paik

STANDARDS

NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS

Creating

Anchor Standard 1: Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard 2: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard 3: Refine and complete artistic work.

Performing/Presenting/Producing

Anchor Standard 4: Select, analyze and interpret artistic work for presentation.

Anchor Standard 5: Develop and refine artistic techniques and work for presentation.

Responding

Anchor Standard 7: Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Anchor Standard 8: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

Anchor Standard 9: Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

Connecting

Anchor Standard 10: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

Anchor Standards 11: Relate artistic ideas and work with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading (K-12)

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening (K-12)

Comprehension & Collaboration 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Presentation of Knowledge 4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language (K-12)

Language 1: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use 4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use 6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION – NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR MUSIC EDUCATION (NAFME)

Core Music Standard: Responding

Analyze: Analyze how the structure and context of varied musical works inform the response.

Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators' and/or performers' expressive intent.

Evaluate: Support evaluations of musical works and performances based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria.

Core Music Standard: Connecting

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding.

SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 7: Production, Distribution, and Consumption



RESOURCES

HANDOUTS

- Album Cover Gallery Walk