

Contemporary Craft Works

Unmasking Masculinity

Overview: After completing this activity, students will have a better understanding of how an artist's selection of media and technique contribute to his or her message.

Age Group/Grade Level: 14-17 years, grades 9-12

Subject Area: Visual Arts

Duration: approximately 50 min.

Background

Mark Newport's childhood memories color his work. He remembers his unathletic dad calling himself "Superman," his mother's sweaters—made as protection from the cold—and his grandmother teaching the young artist to knit.

At first, Newport knitted costumes for famous superheroes, then he started making up his own heroes. He made these costumes to fit his own skinny, six-foot-tall frame, a body type different from that of a superhero. These soft, droopy suits gave Newport a chance to ponder: What is the power of a comic book hero? What defines masculinity?

"These characters are childhood memories of the ultimate man—the Dad every boy wants, the man every boy wants to grow up to be."
—Mark Newport

Discussion

Share Mark Newport's *Batman 2* with students. Explain that the artist grew up obsessed with comics. Batman was his favorite: "Batman is a human hero. He made himself a hero."

- What traits do superheroes have? How do those traits suit this costume?
- Look closely; how did Newport make this costume?
- How does his decision to knit this costume support or challenge the image of a superhero? Of a male artist?
- How might the message of this artwork be different if a woman had made it?
- What sort of protection could this costume provide the wearer?

Explain that Newport makes these life-size superhero costumes to fit his own tall, skinny body.



Mark Newport, *Batman 2*, 2005, acrylic and buttons, 76 x 26 x 6 in., Museum purchase through the Richard T. Evans Fund, 2010.20. © 2005, Mark Newport

Activity

Explain that, when he became a father, Newport's ideas about masculinity changed. Instead of superstrength and supermanliness, he now thinks of integrity and consistency as valuable masculine traits.

- Where do you see Newport's revised definition of masculinity at play in his artwork?
- How does American culture define a "real" man?
- How do the concepts of masculinity and heroism interact? How does Newport's selection of media challenge these ideas?
- What are two characteristics that you think of as either truly masculine or truly heroic?

Have students create an artwork that embodies their view of the characteristics of a hero. Challenge them to select a medium that reinforces students' messages about what makes a person heroic.

For a full-size image of Mark Newport's *Batman 2*, visit:

https://ids.si.edu/ids/deliveryService?id=SAAM-2010.20_1