

Art Encounters Teacher Notes: Strange Characters

Pause and Discuss

The video introduces artwork by Paloma Varga Weisz, with suggestions to pause the video at specified points to discuss the artwork, with questions to prompt discussion.

Learning Format

The resource is best suited to use in class, but can also be sent to students learning at home, who can write down their ideas and responses to the questions.

Creative Activities

The video can be used on its own without a follow on activity, but you may want to combine it with a creative activity of your own design, or one of our suggested activities, which are explained in more detail in the video:

- Create a character inspired by the work of Paloma Varga Weisz, combining animal and human qualities and using interesting textures
- Create a character which combines human and organic forms, like the pinecone man. Collect natural objects and use them to inspire your work

Video Transcript

We've provided the transcript for the relevant sections of the video here, with questions highlighted in bold. You'll also find some discussion prompts to use in class below each set of questions.

We meet lots of interesting characters in the *Bumped Body* exhibition. A character called *Bumpman* appears in several pieces, with versions carved from wood and cast in bronze. In this piece he sits on a little stool, peering upwards with a sad, but peaceful look on his face. He's covered in uneven bumps, which have been carefully carved by the artist, and glazed with mottled colours, ranging from reds and pinks to blues and greens.

We meet a whole family of strange figures, called *Wild Bunch*, in another room. These characters are ceramic, which means they've been sculpted from clay, rather than carved from wood, like most of the other pieces in the exhibition. They have been glazed, so they have a shiny surface, but no colour has been added. They do look human but are not quite realistic, with their animal-like ears and their rough, quite lumpy bodies. They are arranged in groups in the gallery, possibly families, of adults and children.

Before I tell you any more about these characters, I'd like you to think about your first reactions to them. In a moment, pause the video and respond to these questions, either by discussing them as a class or writing down your ideas. Remember, there are no wrong answers – the brilliant thing about art, is that we can all have different responses to it.

What do you think of *Bumpman*? Who do you think he is?
What might he represent?
What do you think he's thinking or feeling?
How does he make you feel?

PAUSE

Then you're going to look at *Wild Bunch*. Take a closer look at the figures, notice the shapes and textures. What words would you use to describe them? We know they're made from ceramic, rather than carved from wood like *Bumpman*, and other pieces. What difference does this make?

PAUSE

Like most artists, the inspiration for Paloma Varga Weisz's work comes from a huge range of different things. She talks of having an archive in her brain – almost like a big library of different images and artwork she's seen, books, history, religious objects – and that all combines with her own personal experiences to form ideas for her work.

When talking about the inspiration for *Bumpman*, Varga Weisz mentions seeing a very old book with images of different diseases, like the plague, with simplified illustrations. She also takes inspiration from very old paintings like this one, by 15th-century artist Piero della Francesca. I think you can particularly see the similarities in the faces, which are slightly flattened and simplified.

The artist also says that *Bumpman* is a hopeful character, and although he looks as though he has some kind of disease, he doesn't appear to be suffering. His pose, sitting on the stool with his hands and feet crossed, is quite relaxed, almost like he has accepted his fate and is content with it.

Like *Bumpman*, Paloma Varga Weisz drew on lots of ideas when creating the *Wild Bunch* figures. As they appear to be part human, part animal, we might associate them with fauns or characters from myths and fairytales. However, Varga Weisz says they are actually more inspired by the possibilities of childhood imagination, and figures from Medieval paintings like this one by Lucas Cranach the Elder, which shows primitive, naked people lounging around on a riverbank with lions and deer. As the name suggests, these families of figures are quite wild. As well as their unusual ears, they have a rough, unrefined shape, as though the artist has left them unfinished, choosing not to smooth out the clay on their limbs and torsos. This makes them appear quite primitive, almost as if they may be covered in fur rather than skin, however their poses are so skillfully done, clearly human and quite civilised, that they cross the boundary between these two states.

Texture is clearly an important quality in Varga Weisz's work. The process of carving wood is very highly skilled. Varga Weisz says it's like peeling a wooden apple, and you can't correct mishaps. It lends itself well to creating rough, organic textures, which we see in some pieces, but in the figures which are clearly more human, she achieves a beautifully smooth surface which must be painstaking to achieve. When creating all her work, Varga Weisz works intuitively, she doesn't always know what something will look like when she begins a piece – she responds to the materials she is using and the sculpture, and it's meaning shifts and changes as she works.

We also see quite a few characters that we might think of as 'hybrids', which are part human and part something else. Some could be described as being 'anthropomorphic', something which is half human and half animal. In some of her smaller carvings this is more obvious, for example this bust of a dog with what appears to be a human neck and body, and this little man with a pinecone growing from his skull. Varga Weisz also created animals that seem to have human qualities, like this deer who stands on his hind legs like a human. The way he faces the wall makes it almost look like he's admiring his own shadow, like he's posing for himself in the mirror.

Creative Activities

I'd like you to take inspiration from the themes of texture and hybrid characters to create some art work of your own.

You could create a character inspired by Paloma Varga Weisz's work, which combines human and animal qualities. You could use texture to make your creature seem more wild, perhaps it could have scales, bumps, feathers or fur. This could be a drawing, a painting or a sculpture, using clay or plasticine.

Or, you could take inspiration from the pinecone man, creating a character that incorporates organic shapes. You might want to collect some organic forms to inspire you, like conkers, pinecones, rocks or shells and use these as a starting point for your work.

We'd love to see what your class makes. You can share images of their work with us via email to Alison.smith@henry-moore.org or on social media via:

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