

Donna F. St. John
Artist Statement

Tribute Exhibition Of Authentic Heroism
Investigation of Grace, Vision, Clarity & Purpose

ARTIST STATEMENT:

Who do we consider worthy of the title *Hero*? The concept of societal honor has always intrigued me and over the past four years I have contemplated the role of both simulated and authentic heroes in our society. What characteristics does our contemporary population require of someone in order to regard him or her a champion? What is the difference in the consideration between our perception of personal heroes and the heroes deemed so on a collective societal level? My artwork has investigated the deviation between authentic and simulated honor. In a world that has become increasingly artificial, I call into question whether we truly honor the people that have made extraordinary contributions and sacrifices in our contemporary society. I have created a body of work that provides a tribute to a number of diverse individuals; some of which have been internationally recognized and some are clearly unknown to the average American. No one represented in this exhibit is without flaw; they were each blemished with doubts, imperfections, frustrations and the very same human qualities that are balanced within our own lives. Yet each individual was capable of seeing beyond their personal existence and strove to improve the human condition. Every person presented has provided a profound example of the human experience despite the adversity they faced. They are either included for their worldwide contributions to the betterment of others or for their simple acts of kindness to me personally. The creation of this tribute exhibition and the questions it posed

were artistically and philosophically challenging, but also cathartic and healing. As our world continues to blur the lines between simulated and authentic realities, I have chosen to pose questions about the value and perceptions of honor and heroism using mixed media assemblage and oil paints; this media choice also presents a blurring of lines between high and low art.

This ontological investigation considers the individual narrative and the metanarrative created in our contemporary society for both the simulation and authentic testaments of heroic honor. Each of these tributes recognized the synthesis of the solitary and the collective story; it was this realization that provided them with a sense of higher purpose and the hope to cultivate a world that is based more on the refinement of ethics as opposed to individual egos. Each tribute also demonstrated an understanding of the link between their own narrative and the tapestry that connects all beings together. Their realization of human connectedness became the fundamental determinant in their personal sacrifices and life choices. This inspiring study of authentic and simulated heroes has made me reconsider the power of the human spirit in one's life work and the daily opportunities to create gifts of kindness and generosity. Many of these heroes' actions were accomplished despite imminent danger, lack of resources, and without the desire of achieving accolades from society. It was not just the deeds of these tributes that determined their heroic accomplishments; it was their altruistic motivation that was profoundly inspirational.

Each of these people is unique in their own history and deeds; but regardless of their distinct qualities I have discovered four characteristics that were a commonality. The four character factors routinely represented by these tributes were authentic grace, vision, clarity and purpose. My aspiration was to provide the viewer with the motivation and recognition that each of us has the power to alter the ethical awareness in our society and

raise our own level of consciousness through our individual actions. It is my hope that this exhibition will provide the viewer with the opportunity to reflect on people of great character while also considering whom we honor in our society and why they are considered worthy of our reverence.

The individuals featured in this body of work had an extensive sense of goodwill, which allowed them to envision both the individual elements and the complex connectedness of our contemporary times. Every person modeled extraordinary levels of human grace that manifested the philosophy that individual actions could contribute to the betterment of society while recognizing that there is wisdom and power in responding to a contemporary society as a whole. They were either confident or hopeful that their actions could change the trajectory of humankind and they believed that their life deployed them with the social responsibility to do so. The individuals in this exhibition demonstrated awareness beyond the sense of separate self. They had the wisdom to recognize connections within the human species and also within physical acts that transcended time.

“Without the concept of an other, there is no separate I. Without the sense of an I, nothing can be seen as other.” (Mitchell, 58) This quote was taken from a translation of the *Second Book of the Tao*. To understand the concept of grace through connectedness, we can also look to Eckhart Tolle and his thoughts on a collective conscious in his book *A New Earth*: “The ego may be clever, but it is not intelligent. Cleverness pursues its own little aims. Intelligence sees the large whole in which all things are connected. Cleverness is motivated by self-interest, and it is extremely shortsighted. The ego creates separation, and separation creates suffering.” (Tolle, 112) This exhibit includes a piece honoring Malala Yousafzai. Her assemblage painting is an installation tribute to her sense of responsibility for all women and their educational fate. She states, “To all the girls who have faced

injustice and been silenced. Together we will be heard.” This young woman recognized that achieving educational equality is not an individual ambition; it is a campaign uniting all women. Malala was born in Pakistan in 1997. She became an advocate for girls' education, which resulted in the Taliban issuing a death threat against her. On October 9, 2012, a gunman shot Malala when she was traveling home from school. She was shot three times at point blank range. She survived and has continued to speak out on the importance of education for women. Malala has used this tragedy to propel her and her campaign for educational equality.

Malala was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014. This piece pays homage to her courage, grace and spiritual awareness. The assemblage painting is titled, *The High Cost of Education*; it pays tribute to Malala's elevated level of grace. I have used paint and intentional objects to reveal unexpected connections that symbolize social justice. The objects are placed in an unfamiliar arrangement, which at first glance presents a clear narrative, but if the viewer takes the time and labor to unravel the “low” art media objects the narrative becomes more significant. The foundation of this piece leads people down an uncomfortable path that undermines soloptic thinking and asks them to rethink their definition of social justice and life's inexplicable interconnections. We complain about America's high cost of education but we are incognizant to the immense sacrifices that many young women are forced to pay for their education, for their hope of a favorable future.

Consider the statement by Emmanuel Levinas in *Entre Nous*:

There is no doubt that we need to react strongly against the classical idea of the eminent value of autarkic or personal self- sufficiency. The perfect is not perfect because it suffices for itself; or at least the perfection of self-sufficiency is that of a system, not that of a being... Under what conditions can the relationship bind a being to what it

needs for spiritual value? It seems as though here there must be reciprocity, an awakening. The only relationship that can be said to be spiritual is that of a being with a being; ...what really matters is spiritual commerce between beings, and that involves not respect but love. (Emmanuel Levinas, 61)

Is there really a separation between each of us or is that an illusion that makes our lives more neatly packaged and easier to maintain? All recipients in this exhibition tribute exemplified an understanding of grace that goes beyond their mere existence or survival. They were driven by grace and were able to overcome intellectual rationale to accomplish profound or memorable actions that to many people would seem illogical. Through it all, they remained steadfast in their recognition of responsibility and compassion for others. These tributes questioned where each of us begins and each of us ends. What are the ties in history that bind us together? Are we irrefutably intertwined or are we each our own separate entity? If we are each separate, then what is the purpose of kindness or empathy? If we are on some level bound together, then why does social injustice exist? The *Tao* describes this interconnection by stating, "The master knows that all beings are strung on a single thread and that all life and death are one body." (Mitchell, 78)

Vision was another common characteristic; many of the tributes in this exhibition maintained an optimistic viewpoint in the face of despair and desolation. They worked tenaciously, sometimes with support of their contemporaries, but often without approbation. Each tribute strove to remain buoyant and progressive in their personal outlook. Another piece in this exhibition is titled *Nonviolence is the Weapon of the Strong*. This assemblage represents Gandhi's spiritual eloquence and his ability to provide humankind a model of extraordinary grace, strength and optimism. He embraced an ascetic lifestyle based on fasting and meditation. Gandhi has stated that the deepest spiritual awareness implies absolute nonviolence. The hand-stitched, cotton assemblage portrait

pays homage to Gandhi's peaceful campaign of economic independence for India through the manufacturing of homespun cotton, thus replacing imported textiles from Britain. Each cotton stitch is a reminder that social action and the cultivation of peace is obtained through optimistic tenacity and patience. Although he was imprisoned for his nonviolent political action seven times on separate occasions, Gandhi continued to model a flawless example of hopeful strength and empathy, emulating a perfect spiritual balance.

Clarity and purpose are two more characteristics that are laudable life attributes represented by the people in this exhibit. The outlook of these individuals remained focused and progressive regardless of the query from their contemporaries or the distinctive dilemmas that they each experienced. Many of the tributes exemplified an unshakable certainty. Their clarity and purpose were demonstrated by their example of a sustained focus in regards to their ambitions in the face of tribulation. They had a pure concept of what they were to accomplish without being bound by the restraints of society's acclaim. They simply remained true to their vision subscribing to the belief that the actions of their lives were of greater importance than, in some cases, life itself. Consider the assemblage piece *Is This the Cost of Social Justice?* This memorial assemblage piece was created because I was haunted by the image of a Middle Eastern man performing the act of self-immolation; I couldn't sleep at night. I had to create a tribute to Bouazizi and to his mother. I needed to pose the question "Is this what it takes to be treated with respect?" This piece shows Bouazizi's mother as she holds an image of her son after he has set himself on fire. Bouazizi believed that honor was more important than life itself. After repeated harassment from government officials, the confiscation of his vegetable scale became the last straw. The 26-year-old street vendor set himself on fire in protest. This act ignited the revolution in Tunisia, which resulted in the downfall of Egypt's dictator. The

artwork is a reflection on social justice. This piece is made out of thousands of ordinary matchsticks; the matchsticks are a metaphor for each of us. Mohamed Bouazzi's mother is a symbol of the Virgin Mary. The sense of hope is represented through her image, water and a bird's nest. This piece asks the viewer "Are you the one that can douse the flame or are you the single match that can ignite the blaze of social injustice?"

The media chosen for each piece in this exhibition was specifically tailored to speak of the tribute's message and life accomplishments. The mixed media compilation is in reference to Arte Povera.

In its general sense, 'Arte Povera' (an Italian term meaning poor/impoorished art, allegedly derived from the 'poor theatre' of the Polish film director Jerzy Grotowski) describes a type of avant-garde art made from "found objects" including worthless materials, like soil, bits of wood, rags or scraps of newspaper. More specifically, it refers to a group of avant-garde painters and sculptors based in Turin, Milan, Genoa and Rome from the mid-1960s onwards who produced a provocative fusion of Conceptual Art, Assemblage, Minimalism, and Performance Art. The group was promoted and publicized by the Turin dealer Enzo Sperone and, notably, by the art critic and curator Germano Celant (b.1940). The latter coined the name 'Arte Povera' and curated the movement's first exhibition in 1967, in Genoa. (Visual Arts Encyclopedia)

I did not restrict myself to the exclusive use of "worthless" or "everyday" materials; however, I did find great revelation in the Arte Povera movement and the countless decisions and opportunities for problem solving that the mixed media constructions demanded from me as the creator of this exhibition.

Researching each individual also provided a great catalyst. This stimulus compelled me to question how I could compress someone's personal life goals and moments of distinction into an accolade worthy of their merit. I felt an enormous responsibility to visually communicate an accurate tribulation for each individual featured in this exhibition. This sense of duty propelled my personal inventiveness through the synthesizing of mixed

media and mixed processes. This required me to combine intentional physical objects into art pieces that were both true to the tributes' messages and also celebrated the breadth of their global accomplishments. This intentional breaking free of "high" and "low" art media restrictions created a less constrictive canvas and provided a very succinct statement for the testimonial of each individual.

This body of work also investigated the theoretical questions of simulacra. Consider the piece titled *Homage to Authentic Nobility, Examination and Hope for the Simulated*. This vanity assemblage examines whom we honor in our contemporary society. An oil painting of Rita Levi-Montalcini is the center of the vanity; she is the 1986 Nobel Prize recipient for her work in physiology. Her quote tells young people to not think of themselves but to think of others. Montalcini is a proud woman but she is the opposite of vane. The two side panels of the vanity have been reversed. The wood from the side panels has been etched with the names of all 47 women in history who have earned a Nobel Prize. Many of these women's names are unfamiliar to us. In contrast, portraits of two very recognizable women, Kim Kardashian and Paris Hilton have been painted on the side mirrors and attached to the back of the vanity, out of view. The microscope on the vanity scrutinizes different quotes from simulated fame. In a world in turmoil, Kardashian is quoted "I hate when women wear the wrong foundation color. It might be the worst thing on the planet." Hilton's quote is, "All you have to do in life is go out with your friends, party, have fun, and look twice as good as that bitch standing next to you." The quotes from both simulated personas are statements that are disturbing and lacking in grace, but these two famous women are able to use simulacra to create their own empires. This assemblage piece examines society's lure of simulacra and encourages the viewer to reexamine whom they are personally paying homage to. According to Baudrillard and his theory on postmodern

simulation and simulacra, it is a question of substituting the *signs* of the real for the real.

Baudrillard has claimed that the postmodern culture has lost the ability to make sense of any distinction between authentic and artifice.

Such is simulation, insofar as it is opposed to representation. Representation stems from the principle of the equivalence of the sign and of the real (even if this equivalence is Utopian, it is a fundamental axiom). Simulation, on the contrary, stems from the Utopia of the principle of equivalence, from the radical negation of the sign as value, from the sign as the reversion and death sentence of every reference. Whereas representation attempts to absorb simulation by interpreting it as a false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum.

Such would be the successive phases of the image:

it is the reflection of a profound reality;
it masks and denatures a profound reality;
it masks the absence of a profound reality;
it has no relation to any reality whatsoever:
it is its own pure simulacrum. (Sheila Faria Glaser, 6)

The first order of simulacra is the image; this image remains a recognizable counterfeit.

Baudrillard associated the industrial revolution with the second order of simulation; this is determined by our ability to mass reproduce an image or persona. This order masks reality quite well, but there still remains the ability to discern that this image or identity is not authentic. The third order is simulacrum is the state of no longer having any distinction between true reality and its representation. There is only the simulacrum or the illusion of reality that remains.

Baudrillard pointed to a number of variables that account for the phenomenon of simulacra. One of these factors producing the simulation effect is the ubiquitous nature of media culture that has been created in our contemporary society. Media culture would be defined as any contemporary media, including images, commercials, billboards, tweets, social networking, etc. The constant feed of media culture does not just convey stories or information; it creates illusions of stories that are no longer transparent or true. As a

society we interpret these illusions through a simulated lens that lacks all levels of accuracy, therefore we provide admiration to illusionary heroes and subsequently ignore those in our midst that are worthy of acclaim. This cycle continues, keeping us one step removed from true reality.

My research sprung from esoteric concerns of society's simulated sense of homage, which in turn has led me to the personal goal of investigating and providing authentic tributes to real heroes. My artistic journey for this body of work began with three questions:

- Whom do we consider worthy of the title *Hero*?
- What characteristics does our contemporary population require of someone in order to consider him or her a champion?
- What causes each of these champions to dedicate their life energy to the betterment of others?

Over the course of my study, I have had the honor to widen my understanding in regards to authentic heroes in our society; I have studied people that have managed to rise above their societal adversities to unlock their potential. In some instances they were also able to open social justice opportunities for those that surround them. This exhibition allows each of us to envision how a more conscious world could be created. These tribute recipients believed that their lives could change the trajectory of society and it was their duty and social responsibility to do so. These beliefs provided them with the energy to complete their actions without the lure of societal acclaim.

By creating this exhibition of tributes, I have raised questions that challenge our society's simulated value system and a simplistic soloptic view of the human existence. Each of these authentic tributes did not concern themselves with simulacra; they focused

on a collective existence with extraordinary levels of grace, purpose, vision and clarity.

These historical figures pushed their fellow beings to consider questions of higher levels of consciousness that are frequently dismissed in a simulated society. The tribute's life actions asked each of us to look within ourselves and consider all of the existing connections in the past, present and future. Charles Simic, the Poet Laureate, best stated this concept in his work titled "St. Thomas Aquinas" with these philosophical words:

“...Everyone I met

Wore part of my destiny

Like a carnival mask.” - Charles Simic,

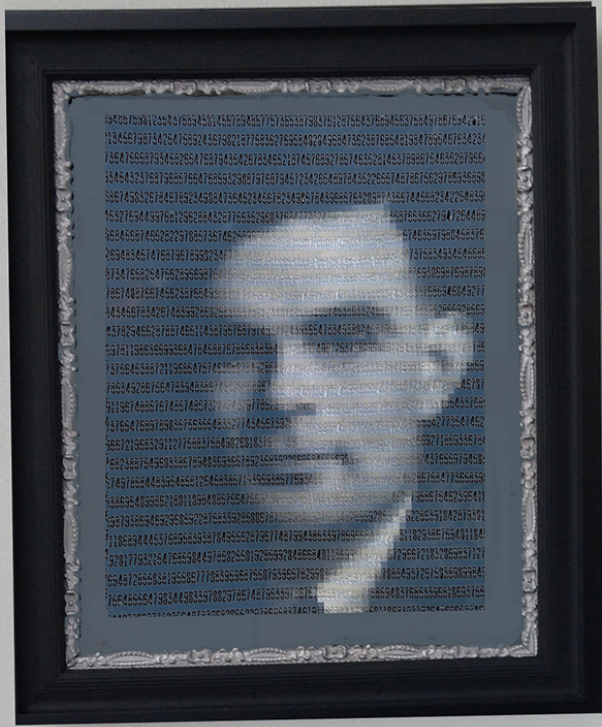
“St. Thomas Aquinas”

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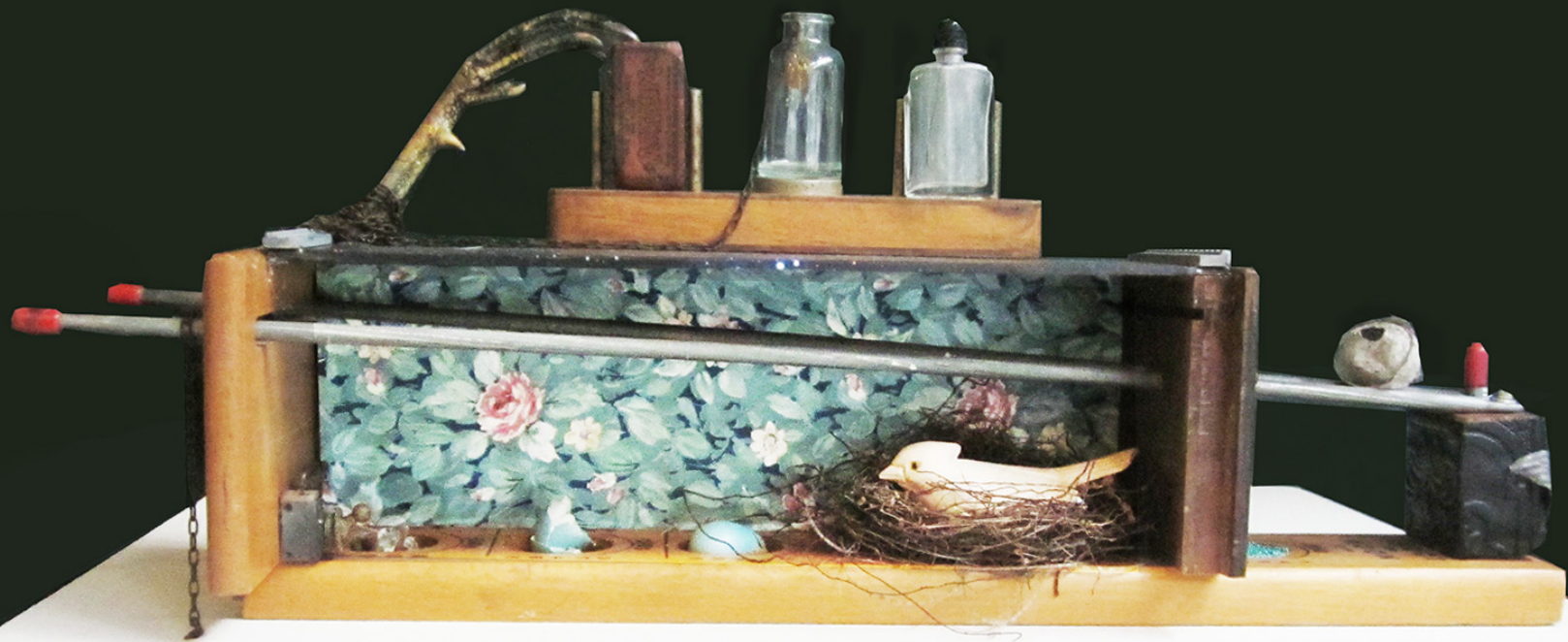


James C. Blaine
1874 Memorabilia

AN EXHIBITION
TITHU TRAP
PURPOSE
VISION
CLARITY
& GRACE

















Donna F. St. John – 4-Tier Lesson Plan Format

“Educational progress should not be assessed by the amount of information that a student can process. Educational success should be measured as the astute ability to creatively synthesize seemingly disparate ideas in order to solve global problems in a collaborative way, with the realization that our entire existence is co-dependent.” St. John Global STEAM

Intentional Design for the 21st Century Learner- 4-Tier Lessons

Step by step instructions considering the learner, the instructor and the contemporary environment in which we live.

The four tier approach to quality lesson plans include:

- ❖ **Rigorous Art Standards** – Standards of the main subject area
- ❖ **Integrated Standards** – Standards of at least two other subject areas
- ❖ **Multi-Sensory Driven Stimuli** – differentiate the learning by considering the presentation of a variety of senses.
- ❖ **Presentation Differentiation** - differentiate the learning by considering your presentation style and student preferences; this would include both a linear, sequential sequence to the presentation and a novel consideration to enhance student engagement.

Title of Lesson – Tributes and Assemblage

This lesson was created and written by Donna F. St. John

Grade Level – High School

Allocated Time – 2 weeks

Outcome Statement- At the end of this lesson the students will be aware of who they admire and why; they will understand that for centuries artists have used their artistic voices to create tributes of admiration. Students will use the design process to research, brainstorm, collaborate, critique, reflect and design a piece of artwork that provides a tribute to an authentic hero. The definition of an authentic hero is someone who has used his or her fame, wealth, talent, or beauty to make the world significantly better for society as a whole. The students will begin to contemplate the significance of interconnections and interdependence within our global world.

This lesson is important at this level because it gives students the opportunity to examine *who* they admire while investigating historical and contemporary figures. The students will see the integration of different disciplines as they express their ideas through art, design, and the engineering process.

Objectives –

- Investigate tribute art throughout history and recognize the power of the artistic voice in cultivating change

- Create a 2-D, 3-D, installation, or video art piece that presents a tribute of an authentic hero
- Research their chosen hero to gain a deeper understanding of their hero's accomplishments and use this understanding to propel their artistic decisions reflecting on the how interconnectedness can alter social injustice for others
- Manipulate found objects to create an intended reaction by creating duplicity, contrast, or juxtaposition in a well crafted way and orally express their choices of objects, symbols, and the manipulation of those choices
- Artwork and writing statement should be presented in a professional manner

Art Discipline Standards –

MI.A.K-12.01

STANDARD: All students will apply skills and knowledge to perform in the arts.

MI.A.10-12.01.14.VA

Apply materials, techniques, media technology, and processes with sufficient skill, confidence, and sensitivity that personal intentions are carried out in artworks.

MI.A.K-12.02

STANDARD: All students will apply skills and knowledge to create in the arts.

MI.A.10-12.02.20.VA

Create artworks that use organizational principles and functions to solve specific visual arts problems.

MI.A.K-12.04

STANDARD: All students will understand, analyze, and describe the arts in their historical, social, and cultural contexts.

Integrated Standards –

MI.SS.K-12.01.02 STANDARD: All students will understand narratives about major eras of American and world history by identifying the people involved, describing the setting, and sequencing the events. (Comprehending the Past)

MI.SS.7-9.01.02.02: Identify and explain how individuals in history demonstrated good character and personal virtue.

MI.LA.10-12.03.01 Integrate listening, viewing, speaking, reading, and writing skills for multiple purposes and in varied contexts. An example is using all the language arts to complete and present a multi-media project on a national or international issue.

MI.LA.10-12.06.04 Document and enhance a developing voice with authentic writings for different audiences and purposes. Examples include portfolios, video

productions, submissions for competitions or publications, individual introspections, and applications for employment and higher education.

Universal Design for Learning/ Tier 3 and 4 – This section lists the ways that the lesson is diversified in response to Multi Sensory Stimuli (include 3- 5) and Presentation Styles (considering both the linear and the random thinkers).

Multi-Sensory Driven Stimuli:

Intrapersonal – Personal investigation of who they admire and why

Interpersonal – Group research on the individuals in history how presented themselves with grace, clarity, vision and purpose – using their talents to make the world better (see definition in Outcome Statement of this lesson)

Kinesthetic – Creating the artwork

Linguistic – Writing and researching heroes worthy of tribute

Musical – I Need a Hero by Bonnie Tyler / instrumental music playing during studio sessions

Presentation Style Consideration -

Linear Thinking –List of Nobel Peace Prize Winners/ rubric

Novelty – Students enter the classroom with Bonnie Tyler’s I Need a Hero playing with the definition of hero written on the board

Anticipatory Set –

Greet students at the door wearing a Super Man/Woman T-Shirt

Concepts and Vocabulary –

Tribute Art, Hero, Global Interconnections, Design Process, Objects as art media, Symbols, Media Intentionality, Assemblage, Contemporary Art, Tribute Art

Materials – -Found objects brought in by students and teacher

-Wire

-Shadow boxes/frames/items to display assemblage

-Glue

-Hot glue

-Other adhesives

-Nails

-Cardboard

-Pedestals for display

-Cameras / printers / video camera

Resources

- Tribute artwork, PP
- Books from library
- Newspapers, Newsweek, USA Today
- Film Examples
- Nobel Peace Prize List
- Hero Song by Bonnie Tyler

Daily Plan of Action –

The lesson begins with a short video clip of someone whose life was used to better the world. This could be Rita Levi-Montalcini, Malala Yousafzai, Kailash Satyarthi, Dalai Lama or others. This lesson continues with a group discussion of what makes someone legendary. American students tend to think that legendary means beautiful, rich or famous. We live in a world of reality TV and simulated stars that present themselves as “legendary” but they may just be experts at marketing themselves and simulated fame. The discussion continues dissecting the difference between someone who is legendary and someone who is just famous, wealthy, talented or beautiful. The definition of legendary for this lesson is: someone that has used his or her intelligence, wealth, beauty, talent or fame to make the world better.

The class will view a PP that presents a variety of artists that have provided a tribute as a means of remembering someone or providing homage to people throughout history that have improved the lives of others. This PP could include the following contemporary: James Luna – Artifact Piece, Rauschenberg – Retroactive, Warhol – Monroe, Chicago – Dinner Party, Felix Gonzales Torres – A Corner of Baci, Kehinde Wiley – Portrait Series. I have created an entire Tribute Exhibit that exemplifies the questions of simulated and authentic heroes; many of these pieces are on my website and can also be used as a resource.

The students will work individually or in groups to research historical or contemporary figures that meet the definition of legendary that was provided at the beginning of this lesson. The students work through the design process to determine intentional media and how they will create the tribute worthy of their selected tribute.

This lesson will include a detailed discussion on what legendary means to the American student.

Day 2 – Review and discussion in small groups.

Research will continue. Students and student groups will explain and defend their decision continuing to brainstorm intentional media choice and construction. After a group consensus has been reached; the materials are collected and the studio work begins.

Following Work Days –

Students will research, review, collaborate, construct, critique, refine and repeat the design process. Students should have a written artistic statement and well-constructed final project for a school exhibition.

Accommodations –

Students with physical disabilities are provided with physical adaptations and special assistance and one on one instruction when needed

Closure – What is the definition of the following:

Tribute Art and Heroes, Grace – Virtue – Purpose, Ethics, Global Interconnections, Design Process, Objects, Symbols, Media Intentionality, Assemblage, Installation

Assessment –

Scoring Guide
Social Justice Art Grading Rubric

Points	Criteria Description
30–28 Points	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The tribute artwork is visually interesting and demonstrates a good understanding of the concepts introduced, focusing on media choice and intentionality, symbolism, tribute art.• The student is proficient and comfortable in the design and creation process• The final piece is well crafted and turned in on time• The student’s artistic statement is well written• Student prepares this artwork to be displayed in a professional manner.
27–25 points	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The tribute artwork is somewhat interesting and demonstrates an appropriate understanding of the concepts introduced, focusing on media choice and intentionality, symbolism, tribute art.• The student is proficient and semi comfortable in the design and creation process• The final piece is well crafted but not turned in on time• The student’s artistic statement is written but has several errors• Student prepares this artwork to be displayed in a professional manner.
24–22 points	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The tribute artwork is moderately interesting and demonstrates a moderate understanding of the concepts introduced, focusing on media choice and intentionality, symbolism, tribute art.• The student is working towards artistic proficiency and is mildly comfortable in the design and creation process• The final piece is lacking craftsmanship and is not turned in on time• The student’s artistic statement is written but has many grammar errors.• Student does not prepare this artwork to be displayed in a professional manner.
21–0 points	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The tribute artwork is not very interesting and does not demonstrate a moderate understanding of the concepts introduced, focusing on media choice and intentionality, symbolism, tribute art.• The student is working towards artistic proficiency and is not very comfortable in the design and creation process• The final piece is incomplete and is lacking craftsmanship/ not turned in on time• The student’s artistic statement is incomplete.• Student does not prepare this artwork to be displayed in a professional manner.