

LESLIE SMITH III: MAKING MEANING



Leslie Smith III. *Spring Kept Its Promise Once Again*, 2021 (detail)

ACTIVITY OVERVIEW

Leslie Smith III challenges the idea that a painting must exist within a traditional square or rectangular canvas. He creates his structures, allowing the physical form of the artwork and surrounding negative space to become part of the composition.

Through abstraction, Smith's work seeks to simultaneously communicate his personal narrative while eliciting a universal emotional response from the viewer. His paintings offer a sensory and conceptual experience, pairing vivid compositions with evocative titles that invite reflection and interpretation.

In this activity, students will explore Smith's abstract artworks through close looking and discussion. They will then create an artwork inspired by his nontraditional canvas shapes, allowing their ideas to develop through the process of making. Finally, students will title their work and consider how titles can influence interpretation.

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Examine and discuss defining features of Leslie Smith III's artistic practice
- Create an original artwork on a non-traditional canvas shape
- Consider how meaning can develop through the process of making rather than from a predetermined idea
- Investigate the relationship between image, text, title, and interpretation

MATERIALS LIST

- Image of a Leslie Smith III artwork (digital or printed)
- Colored cardstock
- Scissors
- Glue
- Optional: Drawing or painting materials



Learn more about the artist
at lesliesmith3.com

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SUGGESTED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Look closely at Smith's artwork. What do you notice first? What do you notice after looking for a little longer?
- What do you notice about the shape of the artwork? How would your experience of the artwork change if it were a traditional rectangle?
- What shapes, colors, or textures do you see? What might they make you think about?
- Does knowing the title change what you notice or how you interpret the artwork?
- Can an artwork have more than one meaning? Can a viewer have an interpretation that is different from what the artist originally intended?
- Smith often allows his artwork to develop through the process of making. What might happen if you began creating an artwork without deciding what it would be about?

ACTIVITY STEPS

1. Begin by showing students an image of a Leslie Smith III artwork without revealing its title. Give students time to look quietly before beginning a discussion. Encourage students to describe what they see before making assumptions about what the artwork means. Consider using the provided discussion questions to guide close looking and interpretation.
2. Ask students to interpret what the work means to them. What emotions does it provoke? Does it remind them of a personal memory or story? Next, reveal the title of the artwork. Discuss how knowing the title of the artwork may change our interpretation.
3. Give each student cardstock. Encourage students to cut or tear the paper into unexpected shapes before they begin adding any drawing or painting to the surface.
4. Students may experiment with lines, shapes, colors, patterns, textures, or materials. Encourage them to respond to what develops as they work rather than trying to create a specific subject.
5. When students feel their artwork is finished, invite them to choose a title. The title does not need to describe the artwork. It might describe a feeling, suggest a story, or raise a question.
6. Have students partner with another student. First, share the artwork without revealing its title. The partner should describe what they notice and what the artwork makes them wonder. Next, reveal the title. Ask students to discuss how the new information changed their interpretation.

REFLECT AND CONNECT

- What did you discover from allowing your artwork to develop through the process of making?
- How did the shape of your artwork affect what you made?
- How did your partner's interpretation compare with your own? Did this change when the title was revealed?
- Does an artist get to decide what an artwork means or does the viewer become part of creating its meaning?



Leslie Smith III, *Cosmic Feud*, 2023



Leslie Smith III, *Spring Kept It's Promise Once Again*, 2021

