

Michael Joo

Art Can Improve Nature By Michael Joo

In some of my work, I have developed what I call "improved" racks of moose and elk antlers. I have taken antlers found in the wild, called "sheds," and changed them in my studio, for instance, by installing metal segments in between sections of the bone, or casting them in rubber and tying them in knots.

I find antlers interesting because they are natural extensions of the moose or elk's body, which, once the animal reaches a certain age, grow and are "shed" each year, increasing in power and size as the animal does. Antlers function as both a tool to battle the outside world and a reflection of the animal's characteristics: they represent the animal's strength/weakness to others and are limited by what that animal can literally carry on its own head. In this way, antlers have much in common with the "identity" we as humans project, something that is always a work-in-progress, that we "grow" and lose, only to re-grow again—a process that is both organic and "man-made." It is limited only by our own capacity to imagine ourselves or to see ourselves as strong beings.

Prostheses—from a deer's antlers, to Wolverine's retractable adamantium claws, to grandma's false teeth—can be replacements or substitutes for missing parts of a body, or be extensions that improve functions of the body. We could also think of prostheses in other ways not limited by function.

Using simple materials found around the house or in nature, make an extension for your body that communicates a part of yourself that others might not see, or that communicates ideas that you might want to express about yourself.

Materials for this activity could include:

Paper towel rolls, sticks, aluminum foil, tape, feathers, string, boxes, or anything readily available.

This activity is imagined for grades 1–5 but can easily be adapted through grade 8.

Activity Summary

Topic: Art and nature
Creating identity

Suitable for

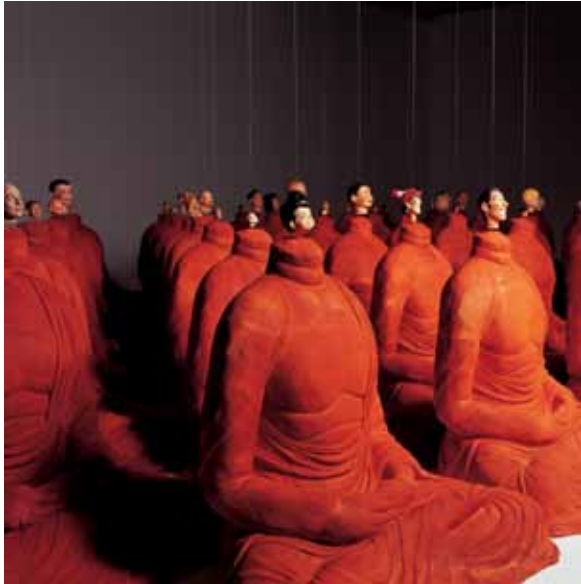
- Beginning level
- Intermediate level

Suggested media

- Mixed media
- Sculpture

About Michael Joo

Artist's Work



Headless (Mfg. Portrait), Michael Joo, 2000. Urethane foam, pigment, vinyl plastic, styrene plastic, urethane plastic, stainless steel wire, neodymium magnets, 66 x 336 x 216 in. (167.6 x 853.4 x 548.6 cm)



Improved Rack (Elk #14), Michael Joo, 2008. Antlers, stainless steel, 96 x 57 x 19 in. (243.8 x 144.8 x 48.3 cm)

Artist Biography

Born 1966 in Ithaca, New York

Currently lives in New York, New York

Science versus religion. Nature versus human intervention. Fact versus fiction. Individual versus cultural identity. Michael Joo explores big ideas through a variety of media and materials, including video, sculpture, installation, blocks of salt, bamboo, Styrofoam, and human sweat. Whether he films himself trekking along the Alaskan pipeline, or builds blocks of salt to represent the energy of historic figures, Joo creates conceptual works of art that address the complex, slippery nature of identity—of a place, a person, or an object.

Joo is a second generation Korean American whose parents immigrated to the United States to study science at Cornell University. Joo recalls a childhood spent in forests and farms, watching his parents play poker, and playing in the backyard of eminent astrophysicist and astronomer Carl Sagan. Joo would go on to study science himself at Wesleyan University, but would eventually earn a Master of Fine Arts degree in sculpture from Yale School of Art.