

Guide for Educators

*Lesley Dill's Poetic Visions:
From Shimmer to Sister Gertrude Morgan*
October 23, 2011 - March 4, 2012



Lesley Dill, *Dress of Flame and Upside-Down Bird*, 2006,
Metal foil, organza, wire, 95 X 45 X 1 in.



Lesley Dill, *Eye (Revelation) #2*, 2010, India
Ink and thread on paper, 12 3/4 X 9 1/4 in.

**“Words are wings.
They lift us
as wings lift animals.”**

- Lesley Dill

Lesley Dill's Poetic Visions: Guide for Educators

Table of Contents:

Page 2: Washington State EALR's

Page 3: Meet Lesley Dill

Pages 4 - 6: About the Whatcom Museum Exhibition

Page 7: About the Folk Artist Sister Gertrude Morgan

Page 8: About the Poet Emily Dickinson

Pages 9 - 10: Classroom Extensions

Page 11: Resource List and Invitation to Museum Programs
Related to the Lesley Dill Exhibition

Washington State EALR's

Visual Arts:

- 1.1 Understands and applies visual arts concepts and vocabulary.
- 1.2 Develops art skills and techniques.
- 1.3 Understands and applies visual arts genres and styles of various artists, cultures, and times.
- 1.4 Understands and applies audience conventions in a variety of settings, performances, and presentations of visual arts.
- 2.3 Applies a responding process to a presentation/exhibition of visual arts. (Engages, describes, analyzes, interprets, and evaluates)
- 3.1 Uses visual arts to express feelings or present ideas
- 4.3 Understands how the arts impact and reflect personal choices throughout life
- 4.4 Understands how the arts influence and reflect cultures/civilization, place, and time.

Writing:

- 2.2 Writes for a variety of purposes.
- 2.3 Writes in a variety of forms/genres

Communication:

- 1.1 Uses listening and observation skills and strategies to focus attention and interpret information.

Reading:

- 1.1 Use vocabulary (word meaning) strategies to comprehend text.
- 2.3 Expand comprehension by analyzing, interpreting, and synthesizing information and ideas in literary and informational text.
- 3.4 Read for literary experience in a variety of genres.



Angel, 2010, cutout from Hell Hell Hell/Heaven Heaven Heaven: Encountering Sister Gertrude Morgan and Revelation, India ink and thread on paper 16 X 12 in.

Lesley Dill's Poetic Visions: Guide for Educators

Meet Artist Lesley Dill:

The Whatcom Museum is proud to bring the work of nationally-recognized contemporary artist Lesley Dill to the Northwest. Lesley Dill is among the most prominent artists working at the intersection of art and language. Experimenting with a wide range of tactile materials, Dill creates evocative mixed-media artworks that fuse poetry and image to stir hidden feelings and meanings. Along with poetry, Dill's travels abroad and profound interests in spirituality and the world's faith traditions also serve as catalysts for her exploration. Her work crosses traditional boundaries between artistic disciplines and includes printmaking, drawing, sculpture, photography, installation, and operatic performances.



Lesley Dill Working

Born in New York and raised in Maine, Dill received her Master of Arts from Smith College in 1974, and her Master of Fine Arts from Maryland Institute College of Art in 1980. In pursuit of a career in painting, the artist moved to New York after graduation. Her eyes were opened to new modes of expression and she soon emerged prominently as a sculptor and multi-media artist. Her interest in language and allusions to strong feminine identity reflect her friendship with the late artist, Nancy Spero (1926 - 2009), who used text and depictions of the female form, often appropriated as classical goddesses, in her scroll paintings. Dill's artworks are in the collections of over fifty museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art New York, and the Whitney Museum of American Art. The artist lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

Language has always been important to Lesley Dill. She calls herself a "word collector" and says she can "feel" the words in her body. Her mother was a speech and drama teacher. Her father, who was schizophrenic, helped Dill comprehend that one simple word could be interpreted in many ways. On Dill's 40th birthday, her mother gave her a complete collection of Emily Dickinson's (1830 - 1886) poetry. This gift had a major impact on her life and work. As Dill read the poems, images emerged from the poems like visions and become a catalyst for her work. Now, no matter what she is making, language is always present in some form. It may be secret, or hidden, but it's always there. Dill appropriates fragments of poetry by Dickinson and other poets, including Catalan writer Salvador Espriu, Franz Kafka, Pablo Neruda, Tom Sleigh, and others. The word fragments become launch pads for feelings and imagination.

Dill uses a wide range of materials chosen for their evocative power. Delicate materials like paper, thread, leaves, and hand-scrubbed metallic foil serves as human skin, which is fragile, yet flexible and strong. United by the interplay of words, figures, and symbolic imagery, the artworks in *Poetic Visions* provide a window into Dill's thoughts and ideas. Dill's mixed-media work explores some of the same big issues Dickinson grappled with in her poetry - life and death, faith and doubt, the natural world and the spiritual dimension, the human body and the concept of transcendence.

Lesley Dill's Poetic Visions: Guide for Educators

About the Lesley Dill Exhibition at the Whatcom Museum Lightcatcher

Lesley Dill's *Poetic Visions* includes three of Dill's major projects: The stunning installation *Hell Hell Hell / Heaven Heaven Heaven: Encountering Sister Gertrude Morgan & Revelation*; the wall relief installation *Shimmer*, a 60 foot long silvery curtain made from metal foil and wire; and *Five Allegorical Figures*, which includes five life-size silhouetted human figures composed of textured, cut foil in glistening shades of silver and black with cut-outs of poetry excerpts along their bodies.



Hell Hell Hell / Heaven Heaven Heaven: Encountering Sister Gertrude Morgan & Revelation

In 2004, Lesley Dill saw an exhibition of the work of preacher, folk artist, musician, Sister Gertrude Morgan (1900 - 1980) at the Folk Art Museum in New York. Dill became fascinated with her life and work.

Gertrude Morgan was raised as an active member of the Southern Baptist church. In 1934 she had a religious calling to spread the word of God. She moved to New Orleans in 1939 to begin her missionary work. With two other street missionaries in the

early 1940s, Sister Morgan built and operated a small chapel and center for orphans, runaways, and other children who required food and attention.

In the late 1950's Morgan had a revelation that she would be the bride of Christ. She began dressing only in white. In 1966, a third revelation instructed her to draw pictures of the world to come – the New Jerusalem. Her sermons on paper illustrate aspects of her life and visions, as well as her interpretation of the Book of Revelation. Her drawings, she believed, were composed by God, "Through his Blessed hands as he take my hand and write . . . I just do the Blessed work."

Dill's *Sister Gertrude Morgan* installation is designed as a progressive story vibrating between good and evil/Heaven and Hell. In the center of the gallery are two dresses referring to the life of Sister Gertrude Morgan. The first dress encountered when entering the gallery is a black dress that symbolizes her early life, with red and orange hand sewn letters spelling "Hell Hell Hell" on one side and white letters spelling "Heaven Heaven Heaven" on the opposite side. The gowns represent early and later stages of Morgan's life. This dress has 18 white fabric banners that speak to faith, glory and power rising up behind it and symbolizes her revelations. The dress is adorned with hand sewn fabric letters in various colors that spell "glory," "calling" and "revelation."

Banners and surrounding wall drawings, made of oil pastels and collage on Tyvek, fuse text and image, vibrating with the tension between contrasting realms of Heaven and Hell. In these images, the artist mixes visual and written references to Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism.

Above: Lesley Dill, *Hell Hell Hell/Heaven Heaven Heaven: Encountering Sister Gertrude and Revelation*, 2010, multi-media art installation, variable dimensions

Lesley Dill's Poetic Visions: Guide for Educators

About the Lesley Dill Exhibition at the Whatcom Museum Lightcatcher



Lesley Dill, *Shimmer* (detail), 2005-2006, wire, metal, foil, 12 X 60 ft.X15 in.

Shimmer

Artists are inspired by many different things. In Dill's installation *Shimmer* (2005 – 2006) she wanted to capture the play of silvery light off the Atlantic Ocean. To create this work she cut and wound two million feet of fine wire to form a 60-foot long silvery curtain. It cascades down the wall resembling, in the artist's words, "a kind of electrical waterfall." Above the curtain of wire is a fragment of a poem, also written in wire by one of Lesley Dill's favorite poets, Salvador Espriu (1913- 1985). "You may laugh but I feel within me suddenly strange voices of God and handles, dog's thirst and message of slow memories that disappear across a fragile bridge."

Shimmer was also inspired by time Dill spent in India and Nepal. In Nepal, Dill saw temple buildings with metal ribbons that she called "tongues of God" descending from temple roofs. They are a bridge between the earth and cosmic spheres. In the fragment of a poem by Espriu, the poet speaks of a "fragile bridge" which carries slow memories across.

In India, where Dill lived for two years, she was struck by both the intense labor that goes into the making of sacred objects and by the cumulative sense of time people have spent touching these objects. The time it takes to make a piece like *Shimmer*, which took over 300 eight-hour days and the help of many assistants, is an important element in much of Dill's work.



Above: Image showing temple in Nepal with metal "tongue of God."

Lesley Dill's Poetic Visions: Guide for Educators

About the Lesley Dill Exhibition at the Whatcom Museum Lightcatcher

Five Allegorical Figures

The installation of *Five Allegorical Figures* includes life-sized wall reliefs composed of textured, cut foil in glistening shades of silver and black. Evoking costumed figures, these sculptures balance excerpted poetry by Tom Sleight and Emily Dickinson along their silhouetted bodies. The foil used is from photography and has been hand scrubbed, again giving the viewer a sense of the time it takes to painstakingly hand-work materials.

With individual titles, such as *Dress of Change* and *Dress of Solace and Undoing*, the figures reflect Dill's attempt to fathom the positive and negative energies that exist both within and outside ourselves. Enigmatic and suggestive, the works suggest the complexity of life – constantly hanging in the balance between opposing forces such as good and evil, fierce and gentle, tender and steely, light and dark.



History of Artist's Use of Text and Image:

Beginning with the Cubist painters who integrated painted and found letters and words into their still lifes in the early twentieth century, text has played a progressively significant role in artist's work. Due to the natural result of cross-fertilization between different disciplines – music, literature, philosophy, politics, mass media and advertising – many contemporary artists appropriate text or use language in their work. Artists incorporate text to teach, tell stories, and provoke discussion about political and social issues. Some artists use recorded text, some feature text in billboard form, or highlight words only – with no imagery – as in the work of Lawrence Weiner.

Students can research other artists who use text as a significant feature of their art. A partial list includes: Pablo Picasso, Paul Braque, Marcel Duchamp, Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, Nancy Spero, Ed Ruscha, Bruce Nauman, Jenny Holzer, Glenn Ligon, and Barbara Kruger.

Lesley Dill's Poetic Visions: Guide for Educators

More About Sister Gertrude Morgan

Sister Gertrude Morgan, born in Lafayette, Alabama, the seventh child of a poor Louisiana farmer, was forced to quit school in third grade to help in the family fields. She showed a passion for art and music and when the family couldn't afford art supplies, Sister Gertrude sketched figures and scenes in the dirt outside her home with a stick.



In 1928, she married Will Morgan, and they moved to Georgia. In 1937, while sitting alone in her kitchen one day, she experienced a divine calling to preach God's Word. She left her family and moved to New Orleans, establishing an orphanage and eventually a ministry out of her home, the Everlasting Gospel Mission. Her charitable and evangelical activities intensified in the late 1950's when God asked her to illustrate her sermons and become "the bride of Christ"; she began wearing white nurse-uniform habits, painting, singing (accompanied by a tambourine or guitar) and spreading the word. A single album, recorded in the 1970's, *Let's Make a Record* captured her spirituals.

Sister Gertrude Morgan painted pictures to create visual aids for her preaching. She painted on whatever was at hand, including styrofoam trays, window shades, and even toilet paper rolls. Many of her subjects come from the *Book of Revelation*. In the 1970s Morgan's art gained national attention. Painter Andy Warhol was among her admirers, as was Interview magazine writer Rosemary Kent, who profiled Morgan for the magazine's first issue. In 1974, however, Morgan announced that God had instructed her to stop making art; the fame it had brought her, she said, was unacceptable in His eyes. She continued to preach, write poetry, and operate her mission, and on July 8, 1980, she died in her sleep.

Morgan's reputation continued to grow after her death, and in the early 2000s both her artwork and her music were brought into the national spotlight. Her paintings and drawings became the subject of a major exhibition, organized in 2004 by the American Folk Art Museum in New York. This show traveled to the New Orleans Museum of Art and the Intuit Gallery in Chicago. In 2005, DJ and remix producer King Britt issued the album *King Britt Presents Sister Gertrude Morgan*, surrounding the original vocals from *Let's Make a Record* with electronic beats.

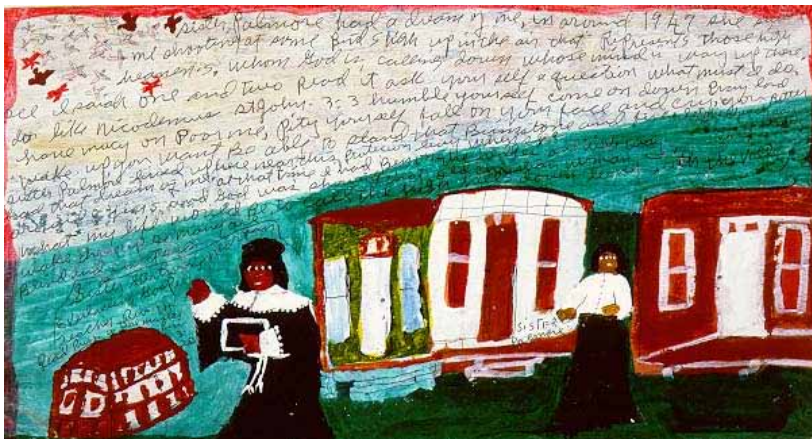


Photo of Sister Gertrude Morgan: *Coming of Age*, (sylvia-deswaan.blogspot)

Sister Gertrude Morgan, *Sister Palmore Had A Dream of Me* c. 1960, Mixed media on cardboard, Louisiana State Museum (lsm.crt.state.la.us)

Sources for Bio:
Brendan Greaves, Foundation for Self-Taught Artists, www.foundationstaart.org.
Tammy La Gorce, <http://mog.com/artists/bio/mn298896/sister-gertrude-morgan>

Lesley Dill's Poetic Visions: Guide for Educators

A word is dead
When it is said,
 Some say.
I say it just
Begins to live
 That day.

- Emily Dickinson

More About Emily Dickinson

The poet Emily Dickinson (1830 – 1886), seemed to know that there are wonderful possibilities in the most ordinary life. Using words as her brush, Dickinson painted vivid pictures of the world around her. She was able to get inside ordinary things and look at them in new ways. In her words, flowers, birds, sunrises, storms, shadows on the lawn, assume wonderful and surprising meanings.

Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, to a successful family with strong community ties. She studied at the Amherst Academy for seven years in her youth, spent a short time at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary and then returned to her family's home.

She loved to garden, cook, play the piano, read and write. Dickinson began composing poems in her teens. She was also a prolific letter-writer. Instead of traveling and socializing, her imagination became an immense universe to explore. She often said “a book can take us lands away.” She taught herself poetry by writing daily.

For Dickinson, thinking, feeling, and imagining were a full-time job. She tried to capture in words what she noticed, imagined, and felt. She did not believe in putting feelings aside but rather thinking deeply about them. When her close friend, Benjamin Newton, died suddenly, the shock and sadness stayed with Emily a long time. Many of her poems wonder about death. Dickinson was extremely shy all of her life, except with family and close friends, who described her as being witty and fun to be with. Eventually she chose to stay in the confines of her Massachusetts home and garden, seeing only those she chose to see, and wearing only white dresses.

She shared some of her poems with family and only six of Dickinson's seventeen hundred poems were published while she was still alive. It was not until after Dickinson's death in 1886, when her sister discovered a huge cache of poems in her dresser drawer, bound by hand into books, that anyone realized what a serious and prolific writer she was.

Dickinson's intellectual curiosity and emotional intensity, as revealed in her poetry capture a range of human experiences. Despite unfavorable reviews and skepticism of her literary prowess during the late 19th and early 20th century, critics now consider Dickinson to be a major American poet.



From the daguerreotype taken at Mount Holyoke, December 1846 or early 1847. The only authenticated portrait of Emily Dickinson later than childhood, the original is held by the Archives and Special Collections at Amherst College.[1]Wikipedia

Lesley Dill's Poetic Visions: Guide for Educators

Classroom Extensions



Lesley Dill, *I Heard a Voice Like a Trumpet*, 2010, Oil stick and watercolor pencil on Tyvek, 102 X 60 in.

Beautiful Writing:

The phrases or poem fragments that Lesley Dill appropriates (or borrows) are often painted by hand with brush and ink on large banners or panels. Share examples of calligraphy or beautiful expressive lettering with the class. Students then find a short poem (or saying) and practice writing it with brush and watercolor. They develop an image to illustrate the text and incorporate both into a final painting on larger paper.

Color Symbolism in Art:

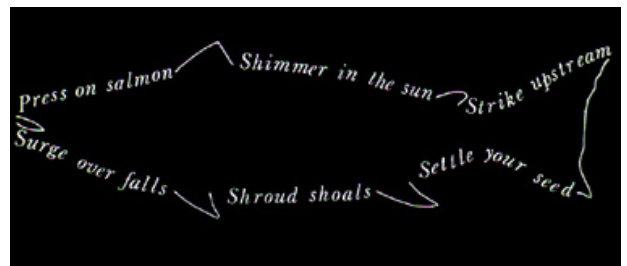
Many artists use color in symbolic ways to represent thoughts or feelings. Have a discussion about color associations in class. What feelings do you associate with the color black, white, red, blue, purple, etc? Which colors seem warm or cool? Which colors seem soft? Which colors capture your attention as you look around the classroom? Students select an emotional word (angry, joyful, excited, sad) and make a collage using only colors they feel express the word.

Water-Word Sculptures Inspired by Shimmer:

Beginning with the word "shimmer", have the class brainstorm a list of verbs that describe water (sparkling, swirling, flowing, splashing). Students select a word and create a mixed media sculpture that describes, illustrates, or is inspired by the water verb.

Concrete Poetry:

A concrete poem is one that takes the shape of the object it describes or uses some sort of visual presentation to enhance the effect of the poem on the reader. The visual layout of the poem need not form a picture, although many concrete poems do. Students choose a topic or theme, write a poem, then sketch some shapes, and write their poems in and around the shape. They may have to play around with the shape so the poem fits.



Example of a concrete poem. "Shaped Salmon," by Court Smith, <http://www.orst.edu>

Folk Art Research Extension:

There are many fascinating folk artists. Students can research folk artists and present their findings to the class. Local artists inspired by folk art include **Randy Clark (aka Fishboy)**. Visit his website at www.fishboy.com. Another local artist inspired by folk art, including the work of Sister Gertrude Morgan, is **Dale Gottlieb**. Visit her website at www.dalegottlieb.com

Lesley Dill's Poetic Visions: Guide for Educators

Classroom Extensions

Music Inspired Activity:

Find the lyrics to some favorite songs. Choose a fragment to use as a springboard for a visual art piece. Incorporate the lyric into the artwork in a hidden or surprising way.

Become a Word Collector:

Students can cut random words out of magazines. Each day, select a word and write it large on the board. Use a brainstorming model to capture meanings that come to students' minds as they hear/see the word. Discover that one word might have many meanings.

Shimmering Shadows:

With a nod to Lesley Dill's *Allegorical Figures*, children create life-sized art using their own shadows. Trace your shadow (full figure or just head and shoulders) on black kraft paper, cut it out and mount it on the wall. Decorate the silhouette using aluminum foil, words from Emily Dickinson poems or your own poetry.

Paint with Words:

Using words as her brush, Dickinson painted vivid pictures of the world around her—flowers, birds, sunrises, storms, shadows on the lawn—that take on surprising meanings. In her words, ordinary things become beautiful and wonderful. For example:

The sun "rose a ribbon at a time."

The birds "unrolled their feathers and rowed home."

Analyze the samples above and then have students take ordinary sentences (The sun rose. It rained today. I rode my bike to school.) and rewrite them in more picturesque, poetic ways.

Write a Short Poem in Iambic Meter:

Dickinson's style of writing was free-spirited and unusual for its time. Most of her poems are written in iambic rhythm or meter, which is supposed to be most like ordinary speech. Lines one and three often have eight syllables; lines two and four have six syllables. The last word in line two rhymes with the last word in line four. Here is an example:

The morns are meeker than they were,
The nuts are getting brown;
The berry's cheek is plumper,
The rose is out of town.

The maple wears a gayer scarf,
The field a scarlet gown.
Lest I should be old-fashioned,
I'll put a trinket on.

Try clapping the rhythm. Discuss what Dickinson is describing in this poem. Choose a season to write about, or a natural object that students can observe carefully (sunflower, pine cone, leaf). Write a poem in this style.

Lesley Dill's Poetic Visions: **Guide for Educators** **Resource List & Educational Programs**

Catalog: *Lesley Dill's Poetic Visions: from Shimmer to Sister Gertrude Morgan*, Whatcom Museum, Bell-ingham, WA., 2011. (Available to teachers in PDF format upon request.)

Lesley Dill's website: <http://www.lesleydill.net>.

DVD About Lesley Dill in her studio: *We Are All Animals of Language*, by Ed Robbins, 2009, 50 minutes. (available on her website.)

Tools of Her Ministry: *The Art of Sister Gertrude Morgan*, by William Fagaly, 2004. Foundation for Self-Taught Artists, www.foundationstaart.org.

Sources on the life and work of Emily Dickinson:

- <http://www.emilydickinson.org>.
- <http://classroomelectronic.org>.
- *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, published by scholar Thomas H. Johnson, 1955.
- *Emily Dickinson*, by Cynthia Griffin Wolff, 1986.
- *Poetry for Young People: Emily Dickinson*, Edited by Frances Schoonmaker Bolin, 1994.

Related Education Programs at the Whatcom Museum

Meet Lesley Dill

Sunday, October 23, 2 PM, Artist's talk, Whatcom Museum Old City Hall Rotunda.

Teacher Open House

Tuesday, November 1, from 3:30 - 5 PM, Whatcom Museum at the Lightcatcher. FREE for teachers!

Use Language in a Silk Painting

Saturday, January 21, 2012, with artist Janet Lehwalder, 10 AM - 4 PM, Lightcatcher studio. \$65./\$55 Museum Members.

Learn About Emily Dickinson

Sunday, January 29, 2012, 2 PM, Whatcom Museum Old City Hall Rotunda Room.

Tour the exhibition with Curator of Art Barbara Matilsky

Sunday, February 5, 2012, 2 PM, Whatcom Museum at the Lightcatcher.

Free Poetry Writing Workshop

Saturday, March 3, 2012, 1 - 4 PM, with poet and teacher Judith Roche, Sponsored by Humanities Washington

Most programs \$3 Suggested donation/Museum members free. Visit the Museum website calendar of events for a complete list of programs.