

Close Study: Close Viewing

Sonya Clark

Artist: [Sonya Clark](#) (b. 1967, Washington, D.C.)



Work: Sonya Clark, *Unraveling*, 2015; Cotton Confederate battle flag, 70 x 36 x 7 in.; Courtesy of the artist and Lisa Sette Gallery; © Sonya Clark; Photo by Taylor Dabney

About the Artwork: Clark developed this work to metaphorically enact the social progress needed to redress the legacy of slavery and the Civil War. She activates the cloth in performances, inviting people to stand beside her and join her in unraveling the heavy cotton flag, thread by thread. The painstaking work emblemizes “the slow and deliberate work of unraveling racial dynamics in the United States,” Clark explains. “I think there’s poetry in what we’re trying to do together.”

Target grade range: 3–5

DCPS Curricular Unit: Creative Placemaking

DCPS Curricular Arc: Determination/Building

DCPS Curricular Theme: Psychological impact of their surroundings on individuals and social interactions

DCPS Social Studies Standards Connections: Grade 5: U.S. History and Geography; Westward Expansion to the Present: The Civil War and Reconstruction (1860–1877)

Note: Annotation is a key feature of Close Study, ensuring that students are engaged in the process of evidence gathering. Annotation can take a range of forms across grade levels and disciplines. Annotation can provide assessment information as to each student’s depth of comprehension. Additionally, it can be a useful tool for launching critical discussions. Encourage students to annotate this work physically or virtually.

Round 1

Type of Question: General Understanding/Responses

Adapted from DCPS’s “Close Study: A Critical Process” and “Close Study: Close Viewing” documents.

Sample Question: **What's going on in this artwork?**

Guidance: The goal of this conversation is to generate a range of student responses to the work. There is no wrong answer, but rather the idea is to open the conversation and create an environment in which students see the value of both their own opinion and the possible range of opinions.

Round 2

Type of Question: Key Details

Sample Question: **What shapes and lines do you see?**

Guidance: The conversation should focus on gathering evidence from the image; formal and technical evidence, as well as evidence based on the imagery. Student responses should include discussion of specific visual aspects of the work. You may ask guiding questions such as, **“How is the top (complete) portion of the artwork similar to the bottom (unraveled) portion? How do these portions differ?”** OR **“What colors do you see?”**, pushing students to focus on the visual aspects of the work and how they might begin to support the responses discussed in Round 1.

Round 3

Type of Question: Structure

Sample Question: *Unraveling* is a still photograph of a performance, or what Sonya Clark calls the **“activation”** of the work. During these activations, the artist works side by side with community members. What do you think the artwork looked like at the beginning of the performance? What do you see that makes you think that?

Guidance: This discussion should focus more specifically on how the structure of the work is supporting the students' interpretations of the work. This conversation might be around compositional strategies, the use of evocative visual designs, or the inclusion of distinct features.

Round 4

Type of Question: Intent/Inferences

Sample Question: **Artists often “apply imagination through reinterpretation of observed and found objects”** (“DCPS Arts Framework for Learning: ACT Cycle Achievement Guide, 5th grade”). For *Unraveling* and *Unraveled* (2015), Sonya Clark purchased and deconstructed (took apart) Confederate battle flags. In *Monumental Fragment* (2019), Clark removed and enlarged the [Appomattox flag of truce](#), which signaled the Confederate surrender of the Civil War. Why do you think Clark reimaged these historical objects in her work?

Guidance: Unlike the intentional omission of information in other rounds, prior to asking students to respond to this question, the teacher should provide some context for the work. This context should come in the form of another visual work. The nature of the context should promote the goals of the overall lesson or unit. This work might be:

- Another work by the same artist
- A work that serves a similar purpose in a more familiar context
- Another work from the same school, movement, or genre

Possible Contextual Works:

- Video of Sonya Clark, *Unraveling*, 2015; Performance (2:06 minutes):
<https://vimeo.com/131027282>
- Sonya Clark, *Unraveling* (detail, performance), 2015; Cotton Confederate battle flag, 70 x 36 x 7 in.; Courtesy of the artist and Lisa Sette Gallery; © Sonya Clark; Photo by Taylor Dabney
- Sonya Clark, *Unraveled*, 2015; Cotton Confederate battle flag, 10 x 36 x 7 in.; From the collection of Angel and Tom Papa; © Sonya Clark; Photo by Taylor Dabney
 - **About the Artwork:** The year 2015 marked the 150th anniversary of the end of the American Civil War. Seeking to visualize through cloth what the end of the Civil War might look like, Clark unraveled a Confederate flag into three discrete piles of red, white, and blue thread. The colorway evokes the U.S. flag, and the soft mounds of thread convey a more subdued mood than the Confederate flag from which they derive.
- Sonya Clark, *Monumental Fragment*, 2019; Linen, 50 x 34 in.; On loan from the artist; © Sonya Clark; Photo by Taylor Dabney
 - **About the Artwork:** A small piece of the Confederate truce flag, a white dish cloth with red stripes that was waved in surrender, leading to the end of the Civil War, is preserved at Appomattox Court House National Historical Park in Virginia. Clark reweave that fragment of the towel at 10:1 scale, magnifying its significance. "Everyone knows the Confederate battle flag. After seeing the truce flag . . . I realized it wasn't hidden, but it also wasn't elevated," she says. Clark continues to make work related to the cloth that she describes as "the flag we should all know."

Round 5

Type of Question: Opinion/Application

Sample question: **If you were to collaborate (work with other students) to create an artwork inspired by your school's history, 1) what aspects of your school would you highlight, 2) what materials would you use, and 3) where would you like to see the finished product displayed?**

Guidance: This round is asking students to internalize the knowledge and information built in the previous rounds by using the concepts generated to visualize a work that applies to a personal goal of communication. The direction of this question is directly related to the broader thematic goal of the lesson or unit.



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