

Studio Saturdays: Poetry Silhouettes



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*Portrait of Amanda
S. Gorman*
Shawn Theodore
(American, b. 1970)

2018

Archival pigment print

MATERIALS

Paper

Pencil

Pen or marker

Shawn Theodore is an American photographer born in 1970. In his artwork, he photographs primarily Black subjects, and focuses on representation and uplifting of black communities in America. Theodore began his photography career in candid, or un-posed, street photography, but eventually turned his focus to posed photographs in specific set-ups. Now, he focuses his work on representing his subjects as characters in what he calls “Afromythology”. **Mythology** is a term that means fictional history, usually related to a specific culture or religion. As a response to **Afrofuturism**, an artistic movement that centers on futuristic and science-fiction themes that draw inspiration from black history and black culture, Theodore is creating **Afromythology**, focusing on making a historical mythology that draws from specifically African-American history. The artist sometimes creates works in a silhouette style, as we can see in this artwork titled “Portrait of Amanda S. Gorman” from 2018. A silhouette is an outline or sharp shadow of an object.

In this silhouette portrait, Theodore depicts young American poet Amanda S. Gorman. A graduate of Harvard university, Gorman is the youngest inaugural poet in US history. This means that she delivered a poem she wrote at a presidential inauguration, the event where the nominee for president officially becomes the president. Gorman read her poem “The Hill We Climb” at Joe Biden’s inauguration in 2021. Born in 1998 and raised by her mother, an English teacher, in Los Angeles, California, Gorman has been writing poetry since she was young; her poems speak on social issues of race and gender inequality in America. Shawn Theodore took this portrait of Gorman in 2018 after she was named the first national US Youth Poet Laureate.

For today’s activity, we’ll be making an artwork inspired by both Shawn Theodore and Amanda S. Gorman by combining writing and drawing into a silhouette of our own. You’ll be choosing an object—or person if you’d like a challenge!-- that is important to you and writing a short story or poem about it/them. Then, you’ll create a silhouette drawing using your words as the outline!

THINK LIKE AN ARTIST

1. What makes the object, thing or person you chose important to you? Try making a list you can look at while you write your poem.
2. If you could speak to the whole country at a presidential inauguration, what would you want to say? What issues in the world would you want to address?

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1) Choose your object, person, or thing that is important to you.
- 2) Sketch silhouette with pencil of your object or person—or animal! Draw lightly so you can go back over it later. While you're sketching, think about what you'll write. Really look at your object or person, and think about why they are important to you, and how they influence your life. Use these thoughts as inspiration for your writing!
- 3) To draw your silhouette, focus on the outline of the object or person, not anything going on inside the lines. Try using your eye and your pencil at the same time, traveling along the outline of what or who you're drawing.
- 4) Once you've got your silhouette sketch, put your thoughts on paper and write your short poem or story. If you're stuck, try looking up some of Amanda Gorman's poetry, or other poems to inspire you!
- 5) Now, you can combine your sketch and your writing to create your poetry portrait! Using your poem or story, write your words in pen going along your pencil outline. If you run out of room and have more words, you can add some details into the silhouette.
- 6) If you want to take your drawing even further, you can add some extra colorful details, patterns, or doodles on the inside of your silhouette. Try doing this project with a friend or family member to compare and contrast your artworks!