

STUDY GUIDE

CENTER
FOR THE
ARTS
AT VIRGINIA TECH

GRAND LOBBY MURAL BRIAN DETTMER



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We would like to thank the artist for providing these images for our educational resources. For more information, visit the links and additional resources in the guide.



ABOUT THE GALLERIES

The Center for the Arts at Virginia Tech provides transformative arts experiences to young people through gallery tours, student exhibitions, workshops with artists, and special school-day performances from renowned touring artists for children, teachers, and families.

Explore exciting new opportunities to connect with the arts through exhibitions and study guides created especially for young audiences. [Contact us](#) to register for a gallery tour and to sign up for emails to learn more about the center's PK-12 programs.

Plan Your Visit

Gallery Hours

Tuesday-Friday, 10 AM-5 PM
Saturday, 10 AM-4 PM
(during exhibition run dates)

Building Hours

Monday-Friday, 8 AM-5:30 PM
Saturday, 10 AM-4 PM

Admission to the galleries is always free and open to the public. The Ruth C. Horton Gallery is located downstairs in the Center for the Arts near the Alumni Mall entrance. The Miles C. Horton Jr. Gallery and Sherwood Payne Quillen '71 Reception Gallery are located upstairs near the Turner Street entrance. The Grand Lobby is on the first floor, off of the Alumni Mall entrance. Find parking information [here](#).



WE WANT EVERYONE TO **ENJOY THE EXHIBITION**

Please prepare your students for their visit to the Center for the Arts by practicing museum manners. The following guidelines will ensure that everyone can enjoy the exhibition.

- Always stay a safe distance away from each piece to keep the art untouched for all viewers.
- If you want to rest and observe, you can sit on the benches or floor (watch out for gallery walls and pedestals, as these aren't meant to be leaned against).
- Food, gum, and beverages are not allowed inside the galleries.
- Please remove backpacks and put them in a safe place away from the art.
- Use only pencils when writing or drawing in the galleries.
- Photography is allowed, but please do not use a flash.

We're Here to Help

Please reach out to schedule a visit or for questions about teaching, learning, and engaging with our programs.

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Memories of the Mountains

Brian Dettmer

Grand Lobby

Suitable for students in grades PK-12

About the Mural

Memories of the Mountains is composed of 39 hardcover library-bound books, each containing four volumes of *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, totaling over 156 literary journals spanning between 1927 and 1974. The source material is concealed and transformed into an undulating landscape inspired by the regional geography.

Through a subtractive carving process, dense patches of text and imagery are revealed from the books' interiors, providing opportunities for new meanings and interpretations. The rhythmic composition seeks a balance between the natural and the manufactured, the organic and the geometric, the specific and the abstract, the literal and the literary. Personal and universal references to place, memory, culture, and history emerge from these vast vessels of poetry, literature, art, and technology.

The physical book is a form of communication that is currently under threat along with the nature from which it is made. This work intends to inspire alternate ways to view the materials around us and to find new ways to approach nature and technology, so that we can evolve and innovate while still honoring and preserving the past.

▲ Brian Dettmer; *Memories of the Mountains*, 2025 (detail); hardcover books and archival varnish; 42 x 350 x 2.5 inches



First to Pass Through Brian Dettmer

Grand Lobby

Suitable for students in grades PK-12

About the Mural

First to Pass Through is composed of two sets of children's encyclopedias, a 12-volume set of *Children's Britannica* and a four-volume set of *Black's Children's Encyclopedia*, both from 1961. Each page of each book was weaved into the adjacent books, creating a strong circular bond between each binding. The primary ring of books reflects the structure of a clock, while the four books in the inner ring reflect four quarters or seasons of a cycle. The work becomes a mandala, clock, calendar, and roulette wheel, allowing thousands of seemingly random images to emerge into specific points of time. Linearity becomes circular as time simultaneously flows forwards and backwards. The outer ring of checkered covers contains obscured etchings, references to various cultures that have embraced the circular form as either a calendar, clock, zodiac, or meditative series of gates to pass through to new levels of understanding.

Artist Statement

Through a meticulous process of sculptural excavation, I explore the inner contents of vintage books that have often been relegated to collecting dust or headed for a landfill. The work is both archival and anti-archival. It is a creation through consumption, an exposure through erasure.

These sculptures break down historic narratives to offer a compression of ideas through a single surface, embracing us with a desire to reconstruct. This abundance of fragmented history reminds us that we are just one part of the bigger picture, as fleeting as the media we create and as permanent as the ideas we surround ourselves with.

— Brian Dettmer

Biography



Brian Dettmer (b. 1974, Naperville, Illinois) lives and works in Chicago. Dettmer is internationally recognized for his sculptural work with books, which he transforms into intricate and detailed artworks. He earned a bachelor's degree from Columbia College Chicago in 1997 and began his career in graphic design. This background continues to inform his meticulous approach to working with analog materials and décollaged compositions.

Dettmer's book sculptures have been exhibited widely in museums and galleries around the world, including the Museum of Arts and Design (New York), Smithsonian American Art Museum and Renwick Gallery (Washington, D.C.), Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art, Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia, and High Museum of Art. In 2014 he was the subject of a 10-year retrospective at the Hermann Geiger Foundation in Cecina, Italy.

His sculptures are held in the permanent collections of several major institutions, including the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Art Institute of Chicago, High Museum of Art, Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia, and Yale University Art Gallery. Dettmer has given talks at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, New York Public Library, and TED Youth, and his work has been featured in the *New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Art News*, *Wired*, and NPR.

Helpful Terminology

Archival: Relating to an “archive” or collection of historical records preserved in libraries or museums. Archival can also refer to a specific material included in the work that keeps it from degrading over time (i.e., “archival” varnish).

Décollage: A technique that is the opposite of collage, as it involves creating an image by cutting, tearing, or removing pieces from an original image, as opposed to building an image from existing ones. The French term décollage translates to “take-off” or “to become unglued.”

Composition: The way an artist arranges different parts of a piece — like shapes, colors, and space — to guide how we look at it.

Materiality: The physical quality and presence of materials used in the artwork (e.g., paint, canvas, wood, etc.).

Subtractive carving: A sculptural technique that involves cutting, carving, or chipping away at a material to create a desired form.

Historic narrative: A story or account of past events, often presented in a way that combines factual information with narrative elements to create a coherent and engaging interpretation of the past

Organic art: Art that features forms and shapes inspired by nature, characterized by their flowing, irregular, and often asymmetrical qualities.

Geometric art: Art that utilizes structural shapes, lines, and patterns to create abstract compositions and forms.

Symmetry: When both sides of an artwork look the same or very similar, giving a sense of balance and harmony.

Activities in the **CLASSROOM**

Novel Notes

Brian Dettmer transforms books into art by uncovering hidden stories inside them. While he remains interested in the texture, Dettmer's focus is on exposing the essence of the book. Encourage your students to reimagine a book by sculpting it into a living, three-dimensional sculpture that reflects the essence or emotion of its story, subject, or theme.

Begin by locating an available and/or old book for each student. These books will preferably be hardcover for durability, but paperback will do just fine. Ask students to explore the book and discover its essence: a feeling, symbol, or truth that stands out. Encourage them to describe it in one word or phrase that will inspire the artwork (for example, words or phrases that may apply to *The Wizard of Oz* would be imagination, adventure, or appreciating your home). Have your students start shaping the book without cutting it apart directly. Ideas for this include:

- Folding pages into fans or waves
- Adding handwritten notes
- Rolling or bending corners to create shapes
- Inserting colored paper between pages
- Tearing out pages and reattaching them to other pages, extending further beyond the spine
- Adding sticky notes peeking beyond the pages with word or doodles
- Attaching objects relating to the book's theme (for example, drawings of a clock or a playing card for *Alice and Wonderland*)

The goal is to be able to stand the book up and spread out the pages to reveal the theme, showing from the outside the spilling over of the inside.

Optional Extension: Allow students to utilize multiple books, stacking them into an unusual

► **Virginia Visual Arts SOLs:** 6.1, 6.3a, 6.12c, 6.16, 6.17, 7.1, 7.16, 7.17, 8.1a, 8.12e, 8.16

Wheel of History

In the work *First to Pass Through*, artist Brian Dettmer carefully combines similar texts to create something spectacular and new. When students look carefully, they might notice themes across the work, tying the encyclopedias together into a seamless and infinite cycle.

Ask your students to point out themes they may notice in the piece (for example, similar colors, specific content around a certain topic, recurring images or words, etc.). Explain that by choosing source material from the same collective year, Dettmer's artwork reflects a wheel of history, exposing life in 1961.

Back in the classroom, break the students into small groups and have each group pick a different year in history (1959, 1842, 2024, 1776, etc.). Prompt the small groups to create a piece of artwork reflecting that year by taking one or more of the following actions:

- Cut out newspaper pieces from newspapers of that year
- Utilize books or texts from that year
- Print out photos from the internet that were taken that year
- Draw or write an original work that reflects an event from that specific year

Encourage the small groups to take their handcrafted mementos and glue them in a circular pattern on a posterboard. After pasting, each group should have a wheel of history, similar to Dettmer's work. Ask the students to write down what connections they see in their groups' artwork prior to exploring the classroom and notating what year they think other classmates' pieces reflect.



Brian Dettmer; *First to Pass Through*, 2015 (detail); hardcover books and acrylic varnish; 53 x 53 x 4 inches

► **Virginia Visual Arts SOLs:** K.6b, 1.8, 2.6b, 3.6a, 4.10, 5.6b, 6.11, 7.11, 8.10, Al.6c, All.6b, All.11, AIV.6a