

Emma Amos

Action Lines

Time: 15 minutes

Study Guide

INTRODUCTION

Emma Amos: Action Lines is a film about a dynamic artist that moves between the past and the present, between the personal and political and between family and society to present a penetrating vision of the world. Above all she seems to question -- what happened, why, what does it mean - and she puts feelingful answers into her art.

Her work is large and highly saturated with color and texture to create an ambiguous space for her to arrange and re-arrange images of black and white people and their interrelationships. Filled with double meanings, her paintings throb with movement that is kept within bounds by frames of woven and printed African cloth, symbolic of her heritage.

Although many of her paintings are autobiographical, there is a recurrent theme of history as a basis for identity. She wants her work to prevent the vanishing of history, art and art-making in a prejudiced, uncertain world. Her goal is to remember, witness and retrieve history by targeting issues such as domination, racism and sexism and articulating them on canvas.

Emma Amos expresses her ideas about African American history, family memories and women's lives and achievements. In this way, she empowers herself to combine dreams and reality to create a new world and a new presence.

TO THE TEACHER:

This video is appropriate for students from upper elementary (Grade 3) to adult learners. However, the student guide is targeted for Grades 3 - 8. The objectives of the guide are to:

- stimulate active viewing that engages students' minds;
- provide questions for reflection;
- suggest experiential activities that involve many areas of the curriculum.

The intent is to give students an opportunity to interpret the artist's work, understand the social and historical context of the artist's life and to make connections to their own lives and learning.

SHARE INFORMATION ABOUT THE ARTIST

You may want to begin by sharing some information about the artist and her accomplishments with the students. Adapt the language to the appropriate age level of the class.

BIOGRAPHY

Emma Amos (1938 -) printmaker, weaver and painter, grew up in Atlanta, GA near the drugstore owned by her parents. She started painting and drawing when she was six. She loved reading the magazines at the drugstore and she copied the glamorous pictures she saw. At age 12 her parents wanted her to study with the famous African American artist, Hale Woodruff, at Atlanta University, but he told them she was too young. Later he became her mentor and advisor at New York University.

After attending segregated public schools in Atlanta, she entered the five-year program at Antioch University in Yellow Springs, Ohio. She spent her fourth year abroad at the London Central School of Art, studying printmaking, painting and weaving. After graduating from Antioch, she returned to the London school for a diploma in etching in 1959.

Her first solo exhibition was in an Atlanta gallery, but she moved to New York in 1960. She developed close relationships with family members and friends of her parents, as well as artists. She taught at the Dalton School and continued her work as an artist by making prints. Then she was employed as a designer/weaver, creating rugs for a major textile manufacturer.

In 1964 she entered a masters program in Art Education at New York University. During this time she studied with excellent artists and began her association with Hale Woodruff. He invited her to become a member of ***Spiral***, a group of serious black artists which included such notables as Romare Bearden and Charles Alston. It took a great deal of courage for her to join ***Spiral*** as she was the youngest and only woman member.

She married Bobby Levine in 1965 and received an M.A. in Art from NYU in 1967. Two small children and no studio made painting difficult, so the versatile and inventive artist focused on sewing, weaving, quilting and doing illustrations for Sesame Street magazine. She developed a television how to crafts series which was produced on WGBH in Boston.

Amos joined the art faculty at the Mason Gross School of Art, Rutgers University, and is now a full professor. From this point on, her career blossomed with numerous solo and group exhibitions, fellowships, awards, lectures, writing and videotapes. Whatever her choice of media - painting, drawing, photographs, weaving, printmaking, collage, quilting - her work is exciting, dramatic and provocative. She is especially noted for her series on black athletes, women runners, swimmers and falling.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

Help students actively view the video by giving them things to watch for and questions to think about, as appropriate for their age and grade level.

- Watch for photos of the artist as a child.
- Watch for examples of energy and movement in the artwork.
- Watch for how she uses color.
- Watch for symbols, like KKK, police, family, American flag.
- Watch for frames of African cloth and how she attaches them to the artwork.
- Watch for how the artist works.
- Watch for a picture of the artist in costume.
- Watch for how she describes learning to draw.
- Watch for figures tumbling through space

- Watch for a photograph of artists in the Spiral Group working together.
- Watch for a present she gives to her daughter.

QUESTION FOR STUDENTS

Begin by reviewing selected items from **What to Watch For** as preparation for interpretative questions about Emma Amos and her work.

? Why do you think the title of this video is called **Action Lines**? What does it tell you about the artist?

? What qualities does Emma Amos think are most important in learning to be an artist? Do you agree that these are more important than talent?

? Emma Amos was considered a prodigy. Did she agree? Her parents wanted her to study with the famous artist Hale Woodruff. What did he tell her?

? What did Emma learn at her father's drugstore?

? Why was it important to the artist that she was invited to join the group called **Spiral** at New York University?

? What process does the artist use in making her work? (Carefully worked out sketches, grid system, rotating between projects.)

? Emma Amos' art is compared to theater. Why do you think this is a good comparison?

? Name some of the artist's series you saw in the film. (sports, animals, falling, water, gifts for daughter.) Which one do you like the best? Why? Which one do you think is the best work of art? Why? (Emphasize the difference between preference and judgment.)

? What great feat does she use as a metaphor for being an artist?
(walking on a high wire.)

? What was the inspiration for the Falling Series? (all the problems in the world.)

? What can you learn from Emma Amos?

EXPERIENCES FOR STUDENTS

The following suggestions are designed to help students express ideas and interpretations about the meaning of Emma Amos' message and work to their own lives. Feel free to select from the curriculum applications that follow or adapt to meet the needs of your students and learning goals.

1. Paint a background using wet on wet techniques. Draw action figures over the background in ink adding lines to show movement. Remember to start with a sketch and consider placement.
2. Do a storyboard of animated figures or a flip-book which shows actions.
3. Look at cartoons and comic strips. How do they show movement? Compare these to the artist's work.
4. Choose a class or group theme and create a series that shows action. Experiment with individual sketches, before "laying out" the final drawing on a grid. Have people, animals and objects moving freely about.
5. Do line drawings of repeated horizontal, diagonal, vertical lines; make them broken, connected, wavy, zig-zag, curved, angular.
6. Choose a partner and decide which one of you will be a model and which one will be an artist. Do quick sketches of each other in different poses and motions, inspired by runners, swimmers and other images in Emma Amos' work.

7. Emma Amos ***Falling Series*** is based on problems in the world. Write down the problems that concern you and decide what you would do about them.

8. Imagine you are a gallery owner who wants to sell a customer one of Emma Amos' works? What would you say to convince a buyer? Write a persuasive speech.

9. Create a costume for yourself like Emma Amos does for her subjects. Ask a classmate to draw your portrait. When all the portraits are complete, make up dialogue or write a play using the characters in the artworks.

10. Emma Amos did a painting of her friends for her daughter. Who would you choose as the subject of a painting to give someone in your family or a friend? Why? Write a letter to the recipient of your gift explaining your choice.

VIDEO SERIES

Emma Amos: Action Lines, created and produced by Linda Freeman, is one of a series of videos that provide an intimate look at both the lives and work of famous African American artists. Art history is being made on film, as the artists create right before our eyes. These documentaries profile the personal relationships, joys and struggles of these extraordinary human beings - and give them the recognition they richly deserve. The goal of the series is to teach students about the art-making process and to inspire them to reach their own life goals.

For more information about **Emma Amos: Action Lines** and the other videos, contact Linda Freeman at L & S Video, Inc., Tel: 914-238-9366; Fax: 914-238-6324.

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