

CURRICULUM THEMES

Community; Photography; Indigenous; Social Issues

CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

GRADE 2 | R2.1- Students will discuss, with guidance, how Sandra Semchuk and James Nicholas' artworks explore ideas about the communities they live in. They will talk about having dialogues with friends and family, being a witness to what happens in your community, and begin to learn about how colonialism affects people within communities.

GRADE 8 | R8.3- The artwork *sharing is the law* explores the differing worldviews of Sandra (a Ukrainian-Canadian woman) and James (a Cree man). Students will use this artwork to learn about how worldviews differ, how colonialism affects worldviews, and how dialogues and witnessing can help build bridges between worldviews.

JAMES NICHOLAS AND SANDRA SEMCHUK: *SHARING IS THE LAW*

Sandra and James use photography, videos, performances, and writing to explore their relationship to each other, their relationships to the land, and the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

In *sharing is the law*, the artists tell us a personal story about these relationships, and how they are affected by colonialism. Before making this artwork, Sandra attended a conference where an Elder had spoken about the importance of generosity in Cree culture. The Elder spoke about how generosity has been turned upside-down for Cree peoples; they are now expected to rely on the Canadian government for generosity. Sandra began to realize the sadness that this must cause her Cree husband, James.

Sandra wanted to note the generosity that Cree peoples have shown her, and asked James how to say “thank-you for sharing the land,” in Cree. She was surprised when he became angry at this question. His reply to her is part of this artwork: “You don’t understand, sharing is the law. The land owns itself.”



James Nicholas and Sandra Semchuk, *sharing is the law*, 2004, 3 lightjet photographs, 76.2 x 95.3 cm each.

[CLICK HERE TO DOWNLOAD THE IMAGE](#)

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

Sandra and James often use their artworks to talk about the idea of being a witness—of seeing things happen and being able to hold on to the memories of those things in case they need to be shared. In *sharing is the law*, what are Sandra and James witnessing?

Many of these artist's works explore colonialism—when one group of people try to take control over a place and/or another group of people. Discuss what you know about colonialism in Canada with your family.

Sandra and James' artworks are often a dialogue, or conversation, between two people or groups of people. Dialogues can be an important part of understanding each other and working out fights. Have you ever had an important dialogue with someone? After having that dialogue, were there any actions you also had to take to make things better?

ACTIVITY

Sandra and James use both pictures and poetry to tell us their stories. Create a collage using found images and text that tells a story about you or your family.

- Think of a story about something that happened to you or your family. Think of what happened at the beginning, the middle, and the end of that story.
- Using collaging materials like old magazines and calendars, find a picture for each part of your story. Glue your beginning, middle and end pictures down on a large piece of paper.
- Think about how James and Sandra use words in their artwork. Can you think of a couple of words you would like to add to each picture? These could be single words, or short phrases. You can add these words into your artwork by cutting them out of magazines and gluing them down, by cutting them out of coloured paper and gluing them in, or by writing them with markers right onto your collage. Don't worry about writing out the whole story- your pictures will help to tell your story too.
- Add anything you would like to your collage, such as more cut out pictures, coloured paper shapes, or drawings.
- Share your story with someone.
- For older children: Think about what your story tells others about your worldview.

WHAT YOU NEED

- Magazines, old calendars, or old books
- Scissors
- Glue stick
- markers
- Large paper for base of collage
- Coloured paper

ABOUT THE ARTIST

James Nicholas was a part of the Bird Clan of the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation (which used to be known as Nelson House). Even though he attended residential school at the age of eight, he still grew up with the strong presence of Indigenous ways of life. His family were trappers and practiced traditional medicine.

James grew up to be a community leader to the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation. He used his education to fight for the rights of Indigenous peoples. He was a lover of languages, and poetry is an important part of his artworks.

James moved to Vancouver to become an actor, writer, filmmaker, and photographer. This is where he met Sandra Semchuk.

Sandra Semchuk is a photographer who grew up in Meadow Lake, Saskatchewan. Her family is Ukrainian-Canadian. Her father Martin Semchuk was a socialist, who worked to bring social changes like Medicare to Saskatchewan. Through her photographs and videos, she explores the complex ways people relate to each other.

Sandra and James met in 1994, and were married soon after. They began to create artworks together, using poetry, photography, video, and performances.

Sadly, James passed away in an accident at a fishing camp on the Fraser River.