

Michael Dean

Teaching Resource

Michael Dean: Lost True Leaves / October 22, 2016 – February 5, 2017

About Michael Dean

Born in Newcastle upon Tyne in 1977, Michael Dean lives and works in London. His work explores themes of language, the act of writing and the struggle to communicate in a variety of forms, including sculpture, photography, poetry, plays, publications and performance.

Installations

Dean's installations are often immersive experiences in which the entire gallery space becomes the work of art rather than just the independent objects. The artist's recent exhibitions have included waste from the making of his sculptures, torn and dyed books, as well as dried grasses, pennies, stickers, and specimen bags strewn across the gallery, all interacting to create a cumulative effect.

For his exhibition at the Nasher Sculpture Center, Dean has created new works upon learning that cacti have lost their "true leaves" in the course of evolution. The books, pages, and sculptures in the exhibition draw on the phrase "lost true leaves," and may be seen as a visual representation of the emotional states of "loving and hating, leaving and having left."



Michael Dean. Photo courtesy Herald St., London.



Suggested Curriculum Connections

Creative Writing I §110.52. Art, Level 1 (b) (1) and (c)

Humanities I §110.55. English, Level 1 (b) (1) (B) and (2) (B) and (C)

Nasher Sculpture Center

Language

Writing is central to Dean's work: his sculptures are generated and accompanied by intimate, observational texts that explore the sculptural qualities inherent in words. Placing the spoken or written word in space is, for Dean, as much a sculpture as is any object.

- What words sculpt your life? What words stick with you and set you into motion in the world? Make a list.
- How can words act like sculpture and how can sculptures act like words?
- Are there any words or letters or symbols you see repeated throughout the exhibition space? What are they and what impression do they make on you?

Michael Dean describes one of his sculptures as an object used to scare away hate and poverty, in the way a scarecrow scares away crows.

- Reflect on your own life and come up with your own "scare-hates." What would you want to scare away? Make a running list of your scare _____.



Tactility

The physical feeling of sculptural objects—perceived through one's vision, one's touch, and one's proprioception (the sense of one's own body in space) is an essential part of Dean's sculptural practice. He wants viewers to feel the sensation of 'touch with [their] eyes.'

- Dean's sculptures often physically engage viewers. How does Dean's installation affect how you move through the space and around the sculptures?
- Do you see any physical human qualities in Dean's work? What are they? Look for repeated images and gestures throughout the installation.

Dean combines heavy materials such as rebar and concrete with light materials such as paper and ink.

- How do these materials interact in the sculptures? What personal connections or associations do you have with the materials you see?



Change

Dean creates his work without any sense of predetermination, allowing for accidents, changes and mistakes to take place. Rather than assigning a set meaning to his work, he hopes that the viewer will activate the space by moving through it and observing, constantly creating new meanings, narratives and vantage points.

Michael Dean has covered the oak floors of the Nasher's lower level gallery with white vinyl, recalling the blank pages of a book.

- How does a blank page relate to the way Dean hopes viewers will experience the work?
- How does the scale of the sculptures seem to change as you move through the space? How do you feel as you walk among them?
- Consider the things in your life that may be changing. Do these changes bring growth or instability? Make a list of these changes and how you have responded to them.
- What materials or symbols would you use to represent change and movement? What would you use to represent stability? What does Michael Dean use?

Intimacy

In Dean's installation, viewers may experience his sculptural objects on a personal, intimate level. Many of the sculptures are scaled to the size of human bodies with proportions taken directly from his wife and children. Viewers are asked to define for themselves what their personal, intuitive experiences are with Dean's almost-bodies, almost-books, almost-sculptures.

Michael Dean thinks of the works in this exhibition as either the roots or the shoots (new growth) of plants.

- Which sculptures seem like roots and which ones seem like shoots? What natural conditions affect the way plants grow?
- What social conditions affect a person's ability to thrive? Do you see any of these conditions referenced in the space?
- Do any of these sculptures seem to be in conversation? What might they be saying? Write a dialogue between two or three works in the exhibition.



Michael Dean's *Lost True Leaves*

Writing Exercise

The following exercise has three parts: **1) observation, 2) mind-mapping, 3) creative writing**. It works to develop a student's understanding of his or her own perceptions and feelings in response to Michael Dean's exhibition at the Nasher using the method of semantic mapping (mind maps) to generate a running list of a student's thoughts.

Students can complete these exercises in the Nasher's Lower Level Gallery in the Michael Dean's installation; before or after a visit, using an image of the installation; or in a classroom filled with objects, half in light and half in shadow.

- Begin by asking students to closely observe the objects they see.
- Using the template on the next page, students should map their objective observations and subjective responses to the objects (see example on following page).
- After creating their mind maps, students can harvest their own language to create a poem. We suggest cinquains and acrostics, but any form can work!

Examples of Poems

Cinquain

2 syllables	True leaves
4 syllables	punching upwards
6 syllables	pink, red, blue, black pages
8 syllables	springing, falling in a fountain
2 syllables	of light.

Acrostic

Leaves
Of
Sand and water, cement
Twist

Throw themselves across shadows
Raging against the
Ugly call of blank
Earth

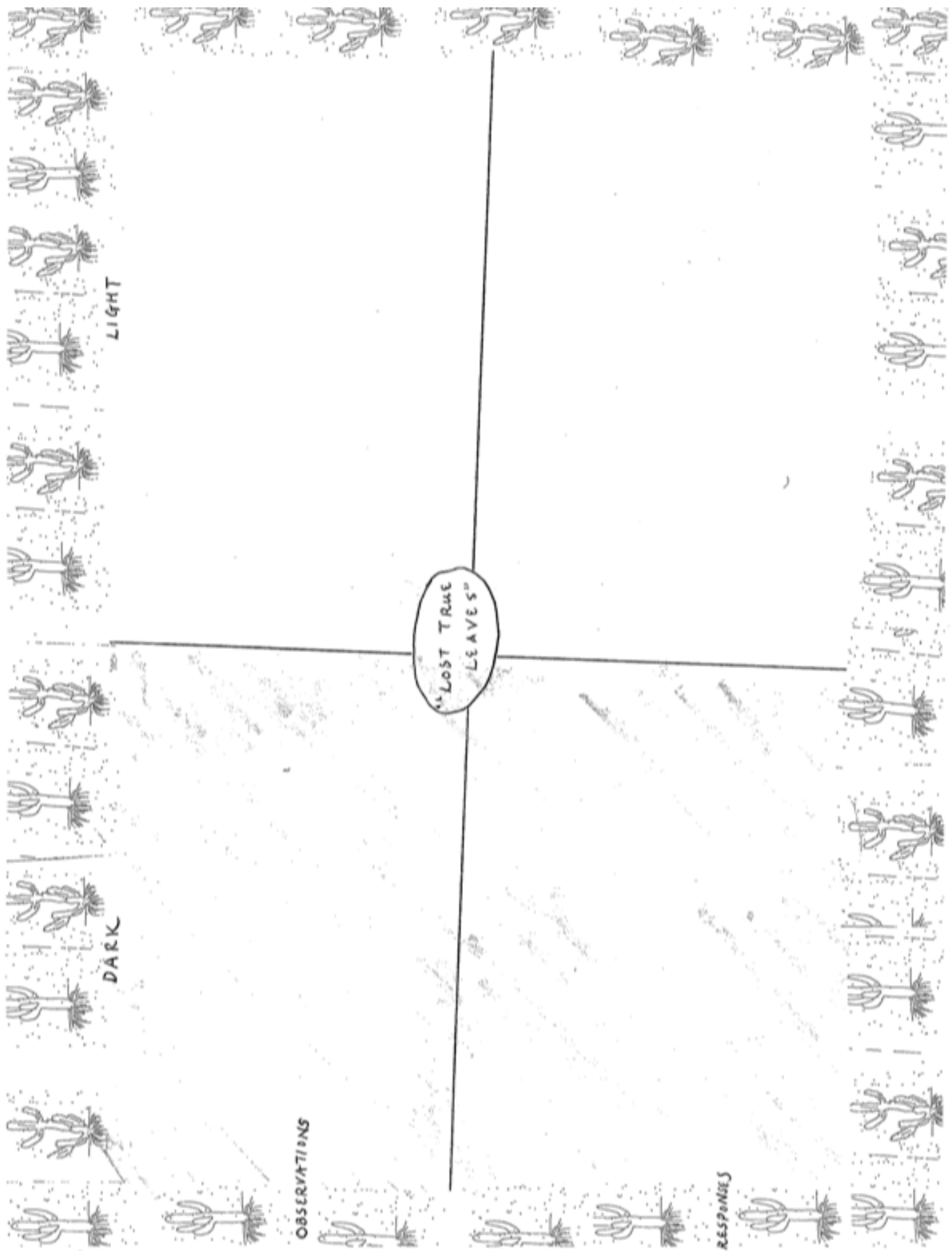
"LOST TRUE LEAVES"

LIGHT

DARK

OBSERVATIONS

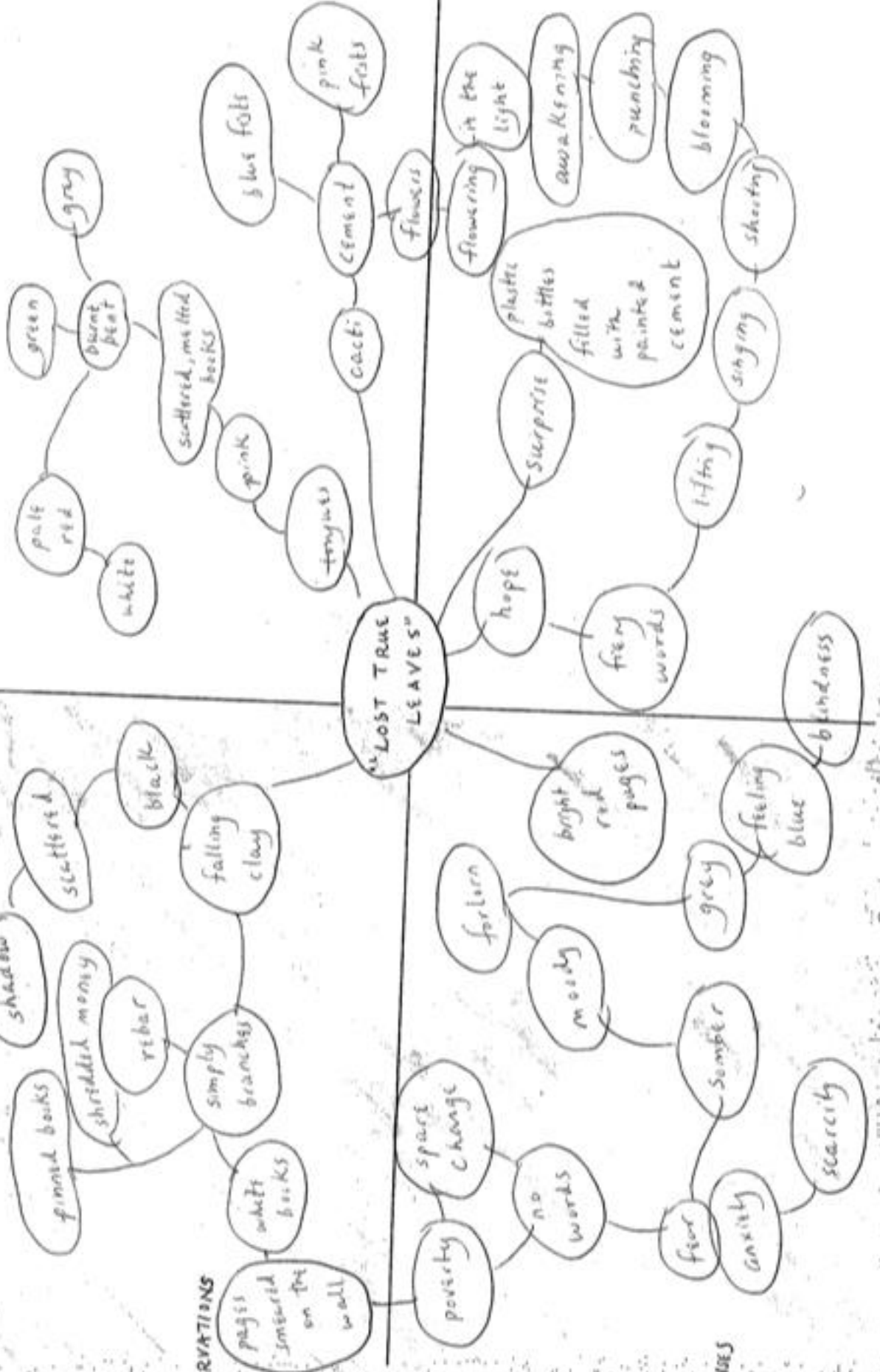
RESPONSES



LIGHT

DARK

"LOST TRUE LEAVES"



OBSERVATIONS

RESPONSES