

# *Casa de Mujeres Lesson Plan*

Compiled by the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

**Target Grade Level:** 9–12 in English language arts, Spanish, and visual arts

## **Objectives**

After completing this lesson, students will be able to:

- Identify and analyze key components of a portrait and relate visual elements to relevant cultural context and significance
- Build on the analysis of a primary source by viewing it again through the framework of a secondary source
- Create a written narrative that draws on visual elements in a portrait

## **Portraits**

Use three portraits from Rachelle Mozman’s series *Casa de Mujeres* found in the online exhibition “Portraiture Now: Staging the Self” at

<http://www.npg.si.edu/exhibit/staging/index.html>:

- *Piscina* (Pool), *El Espejo* (The Mirror), and *El Niño* (The Child)  
<http://www.npg.si.edu/exhibit/staging/mozman.html>

## **Materials**

- “Reading” Portraiture Guide for Educators, found at  
<http://www.npg.si.edu/docs/reading.pdf>

## **Key Terms**

**Colorism:** A form of prejudice and discrimination based on skin tone rather than race. Colorism is a byproduct of racism in that lighter-skinned individuals are typically favored over darker-skinned individuals because lighter skin is “closer” to white. Thus, while it is distinct from racism, colorism among individuals of the same race is the result of internalized racism.

## **Background Information**

### **About the Exhibition**

“Staging the Self” is the ninth installation of “Portraiture Now,” a series of exhibitions at the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery that showcase some of the twenty-first-century’s most creative portrait artists. The exhibition has been organized by the National Portrait Gallery in collaboration with the Smithsonian Latino Center. The artists’ names are reproduced as they use them, with or without accents.

The exhibition features the work of six contemporary U.S. Latino artists—David Antonio Cruz, Carlee Fernandez, María Martínez-Cañas, Rachelle Mozman, Karen Miranda Rivadeneira, and Michael Vasquez—who present identities theatrically, in order to rid portraiture of its reassuring tradition that fixes a person in space and time.

These artists use their work to focus on personal or family issues, telling stories that they have remembered or imagined from their past, manipulating images of themselves or superimposing portraits of their loved ones on their own. Like actors searching for a character, they are looking both for their unique identity traits and for shared traits. In the process, portraiture loses its feeling of certainty and instead becomes a map for finding oneself and others.

### **About the Artist**

In the last two decades, Rachelle Mozman has worked between her native New York and Panama, the country of her maternal family. Starting often from her own experience and family history, Mozman explores how culture shapes individuals and how environment affects behavior. She takes on these questions through multiple photographic series that conflate both documentary style and fictional narrative. Mozman's photographs show servants and masters in their most intimate surroundings. They engage each other sparsely, if at all, playing off of established social roles. The common introspective look of Mozman's lone characters suggests alienation—not what one would expect in a domestic setting.

Mozman received an MFA from Tyler School of Art at Temple University. Her work has been shown in solo and group shows in the United States, Europe, and Central America. She is currently an artist-in-residence at the Lower Manhattan Community Council.

### **About Casa de Mujeres**

Artist Statement: “My work stands at the intersection of documentary, narration, and performance. I photograph my mother and myself as characters exploring our family history. In *Casa de Mujeres* [Women's House], my mother plays the role of three women: a pair of twin sisters, one lighter in skin color, and a maid. These images reflect on traditional social hierarchies prevalent in Latin America. At the same time they can be read as portraits of my mother as her various selves—like a nested doll, revealing the conflict of vanity, race, and class within her.

These reenactments, while personal, address the universal, particularly in relation to what defines identity, family, and tradition in contemporary life. Although staged, this project is not meant to convey a romanticized vision of my experiences but to provide a means for reflection and a search for truth.”

## **Lesson Procedures**

### **Portrait Analysis**

Discuss and analyze *Piscina*, *El Espejo*, and *El Niño* using the following questions as a guide:

- Describe the colors in the portrait. How do they contribute to setting the tone and creating a mood?
- What is the setting of the portrait? What clues help you to determine the setting?
- What objects do you see in the portrait? What might they tell you about the sitter(s)?
- Describe each sitter's pose and gestures. How would you describe their body language?
- Describe each sitter's facial expressions. In what direction are they looking?
- List adjectives to describe each sitter or the portrait overall.

- If a portrait has more than one sitter, list adjectives to describe the sitters' interaction with one another.

### **Conversation Extender**

1. Read the following excerpts from artist Rachele Mozman's 2012 lecture on *Casa de Mujeres* at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. (Alternatively, view the lecture itself; Mozman discusses *Casa de Mujeres*, specifically, from 13:20–32:40:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7QZo4Lyf9t8>).

*"I decided that I would just have my mother act out . . . family narratives."* Note: The artist's mother plays all three women in the series: both twins—one of whom has lighter skin than the other—as well as the maid.

*"I decided to create a twin for the dama figure, you know, the "lady of the house" figure . . . In Caribbean families, it's not unusual because there's so much intermixing for one child to be very fair and then the brother is very dark and they're siblings, and that's very normal."*

*"As soon as I put the costume on [my mother]" she becomes "very aware of who she is supposed to be"*

*"What are you addressing when you change someone's skin tone?"*

*"I decided to have these characters sort of almost be stuck in time. . . . There's almost a feeling of timelessness..[The time period is] sort of ambiguous."*

*"[The series] also talks about how class, in my perspective, ultimately rides over everything else because . . . it's really class that dominates and it's really class that defines power relationships."*

*"Power struggle between the maid figure" and the "ladies of the house"*

*The artist is "very interested in the contrast within the houses" between "the domestic workers and the residents" as well as the "division of class" within a single home.*

*The photographs sometimes "feel like you're looking at a scene from a play."*

*"These women are always aware of one another. . . They can't escape the other, but the other is an object that they can't really empathize with and they can't really engage with. . . . They are aware of the other, they have some affection, they have some contempt, they have some fear, but they are always within each other's gaze."*

*"It's very much about people watching and being watched."*

*"The conflict between the intimacy and then the distance—the simultaneous intimacy and distance between them, sharing the same home and yet there's this gulf of distance."*

2. Then revisit the portraits and discuss additional insights that emerge as a result of the artist's commentary on her work.

### **Writing Activity**

Students will select one of the portraits around which to create a short fictional narrative (for Spanish classes, students can write as much of the narrative as possible in Spanish). While students should feel free to take the narrative in any number of creative directions, they should include at least three visual elements from the portrait in their narrative.

### **Target Common Core Standards**

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1

Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7

Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7

Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.4

Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.6

Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.