

“Portraiture Now: Staging the Self” 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
- Analyze how multiple portraits address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the artists take
- Create a series of critical thinking questions appropriate to a specific purpose and audience

Portraits

Use the following portraits from the online exhibition “Portraiture Now: Staging the Self” at <http://www.npg.si.edu/exhibit/staging/index.html>:

- David Antonio Cruz, *iwishrainydayscamewithasliceofmango*, <http://www.npg.si.edu/exhibit/staging/cruz.html>
- Carlee Fernandez, *The Strand That Holds Us Together*, <http://www.npg.si.edu/exhibit/staging/fernandez.html>
- María Martínez-Cañas, *Duplicity as Identity: 50%*, http://www.npg.si.edu/exhibit/staging/martinez_canas.html
- Rachele Mozman, *El Espejo (The Mirror)*, <http://www.npg.si.edu/exhibit/staging/mozman.html>
- Karen Miranda Rivadeneira, *My mom braiding my hair like her mother did to her, ca. 1990*, <http://www.npg.si.edu/exhibit/staging/rivadeneira.html>
- Michael Vasquez, *The Neighborhood Tour*, <http://www.npg.si.edu/exhibit/staging/vasquez.html>

Materials

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

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, Rachele 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 Artists

David Antonio Cruz

The son of Puerto Rican migrant parents, David Antonio Cruz has long pondered the life-changing reasons behind the decision to leave one's home country or return to it permanently. In his work Cruz considers this question from the perspectives of those within his family who left, stayed, or went back, and those who—like him—are at home between places.

A versatile artist, Cruz uses a variety of media, including painting, sculpture, drawing, and video. In the works on view on the website Cruz challenges the limits of painting by incorporating various objects that have meaning to him. His work not only tests the boundaries of artistic media but also attempts to document the experience of diaspora.

Cruz received his MFA from Yale University and his BFA from Pratt Institute. He attended Skowhegan School for Painting and Sculpture and the Artist in the Marketplace (AIM) program at the Bronx Museum. He is a recipient of a 2013 Franklin Furnace Fund Grant and the Urban Artist Initiative Award in 2011.

Artist Statement:

I use painting, video, sculpture, and costume-making to map out a queer, diasporic experience that has been suppressed from narratives of Puerto Rican migration.

Through a variety of new and found materials, such as enamel, gold-leaf, china, constructed costumes and rags, I layer my paintings and build up their surfaces in an attempt to make visible the queer body, to dress it, and depict the space where it exists. Whether I layer sound over sound or cover a painted figure in chocolate paint, I use seduction to prompt the viewer to question and negotiate what is being offered while partially obscuring the familiar.

Fixed between the fantasy world of Dorothy's Oz and the politics of Maria's *West Side Story*, my work is anchored in personal narratives, American and queer history events, classic films, and fashion, in order to reinterpret invisible histories of a migrating people and the queer body.

Carlee Fernandez

Carlee Fernandez defines herself as a sculptor, although photography is often her medium of choice to explore familiar or fanciful three-dimensional forms. In the early 2000s she created sculptural hybrids of our consumer age by seamlessly combining rejected skins from a taxidermy

shop with everyday objects. Works like *Hugo Parlier* (2001), a rhino-headed stepladder, emphasize Fernandez's preoccupation with shape and identity as well as the relationship between humankind and nature. More recently, in her *Bear Studies* and *Man* series, and her new work, *The Strand That Holds Us Together*, she merges her own body with beasts and with men she loves and admires. This latest series investigates the relationship between self, gender, and family.

Fernandez earned her BFA from California State University and MFA from Claremont Graduate University. Her work has been included in numerous solo and group shows, including the landmark "Phantom Sightings: Art after the Chicano Movement" (2008) and the California Biennial at the Orange County Museum of Art in 2010.

In the portrait *The Strand That Holds Us Together*, the artist's right hand is photographed next to the left hand of her father.

Artist Statement: My body is the general form of a small bear. With fur and Velcro, I tailored myself to snuggle into the cavity of the animal. I appear part bear, part me. Over my body, I layered posters of male artists, musicians, and film directors, my measurements dictating the scale of the photograph. I hand-painted stripes on a navy blue boys' pocket T-shirt to match that of my father's in an old photo.

All objects bespoke for my body carry qualities of fierceness, masculinity, machismo, or animalness. Physically applying these objects to my body is a way of expanding myself to envelop a whole with new characteristics while keeping my body as anchor. This simple gesture has complex implications of duality between man and woman, human and animal, and the respect for life.

María Martínez-Cañas

María Martínez-Cañas seems to have been born with a camera: at eight years old she was working with a Polaroid Swinger and then a Twin-Lens Rolleiflex that her mother brought from Cuba. Martínez-Cañas was raised in Puerto Rico, where her love of photography and art has culminated in awards and exhibitions. As an undergraduate at the Philadelphia College of Art and in graduate school at the Art Institute of Chicago, Martínez-Cañas embraced experimental photography, pushing beyond the documentary use of the medium to a poetic territory that combines drawing, collage, and photomontage. Maps, family photographs, and art historical images recur in her work as visual markers documenting and reinventing the past.

The series *Duplicity as Identity* consists of nine images in which the artist overlays a photograph of herself onto one of her father, posed identically and taken at approximately the same age. Martínez-Cañas then creates incremental mixes of her and her father that go from 10 percent of his image over 90 percent of hers all the way to 10 percent of hers over 90 percent of his, confounding their identities into one.

Artist Statement: The series *Duplicity as Identity* explores the notions of duplicity, perception, and illusion in photography as inspired by recent familial circumstances. Juxtaposing what is "real" and "imagined," the images reflect the desires, fears, and prohibitions that permeate everyday life and questions of identity.

While the term “duplicity” implies deceitfulness in speech or conduct, it can be argued that it is the basis of all social interactions. Given the fact that the behavior of most people changes according to those with whom they interact, we are continuously recreating ourselves in moments of almost-believable duplicity. A fundamental goal of this work is to discover the relationship between perceived and physical worlds.

Rachelle Mozman

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.

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.”

Karen Miranda Rivadeneira

Since 2006, Karen Miranda Rivadeneira’s photographic projects have focused on identity and intimacy. With her family’s participation, she has staged and photographed memories of her childhood in her family’s home in Queens, New York. She has also worked with native peoples, such as the Mam in Guatemala, the Mandaeans (from south of Iraq and west of Iran) living in Sweden, and the Waoranis in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Most recently she has explored such ancient traditions as shamanism in the Andean Mountains. In these diverse locations she uses the medium of photography to locate the universal while exploring the intersection of memory and tradition.

Miranda Rivadeneira earned her BFA from the School of Visual Arts in New York. She is the recipient of multiple awards and fellowships, including a New York Foundation for the Arts fellowship in photography, the EnFoco New Works Award, and a grant from the Queens Council of the Arts. She has published and exhibited widely and is an invited participant in the 2014 Latin American Photography Forum in São Paulo, Brazil.

Artist Statement: “The act of remembering is an unstable and unreliable process. The more we ‘remember’ an event, the more we are likely to change it. Since 2008, I have been working on *Other Stories/Historias Bravas*, a project where I revisit events from my youth that were

never recorded. In this project, I restage scenarios taken from my memory with the collaboration of my immediate family. I recreate moments that helped shape my interpretation of the world and my identity. These memories are either connected to local folklore or to my own family's tradition such as praying to the rain or blessing the breasts.

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.”

Michael Vasquez

Michael Vasquez was raised by his mother and earned a BFA from the New World School of the Arts (Miami) in 2001. Vasquez's work, in both large-scale painting and sculptural photo assemblages, represents the society in which he grew up: the male world of the streets and gang life.

The artist's bravura paint handling is equal to its subject: dramatic, shocking, and even violent. But it is also imbued with the pathos of young men coming up, trying to find themselves amid a world of trouble, creating a community from what is at hand. Being from that life, Vasquez uses his work to race past questions of objectification and condescension to force our attention on the world of men marginalized and ignored by the American mainstream.

Artist Statement: “My imagery is sourced from photographs I have taken of friends, family, and acquaintances throughout my lifetime. I utilize these photographs in painting, collage, and installation, with content rooted in identity and contemporary family structure. Loosely drawing from personal experience, I investigate the code and allure of a neighborhood street gang through the perspective of a boy growing up without a father figure. I present the gang as an extended family, accompanied by its own set of values that communicate and instill a level of masculinity and toughness beyond a single parent mother's capability. I am most interested in the duality within these values and accompanying feelings such as aspects of pride and shame, affiliation and separation, respect and disrespect, etc., all of which play important factors in one's vulnerable and definitive coming-of-age years.”

Lesson Procedures

Introduction

According to Merriam-Webster, *identity* is “the distinguishing character or personality of an individual.” Discuss what different elements work together to comprise one's individual identity. Then discuss what other sorts of identities might define us (familial, cultural, etc.).

Discuss possible reasons why an individual might identify with more than one identity – either throughout different times or in different settings at the same time in his or her life. Make connections between this conversation and the exhibition's theme regarding identity as something that may be in flux or performed rather than fixed.

Close Reading Activity: Portrait Analysis

Discuss and analyze each portrait using the following questions as a guide:

Looking Questions:

- Describe the colors in the portrait. How do they contribute to setting the tone and creating a mood?
- What is the medium of the portrait? (photograph, painting, collage, etc.)
- 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?
- Describe each sitter's pose and gestures. Are they standing? Sitting? How much of their body can you see? Where are their hands positioned?
- Describe each sitter's facial expressions. In what direction are they looking? Is their face fully visible, partially obscured, or absent altogether?
- 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.

Analysis Questions:

With the observations from your looking questions in mind, consider the following questions for each portrait:

- Individual Identity: What interpretations might be drawn regarding each sitter's individual identity?
- Familial Identity: What interpretations might be drawn regarding the relationship between the sitters in the portrait and/or between the artist and their family?
- Cultural Identity: What interpretations might be drawn from the portrait regarding cultural identity?

Writing Activity: Creating Questions for the Artist

Have students choose one of the six portraits and create a series of additional questions they would like to ask the artist of that work during an interview. All of these questions should be open-ended and should reference elements in the portrait and/or information in the "About the Artists" section.

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.CCRA.R.9

Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take

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.RH.11-12.5

Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole.

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