

MoCP

Museum of
Contemporary Photography

Columbia College Chicago

FRAMING IDEAS

Portraiture and Representation



Dawoud Bey

Sharmaine, Vicente, Joseph, Andre, and Charlie, 1993

from the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Gift of the Artist

CURRICULUM GUIDE

This resource is aimed at integrating the study of photographic portraits into secondary and post-secondary fine arts, language arts, and social science curriculum. This guide contains, information on artists and their work, questions for looking and discussion, and classroom activities related to images from the permanent collection of the MoCP. These lessons are aligned with Illinois Learning Standards Incorporating the Common Core and can be adapted for use by younger students. A corresponding set of images for classroom use can be found at www.mocp.org/education/resources-for-educators.php. Additional images and biographies of the artists featured here can be found on the MoCP's searchable database at <http://www.mocp.org/collection.php>. The MoCP is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization accredited by the American Alliance of Museums. The museum is generously supported by Columbia College Chicago, the MoCP Advisory Committee, individuals, private and corporate foundations, and government agencies including the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency. The MoCP's education work is additionally supported by After School Matters and the Llyod A. Fry Foundation. Special funding for this guide and the MoCP's work with k-12 educators was provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art.

Columbia
COLLEGE CHICAGO

Portraiture and Representation



Diane Arbus
Two Girls in Matching Bathing Suits,
Coney Island, N.Y. 1967



Diane Arbus
Hermaphrodite and a dog in a carnival trailer, Maryland
1970

A portrait is a photograph that is composed to convey information about a person's appearance, identity, and mood. Studio portraits rely on details such as clothing, hairstyle, facial expressions, and body language to teach us about a subject. Environmental portraits present a person in a context or setting that contains details that add to what we learn from their physical appearance. Choices made by the photographer including use of soft versus hard light, framing, vantage point, and timing also influence our perception of the subject.

Among the most prominent photographers of her generation, **Diane Arbus** (American, 1923-1971) is perhaps best remembered for her frank studies of marginalized groups and subcultures. Yet in addition to the nudists, transvestites, carnival performers, and the cognitively-impaired or developmentally-delayed residents of asylums, Arbus also photographed socialites, celebrities, and anonymous strangers passing through New York's streets and parks. For instance, Arbus photographed regularly at Coney Island, producing such pictures as *Two Girls in Matching Bathing Suits*, Coney Island, N.Y.. In the 1950s and 60s Arbus studied with photographer Lisette Model and had an active career as a fashion and editorial photographer. There is a strong connection between her magazine assignments and her personal work, and many of her most famous images were created for or published in magazines. Arbus's quirky and non-traditional style has influenced several generations of portrait photographers.



Nicholas Nixon
Bebe and Clementine, 1986

To create the portrait, *Bebe and Clementine, 1986*, Nicholas Nixon focused on the vulnerability and humanness of his wife and daughter rather than creating a more traditionally idealized image of mother and child. He tightly framed his composition, cropping out the background of the scene as well as most of his subjects' bodies and faces including their eyes. Instead, our attention is drawn to a recently stitched wound on the mother's arm and a stream of drool hanging from the baby's lower lip. Nixon's use of the highly precise 8x10 view camera creates a heightened awareness of the contrast between the baby's flawless, soft, new skin and the freckled, aged skin of her mother, as Bebe hugs her daughter to her body.

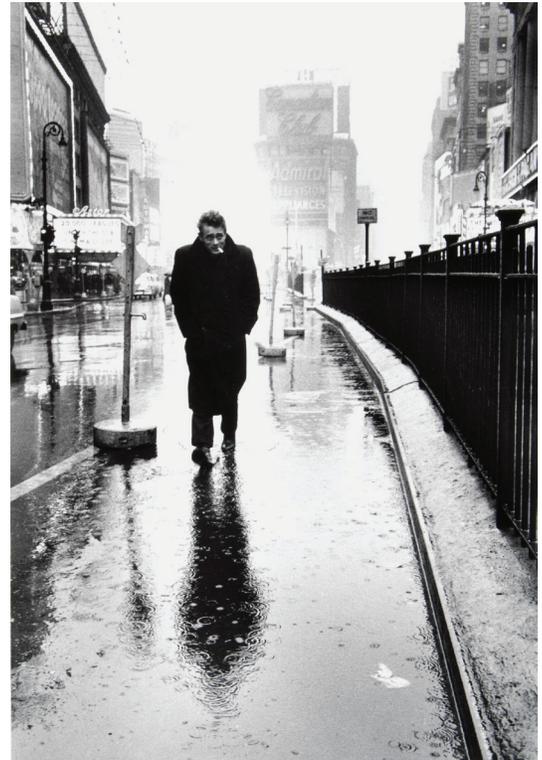


Nicholas Nixon
*Heather Brown McCann, Mimi Brown, Bebe Brown Nixon,
 Laurie Brown, New Canaan, Connecticut, 1976*
 From the collection of the MoCP



Nicholas Nixon
The Brown Sisters, Brookline Mass, 1999
 from the collection of the MoCP

Nixon is perhaps best known for his *Brown Sisters* images, an annual series of portraits he has made since 1975 that depicts his wife and her three sisters in the same order. Nixon's consistent use of tight framing, and minimal backgrounds throughout the over 30 images in the series, pulls the viewer to notice evidence of the passage of time through details such as the women's' changing hair, skin, clothing, and body language.



(both) **Dennis Stock**

Untitled from the James Dean Memorial Portfolio, 1955

In the mid 1950s photographer **Dennis Stock**, on assignment for *Life Magazine* created a series of portraits that were intended to teach readers about a promising young actor named James Dean. Stock collaborated with Dean to plan images that would convey information about Dean's young life and portray the image Dean was establishing as an intelligent, rebellious, and broody heartthrob.

In one untitled environmental portrait, we see Dean reclining in his boyhood bedroom on his aunt and uncle's farm in Indiana. Details within the room such as a set of bull's horns and a matador's cape hung on the wall, and numerous books and albums including a cover facing the camera that reads "Bach" provide insight into Dean's interests and young life. Another image made on the farm shows Dean looking serious while standing next to an enormous pig, revealing a humorous side to the actor that was not often apparent in his films. A now iconic portrait, perhaps the best-known image of Dean, shows him walking in the rain in New York with his collar turned up smoking a cigarette, confirming the public image he came to establish as a cool loner. The leading lines of the street and an iron fence pull the viewer's eye from Dean's reflection in a puddle, to him, and beyond to the buildings and signage of a deserted Times Square. Other images within the series are sparser, relying mainly on pools of soft natural light and Dean's facial expressions and body language to show his physical beauty and convey a sense of mood. Considered together, Stock's portraits of Dean hint at the complexity of his character. Tragically, Dean was killed in a car accident a few months after Stock made these images.

In the image *Sharmaine, Vicente, Joseph, Andre, and Charlie*, 1993 (see cover), by **Dawoud Bey**, we learn about these five teenagers, students at Chicago's Providence St. Mel school where Bey worked as a resident artist, exclusively through their appearance, facial expressions, positioning, and body language. Their clothing, accessories and hair give us a sense of their personal style as well as clues as to when the image was made. The girl on the left appears bold, possibly even confrontational because she looks directly at the camera and the viewer. The young man on the left seems studious, and less confident with his glasses and downward gaze. We make assumptions about the personal relationships between the three students on the left of the frame based on the fact that their bodies are touching. The fact that none of the students are smiling lends a somber, contemplative quality to the image.



Carrie Mae Weems
Untitled #2450, from the Kitchen Table series, 1990
From the collection of the MoCP

Made in the studio with a rare 20x24 Polaroid view camera, a huge camera that must sit on a tripod, Bey spent time positioning the students in the studio and then checking and rechecking how they appear in the camera before shooting the first frame. He then twice moved the camera, repositioned his subjects including moving the fourth sitter farther away from the camera, and shot again. Because the Polaroid camera produces no negative, each 20x24 inch frame is one of a kind. They are mounted together as a triptych in one large frame. Since he began photographing on the streets of Harlem in the 1970s, Bey has frequently photographed young people of color because he feels they are often misrepresented or negatively portrayed in image culture and are under-represented in the tradition of formal portraiture.

Throughout her 30 year career, and using a range of media, **Carrie Mae Weems** has created works that engage themes including racism, gender roles, history, and familial relationships. Weems often appears in her own works, including in the above triptych from her *Kitchen Table* (1990) series in which the camera's position remains fixed and the kitchen scene functions like the set of a play as sparse objects and the subtle movements and gestures of the key figures within the domestic scene reveal narrative. Weems says of her staging of this this influential body of work, "Just looking at it, I've thought "that's life." Everybody has a kitchen table."

To create her series of “projects,” every few weeks artist **Nikki S. Lee** would join a different group transforming her outward appearance to fit in with each community. Carrying a small point and shoot camera, identifiable in her work by the time and date stamp in the corner of each image, Lee would pass the camera to a friend who would take a picture of her among her new peer group. Lee was inspired to make this project after she moved from South Korea to New York to study fashion and photography in graduate school and was aware of the big and small ways that her identity shifted as she moved from group to group. She says, “I really couldn’t understand who I was without the people around me. I realize it is only through my relationships with others that I can see myself.”

Among the communities she joined were skateboarders, senior citizen, lesbians, swing dancers and the Hispanic community. Specific details within each image, such as the robin’s-egg blue Tiffany’s shopping bag, a professionally-coiffed Lee holds while standing in front of an expensive-looking store in an image from the Yuppie Project, convey clues as to the identity of each of her characters.



Nikki S. Lee
The Yuppie Project #4, 1998
From the collection of the MoCP



Nikki S. Lee
The Hispanic Project #18, 1998
From the collection of the MoCP

MoCP Collection Artists Working in the Genre of Portraiture Include:

Portraiture: Diane Arbus, Dawoud Bey; Tina Barney; Roy DeCarava,; Nikki S. Lee; Stephen Mark; Nicholas Nixon; Alec Soth; Carrie Mae Weems; Dennis Stock; James Van Der Zee.

Self-portraiture: John Coplans, Jenifer Davis, Sarah Faust, Lee Friedlander, Robert Heineken, Anne Noggle. Images by the artists and artist’s biographies can be accessed for classroom use from the museum’s website at collections.mocp.org/main.php?module=objects.

Portraiture and Representation

Questions for Looking and Discussion

How can identity be revealed in a portrait?

- Describe what you see when you look at the image. Where does your eye go first? Why?
- What is the subject's relationship to the other elements in the photograph such as other people, the environment we find him or her in, or objects within the scene? What do we learn from these details?
- Are there clues in the image that suggest when and where this portrait might have been made? Describe.
- What moods or feelings are expressed in this portrait? How?
- What can you tell about how this picture was made? Consider the visual strategies used by the artist such as use of light, time of day, vantage point, framing and composition, scale, presentation, etc.
- What do we learn about the subject by looking at this photograph? What details reveal that information?
- Do you think the photographer happened upon this scene, or might they have provided some direction to their subject?
- What do we know to be true about this subject? What assumptions might we have made?

Other Questions to Consider

- What do you know about the maker of the image? Can you tell how he or she feels about the subject of the image? If so, how?
- What makes a portrait a portrait? Are all pictures of people portraits? Why or why not? Does a portrait have to show the subject's face? Can a photograph that does not show a human subject at all still be a portrait?
- How are portraits made in the studio different from those made in the natural world?
- Read more about the artist and their work and the historic and cultural context in which the work was made. How does your impression of the image change?

Activities

1. Create a Persona from a Photograph

Choose a photograph of a person or a group of people. Describe what you see. What do you learn about the person or people depicted in the image? What is the mood of the image? Point to and discuss the visual details reveal that information. Photographers use techniques such as lighting, setting, and framing, and timing—waiting for a particular moment or gesture—to evoke the personality of their subjects. Writers use tools including word choice, **diction**, sentence structure, and **vernacular** speech to evoke character.

Write a narrative about the subject of the image you selected in first person point-of-view. Consider the back-story of that person: Where are they from? What are their interests and concerns? What might they want others to know about them? Weave details from within the image into your story

Compare your narrative with those created by other students in the class. Discuss the connections and differences between how character and voice is revealed through photography and written and spoken language.

Variation: Reverse this process by staging and creating a photographic portrait based on written dialogue from a text. How might you visually represent that voice in a portrait?

2. Creating Portraits

What would you like people to learn about you through a portrait? How could you make those qualities show in a photograph? Work with a partner and alternate the role of photographer and sitter to create portraits of each other that teach others about who you are.

- Create an environmental portrait by photographing your subject in a place that includes details that would help to define or describe him or her such as in their home or workplace.
- Or, create a studio portrait by photographing against a sparse background (like a studio backdrop or blank wall) that would focus our attention on your subject's body, clothing, physical gestures and facial expressions.
- Carefully compose your image in the camera's viewfinder. Try to include only those elements that add to—not detract from your idea and composition.
- Your choice of vantage point—where you position your camera in relation to your subject—can dramatically change the appearance of your sitter and the composition of your image. Look at your sitter through the camera's viewfinder from above, below, from the side, at close range and farther away. Select the vantage point that best represents your subject and concept.
- Consider your choice of lighting. Hard and high contrast lighting such as light coming from a lamp without a shade or out-of-doors at noon on a sunny day can create a harsh image. Soft or diffused light, such as light passing through a window or a lamp shade or outdoors at the beginning or end of the day can create a soft or romantic mood in a photograph.
- Print your images or present them as a digital slide show and share them with your classmates. Judging by their comments, did your portraits communicate what you intended? If you were to do this project again, what changes would you make?
- Critique this work with your peers. Discuss how each photographer used techniques including framing, composition, vantage point and lighting in their work. Discuss what you learn about each sitter through their portraits and how those qualities are communicated. Judging by the comments of your peers, did your portraits communicate what you intended? If you were to do this project again, what changes would you make?

3. Photograph a Day in Your Life

Photographers like Carrie Mae Weems know that sometimes commonplace moments and locations can be very interesting and revealing. Start photographing first thing in the morning. Carry your camera with you throughout the day, and make approximately 30 images before you go to bed that night. Photograph all aspects of your day, including everyday moments and locations such as commuting to school, or eating dinner. Look around your spaces for groupings of things that might also teach others about you such as the items on your bedside table, notes posted on your wall, or the contents of your bag. Create a slideshow or poster of the images you made sequenced chronologically, and share them with your peers. What do you learn through the individual images and in each person's grouping of images? How is that information revealed? Which images do you think are the most successful? Why?

Tips

- Try to represent your day evenly. Avoid photographic clichés such as making a lot of pictures of your friends “mugging” for the camera. for the camera.
- If you want to include yourself in some of the pictures, have a friend take the picture, or photograph yourself by holding the camera at arm's length away from your body.
- Think about how best to frame each image in your camera's viewfinder. Move your camera in and out and change your vantage point and the light in the room to make visually interesting photographs.

4. Considering Representation: Identify Clichés and Stereotypes.

Teacher's note: When students first begin making portraits, they often create images that imitate stereotypical and cliché images they have seen in popular culture without considering how they are portraying their subjects. The best antidote for this is to share with them a range of thoughtfully made and complex images made by other students and professionals such as those featured in this guide. It is also important to teach students to critically examine photographs and to consider how a subject is presented, the context in which the image appears, the purpose for which it was made, and to recognize and discuss limited and negative portrayals when they encounter them. This is a good project to assign before students make self-portraits and portraits so that they will be more conscious of how they choose to represent themselves and others.

When we look at images of people we should be aware that all photographs are the result of a series of choices and factors that determine how that person is portrayed. Those choices include many factors such as use of vantage point, framing and composition, setting, lighting, clothing, body language and facial expression. The context in which we find an image can also influence how it is received. For example, how is an image of a person on Facebook different than one that we might find in a newspaper article, advertisement, or on the wall of a museum?

Every image represents one among many possible interpretations of a given subject. Sometimes the choices photographers and others make result in images that reflect clichés or **stereotypes** of race, class, age, gender, sexual orientation or culture. For example, we often see images in popular culture in which teenagers appear rude, wild, or out of control. Street photographer Garry Winogrand (1928-1984) was widely respected for his work but some consider his portfolio *Women Are Beautiful*, held in the collection of the MoCP to be sexist.

- Look at pictures of people online, in books, magazines, newspapers, posters, anywhere that you find images. Examine how the subject of each photograph is represented.
- What do we learn about the subject by looking at this image? What is the mood of the image? What details within the image communicate that information? How do you feel about how the person is represented in this image? Why?
- Where did you find this image? For what purpose do you think it was made? Who is the target audience for this photograph?
- Find and bring to class three photographs that you feel reflect clichés or stereotypes of representation. What elements within the photographs contribute to why you selected them?

Compare your images with those selected by your classmates. Discuss why and how each image might represent a limited or stereotypical portrayal. Are you all in agreement on each image? Why or why not?

Glossery of Terms

diction

Choice of words, a way of speaking in written or spoken language.

environmental portrait

A portrait made in a setting, such as a home or workplace that provides details that help us to learn about the subject.

framing/composition

How one composes an image in the camera's viewfinder. Framing can also refer to how an image is finished for final presentation.

montage

A single composition made by combining several images.

point of view (vantage point)

Point of view is where a photographer stands in relation to the subject he or she is photographing. It can also refer to the photographer's view or opinion of that subject.

point of view (first-person narrative voice)

First-person narrative is when a story is narrated by a single character at one time, who speaks for and about themselves and represents a point of view in the writing.

scale

The relative size of an element within a composition. Scale can also refer to the size of the finished work.

sitter

The person who is the subject of a formal portrait.

stereotype

A rigid, oversimplified belief that is applied to all members of a group or culture.

studio portrait

A portrait made in a studio setting that relies on the sitter's appearance, facial expression and body language as well as technical choice made by the photographer such as lighting and composition to describe the subject.

Triptych

Three images that are intended to function as one.

vernacular

An every day style of language or architecture that is distinctive to a particular region or place.

Illinois Learning Standards for English Language Arts Incorporating the Common Core: Standards Addressed in This Guide:

CC.K-12.L.R.3 Knowledge of Language: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

CC.K-12.R.R.1 Key Ideas and Details: 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.

K-12 R R.2 CC.K-12.R.R.2 Key Ideas and Details: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

CC.K-12.L.R.6 Vocabulary Acquisition and Use: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression.

CC.K-12.R.R.6 Craft and Structure: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

CC.K-12.R.R.7 Integration of Knowledge and Ideas: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

CC.K-12.R.R.9 Integration of Knowledge and Ideas: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

K-12 R R.10 CC.K-12.R.R.10 Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity: Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

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