FRAMING IDEAS

Still Life: The Object as Subject
Images from the collection of the MoCP for classroom use. This image set corresponds with a curriculum guide that can be found at http://www.mocp.org/education/resources-for-educators.php. These resources were created with special support from the Terra Foundation for American Art.
Jan Groover
Untitled #1308, 1983
Roy DeCarava
Ketchup Bottles, Table and Coat, 1983
Abelardo Morell
Pieta by El Greco, 1993
Abelardo Morell

*Three Women by Hopper, 2000*
Zeke Berman
Game, 1998
Zeke Berman
Untitled (Fruit Basket), 1984
Laura Letinsky
Untitled, from the Morning and Melancholia series, 2001
Laura Letinsky
Untitled, #35, 2001, from the *Morning, and Melancholia* series
William Mebane and Martin Hyers
Installation view of *Empire* (1996)
on view in the MoCP exhibition *Peripheral Views: States of America*
July 13-September 30, 2012
Mebane and Hyers
*untitled*, 2006, from the series *Empire*
Mebane and Hyers
untitled, 2006 from the series *Empire*
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untitled, 2006 from the series Empire
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untitled, 2006 from the series Empire
Christian Boltanski
untitled from the Favorite Objects portfolio, 1998
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1998
Christian Boltanski
untitled from the *Favorite Object Portfolio*, 1998
Zeke Berman
(American, b. 1951)

Zeke Berman’s background as a sculptor is evident in his painstakingly fabricated arrangements for the camera. Using string, wood, clay, water, paper, and glass, Berman creates complicated still lifes that resist clear-cut visual interpretation. By conflating the difference between what is seen by the eye and what is seen by the camera, Berman incites our imagination and challenges our perception.

Born in New York in 1951, Zeke Berman is a graduate New York’s High School of Music and Art and the Philadelphia College of Art (BFA in sculpture, 1972). Included in many major museum collections, Berman’s photographs have been exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago; Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art; Friends of Photography, San Francisco; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; and Museum of Modern Art, New York. Berman is the recipient of grants and fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, the McDowell Colony, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the New York Foundation for the Arts.
Christian Boltanski  
(French, b. 1944)

Christian Boltanski is one of France’s most established contemporary artists. Working with multiple mediums, including installation, artists’ books, and photography, Boltanski’s oeuvre addresses the ephemerality of existence. Among his favorite subjects are childhood, memory, autobiography, loss, and death, with the goal of soliciting a sentimental response from viewers. Boltanski favors photography due to its relationship with time, its ability to serve as a visual representation of memory, and, thus, its power to create emotion. He often employs a documentary aesthetic to exploit photography’s associations with evidence and history. He creates fictional archives to blur the boundary of fact and fiction, all the while drawing on a religious sensibility of relics and shrines.

Favorite Objects (1998), in the collection of the MoCP, is a collaboration between Boltanski and the students of the Lycée Français de Chicago, a private school serving pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade students. As a visiting artist in the Lycée’s Artist-in-Residence program, Boltanski asked each student to bring his or her favorite possession to be photographed. Over the course of two days, the items were uniformly photographed, creating a catalog of mundane yet meaningful objects, ranging from toys to personal journals. Afterward, Boltanski met with students to create artwork related to the photographs, challenging them to explore the significance of their carefully chosen objects. Favorite Objects is the archive of 264 color photocopies created from the original black and white photographs, of which there are 264 editions—the number of students in the school at the time. In addition to holding one of these editions in its permanent collection, the MoCP also houses the original 264 gelatin silver prints on loan from the Lycée.

For Boltanski, who maintains a long-held interest in the loss of childhood, Favorite Objects departs from his usual method of amassing anonymous photographs and items and then displaying them as mysterious shrines or fictional archives out of their original contexts. In Favorite Objects, even commercial toys such as Barbie dolls or Transformers retain an aura of intimacy derived from the knowledge that they were individually chosen by the students. The catalog of objects almost serve as an alternative yearbook, with an object chosen to represent each student, or as a time capsule capturing aspects of the Lycée’s student body in 1998. Despite the assurance that this archive, these objects, and these people are indeed real, questions remain as to what knowledge is gained in viewing the objects as a group and what is revealed about their owners, if anything. In most instances, the mystery remains intact; no more is revealed about these children than the people or objects in one of Boltanski’s fictional archives. The viewer is left to create his or her own narratives. For the students who participated, time may continually transform the archive, permitting it to become saturated with feelings of loss or nostalgia as they become adults.
Roy DeCarava
(American, b. 1919-2009)

Roy Rudolph DeCarava was born in New York City’s Harlem, on December 9, 1919. From 1938 to 1940 he studied painting at Cooper Union Institute, from 1940 to 1942 painting and printmaking with Elton Fax at the Harlem Art Center, and drawing and painting with Charles White at George Washington Carver Art School in 1944. He originally purchased a camera (in 1946) to document his work in printmaking, but by 1949 photography itself was his sole artistic focus. He went on to establish himself as a post-war street photographer of daily life, specifically African-American life in New York. DeCarava was not the first photographer to shoot Harlem, but his commitment to interpreting it in artistic terms sets him apart from the history of social documentary established there.

His first photography exhibition was in 1950 at Mark Pepper’s Forty Fourth Street Gallery. There were 160 prints in exhibition, and Edward Steichen purchased three for the Museum of Modern Art’s collection. There Homor Page, a student of Steiglitz, befriended DeCarava and began discussing darkroom technique with him. Soon thereafter, DeCarava started to experiment with a darker tonal range. His studies of the New York jazz world, begun a few years later, further developed his penchant for dark printing. While the deep tones in his pictures sometimes push the edge of legibility, both true blacks and true whites are rare.

In 1952 DeCarava became the first African-American recipient of a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship. The year of the fellowship was remarkably fruitful, producing such important prints as Nightfeeding. At first rejected by publishers, photographs from the project were eventually published with the help of Langston Hughes in 1955 as The Sweet Flypaper of Life. Shortly thereafter, DeCarava opened one of the first galleries in New York devoted to photography, A Photographer’s Gallery, which would feature exhibitions of Bernice Abbott, Harry Callahan, and Minor White in the two years it was open. At the same time, he began a series on jazz musicians that would occupy him for a decade.

Roy DeCarava’s work was included in the Museum of Modern Art’s Family of Man exhibition. In 1958 he began to take on commercial projects, and his pictures have appeared in such periodicals as Sports Illustrated, Look, Newsweek, Time, and Life. He ran the Kamoinge Workshop for young African-American photographers from 1963 to 1966. In 1969 he refused to be a part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s exhibition Harlem on My Mind, critiquing its conception of African-American artists and its marginalization of photography as an art form. He began teaching at Hunter College in New York City in 1975, where he became a full professor of art. In 1992 Wesleyan University awarded him the honorary degree of doctor of fine arts.
Laura Letinsky
(Canadian, b.1962)

I explore formal relationships between ripeness and decay, delicacy and awkwardness, control and haphazardness, waste and plentitude, pleasure and sustenance. – Laura Letinsky

In her first series of published photographs, titled Venus Inferred, Laura Letinsky took as her subject heterosexual couples intimately engaged and tried to show us what love looks like. Letinsky’s pictures of love are composed of Necco Wafer colors – peach, blue, green and yellow – and contained within an elegant formality. These visual attributes are fully unleashed in her most recent series, Morning and Melancholia, still-life compositions discovered in the remains of daily meals that reference Dutch and Flemish painting. Together, both series of photographs offer an extended essay on fragility, the domestic arena and, according to Letinsky, the photograph’s transformative qualities.

Born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada in 1962, Laura Letinsky received her degrees in photography from the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg (BFA, 1986) and Yale University School of Art, New Haven (MFA, 1991). Her works have been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Art Institute of Chicago; Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Ottawa; and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, among others. Her works are held in several permanent collections, including those at the Yale University Art Gallery and the Art Institute of Chicago. Letinsky currently serves as an assistant professor at the University of Chicago.
Abelardo Morell  
(American, b. Cuba 1948)

The camera obscura is a device that enables an artist or draftsman to see an inverted image of the living world on a plane surface. The guiding principle of the camera obscura, which literally means, “dark chamber” is that light entering a room or camera from a single point creates an image of the exterior world. Used since the Renaissance, the camera obscura was one tool with which artists were able to accurately or realistically manage perspectively difficult scenes or subjects. In Camera Obscura Image of Houses Across the Street in Our Bedroom, Abelardo Morell employs the principles of this optical device to set up an inverted image of his street on his bedroom wall. In this picture, the entire room functions as a camera, and Morell takes a picture of the phenomenon using a hand held camera. Thus, the resulting image is a picture of a picture, taken of a camera with a camera. Morell’s probing approach to the link between photographic history and optical apparatus is evident in his other works, several of which are pictures of paintings. In these, Morell has taken a picture of the pages of art books that sit on end or at jarring angles to the plane on which the photograph is made. These images conjure up the perspectival challenges faced by artists, artistic notions of abstraction and distortion, and the effect that mechanical reproducibility of images has had on the history of art and image making.

Photographic explorations by Abelardo Morell have transformed ordinary rooms into camera obscura, offered dramatic close-up views of books, and shown water from puzzling perspectives. His diverse photographs have been showcased in many one-person and group exhibitions at such venues as The Art Institute of Chicago; The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; The Brooklyn Museum, New York; the International Museum of Photography, George Eastman House, Rochester, New York; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Museum of Photographic Arts, San Diego, California; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; and the Smithsonian Institution International Gallery, Washington, DC. Born in 1948 in Cuba, Morell teaches at the Massachusetts College of Art, Boston. His book of camera obscura photographs, A Camera in a Room, was published in 1995.
Irving Penn
(American, 1917-2009)

Irving Penn is perhaps best known for his fashion photographs that, beginning with his notable 1950s series of the Paris collections, defined a new look for magazines. By placing models against plain backdrops, Penn removed the familiar indicators of space or scale and allowed fashion to stand alone as the subject of his images. Many fashion photographs point to changes in aesthetic sensibilities as well as to changes in fashion itself, and Penn’s routine use of minimal, flat backgrounds can be viewed as the introduction of the modern age of fashion photography. Penn frequently stresses the ephemeral nature of life by bringing out interesting flaws and impurities in his subjects, such as wrinkles, hairs, or dirt, which would have gone unnoticed on cluttered, distractive, or ornate backgrounds. He additionally renders beautiful seemingly unattractive or mundane items including cigarette butts retrieved from the gutter and frozen vegetables. Penn’s attention to detail and his technical excellence are two traits fundamental to his entire range of work that includes fashion, still life, ethnographic portraiture and nudes.

In the 1960s and early 1970s Penn turned his attention to so-called “primitive” cultures, those untouched by industrialization. Traveling with a canvas tent for a studio and using his characteristic simple backdrops, Penn revealed an interest not ethnographic or anthropological. Instead, Two New Guinea Men Holding Hands illustrates how Penn’s experience as a fashion photographer informed his ethno-aesthetic projects, as he focuses on the formal qualities of his subjects’ dress, pose and adornment rather than their individual identities, customs and surroundings.

Irving Penn’s images have defined several generations of fashion and portrait photography. Penn, who was born in 1917 in New Jersey, worked in New York as a graphic artist in the 1930s, and spent a year painting in Mexico before starting work at Vogue magazine in the early 1940s. His photographs have been widely exhibited, included in major retrospective exhibitions, and are in the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; and Moderna Museet, Stockholm, among many other museums.