

EDUCATION GUIDE

MUCH UNSEEN IS ALSO HERE
AN-MY LÊ AND
SHAHZIA SIKANDER
and
Martine Gutierrez

June 3 – August 29, 2021

MoCP Museum of
Contemporary
Photography

Columbia
COLLEGE CHICAGO

This guide serves as a viewer supplement to the exhibitions *Much Unseen is Also Here: An-My Lê and Shahzia Sikander* and *Martine Gutierrez*. It includes information about the works on view, questions for looking and discussion, classroom activities, and suggested readings. You may download this guide, along with other curricular resources, from the museum's website [here](#). Prior to visiting the MoCP, you must reserve a free timed ticket. Reserve your ticket [here](#).

Much Unseen is Also Here: An-My Lê and Shahzia Sikander is a collaboration between the MoCP and the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago and was curated by Abigail Winograd. The exhibition is part of *Toward Common Cause: Art, Social Change*, and *The MacArthur Fellows Program at 40* initiative, organized by the Smart Museum of Art in collaboration with exhibition, programmatic, and research partners across Chicago.



An-My Lê, *Andrew Jackson Statue (Boxers)*, Lafayette Square-President's Park, Washington D.C., 2020

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INTRODUCTION

**"YOU ROAD I ENTER UPON AND LOOK AROUND, I BELIEVE YOU ARE NOT ALL THAT IS HERE,
I BELIEVE THAT MUCH UNSEEN IS ALSO HERE."**

—Walt Whitman, "Song of the Open Road, 2"



Shahzia Sikander, *Of Masks and Bull 1*, 2017
© Shahzia Sikander
Courtesy: the artist and Sean Kelly, New York

During the past year, the murder of George Floyd by police prompted an upwelling of anger that led to public and sometimes violent confrontations with and over monuments. Most of the conversations about who—and what—should represent the United States occurred quietly, however, as cities and states across the country began to pass laws, established commissions, and removed statues. This reimagining of how we visualize and tell our collective history served as inspiration for this exhibition of works by An-My Lê and Shahzia Sikander, two artists who are connected by an impulse to see America, to see oneself in America, and to see America seeing itself. In their recent works, both artists use the monument, a key to understanding history's embeddedness in our present as both episodic and fragmentary.

With the series *The Silent General*, Lê probes the way in which both identity and history are projected onto landscape, as she negotiates her relationship to the tradition of American road trip photography in order to confront the political rhetoric of the moment and tackle current events. Shahzia Sikander's work investigates the interstices of power, gender, empire, and self, and her works in this exhibition focus on the vagaries of representation and monumentalism as well as the investigation of traditional art forms.

In many ways, *Much Unseen is Also Here* is the story of two Asian American women exploring their relationships to America, its monuments, and the history of art in the midst of our nation's collective upheaval and long-overdue reckoning.

Abigail Winograd

MacArthur Fellows Program 40th Anniversary Exhibition Curator
Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago

Introductory Questions for Looking

- Upon first entering the gallery space, what connections can you make between these two artists? Are there any visual similarities? What are their differences? Do you see a conversation between the two artists?
- Why might the organizer of this exhibition choose to feature these two artists next to one another? What might Winograd mean by in stating that these artists are working to “see America, to see oneself in America, and to see America seeing itself?”



An-My Lê, *Citrus Tree*, Fowler, California, 2019

An-My Lê: *Silent General*

An-My Lê makes photographs that question truth in photojournalism, politics, and place, often through depictions of war and its remnants. From the standpoint as a Vietnamese American woman, Lê's series *Silent General* looks at the present moment in the US to examine how (and if) the country has progressed since its founding, and the ways in which the past reverberates in present-day landscapes, symbols, and traditions. The project began as a road trip in 2015, prompted by the murder of nine African American worshippers at the Emanuel African Methodist Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Lê created six photo essays—she calls them fragments—ranging from portraits of female border patrol officers in Texas to documentation of public statues in parks. **Each fragment reflects on what it means to live in the US now, showing multiple perspectives to reveal a fuller depiction of national identity.**



An-My Lê, *Migrant Workers Harvesting Asparagus, Mendota, California, 2019*

Questions for Looking

- The artist focuses on many different topics under one series, including border patrol officers, monuments, the 2016 presidential election, movie and TV sets, and migrant workers. What might be the purpose of showing these together in one series? Why might the artist call each chapter of her project a “fragment?”
- The title, *Silent General*, is taken from a section of Walt Whitman's book, *Specimen Days* (1882), written in the aftermath of the Civil War. The book was a reaction to and reflection upon issues of widespread corruption, a growing wealth gap, rising anti-immigrant sentiment, and a broken apart political system in the 1850s. Considering the title, *Silent General*, which Whitman wrote in reference to General Ulysses S. Grant. How does this title resonate with Lê's images of contemporary settings? What might the artist be saying about the current political moment, such as this image of a site of the Black Lives Matter protests?



An-My Lê, *St. John's Episcopal Church, Lafayette Square, Washington, D.C., 2020*

Shahzia Sikander

(American, b. 1969 Pakistan)



Shahzia Sikander, *Shroud*, 2020

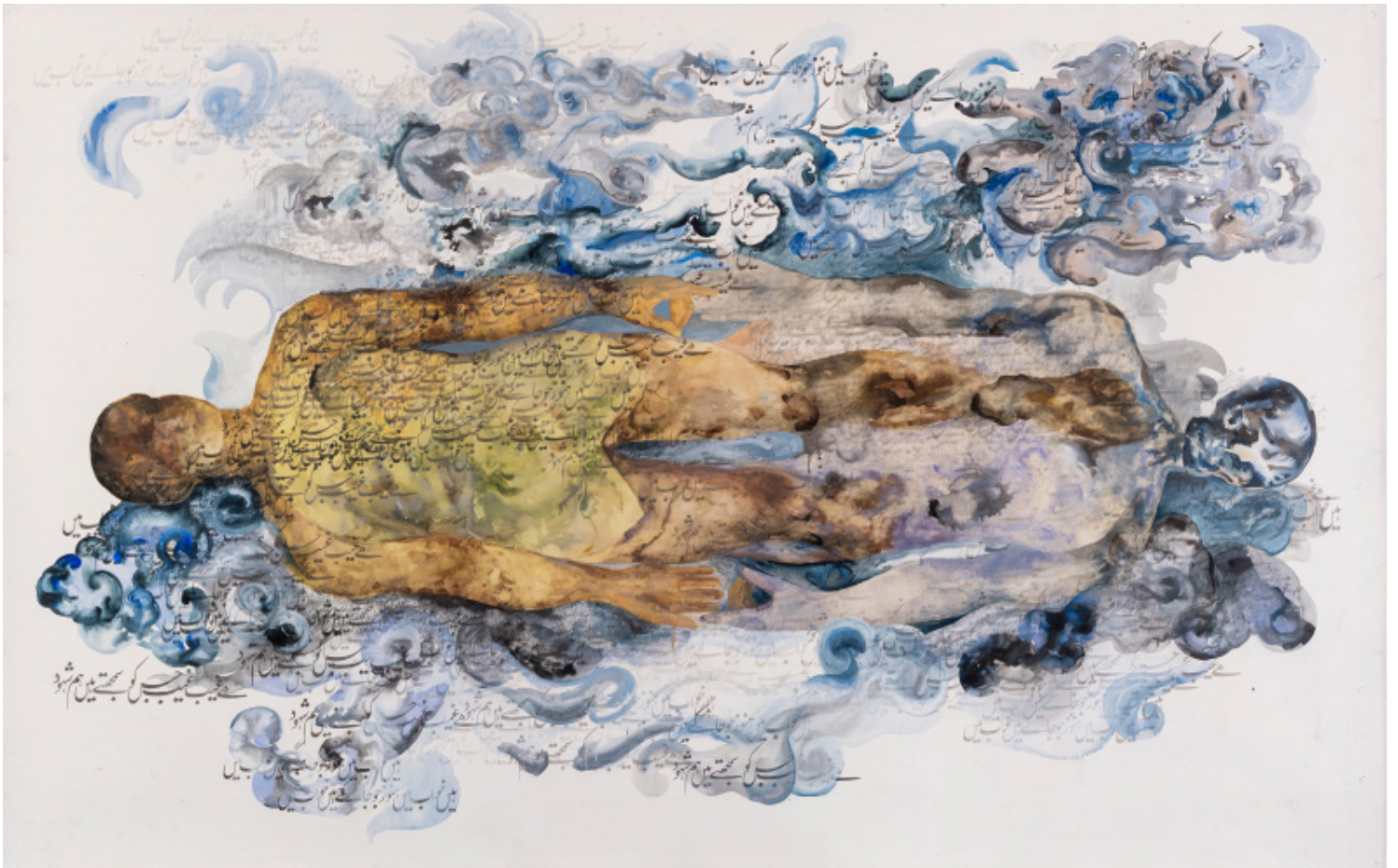
© Shahzia Sikander

Courtesy: the artist and Sean Kelly, New York

Shahzia Sikander is a multidisciplinary artist who has long questioned the intersections of power, gender, empire, and self. Though most well-known for her paintings, this exhibition also displays recent large-scale drawings, the artist's first standalone sculpture, and a mesmerizing animation. Each work, in its own way, interrogates traditional forms, specifically the visual language and technical precision of the Indo-Persian miniature tradition. Like Lê, Sikander uses a visual vocabulary of repeating motifs to address larger topics related to identity and belonging.

Questions for Looking

- This exhibition features Sikander working in a variety of mediums, including ink gouache drawings, paintings, a bronze sculpture, and a video animation. How can this approach to using many different materials support the artist's overarching concept to reimagine traditional forms?
- The artist states: "Throughout my practice I have aimed at creating work with unpredictable diversity in pursuit of a multi-faceted imagination, open to influences and experiences." This is exemplified through the amalgamation of the Indian Devita and Greco-Roman Venus figures in Sikander's *Promiscuous Intimacies* (2020) or the overlapping of Urdu and English text in *Kinship*. What else might the artist mean by "unpredictable diversity?"



Shahzia Sikander, *Kinship*, 2019–20
© Shahzia Sikander
Courtesy: the artist and Sean Kelly, New York

Key Theme

Deconstructing Monuments



Lê's images of monuments powerfully capture the tensions engendered by competing visions of Americanness. In 2017, in New Orleans, Louisiana, a 1915 statue of P. G.T. Beauregard, a Confederate general, was vandalized with red paint, in protest of its honoring of a white supremacist. Around this time protestors surrounded the monument, some in favor of its removal, and others against it. This statue is of particular import to Lê's series, as then mayor of New Orleans, Mitch Landrieu, called for its removal after the fatal shooting of nine African Americans in a Charleston, South Carolina, church in June 2015—a catalyst for Lê's series. Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards opposed the removal of the statue, however, and it remained in place until May 2017.

In December of 2020 this monument of Confederate general Robert E. Lee was removed from its place in the United States Capitol in Virginia, and as Lê's photograph shows, is now kept in US Homeland Security storage alongside the General Beauregard Equestrian Statue.

An-My Lê, *Fragment VI: General Robert E. Lee and P.G.T. Beauregard Monuments*, Homeland Security Storage, New Orleans, Louisiana, 2017

Questions for Looking

- What is the visual information—such as boarded up windows and protest signs strung up in midair or the wooden storage unit—in Lê's photograph surrounding each monument saying about the importance—or shifting sense of purpose—of these structures?
- What are some of the events that led up to the removal of these monuments? What might be reasons that this upheaval did not happen *until* 2020?
- Sikander states: "When one thinks in terms of narratives, and how history is determined, how real is that account? All histories are about redactions, where often the highest bidder gets to tell the story. When I create artwork, regardless of which medium, I research visual forms that challenge fixed narratives in order to reorganize histories and geographies of inequality—and in drawing unexpected connections and juxtapositions, I can move stories and people forward." Considering this statement, how might her sculpture function as an "anti-monument"? Why might the artist use the historical painting and sculpture above as a reference point, instead of creating newly imagined forms?



Also in this exhibition is a bronze sculpture by Shahzia Sikander, her first free-standing, three-dimensional work. This sculpture juxtaposes the figure Venus, the Roman goddess of love, adapted from the Italian Mannerist painting *An Allegory with Venus and Cupid* (ca. 1545) by Agnolo Bronzino, with an adaptation of a sculpture of a Devata from the 11th century that traces to the exterior of a Hindu temple in India. Sikander created this pairing in response to Partha Mitter's 1977 book *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Responses to Indian Art*, choosing figures from outside the classical Western canon to push against the power structures that construct histories. Sikander presents the two goddesses intertwined, their gazes joined, introducing a queer, feminist deviation from fixed notions of tradition, culture, nationalism, and sexuality. The artist has shared her motivation for creating this piece: "I felt the urge to respond to the overt male representation of historical monuments through an anti-monument. . . . [The figures] evoke non-heteronormative desires that are often cast as foreign and inauthentic, challenging the viewer to imagine a different present and future."¹

Shahzia Sikander, *Promiscuous Intimacies*, 2020
 © Shahzia Sikander
 Photo by Chris Roque of UAP
 Courtesy: the artist and Sean Kelly, New York

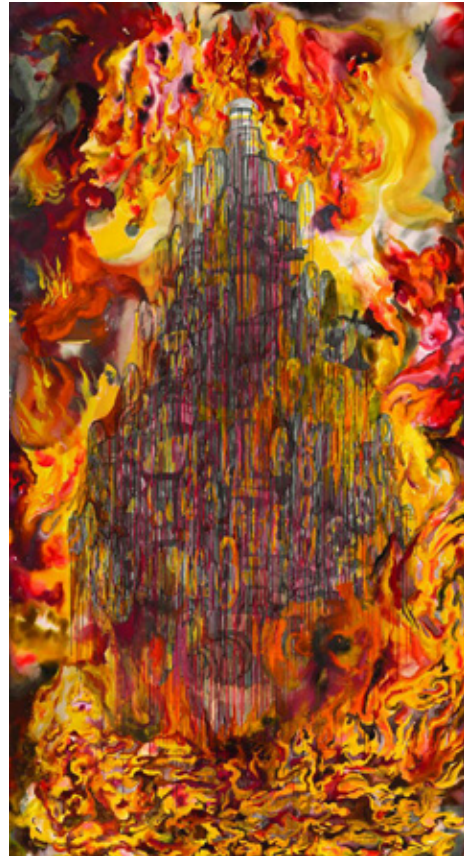


Left to right: *Celestial dancer (Devata)* mid-11th century, collection of the Metropolitan Museum New York; Agnolo Bronzino's painting, *An Allegory with Venus and Cupid* (c. 1545), collection of the National Gallery, London

Key Theme

Environmental Destruction and Colonialization of the Land

Sikander created these two paintings in response to seeing a photograph of an oil rig, which was referred to as a “Christmas tree” in a 1962 issue of BP, a magazine published by British Petroleum. Sikander considered the irony of this phrase, and the one-sided relationship we have formed with nature by excessively extracting and taking natural resources from the earth. Trees are a recurring motif in Sikander’s work, and these two paintings visualize trees as harboring the consequences of our abusive and colonizing relationship with the environment. *Oil and Poppies* presents flowing forms in red, with tar-like drippings consuming the plant life visible underneath and hovering over a brown-stained background. At the same time, the poppy blossom alludes to the opium industry in Afghanistan and the long-term U.S. intervention and conflict there. *Flared* shows the Christmas tree structure engulfed in flames—a comment on the wildfires that frequently ravage the American West due to climate change caused by burning fossil fuels.



Left to right: Shahzia Sikander, *Oil and Poppies*, 2019–20; Shahzia Sikander, *Flared*, 2019–20
© Shahzia Sikander
Photo: Adam Reich
Courtesy: the artist and Sean Kelly, New York

Key Theme

Borders and Migration



An-My Lê, Sugar, Cane Field, November 5, Houma, Louisiana, 2016

Similarly considering a damaging capitalist relationship with nature and its resources, An-My Lê points to the violent history of sugar cane farming on plantations in the American South—and the still profitable and problematic labor practices of modern-day sugar production. Sugar is a labor-intensive crop that grows in tropical or subtropical regions, nicknamed “white gold” for its high monetary value. In the 1800s plantations in Louisiana were rapidly expanded with slave labor, as the state became one of the highest producers of sugar worldwide. To this day, sugar is a \$3 billion business in Louisiana alone. Here Lê engages with the land to present it as a site of trauma by ominously featuring a red sun shining through large plumes of smoke from the burning and charred fields below.

Questions for Looking

- In these works, both artists consider the destructive natures of the oil, opium, and sugar industries to humans and the planet. What emotional response do the artist's choices in color and composition elicit?
- How might the subject of climate change relate to other topics presented in this exhibition, such as issues of power, nationality identity, and history?
- Sikander states: “Our ecological condition is a mirror of social conditions: erosion of climate, of borders, rising waters, rising heat, displacement of bodies...these works engage with symbols of extraction and to the imagination and art as sources of abundance. Art and imagination replenish, breathe life, sow seeds of growth.” Do you agree that art can be a restorative force to the larger social and ecological issues? Explain.

Key Theme

Deconstructing Monuments

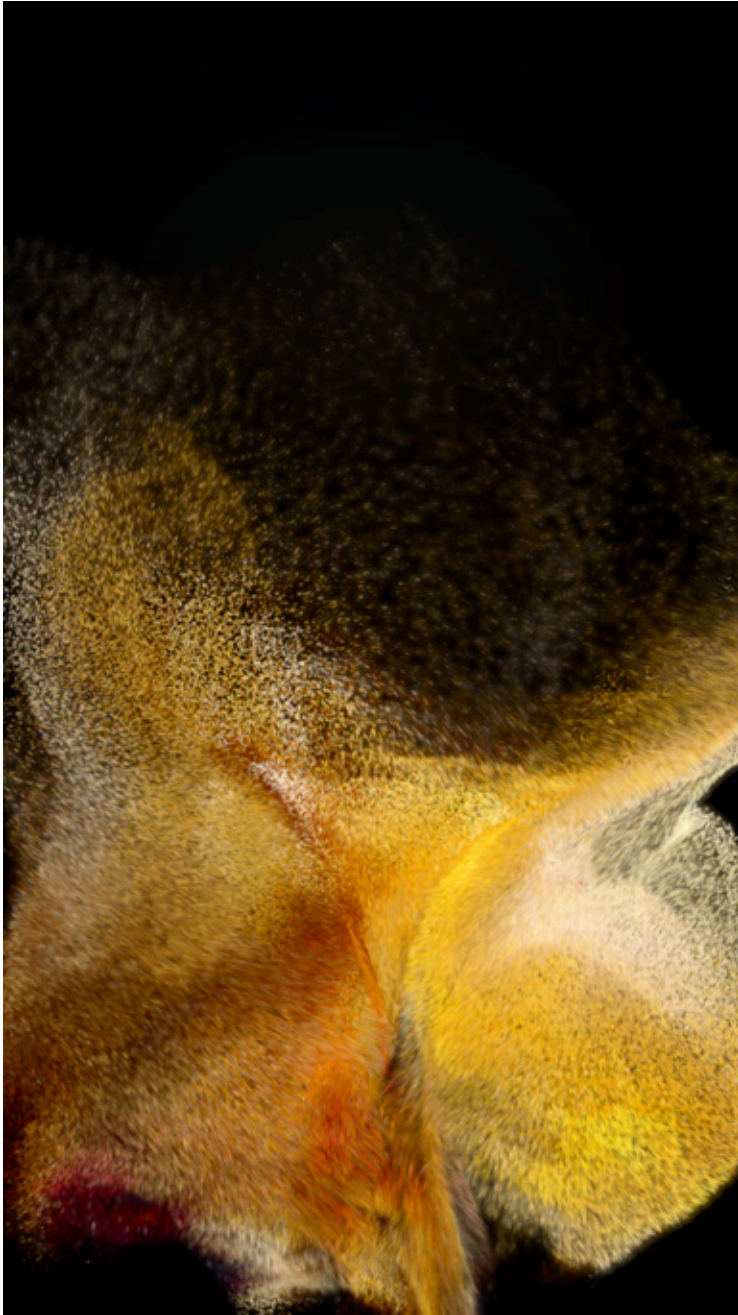
An-My Lê spent time at the US-Mexico border, photographing the Presidio-Ojinaga International Bridge, which crosses the Rio Grande River, connecting US Route 67 in West Texas to the Mexican Federal Highway 16. These two images show female border protection officers with similar body language and in front of identical signs, but on either side of the border. Lê created these images while conversations grew increasingly heated over President Donald Trump's persistent effort to build a wall between the United States and Mexico. The images challenge us to see beyond rigid representations of national identity in recognition of a common humanity.



An-My Lê, *US Customs and Border Protection Officer, Presidio-Ojinaga International Bridge, Presidio, Texas, 2019*



An-My Lê, *Mexico Customs and Border Protection Officer, Presidio-Ojinaga International Bridge, Presidio, Texas, 2019*



Shahzia Sikande, *Reckoning*, 2020 (animation still)

© Shahzia Sikander

Courtesy: the artist and Sean Kelly, New York

For Sikander's film, *Reckoning*, the artist created an imaginary traditional Indo-Persian-Turkish painting and then deconstructed her creation by animating fragments that break away, compress, and expand. The particles of dust in the beginning of the film represent the components of our bodies returning to earth as dirt or ash—a sentiment also represented in the music, sung in Turkish by the Pakistani vocalist Zeb Bangash, about the return to the earth through death. Evoking human notions of displacement and migration, the floating tree and its serpent-like movement nod to the banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. Extending themes explored throughout this exhibition, this film presents a liminal space where rigid ideologies and traditions are broken and, as the title indicates, called to a reckoning. The film instead suggests a future stripped of socially, historically, or arbitrarily placed categorizations.

Questions for Looking

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On the 3rd floor

Martine Gutierrez: *Indigenous Woman*



Martine Gutierrez, *Body En Thrall*, p.116, from *Indigenous Woman*, 2018

In the museum's third level, we see an exhibition of images by Martine Gutierrez (American, b. 1989), who works across performance and photography to produce elaborate narrative scenes that explore complexities of gender, race, class, and heritage. In 2018 Gutierrez produced *Indigenous Woman*, a 124-page magazine of self-featuring fashion spreads, trope product advertisements, and an agency declaring Letter from the Editor (herself). Through the style and construct of this sensational artist book, Gutierrez subverts cisgender ideals of beauty; revealing how deeply sexism, racism, transphobia, colorism, and other biases are embedded in popular visual culture.



Martine Gutierrez, *Poder de la Flor*,
Neo Indio series, p.30, from *Indigenous Woman*, 2018

Key Theme

Self Representation



Martine Gutierrez, *Body En Thrall* series, p.120, from *Indigenous Woman*, 2018

Gutierrez produces scenes that employ tropes of pop culture to explore the complexity, fluidity, and nuances of both personal and collective identity in terms of race, gender, class, indigeneity, and culture. Working across performance, photography, and film, she simultaneously acts as subject, artist, and muse. Gutierrez asserts control over her own image by executing every stage of the creative process—staging, lighting, makeup, costuming, modeling, and photography. The title of one of the series of images is *Body En Thrall*, for which the artist states, “is a play on words, a shifting between *in thrall*, which means being under someone else’s power, morally or mentally enslaved, and *enthrall*, to capture the attention of another, to bewitch, ensnare, or fascinate.”

Questions for Looking

- How do you see the artist claiming power and control, as she states in the quote above? What might be some ways inequities form as a result of the power dynamics within the fields of fashion, photography, advertisement, and styling industries?
- Consider Gutierrez’s work in relation to the exhibition on the first floor about monuments and traditions. What is the value of self-representation, particularly for Indigenous and BIPOC populations in the United States?

Key Theme

Subverting Beauty Standards



Martine Gutierrez, *Covertgirl*, Ad p.44, from *Indigenous Woman*, 2018

The artist states: “Working to convey my own fluid identity, one that bridges the binaries of gender and ethnicity, **I aim to subvert pre-colonial standards of cis white beauty, raising questions about power, perception, and identity.** Is it lineage, the physicality of body, a social enactment of gender, or perhaps costume that dictates our perceptions of ourselves? Is our perception of self even our own, or is it the result of how others see and interact with us? Are we inside-out? Are we outside-in?”

Classroom Activity

Have students create fashion photography inspired by Martine Gutierrez’s images. Working individually or in teams, have students create images filling all roles as stylist, makeup artist, graphic designer, model, and photographer. Discuss what was difficult, interesting, or challenging in staging and producing their images. Have students discuss which role they felt most comfortable in, and why certain sides of the camera are more easy or difficult.

Questions for Looking

- Considering this statement, do you see any connections in concept or form to the works by An-My Lê and Shahzia Sikander on the first floor? Can mannequins and monuments both act as structures that perpetuate harmful standards? Explain.
- The artist states: “We are conditioned to assume that physical appearance is, in fact, identity, which is often not the case. As mixed transwomen, we’re often seen as male when we feel female, or have been assumed to be from another culture because our ethnicities are ambiguous. None of us fit neatly into one category.” Considering this quote, why might the artist create mock advertisements as part of her project? What role do advertisements play in your own understanding of culture and identity?

Illinois Learning Standards Addressed in this Guide

VISUAL ARTS STANDARDS

VA:Re7.2.K-12 Perceive and analyze artistic work. Visual imagery influences understanding of, and responses to, the world.

VA:Re8.K-12 Construct meaningful interpretations of artistic work. People gain insights into meanings of artworks by engaging in the process of art criticism.

VA:Re9.K-12 Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work. People evaluate art based on various criteria.

VA:Cn11.K-12 Relate artistic ideas and works with social, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding. People develop ideas and understandings of society, culture, and history through their interactions with and analysis of art.

SOCIAL SCIENCES STANDARDS

SS.CV.1.9-12 Distinguish the rights, roles, powers, and responsibilities of individuals and institutions in the political system.

SS.CV.6.9-12 Describe how political parties, the media, and public interest groups both influence and reflect social and political interests.

SS.CV.8.9-12 Analyze how individuals use and challenge laws to address a variety of public issues.

SS.H.3.9-12 Evaluate the methods utilized by people and institutions to promote change.

SS.H.7.9-12 Identify the role of individuals, groups, and institutions in people's struggle for safety, freedom, equality, and justice.

SS.H.8.9-12 Analyze key historical events and contributions of individuals through a variety of perspectives, including those of historically under-represented groups.

SS.H.11.9-12 Analyze multiple and complex causes and effects of events in the past.