

## Breaking the Binary: Queerness and the Image

This print viewing introduces students to a range of images that focus on the spectrum of identities within the umbrella of LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender, and Queer). The images focus on topics of youth, aging, identity, performance, and the notion of living an authentic life. The selection of work encourages students to discuss perceptions on identity and how photography can either represent or misrepresent that identity, while also navigating the artists' choices in color, composition, point of view, and staging.



Laurence Rasti, *Untitled*, from the *There Are No Homosexuals in Iran* series, 2014

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## Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst (American, b. 1983 and 1982, respectively)



*Relationship #22 (Tillamook Dairy Parade), 2010*



*Relationship #31, 2010*



*Relationship #28, from the Relationship series, 2008*

The series *Relationship* (2008-2013) can be approached in several ways. First, it is a documentation of the romantic relationship between artists Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst, which lasted from 2008 to 2014. The pair's photographs were not originally intended for exhibition or publication; they are snapshots of their daily routine and mementos of their life as a couple. *Relationship* also documents the numerous physical changes that occurred as the couple simultaneously realigned from one gender to another. Drucker is today a trans woman and Ernst a trans man. In their photographs, the artists capture the successive stages of their respective processes of gender realignment. *Relationship* therefore assumes a third level of meaning, since it also refers to the relationship of an individual with their body. The artists are also Emmy-nominated producers on the Golden Globe and Emmy-winning show *Transparent*.

### Questions for looking:

- When this work is exhibited, Drucker and Ernst display the images out of chronological order. What strategies do the two artists employ to show the passage of time in their work? Why might they disrupt viewers from seeing the images in a clear timeline?
- This series is a collaboration of two artists. Are you able to see a specific style of photographing by one or the other? How or how not?
- In her groundbreaking book *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler states that "masculine and feminine roles are not biologically fixed but socially constructed." Do you think these images present the fluidity of gender? How or how not?
- In what ways do these images seem to defy social expectations of gender? In what ways do they seem to conform?

## Jess T. Dugan (American, b. 1986)



From the *To Survive on the Shore* series (left to right): Dee Dee Ngozi, 55, Atlanta, GA, 2016; Gloria, 70, Chicago, IL, 2016

Jess T. Dugan is interested in representations of identity, particularly as they apply to LGBTQ communities. Commenced in 2013, *To Survive on this Shore* started from the recognition that, in representations of transgender and gender-nonconforming people in the media and the arts, older people feature very rarely in comparison with younger individuals. Dugan seeks to remedy this absence by photographing trans people aged fifty or older. She has produced over eighty works for the series in collaboration with Dr. Vanessa Fabbre, assistant professor at the Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis, who conducted interviews of Dugan's subjects. The paths of their subjects range widely and reveal the complexities of living a gender that doesn't suit one's identity. Dugan and Fabbre's project underlines the fact that these older individuals paved the way for today's greater tolerance toward transgender people, as well as those who identify outside the male/female binary.

### Questions for looking:

- How can a portrait communicate information about the subject's identity and place in society?
- All the individuals pictured in *To Survive on this Shore* are over 50 years old. Does aging change one's perceptions of identity? Does identity evolve as we age?
- Each portrait has a companion interview. Does the text change how you read the images? If so, how?

Laurence Rasti (Swiss, b. 1990)



All Untitled, from the *There Are No Homosexuals in Iran* series, 2014

In 2007, the former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad gave a speech at Columbia University in which he stated, “In Iran, we don’t have homosexuals like in your country.” His words echo in the title of Laurence Rasti’s series *Il n’y a pas d’homosexuels en Iran (There are no Homosexuals in Iran)*. Homosexuality does indeed exist in Iran, even if consensual relations between members of the same sex are punishable by death. Rasti captures sensitive portraits of gay Iranian refugees in the Turkish town of Denizli, through which they often travel as they exit their home country. Rasti obscures the faces of her subjects who prefer to remain anonymous, a reminder that their lives have been under threat.

**Questions for looking:**

- Do you experience a duality between public and private life in your own culture? Do politics and religion affect your daily life? How?
- The identities of the individuals in Rasti’s images are all obscured. Why might the artist choose to keep her subjects anonymous?
- Think about your personal freedoms. How would living under an authoritative regime change your daily life and modes of expression?
- Do you think this form of photography can be an effective way to critique human rights issues? Does the work go far enough?

**Kelli Connell (American, b. 1974)**



*The Valley*, 2005-2006



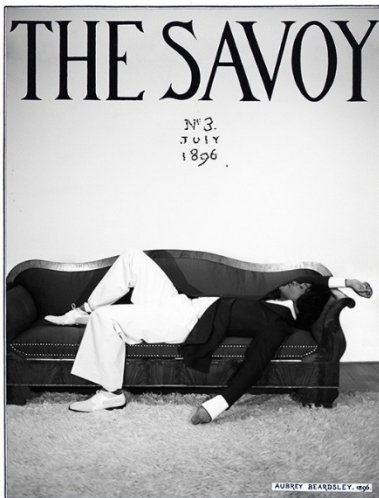
*The Carnival*, 2005-2006

A single model plays two roles in each of the photographs in Kelli Connell's series *Double Life* (2002-ongoing). Connell uses elements of private relationships she has experienced herself or witnessed in others to inspire these two-person scenes. She then uses Photoshop to stitch multiple medium-format negatives together to create the juxtapositions in the final photographs. The result is a multi-faceted questioning of duality: of masculine and feminine, exterior and interior, static and evolving. Appropriately, Connell's intentions here are two-fold. On the one hand she exposes her autobiographical questioning of sexuality and gender roles, particularly as they influence identity in relationships. On the other hand, she is also interested in how the response of viewers reveals their own notions of identity and social constructs.

**Questions for looking:**

- What do we learn about the subject by looking at this photograph? What details reveal that information?
- What do we know to be true? What assumptions might we have made?

## Iké Udé (Nigerian-American, b. 1964)



Savoy #3, 2003



Cover Girl, 1994

Exploring the multiple personae that one can adopt, Iké Udé plays with theatricality, fashion, and notions of celebrity in his portraiture, revealing identity to be both cultural construct and individual creation. Through overt self-styling that combines historical and contemporary fashion, he explores the ambiguities of gender, sexual, and cultural representations within the art world. According to gender theorist Judith Butler, identity is performative, coming into being through the repetition of actions that constitute the self. In *Cover Girl*, Udé plays at performing his identity differently for each magazine cover, blurring distinctions and subverting the gendered and sexual norms typically embedded in advertising. In so doing, he questions viewers' expectations, of which they might be unaware themselves, presenting a different and equally valid vision for how masculinity and femininity might be conceived.

Similar to his *Cover Girl* series, *Yellow Book* and *Savoy* reimagine the covers of two competing literary periodicals, both illustrated by Aubrey Beardsley and published in London during the 1890s, with the artist himself pictured as a leading figure within the arts movements of the era. Udé draws on the symbols of Aestheticism and Decadence as he takes on and transforms the persona of the fin-de-siècle European dandy.

### Questions for looking:

- Do the artist's recreations of magazine covers appear authentic? How do we know they are not "real" magazine covers? Why might those telltale details be significant?
- What role do the headlines play in how you read the images?
- What might Udé be communicating about his own identity through these magazine covers? What might he be suggesting about celebrity and identity?
- How does Udé represent gender, sexuality and race in this work? Why might he make these decisions?

### Deeper Reading: Black Dandyism

In her exhibition essay for the 2015 MoCP exhibition, *Dandy Lion: (Re) Articulating Black Masculine Identity*, Shantrelle P. Lewis states that there is "a current and growing movement among men of African descent—a manner of dress, attitude, and biting sense of humor with both historical antecedents and contemporary motivations." She continues to state: "The roots of Black Dandyism can be traced back to attempts by 15th-century African rulers to mix African attire with European fashions, and also to the 'dressing up' of enslaved Africans in Europe and the Americas during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Black Dandyism is thus an assimilation of European menswear intertwined with an African aesthetic of performance and ritual of dress.

In a continental African context, clothes are extremely important—for royalty and commoners alike. Scholar Monica Miller notes that articles of clothing on Black men during slavery (and colonialism) often signified one's station in life: freedom or subjection. In response to the widespread stereotype of Black men as brutes, by the early 20th century, fashion became a means for men of African descent to exert control over self-presentation and craft new identities, and thus a new phase of the dandy movement was born."

## Zanele Muholi (South African, b. 1972)



Left to right: *Tumi Nkopane, Kwathema, Spring, Johannesburg, 2010*; *Nhlanha, Esther, Mofokeng, 2010*

Zanele Muholi is a photographer and visual activist whose ongoing series of large-format black and white series *Faces and Phases* aims to redress the invisibility of lesbian and queer identity in post-apartheid South Africa. Muholi counters conventional perceptions of lesbian and transgender communities—which suffer from an epidemic of continuous assaults and “corrective” rapes—by creating portraits of individual members that convey their dignity and empowerment. To date, she has made more than 240 portraits, ensuring black queer visibility and assembling an archive of an often invisible and marginalized population for posterity.

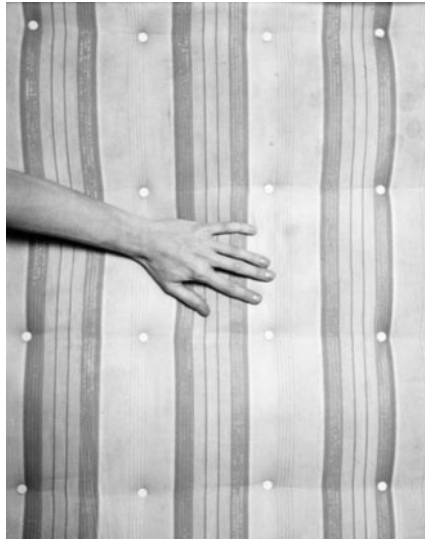
### Questions for looking:

- Can photography serve as a form of activism? Can it similarly serve as a tool of repression? Describe.
- In her essay, *The Many Faces of Frederick Douglas* (2014), Celeste-Marie Bernier writes: “For [Frederick] Douglass, photography was the lifeblood of being able to be seen and not caricatured, to be represented and not grotesque, to be seen as fully human and not as an object or chattel to be bought and sold.” What role does representation play in the dismantling of dominant narrative?

## Robert Mapplethorpe (American, 1946-1989)



*Self Portrait, #385, 1980*



*Untitled (Self Portrait), PD437, 1982*

Risqué and unexpected, Robert Mapplethorpe's works deal not only with the exploration of sexuality as self-image in the late twentieth century but also the contradictions inherent in the classical depiction of the human form. Though infamous in the 1980s for his nude studies that seemed to straddle the fine line between art and pornography, Mapplethorpe also spent a significant portion of his career creating self-portraits and traditional floral still lifes. Yet Mapplethorpe is remembered by many for being at the center of the 1989 National Endowment for the Arts controversy over the funding and exhibition of art that challenged the accepted social mores of the time (along with artist Andres Serrano). Arguably, Mapplethorpe and his art are best understood in these historic terms: after all, many artists have led lives on the edge of social acceptability and have chosen to reflect this reality in their artwork. Mapplethorpe, however, is also recognized for his aesthetic accomplishments, which include a type of highly stylized image that sleekly packages a quite personal and intimate vision. The evolution of this vision, which cannot be divorced from Mapplethorpe's homosexuality, can be traced from his earliest experiments with Polaroid photography to his more elaborate studio portraits, still lifes and nudes.

### Questions for looking:

- Can you think of other ways to photographically explore queerness apart from portraiture? Are portraits the best-suited approach to explore this theme?
- 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?



**Paul Mpagi Sepuya (American, b. 1982)**



*MirrorStudy (Q5A3505)*, 2016

Paul Mpagi Sepuya is interested in the intimacy created during portrait sessions between the photographer and subject and the performative nature of photographing and posing in a studio environment. In his series, *Figures, Grounds and Studies* (2015-2016), Sepuya uses young, queer men and himself as models. Using heavy drapery to cover portions of the bodies, he plays with the power of suggestion and denies the viewer the ability to gaze at his subjects' faces. Additionally, as with *Mirror Study* (2016), the artist often tears his prints into fragments, splitting the body parts of his models and collaging multiple prints. The resulting flat, yet sculptural, works obscure the identities of his models and create an assemblage of sometimes unidentifiable parts.

## Illinois Learning Standards Addressed in This Guide

### Visual Arts Standards

VA:Re7.2.K-12

**Responding:** Perceive and analyze artistic work.

**Enduring Understanding:** Visual imagery influences understanding of, and responses to, the world.

VA:Re8.K-12

**Responding:** Construct meaningful interpretations of artistic work.

**Enduring Understanding:** People gain insights into meanings of artworks by engaging in the process of art criticism.

VA:Re9.K-12

**Responding:** Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

**Enduring Understanding:** People evaluate art based on various criteria.

VA:Cn11.K-12

**Connecting:** Relate artistic ideas and works with social, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.

**Enduring Understanding:** People develop ideas and understandings of society, culture, and history through their interactions with and analysis of art.