

EDUCATION GUIDE

LOVE

still not
the lesser

17 Aug-22 Dec 2023



Jorian Charlton, *Untitled (Shai & Lex)*, 2020.

MoCP Museum of
Contemporary
Photography

Columbia
COLLEGE CHICAGO



Yuge Zhou (周雨歌), *Love Letters (summer)*, 2021

This guide serves as a viewer supplement to the exhibition *LOVE: Still Not the Lesser* and can be used for engaging with the exhibition. The guide includes information about the works on view, questions for looking and discussion, classroom activities, and suggested readings. You may learn more about educational programs at the Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College Chicago [here](#). To schedule a virtual tour of the exhibition or print viewing with your class, please visit [here](#).

This Education Guide is authored by Columbia College Chicago undergraduate and graduate students Kyli Hawks, Ash Huse, Noah Fodor, and Hillary Johnson, with Kristin Taylor, MoCP's Curator of Academic Programs and Collections.

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INTRODUCTION

This exhibition, curated by MoCP Associate Curator Asha Iman Veal, features twelve artists who depict varied expressions of love: from depictions of caregiving, to romantic love between partners, to the importance of shame-free self-love. The curator chose to forefront artists working on this topic in a time of resurfacing and community building after social isolation. This exhibition is a follow-up to the 2022 MoCP exhibition, *Beautiful Diaspora / You Are Not the Lesser Part*, which considered contemporary art as central to the portrayal of expansiveness—beyond a single-country scope, political commodity, or compressed narrative.

Veal's exhibition essay includes many quotes on love, beginning with two quotes from James Baldwin:

I use the word 'love' here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace—

*Has everyone been in love?
Not on the basis of the evidence.
If they have, they've forgotten it.
If everyone had been in love,
they'd treat their children differently.
They'd treat each other differently."¹*

Questions for Looking:

- What do you expect to see in an exhibition on this topic?
- What immediately comes to mind when you think of the word love?
- Do you think someone can visually depict love?
- Do you agree with James Baldwin's statements? How might it look for love to function as a state of being or state of grace?

In the spirit of the exhibition essay, this guide includes many quotes from the artists so you can learn about their views on love, and their artistic practice, in their own words.

1. James Baldwin, excerpt from *The Fire Next Time* 1963, New York: Vintage International, p.95
"I use the word 'love' here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth."

James Baldwin, excerpt from "Meeting the Man: James Baldwin in Paris" 1970 dir. Terence Dixon, France/UK
"Has everyone been in love? Not on the basis of the evidence. If they have, they've forgotten it. You can't prove it by me that everyone's been in love. If everyone had been in love, they'd treat their children differently. They'd treat each other differently."

LOVE still not the lesser

ARTISTS FEATURED

Alia Ali

Alicia Bruce

Jorian Charlton

Jess T. Dugan

Mari Katayama

Kierah KIKI King

Mous Lamrabat

Tom Merilion

Salma Abedin Prithi

Modou Dieng Yacine

Yuge Zhou

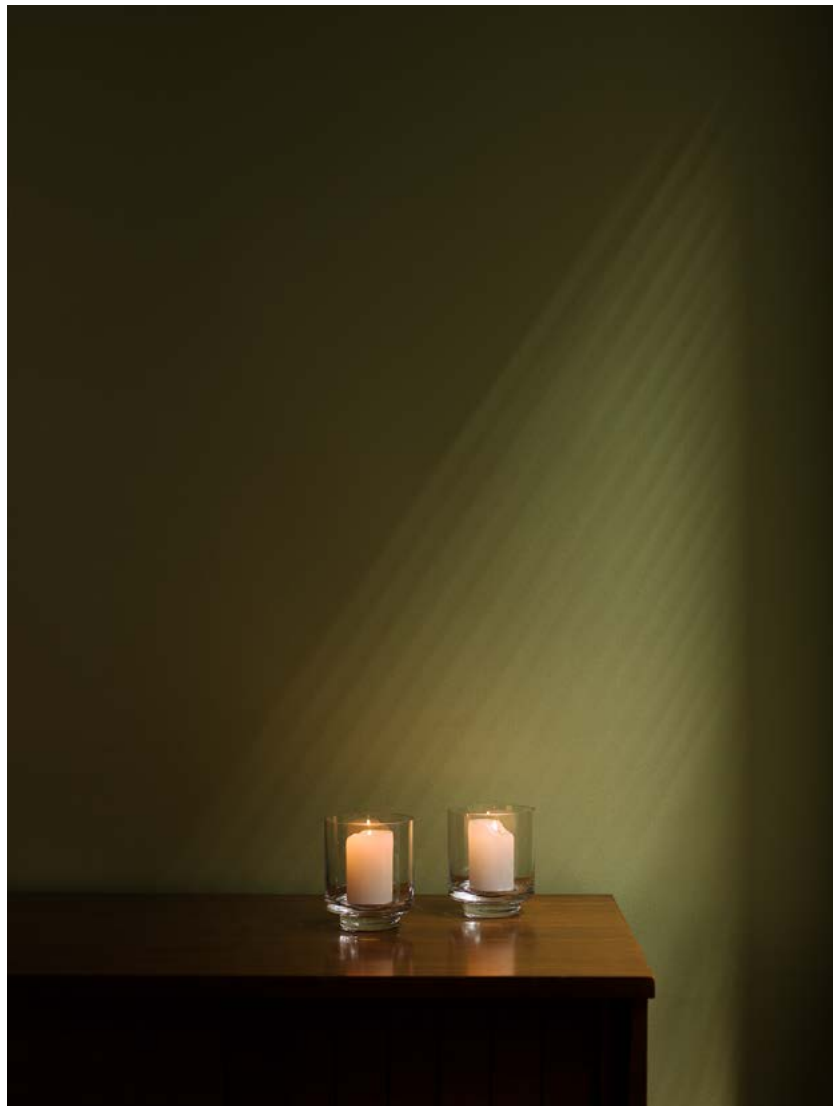
AND THE DEBUT OF
Jorge Ariel Escobar

Key Theme

Love as Expansive

LOVE: Still Not the Lesser includes many works that picture love from many perspectives. Several images depict affection and tenderness between androgynous bodies, as well as queer and various culturally diverse depictions of love. The curator states:

Love is a right of existence. Themes of visibility and adoration recur as concepts embraced by many of the photographers in the exhibition, and they use portraiture and self-portraiture as tools to affirm many different types of bodies as divinely worthy of enjoying gentle care and affection.



Jess T. Dugan
Candles, 2020, from the *Family Pictures* series, 2012–present

Exhibition Highlight
Mous Lamrabat
(Moroccan – Belgian, b. 1983)

*Life should be easy and simple.
and this is how we can make it so:
connecting each other and celebrating
the differences that set us apart.*²

—Mous Lamrabat

Mous Lamrabat challenges the conventions of fashion photography with his images that upend constructs of racism and monoculture. For example, the image titled *Warning* (2021) re-presents garments from prominent Belgian fashion designer Walter Van Beirendonck's controversial Fall/Winter 2015 Paris Fashion Week collection. In the 2015 runway show, Van Beirendonck chose a series of male models to walk the runway adorned with bold text panels featuring phrases such as "An eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind." The fashion line was made in response to acts of censorship and violence in France in 2015. One such event was the notorious mass shooting at the office of French newspaper Charlie Hebdo, a publication that produced antireligious and liberal articles that comment upon current events. A rise in local islamophobia followed the shootings, that had been the action of one specific fringe group. In Lamrabat's images, two figures are connected in their body language, standing side-by-side.



Mous Lamrabat, *Where is the love*, 2019

In many of Lamrabat's images, the subjects appear in the desert, with little

2. Cerbarano, Rica. "Mous Lamrabat Calls for Peace and Love in His Latest Exhibition." [Vogue](#), June 6, 2022.



Mous Lamrabat, *Warning*, 2021

visual information in the background to suggest a specific time or place. We are left only with the person in the image, and the colors of their garments, their body language, and recognizable symbols, such as a heart or yellow smiley face.

Questions for Looking and Discussion:

- Look closely at the details of the images. Can you spot any recognizable symbols or logos? Which colors are drawing your eye the most?
- Identify repeat motifs in the images (such as yellow happy faces, Nike swooshes, and other corporate logos). Why might the artist choose to repeat these details?
- Why do you think the artist chose to print the photographs in the *Peace Room* (2022) installation onto swathes of fabric? Does the material have an impact on how you read the images?
- Some of the images feature religious iconography from the three most followed Abrahamic religions (Islam, Judaism, and Christianity). What do you notice about the ways Lamrabat photographs this type of imagery?
- What might “explicit beauty” mean?
- To you, do the words “Stop Terrorizing Our World” change in meaning when they shift from being seen on models on the runway to the bodies and settings in Lamrabat’s images?



© Marie-Amélie Tondou, *Walter Van Beirendonck AW15* via Dazed Digital; not in the MoCP exhibition or collection

Exhibition Highlight
Mari Katayama
(Japanese, b. 1987)

*I endeavor to find beauty in the world because we love and live.... Whenever I put love into words, I think both my writings and utterances become false depictions of my mind – a mind that fails to express itself truthfully, just as photographs are never truly true. But in the end, no method can convey love perfectly. So we spread our words, our pictures and all expressions out like roots, stretching them like arms to embrace you.*³

—Mari Katayama



Mari Katayama, *you're mine #001*, 2014

Mari Katayama creates hand-sewn prosthetic limbs and photographic self-portraits to adorn her body as a living sculpture. Katayama had both of her legs amputated when she was nine-years-old, due to a rare disorder. This artist stated in a 2017 *The Guardian* press interview: “You can’t separate my body from my work. But, I’m not making art out of my disabilities.”⁴ This can be seen her large-scale piece, *you're mine #001* (2014), where the artist can be seen wearing lingerie in a reclined yet powerful pose as she meets the viewer’s gaze with an expression that asks us to look longer.

3. Katayama, Mari. “A Gift of Love.” [The New York Times](#), June 16, 2023.

4. “Punk Prosthetics: The Mesmerising Art of Living Sculpture Mari Katayama.” [The Guardian](#), March 6, 2017.

Exhibition Highlight

Jorge Ariel Escobar

(American, b. 1994)

*Until I met you I didn't know what love was. Until I met you I didn't know what it was like sleeping next to someone I cared so deeply about. Until I met you I didn't know what heartbreak was. Although we didn't last, you still mean the world to me. Although we didn't last, I'm happy you were in my life when you were.*⁴

—Jorge Ariel Escobar,
from *Would You Lie With Me?*⁵

Jorge Escobar examines themes of intimacy and desire in his photographic practice, taking inspiration from his life and experiences. Quite often his projects function as love letters to people and places from his past, as well as interrogations of human bonds of romantic, familial, and cultural closeness. His series, titled *Would You Lie With Me?*, gives viewers access to private moments of tenderness between the artist and his former lovers, while also alluding to memories of erotic desires from his youth.

Escobar grew up in a rigid Catholic household surrounded by homophobia, which hindered his process of self-discovery. His images of loosened belt buckles and clothes sprawled across the floor create an authentic view of his path through longing for intimacy and actualizing desire.



Jorge Ariel Escobar, *Could we just lay here for a minute? II*, 2022

Questions for Looking and Discussion:

- What visual representations of intimacy do you typically see in mainstream media today? Who is intimacy expressed between, and what do the people usually look like? How is intimacy represented visually in Katayama and Escobar's photographs?
- What emotions do you see in the images by both artists?
- What do you notice about the color palette of the images? What impact does the color have on the mood or narrative you create?
- Why might Katayama choose to adorn her body with glitter? What does this detail add?

5. "Would You Lie with Me." Jorge Ariel Escobar's [Portfolio](#). Accessed July 31, 2023.

Key Theme

Love as Joy

Questions for Looking and Discussion:

- Joy and love can be difficult to describe in words. Do you think it is possible to capture the feeling of big emotions in images? How would you choose to photograph joy?



Jorian Charlton
Untitled (Cynn & Melisse), 2022

Some artists in this exhibition depict the joyful experience of being in love. It is common for movies, songs, and advertisements, and other forms of media to depict themes of coming of age, finding true love, and rekindling desire. Yet until recent years, mainstream media portrayals rarely reflected a multiplicity of diverse experiences. Many images in this exhibition depict what joyful love can look like for people young and old, queer and hetero, transgender and cisgender, and more. See additional works beyond the exhibition in the MoCP collection of photographers depicting joy [here](#).

Exhibition Highlight

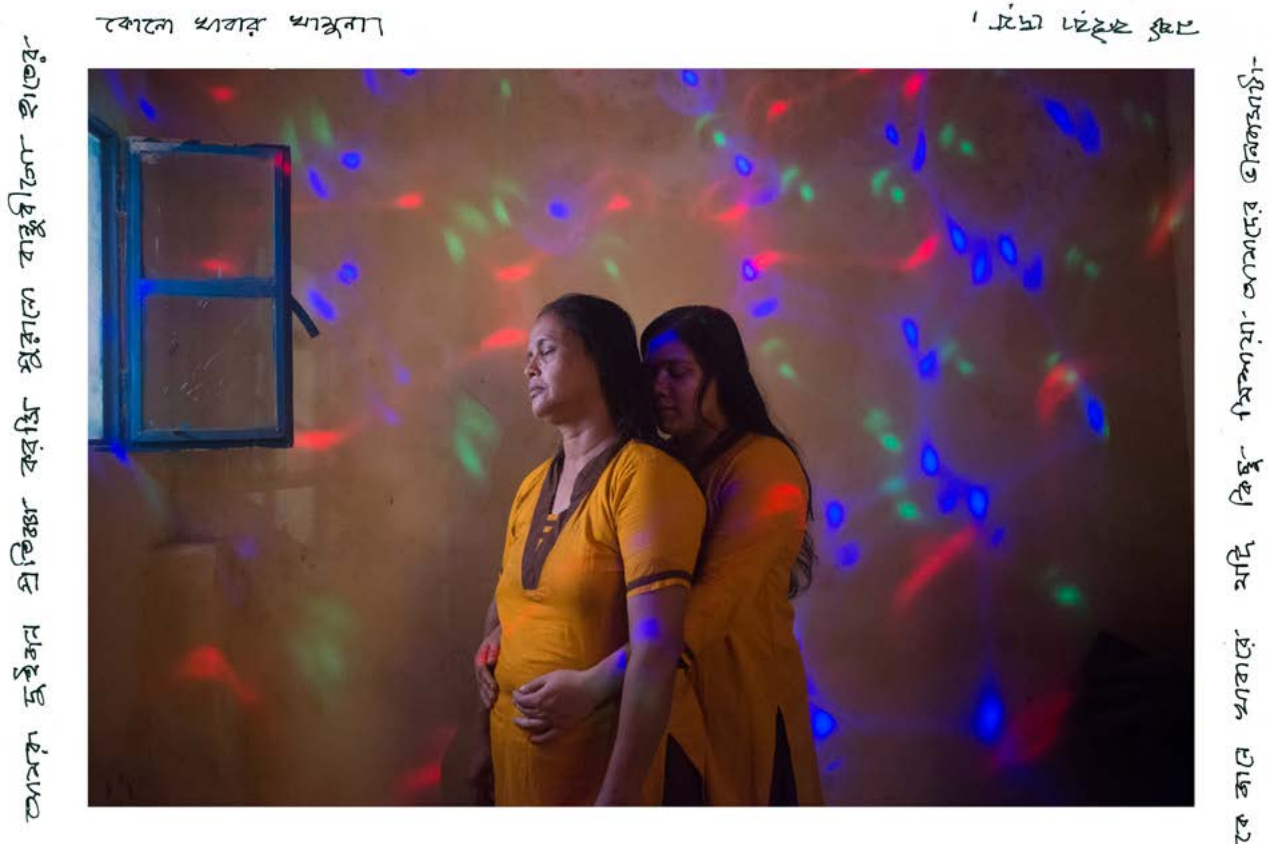
Salma Abedin Prithi

(Bengali, b. 1985)

Salma Abedin Prithi's series, *Dear Love* (2011–2018) follows people in relationships of varied backgrounds to meditate on the connections formed between two people. Photographing within peoples' homes, Prithi captures the stories of mothers and daughters, husbands and wives, lovers, friends, siblings, and more. She asks her subjects to reflect on their connections and their feelings on the relationships they have formed.

Questions for Looking and Discussion:

- Notice how each person in the images is standing or posed. What does the body language suggest about each relationship?
- If you were photographed for *Dear Love*, would you choose to be photographed alone or with a relative, friend, partner, or someone else? What would you want to say to a stranger about this relationship? What would be the most important thing to say?



Salma Abedin Prithi, from the *Dear Love* series, 2011–2018

Key Theme

Love as Care

Questions for Looking and Discussion:

- Some photographers have been criticized for photographing their children, on the grounds that the children may not have agency in deciding whether they would like to have their images in circulation. Do you think there are any other ethical or special considerations to consider in photographing family members?



Jess Dugan
Mom holding Elinor
(one month old), 2022,
from the *Family Pictures*
series, 2012–present

Many works in the exhibition speak to family love, and the unconditional love between parents and children that can fuel caregiving. Others show end-of-life care for the dying, capturing the emotions of loss that come with the closing of a chapter of love. See additional works beyond the exhibition in the collection of photographers depicting family and caregiving [here](#).

Exhibition Highlight

Tom Merilion

(British, b. 1967)

About this project, the artist states:

"I didn't make a conscious decision to document my mom's last weeks. Her decline had been so gradual over the previous five years or so, that it became part of life... We didn't discuss it, but it seemed natural to continue to take photographs, even when it was clear that she hadn't long to live.

My mom was admitted to hospital on the 23rd of Feb 2019, and died five weeks later on the 31st March 2019. The photographs were taken by me and by her over those five weeks...

After a couple of days in hospital, she asked for her camera. She was an

artist and had always collected her belongings from the hospital that I looked at the photographs she'd taken.

I found I could remain detached and technical by hiding behind the camera, but sometimes I'd be emotionally caught off-guard and forced to question the decency or appropriateness of what I was doing. The fact that my mom continued to take photographs, including ones of herself, I felt gave me permission to do the same...

*I am proud of these photographs, of my mother's creative example and especially of her courage in the face of death."*⁶



Tom Merilion, from the *Between Light & Dark* series, 2019–2022

Questions for Looking and Discussion:

- In what ways might photographing a close family member be different from photographing a stranger?
- Are there elements in the photograph that show you the close relationship between the photographer and subject? What are the differences between Merillion's images and those by his mother?

6. Statement emailed by the artist to Asha Iman Veal, June 2023

Exhibition Highlight
Kierah KIKI King
(United States, b. 1998)

*I believe that queerness can strengthen a sense of exploration—
if we allow it to do so.*

—Kierrah KIKI King



Kierrah KIKI King, *Fruitful Devotion* (still), 2023

**Questions for Looking
and Discussion:**

- **This piece addresses care in the form of self-love, instead of love provided from an external source. How would you compare and contrast this piece to others in the exhibition that depict love between partners?**
- **What do you notice about the music and choreography of the piece? How do you see notions of love and selfhood in the movement of the dancers?**

Kierrah KIKI King's video and performance, *Fruitful Devotion* (2023), is a portrayal of self-love as an embodied connection between sensuality and pleasure centered around non-binary and femme Black queerness. They seek to explore the body and sexuality as gifts that are distinctly self-nourishing when explored beyond partner-centered or commercialized sexualization.

Deeper Reading

The Self-Care Movement

In 2023, the self-care movement is estimated to be a \$1.5 trillion global industry, championed by social media influencers, Hollywood actors, and corporations.⁷ However, the idea of “self-care” first became popular in the 1960s and 1970s when Black Panthers, women’s rights, and civil rights activists promoted caring for oneself as a tool to avoid burnout.⁸ Activist leaders

such as Angela Davis and Ericka Huggins created wellness programs that taught nutrition, meditation, and yoga to maintain mental, physical, and spiritual health. Writer Audre Lorde also promoted self-care in the 1980s, stating: “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.” See Angela Davis speak on self-care [here](#):



7. Callaghan, Shaun, Martin Lösch, Anna Pione, and Warren Teichner. “Feeling Good: The Future of the \$1.5 Trillion Wellness Market.” [McKinsey & Company](#), April 8, 2021.

8. Chazz Scott, “How the Black Panthers Used Self-Care as a Form of Empowerment - the Baltimore Times Online Newspaper: Baltimore News.” [The Baltimore Times Online Newspaper | Baltimore News](#), March 11, 2022.

Harris, Aisha. “How ‘Self-Care’ Went from Radical to Frou-Frou to Radical Once Again.” [Slate Magazine](#), April 5, 2017.

Activity

Picturing Love



Alicia Bruce
Mike and Sheila Forbes,
Mill of Menie,
from the monograph:
I Burn But I Am Not
Consumed, 2023

Making the Photographs:

Make several photographs, trying a variety of framing techniques, points of view, and lighting strategies. If working with portraiture, consider talking with your subjects and inviting collaboration, in the spirit of Tom Merillion. If you can print your photographs, consider adding captions on the margins in the spirit of Salma Abedin Prithi. Choose words that will enhance the viewer's understanding of the image. Consider how your handwriting becomes a visual component of the artwork. Will the text be in script or cursive? English or another language? Large or small? In black ink or colored ink? Each of these choices impact the visual design of the artwork.

Share your images!

Post your images to Instagram, tagging us at [@mocpchi](#) with the hashtag [#lovenotthelesser](#)

Extended Resources

Bell Hooks, *All about love: New visions*. New York: William Morrow, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2022.

Tricia Hersey, *Rest is resistance: A Manifesto*. New York: Little, Brown Spark, 2022.

Illinois Learning Standards Addressed in this Guide

VISUAL ARTS STANDARDS

Anchor Standard 6: Convert Meaning through the presentation of artistic work.

Enduring Understanding: Objects, artifacts, and artworks collected, preserved, or presented either by artists, museums, or other venues communicate meaning and a record of social, cultural, and political experiences resulting in the cultivating of appreciation and understanding.

Essential Questions: What is an art museum? How does the presenting and sharing of objects, artifacts, and artworks influence and shape ideas, beliefs, and experiences? How do objects, artifacts, and artworks collected, preserved, or presented, cultivate appreciation and understanding?

Anchor Standard 7: Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Enduring Understanding: Individual aesthetic and empathic awareness developed through engagement with art can lead to understanding and appreciation of self, others, the natural world, and constructed environments.

Essential Questions: (a) How do life experiences influence the way you relate to art? (b) How does learning about art impact how we perceive the world? (c) What can we learn from our responses to art?

Illinois Learning Standards Addressed in this Guide

VISUAL ARTS STANDARDS

Anchor Standard 8: Construct meaningful interpretations of artistic work.

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

Essential Questions: (a) What is the value of engaging in the process of art criticism? (b) How can the viewer “read” a work of art as text? (c) How does knowing and using visual art vocabularies help us understand and interpret works of art?

Anchor Standard 9: Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

Enduring Understanding: People evaluate art based on various criteria.

Essential Questions: (a) How does one determine criteria to evaluate a work of art? (b) How and why might criteria vary? (c) How is a personal preference different from an evaluation?

Anchor Standard 11: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, 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.

Essential Questions: (a) How does art help us understand the lives of people in different times, places, and cultures? (b) How is art used to impact the views of a society? (c) How does art preserve aspects of life?

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