

LESSON FOUR: Identity



IMAGE SIXTEEN: Sarah Lucas. British, born 1962. *Geezer*. 2002. Oil, cut-and-pasted printed paper, and pencil on wood, 31 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 29 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (81 x 74.9 cm). Purchased with funds provided by The Buddy Taub Foundation, Dennis A. Roach, Director, 2003. © 2008 Sarah Lucas



IMAGE SEVENTEEN: Ellen Gallagher. American, born 1965. *Skinatural*. 1997. Oil, pencil, and plasticine on magazine page, 13 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 10" (33.7 x 25.4 cm). Gift of Mr. and Mrs. James R. Hedges IV, 2000. © 2008 Ellen Gallagher

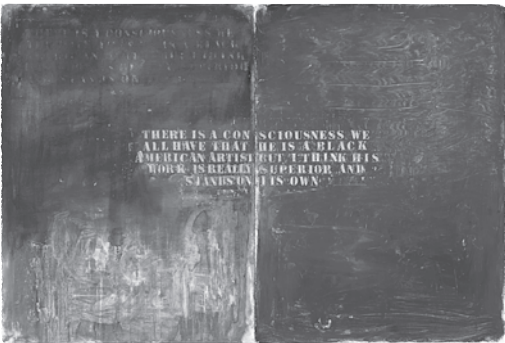


IMAGE EIGHTEEN: Glenn Ligon. American, born 1960. *Untitled (There is a consciousness we all have. . .)*. 1988. Synthetic polymer paint and pencil on two sheets of paper, 30 x 44 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (76.2 x 111.1 cm). Gift of Jan Christiaan Braun in honor of Agnes Gund, 2000. © 2008 Glenn Ligon

INTRODUCTION

This lesson examines identity as represented in contemporary drawing using a variety of materials and processes. Extending ideas about politics and portraiture from Lesson Three of this guide, this lesson challenges conventional notions of representation and what constitutes a drawing.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will consider the challenges of representing identity visually.
- Students will consider text and elements of popular culture in an image.
- Students will continue to consider the role of drawing as a political medium.

INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

- Ask your students to define “identity.” How can identity be represented visually? Ask your students to consider personal identity versus cultural identity. How might they be the same? How might they be different? How can identity be challenged?
- Tell your students that some of the objects in this lesson are collages created using materials taken from popular culture. Ask your students what popular images they might include if they were to make a representation of some aspect of their identity. From what sources would they collect these images? Would your students embrace the images they choose or challenge them?
- How would text function in their images? Would they utilize existing text that might be part of the images they choose or would they create their own text?

IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

- Show your students *Geezer (Image Sixteen)*, by Sarah Lucas. Ask your students what they notice about how the object was made. What can we know about the identity of this figure by looking? What visual evidence did the artist include to help the viewer understand who is represented in this image? Try to get a good sense from your students of who this person is before moving on. What is missing from this portrait?
- Tell your students that in British slang geezer means “dude,” or a regular guy. Did your students expect this to be an image of a young man? Why, or why not?

This work represents Charlie George, a British soccer star from the 1970s who played for a soccer club called Arsenal. Lucas and George grew up in the same working-class neighborhood in North London, and she made a number of images of him. “It’s a local thing,” she said. “Local to me. It was a big moment when he drove up and parked outside his father-in-law’s house in a Jaguar. He was the first, I suppose, ‘famous’ person I knew.”¹⁴

- Ask your students if there is a famous person that they feel could represent them in some way, either because of where that person is from or because of what he or she signifies. Have students write down their ideas, then divide them into pairs to discuss. Tell your students that they do not have to share who their person is with the large group, but do ask them to share the ideas that connect them to that person. Why are those ideas an important part of who they are?

14. Sarah Lucas, quoted in “I sometimes wonder how long I’ve got,” by Gordon Burn, *The Guardian*, October 17, 2005.

- Tell your students that Lucas made this work by collaging pizza-parlor advertisements that had been slipped under her door. Ask your students to consider possible connections between a soccer star or any professional athlete and advertisements.
- Lucas has many personal connections to this image. George grew up in her neighborhood, to make an image of him she used advertisements that had been delivered to her house, and some people think that in this image she and George look alike. (To see another picture of George go to <http://ds.dial.pipex.com/bob.dunning/charlie.htm>.) Lucas's interests as an artist include androgyny and the construction of personal identity. How does she address those ideas here? Ask your students if they think that Lucas intended this work as a self-portrait, a portrait of George, or both.
- Next show your students *Skinatural* (Image Seventeen), by Ellen Gallagher. Have your students look closely at the work and describe the different components. Can they determine how this object was made?

Gallagher uses archival materials from African-American magazines such as *Our World*, *Sepia*, and *Ebony*. She digitizes the images so they can be re-created in any scale, then uses materials such as oil, pencil, and plasticine to alter them. Gallagher is interested in the gridlike structure of the wig ads she found in many of these publications and the language used to sell them. In this image, she has altered the advertisement on the left side and created a grid of small hand-painted wigs on the right side.

- Ask your students what identity issues the wig advertisement raises for them. What can a wig do to alter one's identity? Specifically, how do wigs change the appearance of the African-American models shown wearing them in this ad? How does Gallagher's intervention in the work highlight or respond to those issues?

Gallagher said, "What's seen as political in the work is a kind of one-to-one reading of the signs as opposed to a more formal reading of the materials, how it's made, or what insinuations are made. I think people get overwhelmed by the super-signs of race."¹⁵ Her work deals with concepts of cultural identity, but she goes on to challenge the viewer to think about personal identity within the context of cultural identity. Thinking of the models in the archival ads, she encourages viewers to consider "what it means to look at somebody who was eighteen in 1939 . . . whatever she was. It's impossible to know who that was. But try anyway to have some kind of imaginative space with that sign. I think that takes more balls than to just understand it as some kind of critique of black hairstyles."¹⁶

- Encourage your students to put themselves in that "imaginative space." Ask them what it could have meant for the models personally and culturally to be a part of an advertisement for wigs. Gallagher has painted out the eyes on the face of each model, creating a masklike effect. What comment about their personal identity might she be making? Ask your students to compare and contrast Gallagher's and Lucas's work. What elements of identity are addressed by each artist?
- Both Lucas and Gallagher used images and text from popular culture to create their artworks. Ask your students to reflect for a moment on just the text in their works. What role did the text play in their experience of the work? Did they notice it right away or only after extended viewing? Ask your students to imagine how the experience of seeing only text, as in the next image, will be different from text combined with image.

15. Ellen Gallagher, "eXelento' & 'DeLuxe,'" interview by Art: 21, <http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/gallagher/clip1.html>.

16. Ibid.

- Show your students *Untitled (There is a consciousness we all have...)* (Image Eighteen), by Glenn Ligon. Divide your students into small groups and ask them to discuss the text. What does it say? What does it mean? Are there multiple meanings to this sentence?
- Then ask them to spend some time discussing how the work was made. You can let them know that Ligon made this drawing with paint and pencil on two sheets of paper. What do they notice about Ligon's color choices and the way in which he applied the paint to the paper? How does it influence the way they interpret the sentence or view the image as a whole? Have your students share what they discussed in their small groups with the whole class.

Ligon is interested in language. He has said that he “wants to make language into a physical thing, something that has real weight and force to it.”¹⁷ As such, he considers the physical aspect of reproducing language—the context as well as the materials and processes used in reproduction.

- Tell your students that Ligon often stencils quotations, as in this image, onto paper or canvas, or uses printmaking techniques to repeat a phrase many times over. This quotation comes from a 1988 *New York Times* article about the sculptor Martin Puryear, who was chosen that year to represent the United States at the São Paulo Biennial in Brazil. The statement was made about the artist by Ned Rifkin, a curator at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. Ask your students if knowing who the quote refers to and who said it makes a difference. If so, in what way? Throughout this lesson, we have been thinking about identity and how it is represented visually. How does Ligon's work compare to Lucas's and Gallagher's in terms of dealing with identity issues?
- Ask your students to consider all three works in this lesson. What was the impact of looking at an image in which only text was represented, versus two images containing both text and image? Was it different than what they hypothesized before seeing the image? All three images contain found materials. Ask your students to recap what each found material was and how the artist used it. How are found materials important to what the artists wanted to convey about identity? Do your students consider the works in this lesson to be political? Why, or why not?

ACTIVITY

Spread the Word

Ellen Gallagher said, “I get really excited by this idea that a printed material can be so widely distributed. The black press was widely distributed and there is a great American history of *manifestos*.”¹⁸ Have your students create a work on paper to be distributed. Will they choose to represent a widely debated issue? Or will they communicate a message that has a personal meaning to them? How will their ideas be communicated: through text, images, or both? How will students document the reaction to what they have created?

Reuse It

Ask your students to recycle something that they receive on a daily basis and make it into an art piece. How will the piece reflect their ideas and opinions about the object they are recycling?

17. Glenn Ligon, quoted in “Borrowed Voices: Glenn Ligon and the Force of Language,” by Richard Meyer (Queer Cultural Center), www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/Ligon/LigonEssay.html.

18. Gallagher, “eXelento’ & ‘DeLuxe.”