

The Power of Queer Portraiture



Catherine Opie, *Trash*, 1994. Chromogenic print, 60 x 30". Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis. University purchase, Bixby Fund, and with funds from Helen Kornblum, 2012.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will interpret a portrait by analyzing the sitter's body language and facial expression, the artist's use of media and art-making approach, and relevant contextual information.
- Students will consider how one's attitudes about gender identity, sexual identity, and beauty are formed and evaluate the ability of images to challenge stereotypes.
- Students will reflect on one's role to promote inclusiveness at school and in one's community.

Trash



The American photographer Catherine Opie captures contemporary life through familiar genres—portraiture, landscape, and studio photography. She is known for her work representing queer communities and subcultures including the BDSM scene. For her *Portrait* series (1993–96) Opie photographed members of the LGBTQ+ community drawn from her close circle of friends and fellow artists.

The 1990s were a pivotal time for LGBTQ+ rights and activism. The devastating impact of the AIDS epidemic due to government inaction during the Reagan administration in the 1980s continued into the following decade. Discriminatory medical practices perpetuated misinformation about queer people and prevented access to public health resources, while legal policies like “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” from the Clinton administration further stigmatized LGBTQ+ identities. In the art world the obscenity trial of Robert Mapplethorpe, a gay photographer known for his controversial and sexually explicit images, led to the cancellation of the artist’s exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery of Art and efforts to defund the National Endowment for the Arts. In the face of so much neglect and harm, queer people claimed their dignity and fought for their rights through political organizing, protest, public education campaigns, and community care. Opie, a member of AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), an activist organization established in 1987 in New York, describes her work at the time as responding to the sense of loss and erasure experienced within queer community and a desire for “making images as a record.” Within this sociopolitical context Opie’s work challenges traditional norms of gender and sexuality and how these identities are represented, using the power of portraiture to create a sense of visibility and belonging.

The subject of the portrait, Trash, now known as Tre, was the artist’s roommate at the time and a performer on screen and in clubs. The portrait was taken in their living room in Los Angeles. Set against a vibrant purple background that recalls Hans Holbein the Younger’s portraits of sixteenth-century aristocrats, the full-length, leather-clad figure’s identity is simultaneously asserted and obscured through the white mask-like makeup, prosthetic horns, and fluidity of masculine and feminine signifiers that resist categorization and binary notions of gender expression. A white rose draws attention to a codpiece worn under chaps, and heavily lined eyes and bright-red lipstick paired with a painted mustache and goatee emphasize the performative and expansive experience of gender.

Removed from the surrounding world, the figure’s individuality and self-expression are foregrounded. Drawing on the art historical tradition of portrait photography, Opie elevates

identities that have been labeled by society as “other,” presenting LGBTQ+ culture with dignity and compassion.

MISSOURI LEARNING STANDARDS

English Language Arts

RI.1.A Evidence/Inference

SL.1.A Conversations

SL.1.B Questioning

SL.1.C Viewpoints of Others

Social Studies

AH.1.GS.A: Analyze laws, policies, and processes to determine how governmental systems affect individuals and groups in society in United States history c. 1870–2010.

AH.1.PC.A: Using a United States history lens, describe how peoples’ perspectives shaped sources/artifacts they created.

AH.1.PC.B: Using a United States history lens, examine the origins and impact of social structures and stratification on societies and relationships between peoples.

AH.6.PC.A: Analyze scientific, technological, artistic, intellectual, economic, political, and cultural changes to determine their effect on individuals, groups, and society.

Visual Arts

VA:Re7A: Individual aesthetic and empathetic awareness developed through engagement with art can lead to understanding and appreciation of self, others, the natural world, and constructed environments.

VA:Re7B: Visual imagery influences understanding of and responses to the world.

VA:Re8A: People gain insights into meanings of artworks by engaging in the process of art criticism.

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING COMPETENCIES*

Self-awareness

- Identifying one’s emotions
- Identifying personal, cultural, and linguistic assets

Responsible decision-making

- Demonstrating curiosity and open-mindedness
- Reflecting on one's role to promote personal, family, and community well-being
- Identifying solutions for personal and social problems

Social awareness

- Taking others' perspectives
- Recognizing strength in others
- Demonstrating empathy and compassion
- Identifying diverse social norms, and unjust ones

Relationship skills

- Communicating effectively
- Developing positive relationships
- Practicing teamwork and collaborative problem-solving

*Adapted from CASEL's SEL framework: <https://casel.org/sel-framework/>

ART TALK*

Look

- Invite students to spend one minute looking silently at this **photograph**, letting their eyes wander and be drawn to details that stand out to them. Encourage students to consider their first impressions and what thoughts and feelings arise as they practice close looking.
- Ask students to write down a one-word response to the artwork and then share with a friend their response and what they noticed in the artwork. The response can be a detail, emotion, or association.
- Have students share responses out loud and collect them on chart paper.

Describe

- Invite students to share their observations and thoughts about the artwork. The See/Think/Wonder routine developed by Project Zero can be helpful to scaffold and to get a sense of what students are curious about.
 - What do you SEE?
 - What does it make you THINK about?
 - What does it make you WONDER?
- The open-ended questions below can guide students to construct their own interpretations of *Trash*. Paraphrase and synthesize students' comments, noting similarities and differences, and point to corresponding details in the artwork. Share relevant information about the artist and artwork in response to student questions and comments to deepen the discussion.
 - What do you notice about the setting of the **portrait**?

- What do you notice about the **sitter's** body language and facial expression? What emotions does this artwork evoke?
- What do you notice about the artist's use of color, lighting, and shadow?

Analyze

"Artists who challenge the idea that only a certain type of person or body can be valued are showing that what's considered 'the other' can be beautiful too. . . . It's also important to make photographs that inspire one to really look, to be drawn in, instead of just glancing at something quickly. For me, beauty is also about being held." — Catherine Opie

- Read the above artist statement as a class or in small groups. Invite students to think about the idea of being "drawn in" to a photograph and discuss the following questions in relation to *Trash*:
 - How does Opie's work challenge the idea that only a certain type of person or body can be valued?
 - In what ways does *Trash* challenge **stereotypes** around gender?
 - What potential challenges might this person face?
 - In what ways is the portrait of Trash empowering?
 - How can portraits inspire a viewer to really look?

Create

- Invite students to imagine that they are having their portrait made to show themselves as unique and empowered individuals. Ask students to describe or draw in response to the following questions:
 - What is the setting of your portrait?
 - What are you wearing or posing with?
 - How are you posed?
 - Who is the artist?

Reflect

- Extend the conversation by exploring gender and sexual orientation stereotyping with the following questions:
 - What messages do you receive about gender and sexual orientation?
 - Where do your ideas about gender and sexual orientation come from? (e.g., media, school, family)
 - How do stereotypes of gender and sexual orientation show up in the communities you are part of?
- Ask students to journal or draw in response to the following prompt: *What can I do to help others feel included and valued at school and in my community?* Then, invite students to turn and discuss their ideas with a friend.

**If you are facilitating online, students can share their responses through chat, whiteboard, or a feedback tool such as Padlet or Answer Garden, and the instructor can read them all aloud to honor each contribution.*

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Have students investigate the sociopolitical context of *Trash* by researching policies and events that shaped life for LGBTQ+ Americans in the late twentieth century. Ask students to research a policy from this period that targeted LGBTQ+ people, such as “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” or an event, such as the Stonewall Uprising, and analyze how it affected life for LGBTQ+ people at the time and its legacies today.

Students may use the LGBTQ History Timeline from GLSEN as a starting point for their research: <https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/LGBTQ-History-Timeline-References.pdf>

VOCABULARY

photograph: an image, especially a positive print, recorded by a camera and reproduced on a photosensitive surface

portrait: a likeness or image of a person that is created by an artist

sitter/subject: the person or people in a portrait

stereotype: an oversimplified generalization about a person or group of people without regard for individual differences

symbol: something representing something else by association; objects, characters, or other concrete representations of abstract ideas, concepts, or events

RESOURCES

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