

Artists & Social Justice

FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

Introduced by the Blanton's director of Education, Ray Williams, this lesson is designed to support a synchronous learning experience, inviting close looking and student discussion of works of art and their connection to current issues of social justice.

Lesson Overview

Please use the following resources flexibly, in whatever combination works best for you and your students:

Introductory video and discussion guidelines

Includes guidelines for civil and productive conversations around social issues; consideration of a central work of art and pauses for discussion; a question-generating activity based on a second work of art.

⌚ 25–30 min



Breakout rooms

Send your students to Zoom Breakout Rooms in small groups. Each group will consider a different work of art and discuss two questions together.

⌚ 10 min



Debrief

After the breakout rooms, show each key artwork to the entire group and open up the conversation to the whole class.

⌚ 15–20 min



Closing

Share reflections on the experience by completing the sentence 'And I noticed _____.'

⌚ 5 min

or

or

You may prefer to model your own approach to an object-based discussion with the artwork of your choice, instead of using the introductory video.

or

If you are concerned about the effectiveness of small group discussions, consider using two or three of the key works with the entire class. Review the information provided and develop questions that relate specifically to your course goals.

or

View additional works of art in the Blanton collections that you could use to stimulate thinking about social issues at bit.ly/BlantonSJWorks

If you looked at works together as a class, this is a good time to open up the conversation more broadly, maybe making connections to current events, course readings, or previous discussions.

Step-by-Step Guide

Print this document or keep it open on your screen for reference during the class.

To start, share your screen and computer sound and play the introductory video: bit.ly/BlantonSJ1.

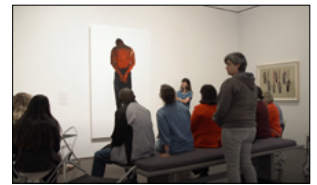
INTRODUCTORY VIDEO:

Guidelines and Expectations

This is a moment to set any additional guidelines you may have for today's discussion. **What do you expect from each other?**

Anti-racism educator Glenn Singleton's *Four Agreements of Courageous Conversations*:

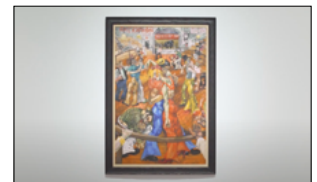
- Experience discomfort.
- Stay engaged.
- Speak your truth.
- Expect and accept non-closure.



Timestamp 1:08

Philip Evergood

The first work in this lesson is Philip Evergood's painting *Dance Marathon* (1934), which you will look at together for a full minute. Remember, the goal is to get students looking and talking. The curatorial information for this work is provided for your reference at the end of this document.



Timestamp 2:43

Luis Jiménez

The second work Ray introduces is a towering fiberglass sculpture, *Cruzando El Rio Bravo* [*Border Crossing*] by Luis Jiménez. The curatorial information for this work is provided for your reference at the end of this document.



Timestamp 6:40

Now, you have the option to set up breakout rooms to encourage close looking in smaller groups, or you may choose to look at additional works as a class.

OPTION: BREAKOUT ROOMS

Divide the class into groups of 4 or 5 students. In the Zoom Chat, share the link to the breakout room materials students will use to view the works at bit.ly/BlantonSJBreakout.

Nominate one student in each group to share their screen for the 10-minute discussion period so the group can look at the work of art together. If you have a large class, feel free to assign the same work to more than one group.

In the breakout room materials, each group is given these discussion prompts:

**Based on what you see, what do you think the artist cares about?
Does the work relate to your own experience in any way?**

Group 1: Deborah Roberts, *Skewered*

Group 2: Byron Kim, *Synecdoche*

Group 3: Vincent Valdez, *Untitled*

Group 4: Ramiro Gomez, *The Broad*

Please set a timer for 10 minutes and issue a 2-minute warning using the **Broadcast To All Breakout Rooms** feature as the discussion time comes to a close. Feel free to pop in to different breakout rooms!

DEBRIEF

After returning from the Breakout Rooms, as you show each key artwork to the entire group:

- Ask a member of each breakout group to share highlights of their conversation.
- You may also want to share some points of information from the included curatorial labels, remembering that the students were working only with the visual information of the artwork itself.
- Synthesize and paraphrase important ideas, and underscore any key points.

You may want to take this opportunity to make connections to current events, course readings, or previous discussions.

OPTION: CLASS DISCUSSION

If you have time, you may use two or three of the key works linked to above for the entire class to consider. Review the information provided and develop questions that relate specifically to your course goals.

You may use two or three of the key works linked to above or view other works from the Blanton collection to stimulate thinking about social issues at bit.ly/BlantonSJWorks

CLOSING

To close this experience and highlight what your students have done in this session, invite them to finish this sentence “**And I noticed** _____.” by sharing in the Zoom chat a word or phrase that captures something meaningful that you noticed. A couple of words or a sentence is perfect; not a paragraph.

Then read these responses aloud, each one prefaced by the phrase: “**And I noticed...**”

Finally, share this parting quote with your class:

“We all have a sphere of influence. Each of us needs to find our own sources of courage so that we will begin to speak. There are many problems to address, and we cannot avoid them indefinitely. We cannot continue to be silent. We must begin to speak, knowing that words alone are insufficient. But I have seen that meaningful dialogue can lead to effective action. Change is possible.” – Beverly Daniel Tatum, PhD, author of *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*

CURATORIAL INFORMATION

Philip Evergood

Dance Marathon, 1934

Oil on canvas, 60 1/16 in. x 40 1/16 in.

Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin,

Gift of Mari and James A. Michener, 1991

Object Description: An activist as well as an artist, Philip Evergood was committed to creating art that exposed social injustice. *Dance Marathon* depicts a phenomenon that swept the United States during the Great Depression, in which couples competed for a cash prize by dancing for as long as possible. In this complex and luridly colored painting, Evergood combines realistic details, such as the exhausted couples and crude prize announcements, with symbols, like the skeletal hand, that convey his attitude toward the dismal spectacle. Evergood’s work of social critique, while rooted in the Depression, is a powerful reminder of the timelessness of human desperation and cruelty.



Luis Jiménez

***Cruzando El Rio Bravo [Border Crossing]*, 1989**

Painted fiberglass, 126 in. x 40 in. x 51 in.

**Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin,
Gift of Jeanne and Michael Klein, 2013**

Object Description: Totem-like in stature, *Border Crossing* is a fiberglass sculpture by Texas native Luis Jiménez. In this monumental work, Jiménez depicts a Mexican man carrying a woman and infant on his back across the Rio Grande River—Jiménez was inspired by his father and grandmother's illegal immigration to the United States in the early 1920s. *Border Crossing* is a tribute to the determination of the thousands of immigrants who have traveled across the southwestern border in search of a better life. As Jiménez later described: "I had wanted to make a piece that was dealing with the issue of the illegal alien.... People talked about aliens as if they landed from outer space, as if they weren't really people. I wanted to put a face on them: I wanted to humanize them." Born in El Paso in 1940, Jiménez began studying art as an undergraduate at The University of Texas at Austin and received his Bachelor's degree in 1964.



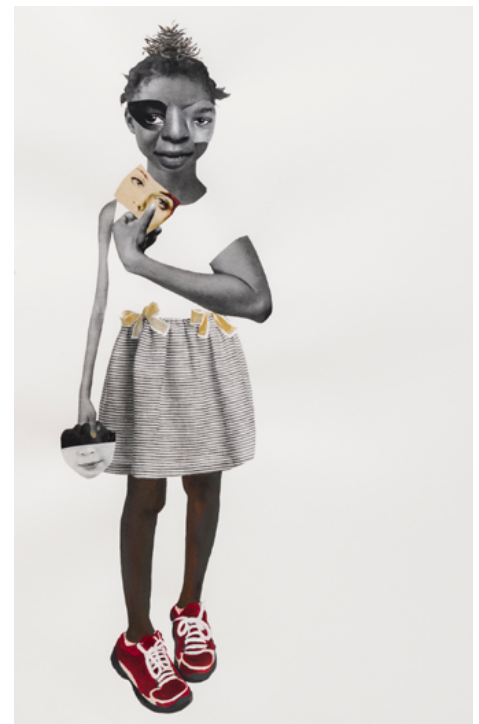
Deborah Roberts

***Skewered*, 2017**

Collage, acrylic, and graphite, 44 in. x 32 in.

**Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin,
Promised gift of Jeanne and Michael Klein, 2017**

Object Description: The protagonists of Deborah Roberts' collages are eight to ten-year-old black girls—subjects who rarely find themselves in the spotlight of art history. Often wearing polka dots or striped skirts and bows or barrettes in their hair, these knobby kneed pre-teenagers remind us of the vulnerable, threshold age when kids—and especially girls—begin to possess a kind of self-consciousness that often devolves into insecurity, especially if they do not adhere to societal standards of beauty and behavior. In *Skewered*, the bun at the top of the girl's hair is, in fact, a painted pile of matches—a hint at the volatile events that inspired this portrait: the July 2017 acquittal of the Minnesota police officer who killed Philando Castile. Castile was an innocent black man whose girlfriend and her four-year-old daughter watched as he was shot to death after being stopped for a broken taillight. The police officer explained that his "broad nose" matched the description of a recent robbery suspect. Roberts explains the white mask held in her protagonist's hand: "if she puts that in front of her, maybe she will survive." As Roberts elaborated



in a recent interview: “I need the collages to break ties as well as heal them; to be both powerful and vulnerable, fragile and fashionable, narrative and non-realistic, but most importantly I want them to challenge the notion that beauty is simply black and white, or only this and not that, and to challenge the notion that we should dehumanize others to feel superior.”

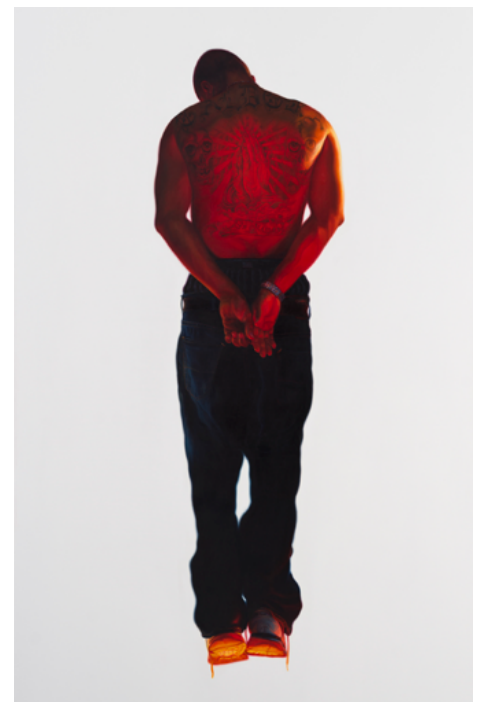
Byron Kim,
***Synecdoche*, 1998**
Oil and wax on twenty panels, each panel 10 in. x 8 in.
Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin,
Michener Acquisitions Fund, 1998

Object Description: A skillful fusion of abstraction and representation in painting, *Synecdoche* is a potent statement about identity. Arranged in a grid, these monochrome panels replicate the skin color of twenty individuals that Byron Kim encountered at random on The University of Texas at Austin campus. As such, *Synecdoche* may playfully literalize a comment made by modernist painter Brice Marden, who once referred to the surfaces of his own monochromatic paintings as “skin.” *Synecdoche* is an ongoing series of more than 410 individual panels that Kim began in 1991 and has continued to the present day. Borrowed from literary criticism, the term “synecdoche” refers to a figure of speech in which a part represents a whole. Here the color of each panel stands in for the individual sitter, while all of the panels together represent the university population. Yet in this context, the work points to the futility—the absurdity even—of defining human beings by their skin color alone.



Vincent Valdez
***Untitled, from The Strangest Fruit*, 2013**
Oil on canvas, 92 in. x 55 in.
Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin,
Promised gift of Jeanne and Michael Klein, 2016

Object Description: The title of this series of paintings, *The Strangest Fruit*, hints at the history that inspired them. In 1939 Billie Holiday recorded “Strange Fruit,” a haunting song about the lynching of African Americans in the United States. Vincent Valdez painted the series of ten life-size Latino men after extensively researching what he refers to as the “erased” history of the lynchings of Mexican immigrants in Texas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Valdez isolates his subjects against stark white backdrops and deliberately does not include nooses around their necks. Rather than directly summon difficult images from the past, he depicts this history in the present tense, underscoring the continued persecution and struggles that immigrants and minorities face in the United States today. He explains, “Presenting this historical subject in a



contemporary context enables me to present the noose as a metaphor and to suggest that the threat of the noose still looms over the heads of the young Latino males in American society.”

Ramiro Gomez

***The Broad*, 2016**

Acrylic on canvas, 72 in. x 72 in.

Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin,

Ellen Sussman Collection, 2016

Object Description: Ramiro Gomez paints from personal experience. In 1986, he was born to undocumented Mexican immigrants in the Inland Empire area east of Los Angeles. Growing up, his mother worked as a school janitor and his father as a trucker. Beginning in 2009, Gomez worked as a live-in nanny to a Beverly Hills family and began to paint figures of women over luxury magazine spreads discarded by his employer. That two-and-a-half-year experience—one of simultaneous assimilation and alienation—has fueled much of his artistic practice since. Gomez has been painting housekeepers, pool cleaners, nannies, and gardeners at work in well-to-do homes and other Los Angeles locations since 2012; the city is an ideal subject for this work as it boasts the largest Latino population in the country. Here we see a woman pushing a large trash can down an empty block outside the recently opened Broad Museum. Gomez’s work reminds us that the manicured hedges, glassy swimming pools, and sun-drenched buildings of the Southern California landscape are often made possible by Latino and immigrant workers. The people in his paintings are always faceless “in part to suggest the way they were taken for granted and overlooked, but in part also because somehow the viewer read more into them that way; they were less threatening, more inward looking and as such they more readily called forth the viewer’s empathy.”

