Invisibility in Image and Text

How do we visualize or verbalize intangible concepts and emotions?

In what ways can images call for critical consideration of text, and vice versa?

Art and language can correspond in dynamic dialogue to explore themes of what is seen and unseen in our lives and the world around us, revealing poignant, subversive, and sometimes humorous expressions. This Permanent Collection Portfolio Guide of photographs, printmaking, and mixed media features a sampling of works from the Addison's collection offering varied perspectives and discussion points for the ways images and text convey notions of invisibility.

Educators are encouraged to use this Guide and the expanded Portfolio Image List as a starting point, a place from which to dig deeper, ask questions, and make new connections for class plans and projects.

For online use, click the images in this guide to access digital images in the Addison's online database.

SELECTED THEMATIC APPROACHES

Identity and Self Reflection — What parts of identity are visible or invisible? How do we use words to describe, hide, or reveal ourselves?

Dialogue between Art and Language — How do artists expand a visual narrative with text, and vice versa? In what ways can art and language be in dialogue when one is removed or obscured?

Historical Representation — How can images and text from the past and present interact to communicate perspectives on history? Which parts of historical narratives are visible or invisible?
Identity and Self Reflection

How might a portrait change when the visual voice and literary voice are viewed separately or together?

What parts of identity are visible or invisible?

Kevin is one of Dawoud Bey’s numerous large-scale color photographic portraits of high school students comprising the series Class Pictures. For the project, Bey photographed students from public and private schools across the U.S., including Phillips Academy and Lawrence High School, as well as Detroit, Orlando, San Francisco, and New York City. At the start of the sitting, each subject wrote a brief autobiographical statement that was not shared with Bey until after the portrait was taken. By turns poignant, funny, or harrowing, these revealing words are an integral part of the project. Describing his process, Bey writes “I want to try to make the fullest, most interesting and compelling visual description of the person and then, hopefully when you put the two of them together—a visual voice with their literary voice—you end up with this more dimensional thing.”
Identity and Self Reflection

How do we use words to describe, obscure, or reveal ourselves?

How can visual representations of ourselves created by others impact our written reflections, and vice versa?

Photographer Jim Goldberg’s work is focused on giving marginalized portions of society a voice in American culture. In 1985, Goldberg was commissioned by the Cambridge Art Council of Massachusetts to create site-specific installation in the Neville Manor Nursing Home for which he spent seven months getting to know and photographing the residents. Each portrait is a result of a long process in which Goldberg presented his subject with a black-and-white photograph and asked that a response to the work be written directly on the margins.

In 1997, Wendy Ewald collaborated with several women artists in Saudi Arabia on an exhibition of self-portraits. Having to work around the strict censorship required of integrated audiences, the images had to be altered to erase areas that revealed too much of the women’s bodies and faces. In the work Shadia, Ewald and Shadia (the artist) used magic markers, text, and ornate design to mask the image, ultimately rendering much of the artist’s figure invisible.
All works below by Duane Michals (b. 1932), purchased as the gift of Louis Wiley, Jr. (PA 1963) and John Clarke Kane, Jr. (PA 1963) in memory of Paul L. Monette (PA 1963) on the occasion of their 50th Reunion, with additional support from the Monette-Horwitz Trust.

D What Is Death?, 1994, gelatin silver print with hand applied text hinged to board, 6 1/4 x 8 7/8 in., 2011.22


Dialogue between Art and Language

*How do we visualize or verbalize intangible concepts and emotions?*

*How do artists expand a visual narrative with text, and vice versa?*

Frustrated by the expressive limitations of the single photographic image, Duane Michals experiments with expanding the medium’s range in a variety of ways, including sequencing photographs and accompanying them with drawings and text. Writing on his pictures is a way to go beyond the image to express and reflect upon things that are often unseen—intangible yet universal subjects such as love, loss, death, and memory. As he has noted, “I had to write about all the things you couldn’t see,” he said. “The artist has to make a leap of faith to insight, otherwise it’s just description.”
Dialogue between Art and Language

How can the absence of concrete visuals enrich the mental imagery conjured by text?

In what ways can art and language be in dialogue when one is removed or obscured?

After his iconic series of cowboy photographs in the early 1980s in which he appropriated advertising imagery while referencing archetypes of American culture and identity, Richard Prince began to incorporate jokes from cartoons strips into his work. Initially drawings, these works were later silkscreened onto canvas with the illustrations removed. Merging the spare and serious language of abstract painting with the humor of popular culture, Prince’s painted jokes are more than a light-hearted exchange. Like advertising images, they offer a window into cultural tastes, desires, and prejudices that are often buried beneath the surface of social interactions.

Pairing ghostly rubbings of snapshots and letters found in flea markets with his own notations about their significance or mystery, James Melchert creates a provocative dialogue between the physicality of the object and the elusive readings that are possible when inspection is filtered through text, memory, and association. This work is part of a larger series inspired by Melchert’s fascination with the “notion of circular communication” whereby “a message goes to the viewer and the viewer projects back into it.”
Historical Representation

*How can images and text from the past and present interact to communicate perspectives on history?*

*Which parts of historical narratives are visible or invisible, legible or obscured?*

Glenn Ligon provocatively comments on language’s ability to communicate and invisibility as it relates to issues of identity, race, and representation. For his 1993 series *Runaways*, Ligon asked his friends to describe him as if they were filing a missing persons report with the police and then paired their descriptions with imagery used by abolitionists, placing them in the format of 19th Century broadsheets that advertised for the return of escaped slaves. In doing so, the artist assumes the persona of the runaway slave and inserts himself into history to explore a connection between the past and who he is today.

*Untitled (speech/hands) #1* is one of a series that layers text from Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan’s speech at the 1995 Million Man March over a silkscreened news photograph depicting the event. Rendered in black oil stick and coal dust, the glittering text is simultaneously seductive and frustrating. Inviting close inspection but providing neither legible text nor lucid imagery, Ligon’s ambiguous work questions the effectiveness of words and images to convey clear truths and invites us to consider the ways they can alternately report, distort, and obscure historical events.
In what ways can images call for critical consideration of text?

How can artworks inspire us to question the ways history is documented?

During an eight-week artist residency in Washington, DC, Sandow Birk found himself particularly fascinated by the enduring potency of one of the nation’s foundational documents: the Constitution. Long interested in the intersection of art and text in graffiti and graphic novels, Birk pondered creating an illustrated version of this living document. Here in his own imaginary monument, history and satire merge to expose the gaps between national rhetoric and societal realities.

Separating word and image, Sarah Charlesworth’s Herald Tribune includes appropriated newspaper front pages from which all text has been removed. Leaving only the masthead and images intact, the artist exposes the subtle ways ideas are conveyed and power structures are perpetuated by pictures.
Curriculum Connections and Resources

SUGGESTED CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

History/Social Studies
- primary source documents
- The Constitution
- American ideals
- race relations
- The Civil Rights Movement
- gender
- The Women’s Movement
- photojournalism
- propaganda
- print media

English
- identity
- race relations
- race and identity
- otherness
- gender
- equality and justice
- protest
- graphic novels
- Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic
- Maus: A Survivor’s Tale
- Persepolis

Art
- representation
- portraiture and self-portraiture
- narrative
- works in series
- images and text
- revealing and obscuring
- composition and storytelling
- photojournalism
- social documentation

CONNECTIONS TO ADDITIONAL THEMATIC PORTFOLIOS

American Identity
Race and Otherness
The Immigrant Experience
The American Civil War
The Great Depression
The Civil Rights Movement
Global Interactions
Images and the Media

TEACHER AND STUDENT RESOURCES

Class Pictures: Photographs by Dawoud Bey. New York: Aperture, 2007. Bey’s photographs accompanied by poignant personal statements of sixty students from various economic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds from high schools around the country.


