

Brooklyn Museum

Teacher Resource Packet

HIDE/SEEK: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture

November 18, 2011–February 12, 2012





HIDE/SEEK

Difference and Desire in American Portraiture

About the Exhibition

HIDE/SEEK: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture is the first major museum exhibition to explore themes of sexual identity in modern American portraiture. It examines more than a century of art, a variety of sexual identities, and the stories of several generations, bringing together more than a hundred works in a wide variety of media. The exhibition highlights the contributions of gay and lesbian artists, many of whom developed strategies to code and disguise their subjects' sexual identities as well as their own. Beginning in the late nineteenth century with Thomas Eakins and John Singer Sargent, it features works by Romaine Brooks, George Bellows, Marsden Hartley, Georgia O'Keeffe, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Agnes Martin, and Andy Warhol. Major works by Keith Haring, Glenn Ligon, Nan Goldin, Félix González-Torres, and Catherine Opie address the impact of the Stonewall Riots of 1969, the AIDS epidemic, and themes of identity in postmodern and contemporary art.

Romaine Brooks (American,
1874–1970)

Self-Portrait, 1923

Oil on canvas, 46¼ x 26¾ in. (117.5 x 68.3 cm)
Smithsonian American Art Museum,
Washington, D.C., Gift of the artist

Description

This painting shows an androgynous figure dressed all in black except for a white collared shirt. Her skin is very pale, in contrast with her red lips, and her eyes are barely visible, peering out from the deep shadow under her hat brim. She looks directly at the viewer from her place alone on a balcony; a twilight cityscape stretches across the background in smudged gray tones.

Background

Romaine Brooks (1874–1970) was an independently wealthy American who spent a turbulent childhood being moved around the United States and Europe and forced to care for her mentally unstable older brother by her volatile socialite mother. At the beginning of the twentieth century she was embraced by the artist-intellectuals of Paris, first as an interior designer with impeccable taste and then as a portraitist so talented at capturing her sitters' personalities that a friend referred to her as a “thief of souls.” Over her lifetime, Brooks was involved in passionate friendships and relationships with both men and women, including a fifty-year partnership with the quick-witted writer Natalie Barney, another intellectual American expatriate living in Paris.

In this self-portrait, Brooks hints at the melancholy isolation she often wrote about in her autobiography, a self-imposed loneliness due in part to her determined refusal to become embroiled in the gossip of the Parisian social elite. At the same time, she portrays herself as an alert, self-possessed individual. She wears masculine-influenced clothing and has a powdered, rouged face, a combination that defies societal expectations of male/female gender identity.



Cass Bird (American, b. 1974)
I Look Just Like My Daddy, 2004

Chromogenic photograph, 40 x 30 in. (76.2 x 101.6 cm)
Brooklyn Museum, Gift of the Prints and
Photographs Council and the Robert A.
Levinson Fund, 2005.40.1. © Cass Bird

Description

This bust-length photograph shows a figure standing in front of a white brick wall. The subject looks directly towards the viewer and wears a blue-and-white plaid shirt and a white-and-black trucker hat decorated with a small metal revolver and the words that give the artwork its title. A few wisps of short hair stick out above each ear. The cursive letters “aca,” part of a tattoo, are visible under the open shirt collar.



Background

Cass Bird (born 1974) is a contemporary photographer who says that her work shows “lives that resist and create alternatives to the structure of societal norms.”¹ She highlights individuals like her friend Macaulay (seen in this portrait) who choose to define their own identities and sexualities, sometimes in line with and sometimes against society's expectations. Bird's work includes both artistic and commercial photography that may not always convey an overt LGBTQ (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer) message but emphasizes people who seem unafraid to show the viewer who they really are.

In this photograph, Macaulay is a prime example of Bird's work, presenting an androgyny that does not conform to standard definitions of male and female identity and challenges the viewer to question his or her own assumptions about gender. The hat's slogan, while possibly a statement of fact, seems also to be a reference to the ambiguity that the whole piece—and much of Bird's work—calls attention to.

¹ www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist_art_base/gallery/cassbird.php

Questions for Viewing *Self-Portrait* and *I Look Just Like My Daddy*

What do these two portraits have in common? What makes them different?

In each of these portraits, what signs do you see of masculine identity? Feminine identity? What is it about these details that make you decide to classify them as masculine or feminine?

What do you think each of these portrait subjects may be feeling? Use evidence from the portraits to support your ideas.

What might these two people say to each other if they met?

Romaine Brooks is included, along with Natalie Barney and other women who have contributed to world history, in a famous work of feminist art, *The Dinner Party* (1974–79) by Judy Chicago, which is on view in the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum. Chicago identifies Brooks as a feminist, though the term was not yet in common use during the early part of Brooks's career when this painting was made. Cass Bird identifies herself as a feminist artist. What evidence of feminism do you see in these portraits?

Classroom Activities

Location Inspiration

American artists like Romaine Brooks and Marsden Hartley drew inspiration from places where they were allowed to be relatively open about their sexualities. For them, that involved living abroad. Think about where you go to feel like you can be most open about your own identity. Write a story about that place and what makes it so special.

Curate Your Own Identity Show

These portraits tell us something about LGBTQ identities from different time periods. Think about one aspect of your own identity (for example, where you're from, what you like to do, or how you want the world to know you). Using online search tools, books, and your own photographs, collect images that relate to this aspect of your identity. Consider contemporary and historical images. Scan these images and add captions that explain their relevance to your theme. Create your own online exhibition on an image site like Flickr or Picasa. If you need some help, take a look at Trent Kelley's project "Hidden in the Open" (www.flickr.com/photos/hidden-in-the-open/sets/72157624480472079/detail/) about African American male couples over the past hundred years. Feel free to join the Brooklyn Museum Flickr group (www.flickr.com/groups/brooklynmuseum/) to share your artwork.



Marsden Hartley (American, 1877–1943)

Painting No. 47, Berlin, 1914–15

Oil on canvas, 39⁷/₁₆ x 32 in. (100.1 x 81.3 cm). Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1972. Photograph by Lee Stalsworth

Description

This painting is made up of a collage-like arrangement of elements. Geometric shapes, flags, letters, and numbers are painted in bright, bold areas of color that seem to overlap a black background.

Background

Marsden Hartley (1877–1943) was born in Maine and studied art in Cleveland and New York City, where he became part of photographer Alfred Stieglitz's artistic circle and saw firsthand the modern art being made in Europe at the time. That work inspired him to move to Paris in 1912 during its heyday as a center of American expatriate creativity. In 1913 he moved to Berlin, a place where gay men were able to be more open about their sexual preferences than they could be in most of Europe and the United States. Hartley, himself gay, loved Berlin and created some of his most famous paintings there, including the *War Motif* series, before World War I forced him to return to America in 1915.

This painting, along with the rest of the *War Motif* series, was partly inspired by the death of a young German cavalryman named Karl von Freyburg. Hartley and Freyburg met in Paris, and though it is unclear whether they were ever romantically involved, Freyburg's death in an early World War I battle in 1914 was enough to motivate Hartley to create a major body of work. Hartley referred to his *War Motif* series not as portraits of Freyburg but as "portraits of moments" made up of elements Hartley had personally observed in Germany. *Painting No. 47, Berlin* includes meaningful components such as Freyburg's initials, his age at death (24), the black-and-white Iron Cross (a bravery medal awarded to him the day before he died), a spur (to mark his place in an equestrian unit), a blue-and-white checked flag (representing Freyburg's native region of Bavaria), and more. The overall composition is arranged to form a vague portrait of a head (the Iron Cross is at the neck, the Bavarian blue-and-white check stands in for the face, and the white spray at the top represents a horsehair-topped World War I cavalry helmet). The "hidden" portrait made up of recognizable parts mirrors Hartley's life as a gay man: hiding his homosexuality in plain sight from a narrow-minded society so that only his close friends and more accepting Berlin compatriots would fully comprehend the symbolic or coded imagery.



Félix González-Torres (American, 1957–1996)

"Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.), 1991

Candies individually wrapped in multicolored cellophane, endless supply; overall dimensions may vary with installation; ideal weight 175 pounds. The Art Institute of Chicago; promised gift of Donna and Howard Stone. ©The Félix González-Torres Foundation. Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York



Description

This artwork is comprised of hundreds of brightly colored, individually wrapped candies, placed in a pile on the floor in a corner of the gallery.

Background

Félix González-Torres (1957–1996) was born in Cuba and moved in his early twenties to the United States, where he studied photography and postmodern theory at Pratt Institute and the International Center of Photography. As he pursued his studies, he grew more and more displeased with the way much of art history had repeatedly emphasized certain restricting ideas, such as the male artist's gaze at the female nude body, or the assumption that an artist's ability to copy his environment implied control or mastery of that environment. González-Torres created art that disrupted these traditional conventions of Western art. For example, viewers of *"Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* are invited to take and eat a piece of the candy that comprises the artwork, involving the viewer in the ongoing creation of the artwork.

"Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) was made in 1991, when González-Torres's partner Ross Laycock was dying of AIDS. The artist has said that this artwork (like others that invite viewers to take elements away) was a way of dealing with his impending loss. The specifications for the piece call for candy with a total weight of 175 pounds (Laycock's weight before his illness) to be presented in an "endless supply" so that as people take pieces of "Ross" with them the candy pile is continuously refilled. The consuming of the candy implicates the audience in Laycock's wasting illness and death, but its replenishing reminds us that deceased loved ones never fully disappear from our lives.

Questions for Viewing *Painting No. 47, Berlin* and “*Untitled*” (*Portrait of Ross in L.A.*)

Spend a few minutes looking at these two artworks. What do you notice?

González-Torres's artwork includes the word “portrait” in the title, but Hartley's does not. What about each artwork seems to be like a portrait? What does not?

Why do you think the artists chose to portray their subjects without showing what they looked like?

Hartley's painting includes clues that tell us about Karl von Freyburg: his initials, his age at death, an Iron Cross medal he won for bravery, and more. Look closely. Can you find each clue? González-Torres's artwork is composed of 175 pounds of candy—Ross Laycock's weight while he was still healthy. Visitors are invited to take and eat the candy, which the Museum refills. With this information in mind, consider how each artist may have felt about his subject. What do you see in their artworks that supports your ideas?

These portraits were created to memorialize someone the artist cared about. Freyburg was killed during World War I, and Laycock died of AIDS. Does this affect your understanding of the artworks? How might these artworks change if they were portraits of living subjects?

Hartley referred to his *War Motif* series as “portraits of moments” from his time in Berlin, and González-Torres's artwork references the AIDS epidemic. What aspects of the portraits represent the artists' personal memories? What aspects relate to these larger social concerns?

Classroom Activities

Make Your Own Nonfigurative Portrait

Both Hartley and González-Torres created portraits of important people in their lives without showing what those people looked like. Think about things that are key parts of your identity and make a portrait of yourself that doesn't include your visual appearance. Consider combining media and/or incorporating small text elements to strengthen your piece.

Memories in Image and Text

These artists responded visually to two particular historical moments of crisis—World War I and the onset of AIDS in the 1980s—that also sparked moving written responses. Study the work of World War I poets such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon or AIDS-era writers like Tory Dent and Paul Monette. Create your own written and/or visual memorial responding to something powerful in your own life.



Resources

<http://beinecke.library.yale.edu/awia/home.html>

The website for *Intimate Circles: American Women in the Arts*, an exhibition at Yale's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library that includes information about Romaine Brooks, Natalie Barney, and many other women in the arts during the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century.

www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/place_settings/natalie_barney.php

www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/heritage_floor/romaine_brooks.php

Links to information about Natalie Barney and Romaine Brooks on the website of the Brooklyn Museum's Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art. Both of these artists are included in *The Dinner Party* by Judy Chicago.

<http://cassbird.tumblr.com>

Cass Bird's Tumblr page with images and videos of her work.

www.flickr.com/photos/hidden-in-the-open/sets/72157624480472079

Trent Kelley's Flickr set, "Hidden in the Open: A Photographic Essay of Afro American Male Couples," includes an assortment of images from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that shows how African American male relationships (not all openly gay) have been depicted through the years.

Between Artists: Twelve Contemporary American Artists Interview Twelve Contemporary American Artists (Los Angeles: A•R•T• Press, 1996)

A collection of interviews, including one that artist Tim Rollins conducted with Félix González-Torres.

Katz, Jonathan D. and David C. Ward. *HIDE/SEEK: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2010)

The exhibition catalogue, with information about each included piece as well as thematic essays. The accompanying website (www.npg.si.edu/exhibit/hideseek/index.html) provides more information about artworks in the exhibition and includes a multimedia section.

Kornhauser, Elizabeth Mankin, ed. *Marsden Hartley*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002)

A comprehensive catalogue of a retrospective Hartley exhibition, including color reproductions and essays about Hartley's life and work.

This packet was written by Rachel Ropeik, Museum Educator, with assistance from Alexa Fairchild, School Programs Manager, and Tricia Laughlin Bloom, Project Curator.

HIDE/SEEK: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture was originally organized by the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, and has been reorganized by the Brooklyn Museum and the Tacoma Art Museum. The original presentation was co-curated by David C. Ward, National Portrait Gallery, and Jonathan D. Katz, director of the doctoral program in visual studies at the State University of New York in Buffalo. The Brooklyn Museum presentation is coordinated by Tricia Laughlin Bloom, Project Curator.

The Brooklyn presentation is sponsored by



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Cover, pages 2,3,4,9: Cass Bird (American, b. 1974). *I Look Just Like My Daddy*, 2004. Chromogenic photograph, 40 x 30 in. (76.2 x 101.6 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Gift of the Prints and Photographs Council and the Robert A. Levinson Fund, 2005.40.1. © Cass Bird

Pages 2,3,4,8: Romaine Brooks (American, 1874–1970). *Self-Portrait*, 1923. Oil on canvas, 46 1/4 x 26 1/2 in. (117.5 x 68.3 cm). Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., Gift of the artist

Pages 2,5,6,10: Marsden Hartley (American, 1877–1943). *Painting No. 47, Berlin*, 1914–15. Oil on canvas, 39 7/16 x 32 in. (100.1 x 81.3 cm). Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1972. Photograph by Lee Stalsworth

Pages 2,5,6,11: Félix González-Torres (American, 1957–1996). *"Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*, 1991. Candies individually wrapped in multicolored cellophane, endless supply; overall dimensions may vary with installation; ideal weight 175 pounds. The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago; promised gift of Donna and Howard Stone. ©The Félix González-Torres Foundation. Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

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