

aperture On Sight

Lesson 7:

Words and Pictures

Form + Content + Context = Meaning

Materials needed:

Computer
Digital projector
Cameras or smartphones
Printer for student images (or preprinted images from last class or existing images such as magazine pages)
Markers

Reference works by:

Dawoud Bey
Todd Spoth

Students will

- ➔ **Know:** Photographs and text communicate differently but can work hand in hand.
- ➔ **Understand:** Photographs and text can work together to describe someone both internally and externally.
- ➔ **Do:** Write brief personal descriptions to accompany their pictures.

Artist bios and project info

Dawoud Bey (born in Queens, 1953) lives and works in Chicago. Bey is known for photographing the histories of marginalized Black communities, whether working in Harlem, at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, or on the dense, unmarked trails of the historic Underground Railroad. Renowned for striking portraits that reflect individuals and their larger communities, Bey creates photographs that speak to something larger than what is visually represented. Bey's monograph *Class Pictures* (Aperture, 2007) depicts teenagers from wide economic, social, and ethnic spectrums, creating a diverse group portrait of a generation that intentionally challenges stereotypes. Bey spent two to three weeks in each school, making formal portraits of individual students, each made in a classroom for one forty-five-minute period. At the start of the sitting, each student wrote a brief autobiographical statement. Together, the words and images in *Class Pictures* offer unusually respectful and perceptive portraits that establish a unique relationship between photographer, sitter, and audience.

“Making photographs, for me, is always about how one uses the visual poetics of picture-making and then weds that notion to a meaningful intention and subject. So, I want each photograph within a project to compel the viewer's attention. . . . All of [the devices at my disposal] are deployed in the interest of creating an engagement with the subject, whether a person, community, or a history.”

—Dawoud Bey, *PhotoWork: Forty Photographers on Process and Practice* (2019), 18

In *Seeing Science: How Photography Reveals the Universe* (Aperture, 2019), **Marvin Heiferman** combines scientific images dealing with knowledge, culture, and imagination with research, interviews, and commentary to demonstrate photography's role in how we understand the world around us. *The New Women of NASA* (2016), by **Todd Spoth**, is featured in Heiferman's book, in which the image of women astronauts Nicole Aunapu Mann, Jessica Meir, Anne McClain, and Christina Koch pose together on a Multi-Mission Space Exploration Vehicle. Heiferman documents the discussion of visual-culture experts as they analyze the photograph not only based on what they can see but also on how what they can see contributes to the overall context of women's representation and diversity within STEM

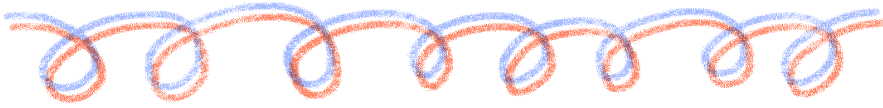
fields. *The New Women of NASA* is a visually powerful image, and when paired with the written conversation discussing its content, it is revealed how the subtle dynamics of a photograph can communicate greater cultural significance.

“I think it is very inspiring, especially to girls, to look at an image like this, which was clearly one of the intentions of this. But it is sad to me that NASA and many of us still feel like we have to make pictures like this because I’d like to think that we’ve gotten past this. But unfortunately, STEM fields—science, technology, engineering, and math—are still too dominated by men and, in particular, white men. So, I think we do still need to do things like this to inspire young women and underrepresented minorities to pursue STEM fields. To me, science and technology are all about hope and finding solutions to our problems, and if we are excluding people then we are missing a lot of people’s talents and ideas.”

—Corey Keller, *Seeing Science: How Photography Reveals the Universe* (2019), 79

Lesson plan

- **Consider reference works by Dawoud Bey:** Read the texts that accompany Dawoud Bey’s photographs. Ask the students to note which details they think are most important or emphasized, then look at the portrait and discuss differences. How do the image and writing communicate different meanings? What kinds of assumptions do we make based on both the textual and the visual portrayal of the students? What is implicit bias? How do photographs communicate differently from text? What does it do to use both forms together?
- **Consider the reference work by Todd Spoth:** Look at the Todd Spoth photograph from *Seeing Science*. Before revealing the title or any context behind the image, ask the students what they see. What do you think is going on in this picture? Who do you think these women are? What do you think their significance is? What kind of assumptions do we make based on the visual portrayal of these women? After they have had the chance to look, reveal the title and the context of the image. Does knowing the context give you a different perspective on who these women are, and how they have contributed to the field? Do you feel as though you brought implicit bias to this image initially? What do you think the reason for that is? If there were more images that documented all the work that women have contributed to the science field, do you think you would have brought the same bias to this image?
- **Photo exercise:** Ask students to select an image they have made that they would like to pair with text. Using markers, they should write on their images and comment on them or add additional context. They may consider: How can the text contradict what the picture is saying? How can it emphasize it? How do the elements work with or against each other? What are the limitations of the text or of the photograph?



Going further

Discuss: Ask students to reflect on the images. What was happening that couldn't be described visually? What context does the viewer need to understand the picture? Invite pairs or groups to add writing—captions, titles, poems, handwritten text on the images, and so forth—that enhances and avoids replicating the visual story told by their photographs.

Do: If students are working on their own smartphones, you might ask students to create a visual diary of, at least, ten photographs between now and the next lesson. Ask them to photograph the world around them: politics, family, love, friends, daily tasks, settings, or anything they think of or see. If the timing of the next class allows, share these photographs at the beginning of class as a warm-up.

Read: “Dawoud Bey on the Photography World, Past and Present,” Chris Boot

Read: “It Could Have Been Her,” from *Dawoud Bey on Photographing People and Communities* (Aperture, 2019), 113 (**Note:** Read and consider before sharing with students.)

ANTOINE

When I was seven years old my father went to jail, and that left me just with a mother, so she had to play both roles as a mother and father. That only made her stronger. That was kind of a challenge for me, because I had to decide whether or not I wanted to go further than my father. That drove me to become successful. That is when I got into comedy, and I would watch *Saturday Night Live*. I started watching a lot of movies, and that made me want to get into theater. That's what I want to do now.



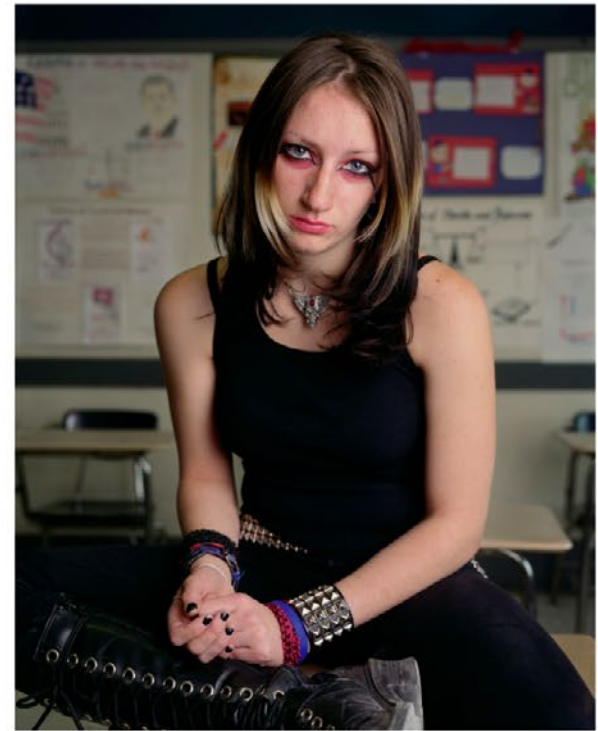
Copyright Dawoud Bey, Courtesy Stephen Daiter Gallery Chicago

SARAH

I may be different, but I take a silent comfort in my difference. My looks do not define who I am. What is normal anyways? And who defines what is normal?

My soul is not dark. I have dealt with pain and misfortunes. I have also had wonderful people and experiences in my life. Everything I go through, the good and the bad, makes me a better person, not just a better person but stronger too. My experiences define who I am.

I'll tell you what I see when I look at myself. I see a young woman owning her individuality, being her own leader, not following the crowd, and I see a young woman who learns from everything around her. Now do I seem so strange?



Copyright Dawoud Bey, Courtesy Stephen Daiter Gallery Chicago



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