



The New Black Vanguard: Photography between Art and Fashion

EXHIBITION RESOURCES

EDUCATOR RESOURCE | Grades 9-12



Micaiah Carter, *Adeline in Barrettes*, 2018

The New Black Vanguard: Photography between Art and Fashion is organized by Aperture, New York and is curated by Antwaun Sargent.

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LEARNING TARGET

Students will learn how young, Black image-makers seize control of their representation to broaden the spectrum of Black experience in photography — complicating a limiting view of Blackness historically shaped by the white gaze. Students will also explore how to use art as a tool for revolution and change, and to challenge society's representation of beauty.

STUDENT OUTCOMES

- students will be able to participate in a range of collaborative discussions on beauty, blackness and gender representation in society and the arts.
- students will be able to evaluate a speaker's point of view by inferring and analyzing a photographer's purpose and objective.
- students will be able to make strategic use of digital media to create magazine covers that challenge beauty representation.
- students will be able to write explanatory texts to convey their purpose, objective, and process behind creating their magazine covers.

COMMON CORE STANDARDS

- SL.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on *grades 9–12 topics, texts, and issues*, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- SL.3 Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, identifying any fallacious reasoning or exaggerated or distorted evidence.
- SL.5 Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.
- W.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Please Note: This exhibition contains a video that included some profanity and partial nudity. That segment of the video is 4 minutes out of a 39-minute video loop. Two photos in the exhibition also contain some nudity.



PRE-VISIT ACTIVITIES | 1-2 CLASS PERIODS

1. Write "vanguard" on the board.
2. Ask students what they think vanguard means. Share out loud. If needed, provide a definition of vanguard. Students copy the definition.
 - a. *a group of people who are leaders in the development of new ideas for an action or movement in society, politics, art, etc.*
3. Invite students to list elements of "culture" and write them on the board. Students may bring up such elements as art, beliefs, customs, food, language, religion, social habits, traditions, and values. Direct students to journal to these questions:
 - a. *How/why do we create culture? Who creates culture?*
 - b. *How/why do we create change (on an individual level, systems level, global level)? Who creates change?*
4. Share responses in small-groups then whole-group (share in chat if virtual).
5. Display the image below (Figure A). Ask students the following questions:
 - a. *What emotions are evoked from this image? What details in the image connect to those emotions?*
 - b. *What might photographer Renell Medrano be attempting to represent here?*
6. Explain to students that we will be visiting an art exhibit at the DIA displaying images similar to the one above.
7. Introduce Antwaun Sargent:
 - a. **Antwaun Sargent** is an American writer, editor and curator, living in New York City. His writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker* and various art publications. Sargent is the author of *The New Black Vanguard: Photography between Art and Fashion* (Aperture) and the editor of *Young, Gifted and Black: A New Generation of Artists* (DAP). He has championed Black art and fashion by young Black photographers, and has built a youth culture around it.
8. Play the video ["A Day in the Life of Antwaun Sargent"](#)



9. Introduce the exhibition *The New Black Vanguard: Photography Between Art and Fashion*; Curated by Antwaun Sargent:
 - a. The New Black Vanguard is a global movement of emerging image makers working in Africa and across the African diaspora who create contemporary portrayals of Black life. Their vibrant portraits and conceptual images fuse the genres of art and fashion photography in ways that break down long-established boundaries. From New York City to Lagos, Nigeria these artists present fresh and diverse perspectives on photography and notions of race, beauty, gender, and power. Their work seeks to challenge the idea that Blackness is homogenous. Bringing together images from lifestyle magazines, ad campaigns, museums, and social media, this exhibition celebrates Black creativity and the cross-pollination between art, fashion, and culture in constructing an image.
10. Explain that the class will be creating magazine covers after their visit, inspired by the exhibit.
11. Suggested homework:
 - a. students read and annotate [an interview between Antwaun Sargent and model.com.](#)
 - b. submit a one-paragraph summary and reflection.

DURING VISIT

1. Explain the Detroit Institute of Arts' "Big Idea," or enduring understanding:
 - a. Young, Black image-makers seize control of their representation to broaden the spectrum of Black experience in photography — complicating a limiting view of Blackness historically shaped by the white gaze.
2. Explain Visitor Outcomes:
 - a. Visitors will...
 - i. See...images that reflect a broad range of Black creativity, experience, and identity.
 - ii. Feel... inspired seeing identities showcased that are historically underrepresented in museums (i.e Black, queer)
 - iii. Do...understand the various boundaries NBV photographers are breaking in photography and fashion.
3. Print copies of Figure B before visit. Allow students to self-explore using the guided handout below.
4. Direct students to stand next to a piece that stands out to them the most. Have students share out why they chose that piece.



5. Ask students what inspiration they can take from today for their projects.
6. Suggested homework:
 - a. students read and annotate an interview between Mickalene Thomas and Quil Lemons (Figure C).
 - b. submit a one-paragraph summary and reflection.

POST-VISIT | 1-2 CLASS PERIODS

1. Post the questions below around the room prior to students arriving to class. Ask students to respond to any of the following questions on a post-it note then stick it under its corresponding question:
 - a. *What is beauty?*
 - b. *Who sets the standard for beauty?*
 - c. *How does SARGENT challenge society's beauty standards?*
 - d. *How do the photographers and models (in the exhibit) challenge society's representation of beauty, blackness, and gender?*
 - e. *How are these artists defining and shaping black representation and gender identity?*
2. Students conduct a gallery walk and read other responses.
3. Class discussion:
 - a. *What is "normal?"*
 - b. *Why does "normal" exist? (lead discussion towards keeping order and following rules; people in power maintain power)*
 - c. *What happens when we don't follow the norm or the rules? (lead discussion towards creating chaos, revolution, culture, and change)*
 - d. *How can we use art to dismantle normal? to create revolution, culture, and change?*
4. Invite students to create groups of 2-4 students with whom they will work on a magazine cover project inspired by the exhibit they saw and the discussions they've had around it.
5. Encourage students to be creative in poses that challenge beauty representation.
6. Create design on [canva.com](https://www.canva.com), a free poster design website.



7. Students write a one-page explanatory commentary that explains the purpose and process behind creating the magazine cover. Explanations can be attached on the second page.
8. Upload magazine covers into digital class platform or shared google drive for all students to view; you can also print them out and hang up in class.

This educational resource was developed by Detroit Public Schools Community District teacher Bayan Founas in collaboration with the Education Programs department at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

Figure A



Renell Medrano, *1984, Harlem, New York*, 2018



Figure B

Photo Title	Photographer/ Stylist/ Model	Describe the image	How does the photographer challenge beauty, blackness, and/or gender here?



Mickalene THOMAS × Quil LEMONS

Antwaun Sargent: In both of your works, one of the things that stands out for me is the notion of family. Both of you incorporate family members as subjects. Can you talk about how that happened and what it means for you?

LEMONS

When I started out, my family complained: “You’re shooting everyone but us. We’re right here! Are we not good enough for you?” I was just trying to figure out what I wanted to say when I photographed them; I needed to reach a point where I felt like I was an adult and could tell them what to do within the frame! Ultimately, I was inspired by Carrie Mae Weems—not wanting to copy her, but wanting to be influenced by that energy and to frame black women in a way that would honor them. My mom had me at fourteen. My family made a group decision: “We got this.” My mom finished school, went on to get her master’s, and continued on in life just fine because of their support. I wanted to show that through my photographs.

THOMAS

That’s what brought me to photography: my discovery of Carrie Mae Weems’s Kitchen Table Series, which evoked a very strong notion of family that was familiar and vulnerable. Those particular images dealt with the familial and gender complexities in black families. She framed the black woman as the matriarch, which was definitely the case in my family. Thinking of her

photos allowed me to think about who I was—I could see myself reflected in the image, I can see my family, and later developed a strong desire of wanting reconnection—through photography. I wanted to be an artist, and I imagined what it would be like to create images that were powerful enough to inspire others.

SARGENT

Another one of the things that connects your work is the clothes and dressing up. I think about your early work, Mickalene, with your various characters. And Quil, in your Purple series, you dressed up your family in Batsheva Hay dresses. Why those dresses?

LEMONS

That started with an Instagram DM. I just DM’d Batsheva Hay, and we realized that we live ten blocks from each other. She gave me ten dresses to work with. My great-grandmother is from Virginia. She moved up north when she was eighteen, but I remember seeing photos of her when she was younger in a similar kind of dress. The series was an homage to her because she’s been the matriarch in my family; she literally held it down for all of us. During those shoots, my family members were just getting

more comfortable with me and my sexuality. My grandma let me do her makeup, no questions asked. She trusted me to do her blush, her full makeup. They let me dictate the femininity, which was amazing. I also remember that when I was shooting them, they were all complaining, “You know we don’t got time for this.” I had to tell them, “Oh, you don’t have the time to see how beautiful you are?” They definitely felt outside of their comfort zones, in the moment, but then once they saw [the photographs], they were like, “Whoa. That’s us. And we’re now going to be seen across the world!”

THOMAS

Providing that type of agency for people of color—and very specifically, to contextualize it, women of color—just to see themselves, that’s so important. So often, we’re equating our beauty to the “beauty norm” and trying to conform to its convictions. We understand that dynamic of beauty within our families, through the matriarchs, like me, and my great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother. You understand, but then you don’t really believe it sometimes. That is what I love about image making. I believe that the camera is one of the

most powerful tools that provides visibility and power, because it allows that accessibility to anyone, anywhere in world. I often reference the philosophies of Lacan in regard to the mirror image—it comes with some points of debate—but what interests me are his thoughts on the “notions of validation, the eyes of recognition until others see you.” I think we need to desire this. Hearing you talk about your family members saying, “Girl, I’m in *Vogue*,” reminds me of my mom. I remember my mother’s expression when she first saw an image of herself in a *New York Times* profile on me. She went straight to the store, collecting stacks of the *New York Times*. It’s that feeling of being accepted, of feeling worth, especially when we worked hard for it. I’ve learned, working with my mother, that I was also this vehicle for her, a voice.

LEMONS

I feel that. The Purple series was a really interesting moment, because my family was not really accepting of my queer identity at first. It was a moment for me and my mom to come to an understanding and for her to finally let me be myself. And for me to give back.

THOMAS

I think our society still has an issue with images of the black body. People still don’t want to accept the black woman’s prowess, you know. Especially, a black lesbian’s prowess. I like to think about the idea of disruption—of disrupting the norm, disrupting what’s acceptable, disrupting ideals, and creating new ways of how we’re seen, seeing our own images, and allowing for these platforms and discourses

that may be uncomfortable. Deconstructing the norm and making people think about their normative convictions.

SARGENT

We’re in this really interesting place, particularly as it relates to the black image and the magazine. Quil, your generation is all about magazine culture and particularly the language of fashion magazines. *Fashion* used to be a dirty word; there used to be huge barriers between art photography and fashion photography. Can you talk about how you think about your photographs in relationship to the magazines to which you’re contributing?

THOMAS

For me, being in magazines evolved organically, which I’m happy about. I’ve never had any discomfort or pushback, thinking about whether I should do magazines or not. But I didn’t actually know how to navigate that space. I didn’t have the real mentorship to know how you go about and do it. It was always something I was interested in, but my practice never led me into that direction until recently. Once I became comfortable and open to the idea of oscillating between different camera methods, between digital and analog, and not feeling so boxed in to a single way of working—I realized great opportunities came my way. Bethann Hardison, the American model and activist, reached out to me to photograph Iman, and they needed it immediately. I only shot with film and the turnaround time was too short, so I missed an incredible opportunity because the deadline seemed impossible for the way I work. I realized then that I really needed to look at how I make my images and

how to make them more accessible. If I’m talking about visibility, acceptability, and thinking about race, gender, and sexuality as an intersection of race, gender, and sexuality in the world, then I need to be able to create it so different groups of people and different demographics can engage with it. If I’m not doing that, then I’m not practicing what I’m preaching.

SARGENT

How do each of you negotiate keeping your voice in those spaces of commissioned work, work for magazines?

LEMONS

I feel like, as an artist, no matter where you go, your work is going to be your work. I’m going to give my essence to holding this camera. Things that I find interesting about a face, you might not.

THOMAS

Exactly. It’s your aesthetic. It’s your language. It’s your voice. Publications are going to gravitate toward particular photographers because they’re interested in those aesthetics. That’s why it’s exciting to accept these editorial jobs—because they’re saying they want what you have. That’s one of the first things I have a conversation about: “Do you want me to be your photographer for hire, or are you hiring me because you want me as a very specific photographer?”

LEMONS

Magazines were my introduction to the art world. I remember picking up *CR Fashion Book* when I was in high school and seeing Conchita Wurst on the cover. I thought, I’ve never seen a person who looks like this!

I wanted to make images like that. I felt like it was something accessible. I respect those institutions so much for what they do. They are commercial but also the product of an art.

THOMAS

It’s about the attitude—the visceral color of it. For me, I’m thinking back to *Ebony* and *Jet* magazine, especially *Jet*’s “Beauty of the Week,” which were all shot by novice photographers. They were everyday women, college girls, wanting to be chosen as the beauties of the week, right? I just love the everyday disposable camera’s rawness in the photography. How do you emulate that? How do you

capture that quality and portraiture? I think people want authenticity right now.

SARGENT

Exactly. The fashion image has traveled so much from when I was growing up. The models that you’re picking that are not traditionally European—both of you are shooting your friends, and you’re shooting them your own way. What’s been so interesting is the blurring of those lines. You can now go to a museum or you can pick up an issue of a magazine and get into a similar discussion about image politics. And magazines are finding ways to bring that work and conversation to wider audiences.

LEMONS

For my generation, we also have the mentality that we don’t want to wait for someone to make us valid or wait for a museum to recognize us. I think we got tired of the gatekeepers. We have built followings online and on social media—people who will follow our work into wherever we go. We have a space to build community. Magazines have to catch up, if they want to stay around, and embrace this wave. They need to embrace us as the people with something to say!

This interview has been edited and condensed from a conversation that took place on April 23, 2019, at Aperture Foundation, New York.

Mickalene Thomas is a 2015 United States Artists Francie Bishop Good & David Horvitz Fellow and a visual artist, filmmaker, and curator. Her solo exhibitions include *Mickalene Thomas: Femmes Noires* at Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto (2018–19); *Mickalene Thomas: Do I Look Like a Lady?* at MOCA Grand, Los Angeles (2016–17); and *Muse: Mickalene Thomas Photographs*, originated by Aperture Foundation, New York (2016), which featured an accompanying exhibition, *tête-à-tête*, curated by the artist. She serves on the boards of the Brooklyn Museum, Children’s Museum of the Arts, Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts, MoMA PS1, and *BOMB Magazine*.