Using Art to Explore Injustice and Social Justice

LESSON PLAN OVERVIEW

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to reflect on pieces of art that critique injustice, understand past and current day white supremacist groups and explore other ways art can be used to inspire and communicate social justice.

In July 2018, a painting called *The City I*, was placed on display at the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, Texas. *The City I*, by Vincent Valdez, is a four-part canvas that portrays a group in Ku Klux Klan robes and hoods on a hill overlooking a metropolis at night. The black-and-white palette recalls the look of historical photographs and old movies, but details such as an iPhone, a can of Budweiser beer, and a new Chevrolet truck situate the work firmly in present day.

Beginning in the fall of 2015, two years before Charlottesville happened, Valdez worked for nearly a year to complete his City series. The scenes they depict are invented, but as the Texas artist points out, this underscores their continued relevance: “This could be any city in America. These individuals could be any Americans. There is a false sense that these threats were, or are, contained at the peripheries of society and in small rural communities…. It is possible that they are city politicians, police chiefs, parents, neighbors, community leaders, academics, church members, business owners, etc. This is the most frightening aspect of it all.”

Throughout history, here and in other parts of the world, art has served as a reflection of society and the times in which we are living. Artists use their unique and compelling vantage point to make powerful statements on the social justice issues of the day. This important artwork provides an opening to talk with students about how art can reflect and critique the injustice in the world and can also illustrate how we wish the world to be by promoting social justice. Art, in its various forms, can indeed be an act of social justice in and of itself.

COMMON CORE STANDARDS: Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, Language
NOTE TO TEACHER

Because the artwork and subject matter in this lesson focuses on white supremacy—which targets people who are African American, Jewish, Muslim and Latino and other marginalized groups, it is important to be mindful that discussing the topic could be upsetting for some or many of your students. Some students may feel comfortable or interested in discussing these issues in class and others may feel nervous, uncomfortable or angry talking about this topic. Prior to teaching the lesson, assess the maturity of your students in being able to handle this challenging content, review your classroom guidelines for establishing a safe learning environment and provide opportunities for students to share their feelings as the lesson proceeds.

- Establishing a safe learning environment means fostering and encouraging your students to:
  - Respect others.
  - Speak from their own personal experiences and not judge the thoughts or experiences of others.
  - Ask questions.
  - Respect confidentiality; remember that everything said in the room stays in the room and that identifying information about others should not be disclosed.
  - Share “air time” and do not monopolize the group’s time.
  - Share to their own level of comfort.

See other resources below that include strategies for making your classroom safe and inclusive for all.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will reflect on the purpose of art in society and how art can be used to convey a message.
- Students will explore their thoughts and feelings about a recent work of art focused on the KKK and white supremacy and learn the historical context for creating that image.
- Students will consider other ways in which art can be used to explore injustice and ways to work towards justice.

MATERIALS & PREPARATION

- Jacob Lawrence paintings (to be projected; choose one of the paintings, see Part 1, #4–5)
- Background Information on White Supremacy (for teacher only)
- The City I (to be projected)
- Vincent Valdez: The City (one copy for each student, optional)
- Artwork Descriptions (for teacher only)
- Other Artwork (select 4–5 to be projected or print in advance, see Part 2, #1)
- “At The Education Department, Student Artworks Explore Tolerance and Racism” article (one copy for each student)
- Board/Smart board (for projecting); large chart paper, makers, tape; paper, index cards or Post-it Notes, pens/pencils; highlighters (optional)
- (Optional) Internet access, speakers; Jacob Lawrence on Panel 58 of The Migration Series video (1½ mins.), See Part 1, #8

KEY WORDS

alt-right endanger microcosm resistance
androgynous exhibition portrait tolerance
antidote extremists occulted trolling
anti-Semitism ideology queer white supremacy
aperture internalized revere
dismantle legitimization racism
empathy marginalized representation

Web Related Connections

Lessons
Confederate Monuments and their Removal
Noose Incidents and their Historical Content
The Alt Right and White Supremacy
We Were Strangers Too: Learning about Refugees through Art
When Perception and Reality Collide: Implicit Bias and Race

Other Resources
Education Glossary Terms
Helping Students Make Sense of News Stories About Bias and Injustice
How Should I Talk about Race in My Mostly White Classroom?
Race Talk: Engaging Young People in Conversations about Race and Racism
Safe and Inclusive Schools for All
Part 1 (45 Minutes)

Let’s Talk about Art

1. Begin the lesson by asking students: *Why do people create art? Why do you create art? What is the purpose of art?* Record some of their responses to the last question on the board/smart board and add/explain that people create art for a variety of reasons: to express their feelings or something else about themselves; to explore something about themselves, others and the world/society; to convey something they think is important; to teach and/or convince; to tell a story; to try to influence people and change the world.

2. Have students brainstorm a list of different forms of art which can include the following: visual arts (animation, architecture, ceramics, drawing, graffiti, painting, photography, sculpting, tapestry, textile); performing arts (dance, film, music, performance art, spoken word, theater, video) and literature (drama, poetry and prose).

3. Explain to students that during this lesson, we will explore art that conveys something about injustice and social justice. Elicit a definition of injustice as follows:

   **Injustice:** A situation in which the rights of a person or a group of people are ignored or disrespected.

4. Project on the board/smart board one of the Jacob Lawrence paintings.

5. Have students take a minute to look at the artwork; if you plan to show both, reveal one at a time and follow this procedure for each: Distribute one index card or post-it note to each student and ask them to write a one-word response to the painting. Explain their one-word response can be a description, emotion, gut feeling, reaction or something else. Give them a minute or less to do so and then collect the cards/post-its and place all of them on the board, wall or floor.

6. Pick a word from the collection and say to students, “Tell me more about this word” and allow anyone to respond: it doesn’t have to be the person who wrote it. Engage students in this process a few times, selecting different words and inviting students to say more about each one. After this process is complete, set the collection of words aside for later use in Part 2 of this lesson plan.

7. Engage students in a whole class discussion about the image by asking some or all of the following questions:
   - What’s going on in this image?
   - What might the artist be communicating? And how?
   - Who do you think that the artist is speaking to? Why?
   - How does the artist express empathy?
   - How do you feel when looking at this artwork?

   **NOTE:** If you feel that students need more information about the artwork, provide them with a brief description using some all of the Artwork Descriptions. If you displayed Panel 58 of The Migration Series, instead of providing a description of the artwork consider playing Lawrence’s 1½-minute video explaining it.

8. Explain that throughout the lesson, they will look at and discuss more pieces of art like this.

Information Sharing

9. Explain that we will see a painting called *The City I*, which was created by Vincent Valdez and is about the Ku Klux Klan.

10. Ask students: *What do you know about the Ku Klux Klan? What do you know about white supremacy? What do you know about what happened in Charlottesville in August 2017?* Provide for students background information on white supremacy.
NOTE: You can present this background information in one of the suggested ways below depending on how much time you have.

a. Have students read the text silently and underline sentences that stand out, circle the big ideas and then turn and talk with a person sitting next to them about what they read.

b. As a class, read it aloud together and provide time for students to share what they know, what more they want to know and what additional questions they have. These can be saved for later research as time permits.

c. Create five different documents, each one containing one of the bullet points (you can print out and cut the section for each). Divide students into five groups, distribute one document to each group and have them read and discuss it. If time permits, they can do additional research to learn more about the topic in their section and then each group can present to their section to the rest of the class.

Art Review

11. Explain that we will now look at Vincent Valdez’s *The City I* and other art that attempts to convey something about injustice in order to foster social justice. Ask: *What is injustice?* Elicit a definition of injustice as follows:

   **Injustice:** A situation in which the rights of a person or a group of people are ignored or disrespected.

12. Ask: *What are some examples of injustice that you see in your school, community, state or society?* Explain that throughout history, artists have used works of art to explore and convey their thoughts and feelings about bias, and injustice and social justice and in order to change hearts and minds.

13. Before revealing the painting, read this aloud:

   Vincent Valdez’s *The City I* is a monumental, multi-panel painting that depicts a group of men, women, and children in Ku Klux Klan garb (clothing) on a hill overlooking a glowing metropolis at night. The black-and-white palette gives the painting a cinematic feeling, and suggests that it was based on a historical photograph, but details such as a cell phone, beer cans and a Chevy truck place the scene clearly in the present day.

14. After reading the paragraph, have students turn and talk with someone sitting next to them; each should share, based on that description, what they think they will see.

15. Show *The City I*. As you did with Jacob Lawrence’s artwork in the opening activity, have students take a minute to look at the artwork (the full panel and each individual panel). Then distribute index cards or post-it notes (one to each student) and ask them to write a one-word response to the painting, which can be a description, emotion, gut feeling, reaction or something else. Give them a minute or less to do so and then collect the cards/post-its and place all of them on the board, wall or floor.

16. Pull out a few words and say, “Tell me about this word.” Have a brief discussion using some of the words as an opportunity to learn more about how students responded to the art. Then engage them in a class discussion by asking the following questions:

   - What’s going on in this picture?
   - What thoughts, feelings or words come to mind when you look at this picture?
   - What might be the message of the picture? What is the artist trying to say?
   - If you could ask the artist a question, what would you ask?

17. After students have had ample time to express their reflections, share some or all of the following information from the handout *Vincent Valdez: The City*. You can summarize what is included in the summary in your own words, read it aloud or distribute to each student and have them read it silently.

18. Engage students in a brief discussion by asking the following questions:

   - Does anything surprise you about what you heard/read?
   - What do you think now that you know more about the artist and the painting?
   - Does knowing this make you look at the painting in a different way? How so?
Part 2 (45 Minutes)

Artwork Gallery Walk

1. Prior to this portion of the lesson, post the selected 4–5 images printed from the Other Artwork around the room in such a way that they cannot be viewed. You can either pull the bottom of each image up taping it above the top of the paper or you can post the images backward. Next to each image, place a sheet of large chart paper and markers for students to write down their responses to the art, as described below.

   **NOTE:** If the gallery walk won’t work in your classroom, you can project the prints, one-at-a-time, on the board/smart board and give students time to jot down their responses on paper.

2. Post the following questions on the board/smart board and read them aloud.
   - What’s going on in this picture?
   - What thoughts, feelings or words come to mind when you look at this picture?
   - What is the message of the picture? What is the artist trying to say?
   - If you could ask the artist a question, what would you ask?

3. After reading the questions, reveal all of the pictures. Instruct students to move around the room and either (1) write a one-word response to the image, (2) write their responses to any of the posted questions or (3) do both.

4. After viewing and responding to all of the images, have students choose one that is particularly meaningful to them and ask students to stand next to their selected image. When everyone is situated, give students a few minutes to discuss the image with others standing in the same place and explain why it is meaningful to them.

   **NOTE:** If you projected the images instead of the gallery walk, designate different spots in the room for students to discuss the images they select.

5. Reconvene the class and engage them in a discussion using the following questions:
   - What images are most meaningful to you and why?
   - Did you have the same interpretation or connection to the image as the people who choose the same image?
   - Was there anything surprising about your discussion?
   - What did you learn by doing this?
   - What is conveyed in the art?

   Use these Artwork Descriptions as you see fit, but after students have shared their interpretations of the artwork so as not to influence their thinking.

Reading Activity

6. Distribute a copy of the article, “At the Education Department, Student Artworks Explore Tolerance and Racism” to each student. Give students 10–15 minutes to read the article silently; have them circle unfamiliar words and underline/highlight sentences that stand out and that they want to remember.

7. Engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions:
   - What do you think about the works of art you read about in the article?
   - What different types of art were used by the artists?
- Why do you think each of the artists created the art they did? What were their motivations?
- How did creating the art impact each of the artists?
- What do you think Ameya Okamoto means when she says, “We can talk to people through color, and stories and visuals, instead of having them sit down and have a really hard conversation.”
- What is the power of art expression coming from young voices and those who are typically marginalized?
- Which piece of art most impacted you and why?

Closing

8. Place the collection of the one-word response cards created in Part 1 and Part II together on the board, wall or floor. Have students look at the words and choose one word they connect with—a word they did not originally write.

9. Distribute a sheet of paper to each student and have them use their selected word to construct a sentence that incorporates the word anywhere in the sentence (beginning, middle or end) and write it down; give them 3–5 minutes for this task.

10. Divide students into small groups of 4–5 students each. Together, have them create a verse of poetry that includes all of the sentences that their group has written. They should keep their individual sentences as is, but together decide on the order of the sentences to construct their verse.

11. Reconvene the class but keep the small groups seated together. Taking turns, invite each small group to present their verse out loud. Remind everyone to listen carefully to hear how the verses together make a poem. These can later be combined on paper and distributed as a class poem about art and social justice.

ADDITIONAL READING AND RESOURCES

- 15 public art projects that boldly advocate for social justice (Mashable, September 24, 2016)
- An All-American Family Portrait, in White (The New York Times, March 5, 2016)
- Art and Social Justice (PBS Learning Media)
- Exhibition Guide and Essay (Blanton Museum of Art)
- The City, Vincent Valdez Painting (video)
- Vincent Valdez: The City (Blanton Museum of Art)
- Voices on Art-Blanton Museum of Art-Perspectives: Maria Hinojosa and Vincent Valdez (Art This Week Productions, July 21, 2018)

Thanks to the Blanton Museum of Art and the ADL Austin Regional Office for their contributions to this lesson.
# Common Core Standards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTENT AREA/STANDARD</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reading</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>R.1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.</td>
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<td>R.2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.</td>
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<tr>
<td>R.7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Writing</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>W.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.</td>
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<td>W.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.</td>
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<td>W.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.</td>
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<td>W.6: Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.</td>
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<td>W.7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Speaking and Listening</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>SL.1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.</td>
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<tr>
<td>SL.2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.</td>
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<td>SL.5: Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.</td>
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<td><strong>Language</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>L.3: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.</td>
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<td>L.4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.</td>
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<td>L.5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.</td>
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<tr>
<td>L.6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.</td>
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Use these additional activity ideas to extend the learning from the lesson.

**Turn and Talk**

Give students 3–5 minutes to reflect upon a time that they experienced bias, discrimination or injustice (e.g., exclusion, racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, etc.). They can jot down notes if that helps. Provide these question prompts which may help their reflections:

- Have you ever experienced (or witnessed) bias, discrimination or injustice and, what happened?
- What feelings emerged?
- Did you do something or did someone else do something to stand up for you?
- Have you ever acted as an ally or activist when someone was treated this way?
- What did you do and how did you feel?

Have students then turn and talk with a partner by responding to some or all the reflection questions above, taking turns (2–4 minutes each). After pairs have shared, reconvene the class and engage them in a discussion, eliciting from volunteers what they discussed in their pairs. If time permits, have students turn their thoughts/feelings about this experience into a short essay, poem or another art expression.

**Create Your Own Art**

Have students create their own piece of artwork that expresses something about bias, discrimination, injustice or social justice. Prior to creating their piece of art, you could have them read about the issue or do some free writing to express their thoughts and feelings. They can use the artwork in this lesson as inspiration or a jumping off point or create something completely new and different. Have them think broadly about what kind of artwork they want to create, whether it's a piece of visual art (drawing, photography, painting, collage, sculpture, graphic art) or performing art (music, song, dance, theater, spoken word, performance art). After students have completed their artwork, organize an art opening where parents and community members are invited to participate. Another idea is to take photos of the artwork and create gallery of their work that is displayed online or in a local community venue, such as the public library or town hall.

**Research**

Give students an opportunity to learn more about the history of current issues elicited by the images shown in this lesson (KKK, history of white supremacy, lynching or another topic that about injustice and social justice). They can conduct research, listen to interviews, watch documentaries and relevant films and explore first-person testimony. They can use some of the resources in the “Additional Reading and Resources” section below and decide on an area of study for which they will investigate further. The culmination of their research can result in a research paper, PowerPoint presentation, timeline of an historical issue or a persuasive or argumentative essay that espouses their point of view.
Video PSA

Have students create a video public service announcement (PSA) about some aspect of social justice they care about. First, have them watch other sample PSAs to understand the important elements of a PSA and what is most effective. Ask what they notice, what works and doesn’t work. Point out the important aspects to consider when developing their PSA including: timing; focus on one issue; inclusion of key/relevant facts; provide a “call to action,” and optional components such as people, music, voiceover, special effects. Provide students with the parameters and class time to work on the details and have them work individually or in pairs to bring the project to completion over the course of a few class sessions or weeks. Then have students present the PSAs in class and consider sharing online.

Poetry

Engage the students in writing a poem in response to one of the pieces of artwork that they viewed, or about their own experience of injustice or social justice efforts. Different poetry forms can be used such as acrostic, free verse, haiku, narrative or sestina. When all the poems are completed, have students share their poems by reading them aloud, making a video recording of all the poems together, creating a book of poetry (online or print) or having a poetry slam where members of the school community are invited to look at the artworks and listen to the poems.

Social Media

Have students join the conversation on social media about social justice issues they care about (#MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, #TakeAKnee, #Activism #HumanRights or engage in a conversation about Vincent Valdez’s by using #VincentValdez or #BlantonMuseum). Or have students develop a social media campaign about an issue they care about. This can include the use of photographs, video, writings, posts/blog posts, articles and interviews. Students should develop an action plan that takes place over a defined period of time (several days, weeks or months) that has an overall goal and also includes benchmark goals along the way. They can include one social media platform or a variety of platforms but students should be thoughtful about using the platform that makes the most sense given their content and goals.

Activism

Engage students in a discussion about what they can do about the social justice issues that were discussed during this lesson and the different kinds of advocacy and activism in which they can participate or initiate. First, have students reflect on The City I painting and ask, “How does art bring attention to the issue of white supremacy/racism and make a difference?”

As a class, brainstorm different ways they can get involved using some of the ideas from 10 Ways Youth Can Engage in Activism to construct some initial ideas. Have students come up with 4–5 possible actions they can take to do something about the issue. When you have a few ideas that everyone feels good about, divide the students into groups and have each group take on one of the ideas. Alternatively, you can choose one idea as a class and have students work in small groups on different aspects of the idea. Consider ways to involve the rest of the school and community in these efforts.
Potent Quotes

Have students find famous quotes about social justice or some aspect of bias and discrimination such as:

"Where you see wrong or inequality or injustice, speak out, because this is your country."
—Thurgood Marshall

Ideally, students should identify 8–10 quotes with which they connect. Working individually or in pairs, have students select one quote and explore the meaning of the quote in one of the following ways: write an essay or poem; create an image (using photography, collage or drawing) to illustrate the quote; make a video of them reading the quote in dramatic voice and then share what it means to them; write a letter to the quote’s author, explaining why it resonates. You can look here for quotes.
Jacob Lawrence Painting

Jacob Lawrence, 1940-1941, [www.moma.org](http://www.moma.org)
Jacob Lawrence Painting

Jacob Lawrence, 1935, [www.blantonmuseum.org](http://www.blantonmuseum.org)
Background Information on White Supremacy

On August 11 and 12, 2017 ‘Unite the Right’ convened one of the largest and most violent gatherings in decades in the U.S. that brought together white supremacist groups including the alt-right, neo-Nazis and the Ku Klux Klan. The gathering’s stated goal was to save the statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville, Virginia, but many of these extremists viewed it as an opportunity for a show of strength. Hundreds gathered on Friday evening and Saturday to broadcast their viewpoints and ideologies, including chanting, “blood and soil” and “you will not replace us.” They carried torches, homemade shields, weapons and Confederate and Nazi flags. Many brandished Nazi salutes. After continued clashes, a car plowed into a crowd of peaceful counter-protesters, killing one person and injuring nineteen. Two troopers also died when a helicopter crashed while monitoring the chaos. Virginia’s governor declared a state of emergency.

There are a variety of groups under the umbrella of white supremacy including: the alt-right, the Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazis, racist skinheads, “traditional” white supremacists, Christian Identity adherents and white supremacist prison gangs. There are also many individuals who are not affiliated with an organized white supremacist group but are still considered to be white supremacists.

Neo-Nazis are one of the main segments of the white supremacist movement in the U.S. and many other countries. They revere Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany and sometimes try to adopt some Nazi principles to their own times and geographic locations, though many neo-Nazis primarily adopt the trappings, symbols and mythology of the Third Reich.

The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) was founded in 1866 and was present in almost every state in the southern U.S. by 1870. It became a vehicle for white southern resistance to the Reconstruction-era policies aimed at establishing political and economic equality for African Americans. Though Congress passed legislation designed to curb Klan terrorism, the organization saw its primary goal as the reestablishment of white supremacy, fulfilled through Democratic victories in state legislatures across the South in the 1870s. After a period of decline, the Klan was revived in the early 20th century, burning crosses and staging rallies, parades and marches denouncing immigrants, Catholics, Jews, African Americans and organized labor. The civil rights movement of the 1960s also saw a surge of Ku Klux Klan activity, including bombings of African-American schools and churches and violence against black and white activists in the South.

The alt right (short for “alternative right”) is a segment of the white supremacist movement consisting of a loose network of racists and anti-Semites who reject mainstream conservatism in favor of politics that embrace implicit or explicit racism, anti-Semitism and white supremacy. Many seek to re-inject such bigoted ideas into the mainstream conservative movement in the U.S. The alt right also includes many racist users of image boards and message forums who enjoy harassing or “trolling” people who disagree with their views.
The City I

Vincent Valdez, The City I, 2015-2016
The City I: Canvas 1

Vincent Valdez, *The City I* (detail), 2015-2016
The City I: Canvas 2

Vincent Valdez, The City I (detail), 2015-2016
The City I: Canvas 3

Vincent Valdez, *The City I* (detail), 2015-2016
The City I: Canvas 4

Vincent Valdez, *The City I* (detail), 2015-2016
Vincent Valdez: The City

Vincent Valdez’s The City I (2015–16) is a four-part canvas that portrays a group in Ku Klux Klan robes and hoods on a bluff overlooking a metropolis at night. The black-and-white palette recalls the look of historical photographs and old movies, but details such as an iPhone, a can of Budweiser beer, and a new Chevrolet truck situate the work firmly in the present day. In spite of the work’s unsettling subject matter, the group engages in seemingly familiar activities: a parent holds a child, a woman clutches a clipboard like a teacher keeping track of her students, and a man checks his phone. We have interrupted their gathering. The group looks warily at us as we look at them; no one appears to be welcome here.

Beginning in the fall of 2015, Valdez worked for nearly a year to complete his City paintings. The scenes they depict are invented, but as the Texas artist points out, this underscores their continued relevance and ubiquity: “This could be any city in America. These individuals could be any Americans. There is a false sense that these threats were, or are, contained at the peripheries of society and in small rural communities…. It is possible that they are city politicians, police chiefs, parents, neighbors, community leaders, academics, church members, business owners, etc. This is the most frightening aspect of it all.”

The KKK has a long history of violent acts and intimidation targeting African Americans as well as Mexican Americans, immigrants, gays and lesbians, Jews, and Catholics. Valdez made his City paintings in response not only to the Klan, however, but also to the structural racism embedded in American cities and their design.

The City I and The City II can also be understood as contemporary history paintings. Instead of responding to or commemorating a specific event, Valdez examines American history through a wider lens, looking at the ways that the past continues to inform the present. In doing so, he enters into dialogue—direct and indirect—with centuries of artists, writers, and musicians who have dealt with questions of identity, fear of the “other,” and the threat of violence. The inscription found in the lower-right corner, “For GSH and PG,” reveals two sources that helped inspire the work: Gil Scott-Heron’s powerful 1980 song, “The Klan,” and Philip Guston’s City Limits, a 1969 painting of cartoonish Klansmen that captivated Valdez when he saw it in an exhibition at the Blanton in 2015. “I am interested in the idea of this subject spanning three artists of diverse backgrounds and different generations,” Valdez explains. “How many more generations of American artists will need to tackle the subject of the Klan?”

A separate, single canvas, The City II (2016), depicts a pile of mattresses amidst discarded trash next to a smoking steel drum. According to the artist, this painting is a symbolic representation of The City I. Reminiscent of Spanish painter Francisco Goya’s early nineteenth-century depictions of mounds of corpses, it metaphorically suggests that the city—and by extension, American society at large—continues to be in limbo.

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Artwork Descriptions

Note to Teacher: Use these descriptions as you see fit, but after students have shared their interpretations of the artwork so as not to influence their thinking.

Jacob Lawrence
*The Migration Series. 1940–1941. Panel 58: “In the North the Negro had better educational facilities”*

Casein tempera on hardboard
12 in. x 18 in.

This is one of the sixty-panel *Migration Series*. A master storyteller and chronicler of history, Jacob Lawrence was one of the leading figurative painters of the twentieth century. A preeminent African-American artist of his generation, Lawrence took as his subject the exodus of African Americans from the rural South to Northern cities during and after World War I, when industry’s demand for workers attracted them in vast numbers. As the son of migrants, Lawrence had a personal connection to the topic. This panel represents educational opportunity, which the migrants did not have in the Southern communities and sometimes in the Northern communities. It represents the importance of education and how it furthers the quality of life. Lawrence used the “two,” “three,” “four” moving up as a metaphor for progress.

Jacob Lawrence
*The Eviction, 1935*

28 in. x 38 3/8 in.
Collage, gouache on cardboard
© 2012 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation, Seattle/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

A childhood spent largely in Harlem during the years of the Great Depression provided Lawrence with subject matter that he returned to throughout his long career. Inspired by the vibrant artistic and intellectual energy that had fueled the Harlem Renaissance, Lawrence studied visual art at an early age, creating *The Eviction* when he was just seventeen years old. It shows a typical Harlem occurrence—a black family thrown out of their home by a white landlord—a scene that, in a larger sense, reflects the overcrowding, poverty, and frequent displacements that the Great Depression caused throughout America’s urban communities. But few painters were tracing the specific narratives of African American experience, and Lawrence vowed at a young age to remedy that situation. Even in such an early work, he forcefully communicated the immediacy of his story, simplified to its essentials, with clear and unwavering vision.
Vincent Valdez

74 in. x 360 in.
Oil on canvas

Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, Purchased through the generosity of Guillermo C. Nicolas and James C. Foster in honor of Jeanne and Michael Klein, with additional support from Jeanne and Michael Klein and Ellen Susman in honor of Jeanne and Michael Klein, 2017.

© Vincent Valdez

“How many more generations of American artists will need to tackle the subject of the Klan?”

The KKK has a long history of violent acts and intimidation targeting African Americans as well as Mexican Americans, immigrants, gays and lesbians, Jews and Catholics. Vincent Valdez’s *City* paintings can be understood as contemporary history paintings. Instead of responding to or commemorating a specific event, Valdez examines American history through a wider lens, looking at the ways that the past continues to inform the present. *The City I* is a four-part canvas that portrays a group in Ku Klux Klan robes and hoods on a bluff overlooking a metropolis at night. The black-and-white palette recalls the look of historical photographs and old movies, but details such as an iPhone, a can of Budweiser beer, and a new Chevrolet truck situate the work firmly in the present day. In spite of the work’s unsettling subject matter, the group engages in seemingly familiar activities: a parent holds a child, a woman clutches a clipboard like a teacher keeping track of her students and a man checks his phone. We have interrupted their gathering. The group looks warily at us as we look at them; no one appears to be welcome here.

Byron Kim
*Synecdoche*, 1998

10 in. x 8 in. each
Oil and wax on twenty panels


*How does it feel to be reduced to one aspect of your identity?*

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.
Why might we feel that we need to be ready to do battle at any time?

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. 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.”

How do stereotypes limit the possibilities for some people in our society?

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 thelynchings 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 marginalized people face in the U.S. 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.”
What does independence mean to you?

In the mid-1970s, Jacob Lawrence, an established artist in his 50s, began making screen prints of subjects he had explored in painting throughout his career. His work depicts the African-American experience, as is apparent in this screen print of migrant workers casting their votes in an election from the 1920s. Much of his work demonstrates his commitment to African Americans achieving racial equality, and he is best known for series on figures such as Frederick Douglas and Harriet Tubman. In 1940-41, Lawrence executed a series of 60 paintings entitled “The Migration of the Negro,” from which this print is thematically derived. After the first world war, millions of Blacks left the south and moved to northern cities, where they experienced the freedom to vote for the first time. This screen print is a complex layering of multiple colors and comes from the portfolio, the Kent Bicentennial Portfolio, commissioned by Lorillard, a division of Loews Theaters, Inc. Made in recognition of the American Bicentennial, artists contributing to the portfolio were asked to respond to the question, "What does independence mean to you?"

Think of a time that really tested your strength and courage.

Border Crossing is an over-life size 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. Border Crossing was conceived as a tribute to the artist’s grandfather, who, with his grandmother and father, illegally crossed the border between Mexico and Texas in 1924. 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.
Whom do we notice and acknowledge in our daily lives? What kind of work is valued?

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.”

What does it mean to be an ally?

Fletcher Martin painted this smoky social realist boxing scene to symbolize the condition in which African Americans lived during the Depression. Martin spent his early career in California with Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros, whose influence is traceable here both in palette and in the artist’s empathy for oppressed African Americans. Martin produced Down for the Count after participating in the American Artists’ Congress in February 1936, during which many artists drew parallels between European fascism and racism in America. Martin’s works often feature men in conflict or experiencing trauma, even those that date to before his time as an artist-correspondent for LIFE magazine during World War II. Here Martin used linear perspective not only to create dramatic depth, but also to clearly demonstrate that these men are not on a level playing field.
Other Artwork

Byron Kim, 1998
Empathy, tolerance and acceptance: More and more, educators are focusing on the importance of schools' paying attention to stuff other than academics.

And for the past two months, an exhibit at the U.S. Department of Education's headquarters in Washington, D.C., has gathered the work of student artists expressing themselves — through their work — about these issues. The exhibit is called "Total Tolerance," and it highlights themes of racism, sexism and diversity.

The student art comes from the National YoungArts Foundation, a Miami-based nonprofit that offers mentoring and fellowships to art students from around the country. Its proposal was selected late last year by the Department and the dozens of works of art went on display in May.

"This exhibition, it really exemplifies why we do this work," says Carolina Garcia Jayaram, the foundation's president and CEO. "Together, with the Department of Education, we can signal to the country that arts education is a necessary facet of education for all students."

As the exhibit winds down in Washington this week, I spoke with three of the 21 young artists, about their art and about how it felt to have their work shown nationally.

Ameya Okamoto, 18, just graduated from high school in Portland, Ore., and will attend Tufts University this fall. Juniel Solis, 16, lives in Miami and will be attending a pre-college at the School of Visual Arts in New York this summer. And Aidan Forster, 17, just graduated from high school in Greenville, S.C., and will be attending Brown University next fall.

Our conversations have been edited for length and clarity.

**Describe your work that's on display.**

**Aidan Forster:** My poem, *Instructions for Suburban Boy Love*, was inspired by the particular brand of queer isolation and loneliness endemic to suburban life in the South. It stems from questions of loneliness and isolation: What happens when you're the only queer kid in your neighborhood? Or in your family? Or in your youth group or your circle of friends? When you start to feel kind of like a threatened or endangered species?

I think for me, queerness is very much like an aperture for language — a mode of filtration for experience.

**Ameya Okamoto:** So I have a couple digitally painted portraits in "Total Tolerance" that are a part of my memorial portrait series, which is ever evolving.

The portraits are about celebration of the lives that have been lost to police violence, but also about overturning negative imagery. One piece is of a boy named Quanice who was 17 years old when he was shot and killed in my hometown of Portland. At the time Quanice was 17, and I was also 17, and so having someone who is only a couple train stops away killed, that was extremely jarring to me. I had to do something, so I created a portrait
using photos, and that piece became so important because it started being circulated in the media, and it started to replace an old mug shot from a couple years back.

I was able to meet with Quanice’s family and give them a print, and that was an extremely moving moment where I realized I could give them a gift of celebration, and in some way help to heal. And I could also use my art to create a positive message and create a more positive narrative.

**Juniel Solis:** I have a painting up called *Los Pajaritos.* It’s a painting of two young adults with makeup and they have a very androgynous feel. They’re wearing orange flowers on their dresses. They’re men and they’re wearing makeup. They are there and you can tell there’s a fear in their eyes.

**What has art done for you?**

**Forster:** Well for me, growing up in a very conservative state, in a conservative region, I really struggled with internalized shame around sexuality. I grappled with the idea that my body and desires are wrong or alien or that I wasn’t made for love or love wasn’t made for me. And as I grew older and searched for a strain of representation, or some sort of narrative that matched mine, I found poetry. I just realized that poetry presented itself as an antidote to that shame I felt, and allowed me to dismantle it and externalize it.

**Okamoto:** When people ask me, "Why do you make art?" I say, for me it’s very reactionary in my gut level. This is what I have to do. I make art to help others.

I think art in general is how we are going to translate experiences, and share stories, and talk to people across cultures, and across language and across political values or any sort of ideation in general. We can talk to people through color, and stories and visuals, instead of having them sit down and have a really hard conversation. I think a lot of times people discredit minors who talk about real issues and talk about institutional change and talk about social change.

So what can I do? I can do grassroots organizing and I can be a part of changing the narrative for people who can vote for people who can make policy change, because at the end of the day it’s all in themselves.

**What sort of responses have you gotten from your work?**

**Forster:** I went to a public, residential arts high school in South Carolina, so I was constantly surrounded by a microcosm of artistic support and development. My friends were always there for each other's work. My parents have always been really supportive of my sexuality — in writing and off the page. But my extended family — I don't really talk about my work with them. ...

I'm so humbled to be selected for this. My entire trajectory with YoungArts has just been one humbling sort of blessing after another. There's been sort of a resounding recognition, I think, with the sort of bravado of the piece.

**Okamoto:** My family and friends are usually very supportive, but there are a lot of people who say I’m too young to know anything. With the critics, I kind of ignore it, because if my art touched them in some way, or they felt like they had to respond in some way, then I think at a certain level my art is doing exactly what I want it to do — which is reach out to the people and talk to the people who don't want to listen. High school is good practice to realizing that there are adult haters out there who are going to come after 16-year-olds.
What do you hope comes of your work being on display at the Department of Education?

Forster: I think my biggest hope for this is sort of twofold. In the first part is that I envision the show as a sort of promontory for the legitimization and authentication of minority and marginalized narratives written by youth. And so I think this exhibition is proving that some of the most potent and primal narratives at play in artistic planes right now are coming from young people and are coming from these like marginalized voices and voices that have historically been occulted.

Okamoto: I think it's amazing to have an exhibit in the U.S. Department of Education that preaches the exact rhetoric that I want to preach, which is equity, inclusion and total tolerance. I hope people see my work and realize they, too, can make work about the things they care about. It doesn't have to be political. And I hope it changes the negative stereotype of the [Black Lives Matter] movement.

What do you think the state of arts education is like today in the U.S.?

Okamoto: They're cutting our classes. They're cutting our art in general across mediums in places for — you know, quote unquote academic classes. And for me, I think that everyone has the capacity to create. It's just about creating space for people to think about their story and how they want to use their stories to express themselves.

What are your plans for the summer? Next year?

Forster: This summer I'm working to make money for college. I'm hosting at a wild game restaurant, [which serves], like, kangaroo! And I'm a poetry mentor for a summer mentorship program.

Okamoto: I will be attending Tufts University — a combined degree program to pursue a BA and B.F.A., so [I'll] be doing interdisciplinary art, race and justice, and neuropsychology. Hopefully, that's my path right now.

Solis: I'm not sure! I'm in the process of figuring that out. I'm attending a pre-college at the School of Visual Arts in New York this summer. I'm just hoping for a change in environment so I can come to terms with my work and find confidence in it.

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