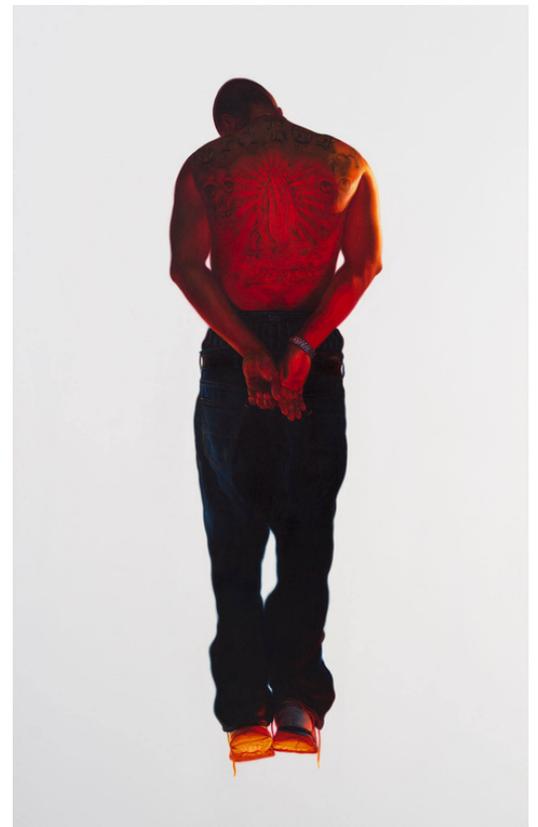


Social Issues in Art

Using Your Voice

A guide for looking, talking, and taking action



Our hope

We strongly believe that an in-person visit to the museum benefits students in myriad ways. Being in the galleries, seeing art up close, and being guided by a gallery teacher all foster a sense of wonder and an openness to consider and discuss difficult concepts. Perhaps you've already brought your students for a visit, or maybe scheduling a visit is not possible. In any case, we hope that this guide may serve you and your students in exploring issues of identity, community, and society through looking at, discussing, writing about, and making art.

The Blanton Museum of Art is pleased to offer Social Issues in Art. This series presents objects from the Blanton's collection that provide opportunities for students to discuss issues relevant to individuals, schools, communities, our nation, and our world.

About this guide

The Theme: "Using Your Voice" offers educators the opportunity to explore themes related to self-representation, courage in the face of injustice, and sharing "hidden" history. Each work prompts students to express who they are and who they want to be, to consider the bravery required to speak to authority against injustice, and to use their own voices to share what they learn about some little-known historical events.

The Plan:

- Select a work to share with students. The title of each work is linked to the Blanton collections website that provides more information AND an image that can be expanded onscreen for projection in the classroom. Zoom in and out to allow students to look closely at the work as you lead students in discussion. (1-2 min.)
- Use the thinking routine (Seek to See) on the next page to help students make personal connections to the artwork and to each other. (5-10 min.)
- Select some (or all) of the suggested questions and prompts for follow-up activities of artmaking or research. (5-10 min.)

The Resources:

- A thumbnail image
- Link to object label information (click on the title of the artwork to access curatorial comments about the artist and the art)
- Suggested discussion questions and follow-up activities
- A high resolution image (for providing photocopied images for classes)

[Relevant TEKS, by grade level](#)

In addition, each page in this resource may include a gray box that highlights TEKS specifically addressed by the artwork.

Our donors

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This series is based on previous collaboration between the Blanton, the ADL, Austin ISD, and the Create Lab.

A Thinking Routine

Seek to See*

Have students silently write their answers to each of the following questions. Then students may “pair share” their responses.

1. What might be this person’s feelings in this situation?
2. What might be this person’s strengths, cultural heritage and power?
3. What are some ways in which we might connect as human beings?
4. What words would you choose to honor their humanity and to encourage them?

Take a moment to reflect about your experience in seeking to see. Did you notice any shifts in your thinking, perspective, or feelings? Did anything surprise you?

We often see inequality through the lens of distribution of resources. This routine addresses a different kind of inequality: Recognition gaps defined as “the disparity in worth and cultural membership between groups in a society.” Recognition of worth and belonging have intrinsic value because human dignity and social justice do as well. Additionally, recognition – the opposite of stigmatization and discrimination- is associated with mental health and wellbeing. Seek to See is designed to direct our gaze onto another human being with a deliberate intention to see complexity, connections and human dignity.

Parade

Mequitta Ahuja, 2007

Recognizing that there is always an element of invention when it comes to depicting oneself, Mequitta Ahuja refers to her heavily manipulated self-portraits as “automythography.” Ahuja, an artist of South Asian and African-American descent, takes photos of herself to document the reality of her body; she then creates works in which she imagines herself as who and how she hopes to be.



She titled this painting *Parade* because she “is a parade of one.” The artist appears, poised mid-stride, on the right-hand canvas. Bright colors describe her figure and flow from her hair, which, as it carries onto the left-hand canvas, expands to become a dense cloud of increasingly abstract markings. She has referred to her interest in “the psychic proportions hair has in the lives of Black people.”

*TEKS connections (African American Studies)

LOOK

Take a few moments to look closely.

- What is one word you might use to describe the person?
- What colors do you see?
- What do you think is going on with this person? What makes you say that?

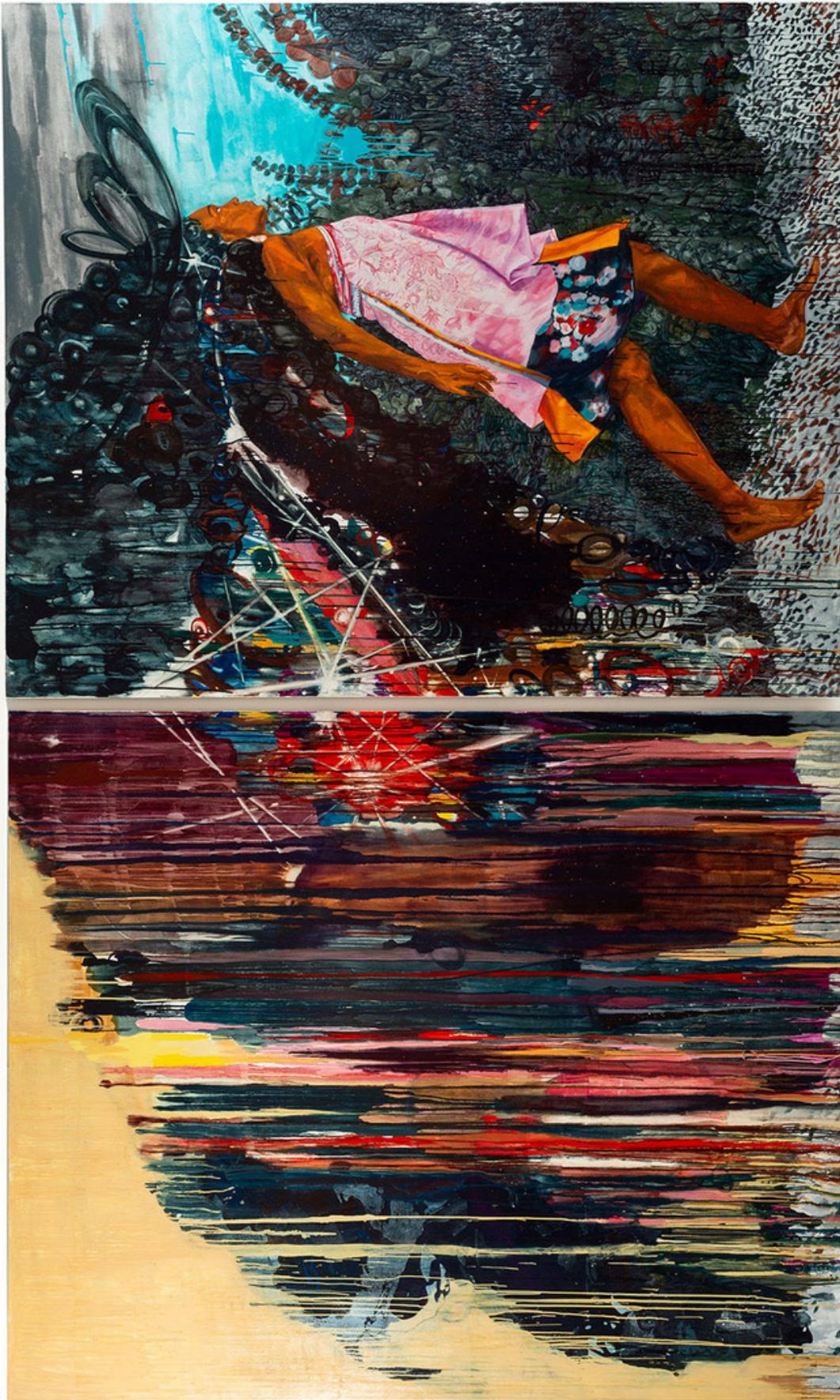
LEARN MORE... and TALK

Share the object label information with students.

- What do you think this person might be feeling?
- Where might this person be? What makes you think so?
- How is her hair represented in the painting?
- What does the spark of white paint on her head mean to you?
- Why do you think Ahuja divided the painting into two panels?

MAKE IT PERSONAL

Have students create a description (either visual or written) of themselves as they hope to be in the future. What gives them hope and power?



Mequitta Ahuja, *Parade*, 2007, 96 x 160 in., enamel on canvas, two panels. Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, Gift of Melanie Lawson and John F. Guess, Jr., in honor of Jeanne and Michael Klein, 2010. 99.1-2

Esther and Ahasuerus

Luca Cambiaso, circa 1569

The Bible tells the story of Esther, the heroine who risked her life to save her entire community. Esther's husband, the Persian king Ahasuerus, had consented to the genocide of the Jewish people in his land. He did not know that Esther, the wife whom he had chosen for her beauty, was Jewish. Though she was terrified, Esther put her own life at risk twice: first, by visiting the king without being summoned (a crime punishable by execution); and second, by revealing her Jewish heritage and faith to him.

Here, Cambiaso pictured the dramatic moment when Esther addressed the king, now knowing whether she would live or die. In the end, Esther's bravery was rewarded as the king listened to her appeal. Although the king could not stop the genocide, Esther negotiated for the Jews to have the right to defend themselves.



Each year the holiday Purim commemorates the day the Jewish people fiercely battled their persecutors and prevented the genocide. It also celebrates Queen Esther, who risked everything for the sake of her community.

LOOK

Take a few moments to look closely.

- What are your first impressions of this artwork?
- What catches your attention first?
- What do you think is going on?
- What do you wonder about?

*TEKS connections (6th grade Social Studies, World History studies)

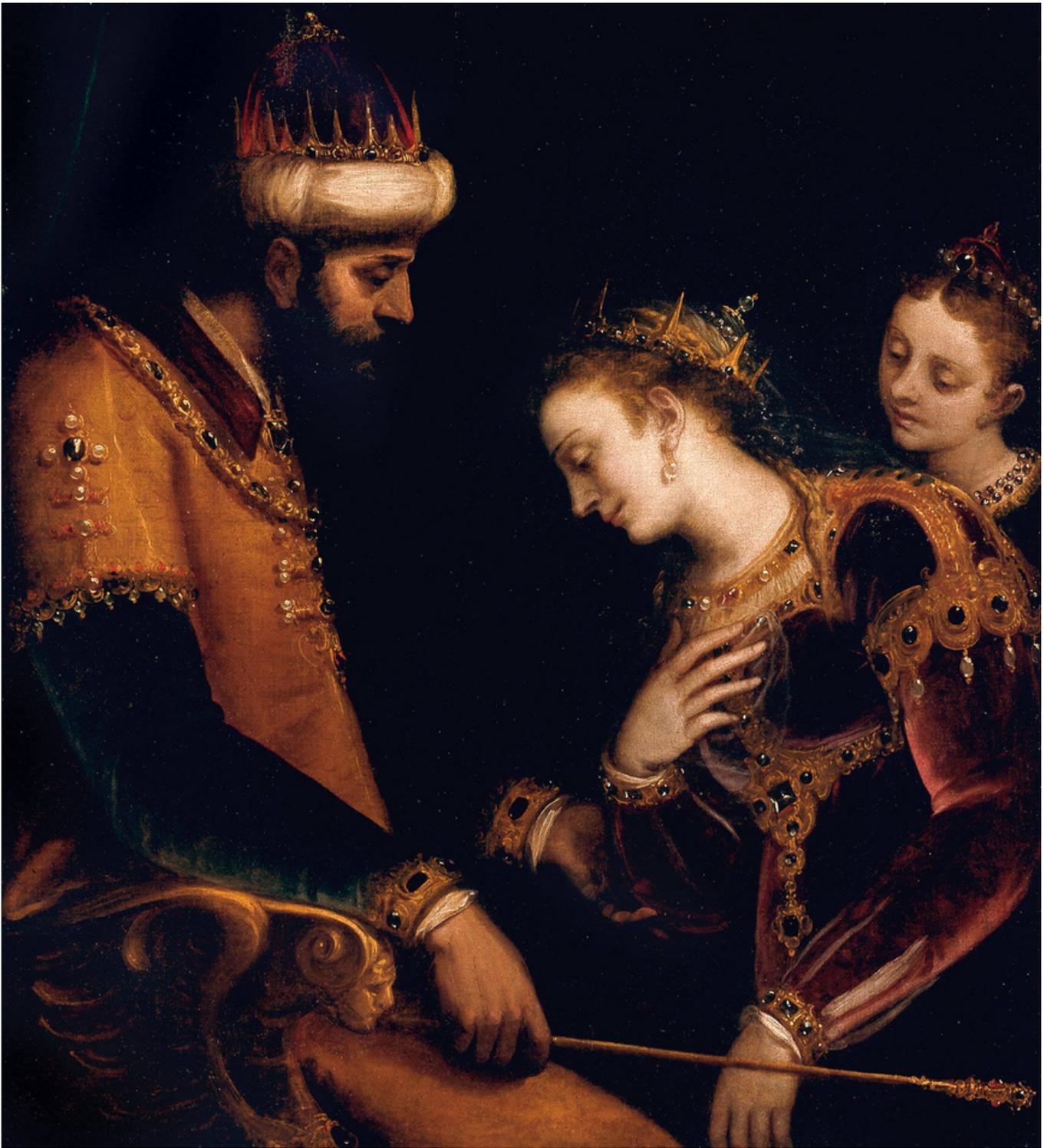
LEARN MORE... and TALK

Share the object label information with students.

- What do you notice about the body language of the different figures?
- What emotions do you perceive?
- Knowing the story of Esther, does anything surprise you about Cambiaso's representation of this scene?
- Can you think of people you've studied who bravely used their voice to speak to authority against injustice? What issues did they address?
- Can you think of a modern equivalent to this story?

ACT IT OUT

Download this [Reader's Theatre script](#) written by the Blanton Education Department to explore the story of Esther.

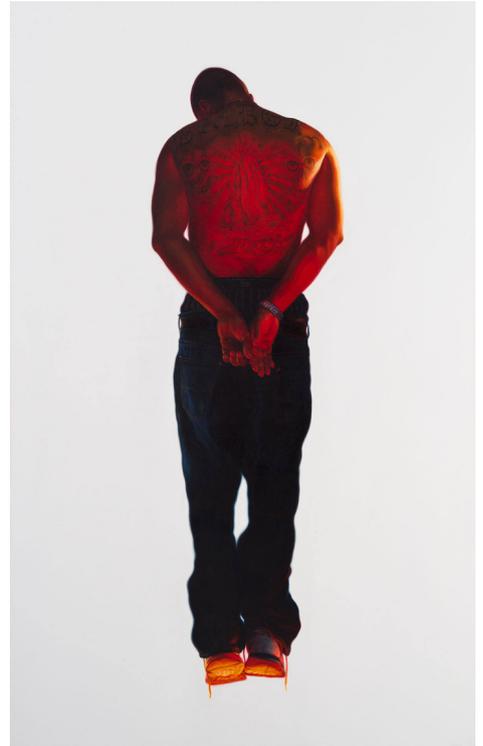


Luca Cambiaso, *Esther and Ahasuerus*, circa 1569, 38 3/4 x 34 13/16 in., oil on canvas. Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, The Suida-Manning Collection, 2017.964

[Untitled, from the Strangest Fruit](#) Vincent Valdez, 2013

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 a series of eleven life-sized Latino men after extensively researching what he refers to as the “erased” history of the lynching of Mexican-Americans 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. Instead, he depicts this history in the present tense, highlighting the continued persecution and struggles that immigrants and minorities face in the United States 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.”



LOOK

Take a few moments to look closely.

- What do you see? What details or elements stand out to you?
- What’s happening in this artwork?
- How do you feel when looking at this work?

*TEKS connections (7th grade Social Studies, Mexican American Studies)

LEARN MORE

Share the object label information with the students. You may also choose to include this information:

Vincent Valdez was doing research in the University of Texas libraries when he came across an early 20th century photograph of Mexican-Americans who had been lynched by Texas Rangers in South Texas. According to the Texas State Historical Association, “of the 468 [lynching] victims in Texas between 1885 and 1942, 339 were black, 77 white, 53 Hispanic and 1 [indigenous].”

Upset because his own classes in Texas history (he is from San Antonio) had not included this information, Valdez decided to use his skills as a painter to raise awareness of this hidden history.

TALK

- How is Valdez’s painting different from the 20th century photograph that led him to create the series?
- Why do you think the artist chose to represent contemporary men for this series?
- What details in the painting are most important for you? Why?

LEARN MORE

Explore other works by Vincent Valdez in the Blanton’s collection. What issues seem to concern the artist? What can you learn about those issues on your own?



Vincent Valdez, Untitled from *The Strangest Fruit*, 2013, 92 x 5 in., oil on canvas. Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, Promised gift of Jeanne and Michael Klein, 2016