

# Visual Diaries: Towards Art History as Storytelling<sup>1</sup>

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## Acknowledgement

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This essay will examine variants of what I refer to as “visual diaries” – or thinking through images and written or oral language –that I assign students in my contemporary art classes at Florida International University (FIU), Miami, and participants in my workshops at Chautauqua School of Art’s summer residency program. FIU is a Hispanic-serving institution that granted more bachelor’s degrees to Hispanics than any other university in the nation in 2020.<sup>2</sup> In addition, since 2019, Chautauqua School of Art, which is not affiliated with a degree-granting institution, supports an intergenerational group of artists, many of whom identify as Black or a person of color, women, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ). Besides my reflections on this dynamic and student-centered, practice-based visual diary pedagogy, I will consider student feedback from unsolicited testimonials and answers to questionnaires. Finally, I will briefly situate visual diaries among Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) research towards the end of this essay.

I invoke “diaries” given they traditionally are spaces for nascent, sometimes unfinished thoughts to be written down, and I want to encourage my students to share their rough ideas rather than the polished ones, which might be typically expected of them.<sup>3</sup> I append “visual” to “diary” to nudge students to examine the visual as knowledge in its own right. This pedagogy stems from my research methods to explore contemporary artworks and visual culture. As an example, when putting together my first monograph, *Productive Failure: writing queer transnational South Asian art histories* (Manchester University Press, 2017), for months, I had the paintings of artists Cy Twombly and Natvar Bhavsar on my desktop. I saw a formal affinity between their works but had trouble articulating this connection in written language. It was easier to see the lack of

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<sup>1</sup> This article is possible because of a decade of inspiring work by my students and participants in workshops I have organized. I especially want to thank my former student Gaelle Bruno, who has kindly provided her visual diary as well as a reflection on it as part of this essay. Anonymous peer reviewers as well as Renee A. McGarry provided useful feedback that has strengthened the essay. Finally, I want to thank Florida International University’s (FIU) 2020 Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) Community, especially Paul Feigenbaum, Project THINC Director. Without Paul’s and my SoTL peer group’s support at FIU, I am not sure I would have the confidence to write this article.

<sup>2</sup> Morgan Hughes, “FIU ranked top U.S. institution awarding bachelor’s degree to Hispanic students, according to Excelencia in Education,” *FIU News*, August 17, 2020, <https://news.fiu.edu/2020/fiu-ranked-top-u.s.-institution-awarding-bachelors-degree-to-hispanic-students,-according-to-excelencia-in-education>.

<sup>3</sup> From 2011-14 I experimented with tumblr (<https://www.tumblr.com>) in my pedagogy, which was popular at that time as a blog, as a space for students to think through images. These eventually became the more fully fleshed out visual diaries I present in this paper.

relationship between these artists' works: Cy Twombly is not of South Asian descent, and Bhavsar is not queer. By letting the jpegs of these artists' works float on my desktop and not rushing to contextualize them in language, I eventually was able to make a compelling aesthetic connection—what I would refer to as “queer Zen” in my book—that I might not have otherwise. In short, I want my students to *slow* down. Art history as a discipline provides crucial skills for students to engage with the visual critically, but I have found language sometimes short-circuits this learning process. Students attach meaning to what they see much too quickly.

In this essay, I present two kinds of visual diaries, both of which avoid collapsing image and text. One type focuses on oral language alongside images. Students present a sequence of images on a topic/problem of their choice, followed by a short discussion. They are asked to think through the issues they present in real-time. In contrast to a more traditional presentation, which might be followed by discussion, this variant of a visual diary values speculative rather than fully formed thoughts. The second kind of visual diary focuses on examining a problem through a sequence of images preceded by a title—just enough language to give some context but not enough to overdetermine the images' meaning—and then through written language in the form of a short essay. The students learn to capitalize on what images can do that perhaps language cannot and vice versa. This diary contrasts from a standard written assignment, such as an exhibition catalog essay in which images necessarily become illustrations of points being made in the text. Finally, I will describe how both kinds of visual diaries build strong connections among peers and give students agency to incorporate their subjectivities.

## Visual diaries: Written Essays

In 2014, I put together a syllabus for my contemporary art history course designated as a “global learning” course at FIU. My contemporary art history course has more BA and BFA studio majors than art history majors, but my syllabus remains the same as if I had all art history majors. Part of the expectation for “global learning” courses is that students explore the slippery concepts “local,” “international,” and “global.”<sup>4</sup> I had my students fulfill this requirement by constructing visual diaries around each idea through the lens of artworks or broader visual culture. I asked students to produce a PowerPoint of 10 images preceded by a succinct title and no other language. I also asked them to write an essay approximately 500 words in length on the same subject, but that does not need to explain every image. Neither image nor text is meant to be illustrative of the other: each is considered distinct though there can be overlaps. Students provide a more traditional ID list, but it appears at the very end of the diary.

Students put together three visual diaries throughout the course. First, I gave them the prompt to explain what “local” means to them in words and images. The second diary dealt with students defining the “international” through a topic of their choice. For the final diary, students described the “global.” The first of these often fell short of my goals. Either the essays ended up being descriptions of the images used, or the images functioned as illustrations. By the third diary, though, students were catching on and beginning to display that they understood that the visual

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<sup>4</sup> Global Learning, Florida International University, <https://goglobal.fiu.edu>

and language need not be collapsed; there was something to be gained from provisionally separating images and language.

One compelling diary explored a student's visit to Fort White, Florida, where he had grown up. As part of the visuals, he incorporated an image of Thomas Rice in blackface as the original Jim Crow along with a photograph of an individual holding up a sign on which was written: "segregation forever." Both came after an image of Google map directions from his home in Miami to Fort White. The poster made palpable the entrenched racism embedded in north Florida. In the text, he decided not to discuss the image or the photograph explicitly—presumably, because they were powerful on their own—and instead focused on using written language to explain the impetus for his visual diary: through memoir as a mode of writing, he wrote about the blatant racism he witnessed at a bar he visited with his father and his white privilege. Together, the images and text were a powerful and sobering meditation on the uglier parts of what constitutes at least one version of what constitutes the student's "local."

Roughly three hundred visual diaries have been produced in total by students since I began assigning them in 2014. Looking back at the diaries, I see that some were playful, while others were more serious. For example, one student whose family had recently moved from Venezuela to the United States put together a poignant diary regarding the political climate in her country of origin. Another explored her Iranian background and the politics of the veil. But, most significantly, almost all the diaries were personal in some way.

Moreover, many of my students speak multiple languages (in varying degrees of proficiency). For those students whose writing/speaking skills are not as strong as they would like, these visual diaries play an essential role in conveying knowledge through images. For example, one student in her diary examining the historical connections between Cuba and Russia incorporated a few words from Russian, her first language, into her textual narrative when unsure of their equivalent in English.<sup>5</sup> Though I do not explicitly indicate students can use multiple languages, I thought it was wonderful that she and many others felt comfortable enough to do so.

## Visual diaries: Oral Presentations

### Chautauqua

I have taught a different kind of visual diary involving oral rather than written language. It is more process-oriented. This approach came out of a workshop titled "Art History as Storytelling," which I co-led with curator Yasmeen Siddiqui at Chautauqua School of Art in 2019. There were approximately twenty artists in the workshop. The participants' ages ranged from the early twenties to mid-forties, but they all were beginning their careers. They were not established artists. We met twice a week for two hours each: one session focused on readings and the other on visual diary presentations/discussions.

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<sup>5</sup> Here is an interesting study which explores the roles of images in helping students whose first language is not English: Pamela I. Lavalley and Mark Briesmaster, "The study of the Use of Picture Descriptions in Enhancing Communication Skills among the 8th-Grade Students—Learners of English as a Foreign Language, *i.e.: inquiry in education* 9, no. 1 (2017), accessed August 6, 2021, <http://digitalcommons.nl.edu/ie/vol9/iss1/4>.

As an ice breaker, we asked students to present visual diaries regarding their artistic practices. Then, as described above, with the written diaries, students put together PowerPoints of 10 images. In a nod to the PechaKucha style of presenting, though, each slide was up for just twenty seconds, and therefore, each presentation in total was three minutes and twenty seconds in length.<sup>6</sup> Afterward, my co-convenor and I would respond. Our voices were just two of many, though, since all the participants contributed to discussions for about 10 minutes per artist presentation. Many mobilized the rich possibilities of sound (volume, pitch, timbre) and the spoken word as poetry to explore their visual ideas.

This initial oral diary was lackluster: the delivery was often flat because the students presented what they already knew, which Yasmeen and I realized was perhaps less helpful. So, we shifted the approach slightly. Students were still asked to present diaries orally, followed by discussion. However, the artists were not to give polished ideas but ideas-in-progress. They were asked to bring along a series of images of interest to them. For any participants that needed a more specific prompt, I suggested that they contextualize their artworks through the lens of those of other artists' works. In the end, they need not know how the images connect (or if they connect at all); it was okay to be messy. The idea was that by presenting and then engaging in a dialogue with their peers and us, the artists could workshop inchoate ideas.

In one example, a student gave a presentation about the relationship between her and her grandmother, who had recently passed away. She opted to stand at the back of the room so we could only hear her and to read her presentation in the form of a poem. Many mobilized the rich possibilities of sound (volume, pitch, timbre) and the spoken word as poetry to explore their visual ideas. Her trembling voice belied her grief and many in the room were teary-eyed at the presentation's conclusion. There was nothing explicitly about the presentation that was connected to her practice, but many of her peers made thoughtful connections between her work and what she generously shared with us. The student presenting afterwards spoke to me and my co-instructor about how her visual diary and its reception had allowed her unexpectedly to make some significant headway in her thinking about her work. I am still amazed at how within the short time period of the visual diary presentation, this student was able to convey so much. Since this time, I have seen many more examples about the power of pedagogy.

In 2020 the workshop's entire focus, which I led on my own, was on the visual diaries, given the positive feedback from the previous summer's participants. There were nineteen participants this time. About eight months after the 2020 residency concluded, a few workshop participants even self-organized their own visual diary sessions. Three were organized in 2021. I have heard from former participants that they have continued to mobilize visual diaries as research, but this was the first time I heard them making it a group exercise. The fact that the visual diaries continued to be organized beyond the workshop as part of the artists' practice reaffirmed my pedagogy's importance. Also worth noting is that during the one session I attended, I was particularly struck by how many of the artists were using the visual diaries to figure out where they fit into the

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<sup>6</sup> A traditional PechaKucha presentation would be double this length—twenty slides @ twenty seconds each: <https://www.pechakucha.com>. The website indicates this is a style of “visual storytelling” which is completely in keeping with my approach.

history of art. Based on my discussion with students (over email, in person, and via Zoom) and via a questionnaire I put together in 2020 regarding the visual diaries, it seems clear that these practice-based approaches to building/presenting visual diaries were instrumental in strengthening participants' researching and thinking skills.

There seemed to be a power to the visual diaries presented over time, too: a community was built. In their anonymous surveys, many participants of the 2020 workshop wrote that this was one of the more meaningful aspects of the seminar. As participants got to know each other's work, the workshop became a space to discuss sensitive issues, such as racism, homophobia, rape, and incest—always through the lens of their artistic practices<sup>7</sup> In response to one participant's visual diary, titled "Glitter Theory," in which he shared the trauma of growing up as a queer person, another artist noted the following that illustrates the kind of space opened up over time in the workshop:

a lot of the time, I don't talk about trauma with my queer friends, even though it is something that we all have. We try to overcompensate for it and become these boisterous happy people. But when we do talk about it, there is a catharsis from knowing that people go through similar situations. There is something there, a bond that happens when you know something like that. I'm fascinated by this connection between people over these very terrible things. A lot of what you said was very poignant, both very personal and very relatable . . . I really respect that you felt that you could share this with us, so thank you.

Given this artist's poignant response, it is not surprising that many of these artists have stayed in touch following the workshop's conclusion.

During the summer of 2020, the entire program had to be online. I was initially concerned that visual diary presentations via Zoom would not be as effective as delivering them in person. However, they were successful, at least partially because they provided a reprieve from our mutual pandemic isolation. In *Best Practices in Engaging Online Learners Through Active and Experiential Learning Strategies*, Stephanie Smith Budhai and Ke'Anna Skipwith assert how "frequent high-quality interactions [online] between learners and instructors add to their success and serve as a learner engagement technique."<sup>8</sup> Here is one email I received from a participant who expressed thanks for the space engendered by the online workshop: "...regarding how the workshop is going... I am not only speaking for myself (because many of us have sidebarred about your workshop) it has been such an absolute pleasure to be a part of... I am in awe of how you managed to make a space (on zoom no less!) for everyone to be intimate... vulnerable... open. It's such an incredible opportunity and experience."

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<sup>7</sup> I am avoiding referring to the "space" as "brave" or "safe" space given the contested nature of such terms: See Lily Zheng, "Why your brave space sucks," *Stanford Daily*, May 15, 2016, <https://www.stanforddaily.com/2016/05/15/why-your-brave-space-sucks/>

<sup>8</sup> Stephanie Smith Budhai and Ke'Anna Skipwith, *Best Practices in Engaging Online Learners Through Active and Experiential Learning Strategies* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 1.

## FIU

Building on the lessons above, I decided to incorporate this more research-based, oral, visual diary into my university contemporary art history classes during the fall semester of 2020. Up to this point, I had only assigned the visual diaries connected to written language. As in the past, some of the diaries varied in terms of the subject matter explored. Some focused on visual culture. For instance, one diary studied the complex history of Cuban immigration to Miami and how this population often self-identifies as “white” in contradistinction to how it was racialized in the past. A slide of a headshot of Cuban American Republican-identified politician Marco Rubio as a child alongside one of a young boy, who had been separated from his family at a US-Mexican border, was particularly compelling and generated lots of conversation. During the lead-up to the Presidential elections, another student presented the United States flag's use both in and out of art history.

Sensitive topics such as “political correctness,” autism, and dyslexia were also discussed. When addressing such topics, moderating discussion, rather than suppressing it, becomes essential. In a questionnaire filled out by students, one student alluded to the importance of dialogue: “It was all interesting, gauging other’s perspectives expanded my view on the topic. As I mentioned, it became a dialogue instead of a monologue.” Also, another student had been enrolled in a course of mine in the past, and she provided some insight into what this particular variant of visual diary offered: “I wanted to add that I felt such a huge difference creating these diaries than I did for your contemporary art history class last spring. Having to speak about the images makes me put a lot more thought into each image, rather than a general emotion over each that can be summed into a writing piece.”

In my contemporary art history classes, the visual diaries using oral language became an important narrative strand throughout the class's overall structure. For a Tuesday/Thursday class, I would present art history through visual diaries one day a week. Some of the significant contexts through which I explore artworks and visual culture include authorship (privileging the details of an author-artist’s life), identity (gender, race, class, sexuality, and disability, among others), form (colors, lines, shapes, textures, typography, the arrangement of elements, and size), and time/place (of production or consumption). I enact these ideas of organizing visual information through my lectures in which I present groups of images under the rubric of a contextual frame. I do so to avoid creating a canon (a singular story) even though I know that inevitably I will anyway—even if it is anti-canon. To put it another way, I impress upon my students that an image – whether artwork or not – is always already part of a framework of some kind, and there are an innumerable number of ways through which one could explore it.

On the other day, students present their diaries. Worth noting is that such an approach allowed the students themselves to produce content that might contest, overlap, or extend the art history I built and, in this way, empowered them to create as much as to be receivers of knowledge. Some students explicitly took on the problems of dominant art historical narratives. For example, one student explored black photographers' works, which were not taught in the university’s photography or my classes. Concerning the visual diaries providing an avenue to expand art

history, one student wrote, “I have never had the opportunity to do this kind of work in an art history class before, and I’m now very glad that I did.”

## Brief notes on Visual Diary Pedagogy, SoTL, and Art History as Storytelling

While the flipped pedagogical model described above is not so unusual in a studio course, it is in an art history course, many of which still are primarily lecture-based. I initially thought a flipped approach would make it challenging to deliver all the facts and information I typically do in my contemporary art history courses. However, I found that making space for “active learning” helped students gain confidence in dealing with images in a more sophisticated way. (At the same time, I found that I did not have to sacrifice as much content as I thought I might: incorporating the flipped model forced me to revisit my lecture notes that generated much more pithy PowerPoints.) SoTL researchers Rodney Carr, Stuart Palmer, and Pauline Hagel defined active learning as involving students in interpersonal interactions and prioritizing student agency, autonomy, and self-regulation.<sup>9</sup> There is a similar sentiment about the importance of building students’ self confidence in Albert Elsen’s statement in a 1954 issue of *College Art Journal* (precursor to *Art Journal*) exploring art history pedagogy: “The student should be guided toward developing self-confidence in his personal powers of analysis and judgment.”<sup>10</sup> Art historian Marie Gasper-Hulvat notes in her important meta-analysis of the literature in the field of art history related to scholarship and learning that much has been written in the interdisciplinary research of SoTL about how both “discussion” and problem-based learning (PBL) have pedagogical significance. Moreover, she notes that the latter both have been features of art history for some time.<sup>11</sup> Visual diaries continue art history’s interest in discussion and PBL but more radically in its embrace of a flipped pedagogical model.

There are three significant outcomes across the two kinds of visual diaries I have incorporated into my art history pedagogy. First, such an approach often has led to creating ethical and intimate spaces of learning and sharing that allowed students to discuss sensitive, complex issues. Even after the workshop ended or class was completed, many students maintained micro-communities of support and sharing, which became especially important during the pandemic. Another outcome is that the visual diaries have proven to be catalysts and “worldmaking exercises” for my students who are not cisgendered white males to make their subjectivities felt, seen, and heard. I cannot underscore this point enough: if art history is to remain relevant, it has to tread the fine line between educating students about dominant art history while being more attentive to issues of difference *tout court*. From my point of view as an instructor, visual diaries accomplish this. Finally, my students have transformed into veritable storytellers of art history. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes, “History is, after all, a storying. The French language has it very conveniently in the word *histoire*, which means both history and

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<sup>9</sup> Rodney Carr, Stuart Palmer, and Pauline Hagel, “Active Learning: The Importance of Developing a Comprehensive Measure,” *Active Learning in Higher Education* 16, no. 3 (2015): 174, quoted in Gasper-Hulvat, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Albert Elsen, “For Better Undergraduate Teaching in Art History,” *College Art Journal* 13, no. 3 (Spring 1954): 197, as quoted in Gasper-Hulvat, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Marie Gasper-Hulvat, “Active Learning in Art History: A Review of Formal Literature,” *Art History Pedagogy and Practice* 2, no.1 (2017): 9-11.

story.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, embedded in art history is an element of fiction that underscores that it is partial. There can always be another story, another way of looking at seemingly the same set of assumptions (or “facts”). Thinking of art history as storytelling empowers students to create the histories they deserve and consider them in dialogue with those they may not see in the classroom.

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<sup>12</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak interviewed by Alfred Arteaga, “Bonding in Difference,” in *An Other Tongue: Nation and Ethnicity in the Linguistic Borderlands*, ed. Alfred Arteaga (Durham, Duke University Press, 1994), 283.



Following this page is an example of a visual diary involving a written essay. The diary is by my former student Gaelle Bruno. Below is a short reflection on what she felt has been impactful of this format. The diary was created in 2017 and is titled “cheveau,” or hair. Her use of French reflects her Haitian heritage.

## **Statement of Reflection (October 2021)**

This format was enjoyable. This diary also came with the instructions of making it local, but it was loosely defined. I chose to define local as me because local is wherever I am. I didn't have a solid idea for a topic for my diary, but it started to develop more when I found artworks dealing with black women and hair. Hair is often the main topic of conversation amongst my friends. My hair hasn't always been spoken about positively and we have gone through a lot of changes together. Hair is a big part of me and defines me, so I made that my specific focus. The free-form aspect of the writing part of the diary allowed me to be more expressive and vulnerable than I might normally be in a more rigid writing format (introductory paragraph followed by three supporting paragraphs). The visual part of the diary is different from most essays because I had to tell a story using images. I included artworks that I felt told my personal story in the written part of the assignment. I think in multiple languages, but I have to write in English only which can be frustrating, so being able to think through images was very freeing.

cheveux









*[Signature]* 2015



Anglesite. 4, Celestite.

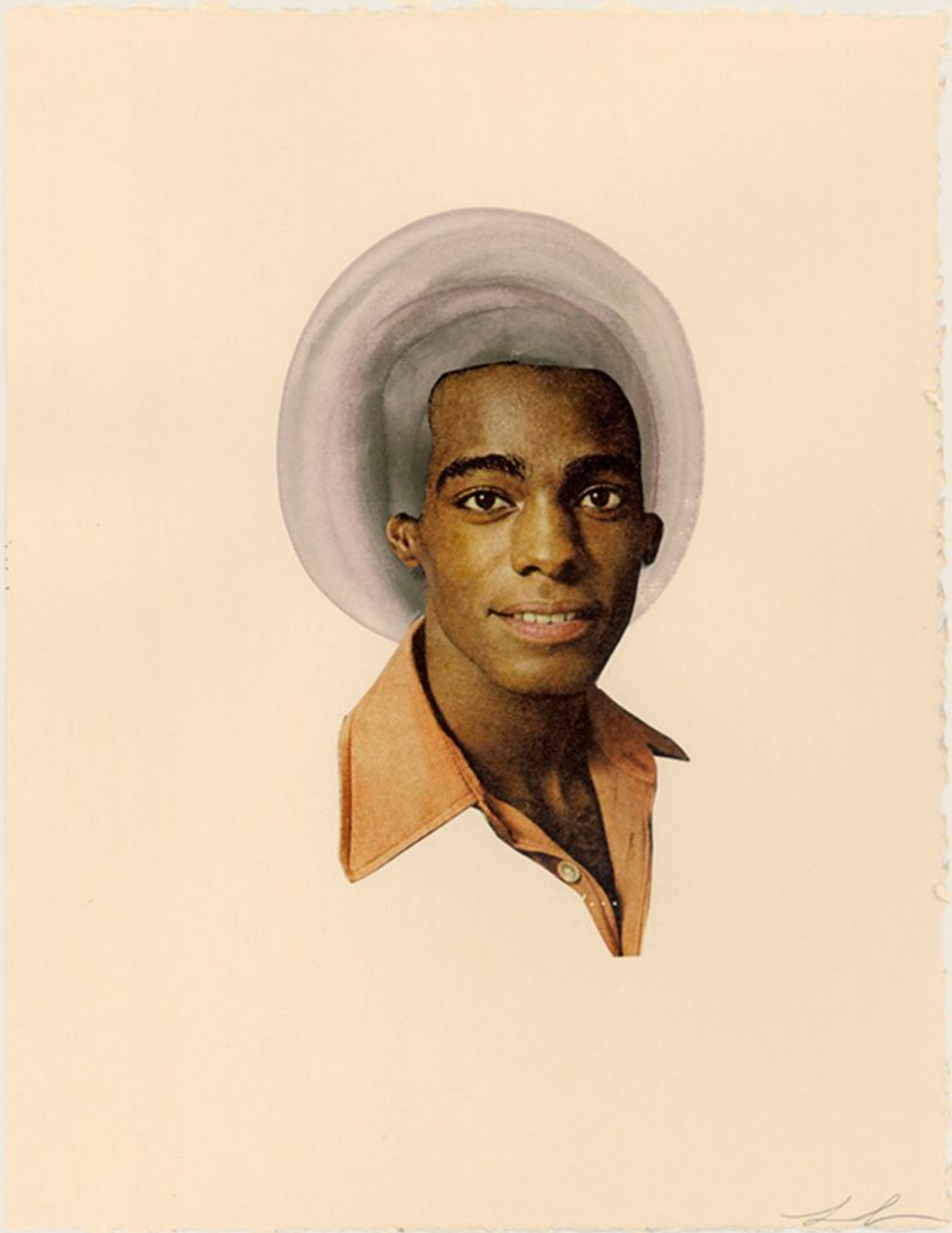






LA 2011







Slide ID List

1. Ellen Gallagher  
*La Chinoise*, 2008  
pencil, ink and cut paper on paper, 30 1/8 × 43 7/8 in

2. Lorna Simpson  
*Double Portrait I*, 2012  
collage and ink on paper, 11 x 8.5 in

3. Lorna Simpson  
*Speechless*, 2017  
collage and ink on paper, 11 x 8.5 in.

4. Lorna Simpson  
*Ultra Violet I*, 2015  
collage and ink on paper, 11 x 8 1/2 in

5. Lorna Simpson  
*Earth & Sky #24*, 2016  
collage and ink on paper, 11 x 8 1/2 in

6. Ellen Gallagher  
part of *DeLuxe*, 2004-5  
etching, 13 × 10 1/2 in.

7. Lorna Simpson  
*Princess*  
collage and ink on paper, 11 x 8 1/2 in

8. Lorna Simpson  
*Sometimes*, 2012  
collage and ink on paper, 11 x 8 1/2 in

9. Lorna Simpson  
*Black Cloud*, 2011  
collage and ink on paper, 11 x 8 1/2 in

10. Gaelle Bruno  
*Sisters*, 2017  
paint on wood, 6 x 5 ft

Local to me is defined by things that [are] in my control and within arm's reach. It can mean a sense of belonging too. My hair has always been a part of me--and has grown with me. It defines me. It is who I am, but I have not always felt like my hair belonged to me.

My hair is something that I couldn't always control. I didn't feel attached to it. Perhaps because of the judgement I've received, it was easier for me to distance myself from my ethnicity to fit into social standards. Being of African/Haitian descent, my hair texture never fit the norm, so I would always manipulate my hair, so it was more manageable and "prettier." Even so, I never seemed to fit in. I've done everything from perming my kinky hair straight or wearing a weave so my hair would look more attractive to my peers. Going to a predominantly white/Hispanic school I would always get asked "Why is your hair like that?" If I had braids, they would say "Hey, Ms. Jamaica."

I always wanted to blend in until I realized that I had to accept my hair, because it belongs to me and I belonged to it. I had to learn how to embrace my blackness for what it is. I was always in control of me and my hair and what social standards I choose to belittle me or enlighten me.

The texture of my hair is a part of my culture and my identity. Wherever I go, my hair will follow me. It's now a part of my style. I no longer choose to diminish myself to belong to a social standard just to feel safe.