



DEANA LAWSON TEACHER RESOURCE

“I want to capture something that represents the majesty of Black life, a nuanced Black life, one that is by far more complex, deep, beautiful, cryptic, celebratory, strange, and poetic.”

EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

Featuring work made over the past two decades, this exhibition is the first museum survey dedicated to Deana Lawson. Working primarily in photography, Lawson investigates and challenges conventional representations of Black identities and bodies. Her work evokes a range of photographic histories and styles, including family albums, studio portraiture, and staged tableaux; she also employs documentary pictures and appropriated images.

In Lawson’s highly staged scenes, individuals, couples, and families are pictured in intimate domestic spaces and public settings, interacting with one another. The artist describes her work as “a mirror of everyday life, but also a projection of what I want to happen. It’s about setting a different standard of values and saying that everyday Black lives, everyday experiences, are beautiful, and powerful, and intelligent.” Lawson’s practice is global in scope, as she creates her images throughout the African diaspora in locations as varied as Brooklyn, Haiti, Jamaica, Ethiopia, Brazil, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the Southern United States. This broad geographical range points to a collective memory of shared experiences and various cultural histories of the past.

This teacher resource can be used to prepare students for their visit to the exhibition and as a lesson guide to engage them with Lawson’s work.

ARTIST BIO

Deana Lawson is a photographer and artist based in New York and Los Angeles. Born in 1979 in Rochester, New York, she is known for her highly staged, large-format photographs that explore an expansive visual representation of contemporary Black life. For the artist, her pictures are portals to imaginative realms that depict individuals, couples, and groups in both domestic and public settings, constructing narratives of family, love, intimacy, and desire. Her relationship with photography is familial in its roots: her mother was an employee at Eastman Kodak, her father worked for Xerox, and her great-aunt was one of the first Black women ophthalmologists in upstate New York.

ART-MAKING PROCESS

Trained as a photographer, Lawson engages with numerous visual languages, from studio portraiture to family albums, to create work that exceeds photographic genres or blends them together. Because of this, her pictures can sometimes be difficult to read in a single form. Working in response to the history of photography, which has a challenging relationship to the ethics of image making and passive voyeurism, Lawson is inspired by a literary engagement with photography—that is, she uses sitters, props, setting, and pose to arrange different elements together that invite numerous readings and interpretations. Her overall process calls attention to how images are constructed and laden with several meanings. Her photographs are not straight portraiture, nor are they intended to be read as visual documents; rather, like a work of literature,

her fictional visual scenes are invitations for viewers to see different possibilities and make their own associations.

Lawson regularly invites acquaintances and strangers to participate in the making of her photographs. She pays her subjects to sit for her and procures written releases to produce her photographs. To compose her images, she often works with a particular idea or inspiration in mind and collaborates with her sitters before arranging their dress, pose, and setting. Meticulous staging and serendipitous exploration are core aspects of her final images.

THEMES

The following themes are explored in this exhibition. Educators can use them as a guideline when introducing Deana Lawson to students.

Diaspora

- Geography, and specifically the Black diaspora, is a recurring theme of Lawson's work. She stages multiple geographies as well as various environments, landscapes, and interiors in her photographs, and she often travels to make her images, both within the United States and to other countries such as Haiti, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and South Africa. Her pictures reference the geographical reach of what she calls an "extended family" of subjects, reflecting a worldview that seeks resonances between disparate places, even as these contexts remain importantly distinct from one another.

Identity

- The High Museum of Art has one of the most significant collections of photography from the civil rights movement, many of which depict intense imagery of violence against Black individuals. Although the reality that these photographs documented is crucial to our understanding of history, it is also important that museum and gallery spaces display a wider view of Black life and experience than just historically traumatic images. In her work, Lawson endeavors to "capture something that represents the majesty of Black life, a nuanced Black life, one that is by far more complex, deep, beautiful, cryptic, celebratory, strange, and poetic." Her work is critical in prioritizing expansive narratives of Black experiences that can uplift and explore identity, relationships, and culture through a Black lens. It is this approach, rooted in vernacular photography, that bell hooks emphasizes as necessary to pose a "critical intervention, a disruption of white control over black images" in photography.

Intimacy (Familial, Romantic)

- The idea of family, in its many forms, and the intimacy associated with it are additional themes within Lawson's body of work. Her images capture a sense of domestic intimacy like that of a family photo album, the settings of which are informed by her own and others' family albums. This approach is augmented by the narrative potential of beautiful strangers she passes in her daily travels who she often uses as her subjects. She is compelled by the relationships and encounters (however transitory) that people have with one another.

In her explorations of intimacy, Lawson frequently includes nudity in her portraiture. When discussing this with students, it is beneficial to acknowledge that Lawson is thinking critically about how Black women and their bodies are and have been represented throughout history. She challenges what she calls "the stain of colonialism upon the Black body within photography" by constructing a liberating

visual vocabulary of her own that honors and expands upon the nuances of Black womanhood. In constructing her own vision, she prioritizes her own gaze and agency.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Encourage students to look and discuss the following:

- Deana Lawson's father was the family's personal photographer, responsible for documenting family events and compiling family photo albums. Do you have someone with a similar role in your life? How do photo albums and memory interact over time? How does this relate to Lawson's work?
- Photography as a medium has historically been used to prove things ("photographic evidence"). In her work, which is often heavily staged, how does Lawson leverage the assumption of truth for the sake of narrative? Is it effective?
- Lawson has stated that photography is a means to see the unseen: "What you see in the photograph is one thing; the specifics or what it references or what it's symbolic of is greater than that." In her work *Nation* (included in the Key Images PPT), we see a contemporary image of two men who are hip-hop artists juxtaposed with an image of George Washington's dentures. What commentary does this make, particularly given that several of Washington's dentures were made in part from the teeth of people who were enslaved? If you could similarly make a dialogue between history and the present, what images might you choose?
- Deana Lawson's work gives us an opportunity to deconstruct the racist White history of photography and how it has often been used to perpetuate harmful stereotypes against Black communities. As a Black artist who focuses solely on photographing Black subjects, how does Lawson reclaim narrative and assert personhood in her work? How would her works change if the subjects were not looking directly at the viewer?

CONNECTION TO THE CLASSROOM

Grades: 9–12

Topic/Theme(s): photography, collage, found imagery, Black artists

Lesson Overview: Found image collages ("mood boards")

Objective: To learn more about Deana Lawson's photography, students will discuss and take direct inspiration from her assemblages. Using various visuals from popular culture and current events, students will curate their own found image assemblages around a central theme or topic. Students will think purposefully about art installation by arranging their assemblages in the classroom, similarly to how Lawson arranges hers in the gallery space (i.e., in corners, along the floor, in large masses, or in thin columns).

Materials:

- Deana Lawson Key Images (PPT)
- Assorted images (magazines, newspapers, public archives)
- Internet and printer accessibility for students interested in searching for specific imagery or for making copies of personal images (i.e., family photos)
- Scissors
- Glue
- Paper
- Tape

Procedures:

1. Show students the following video of Deana Lawson talking about how she creates her assemblages:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yyjeZ4PWYgA>.

- a. After, have students discuss or write a warmup response to the following Deana Lawson quote:
“My gaze is the same for the selecting of found images as it is in finding subjects to photograph.”
2. Using the Deana Lawson Key Images PPT and the work [Assemblage \(2021\)](#) as resources, lead a discussion with students about Deana Lawson and her work, paying particular attention to her assemblage piece. Students will describe, analyze, and interpret the images in her assemblage and how they are installed in the gallery space.
3. Introduce the assignment: students will draw inspiration from Deana Lawson’s work to create their own assemblage.
4. Using magazines, newspapers, internet searches, public archives, and their own personal archives (e.g., family photo albums), students will find and collect a minimum of thirty-five images. This can be done in a single class period or can stretch over several days.
5. Once students have a pool of images to choose from, they will think about narrative, popular culture, and current events and begin to purposefully group their images together. They will use a minimum of twenty to twenty-five images from their original pool for their final assemblage.
6. Students will edit their images with scissors as necessary and begin to glue them to paper (can be any type of paper, thickness, etc.). The paper will serve as backing and will make the final assemblage portable for final installation. A variety of paper sizes will give students more creative liberty—they can collage their images in whatever final shape or form that they want.
7. Once their collages are assembled on paper, students will “install” their pieces in a designated area (classroom, hallway, etc.) with tape in a thoughtful and creative way.

Assessment:

- *Presentation/Critique:* Students will present their works to each other for critique. They will explain how they found the images they did, why they chose them, and how the imagery conveys a theme or commentary on present-day topics.
- *Assessment Extension:* Students will be assigned a photo-taking project (with phone cameras, digital cameras, or whatever is accessible) in which they will use their assemblages as a foundation for posed photographs.
 - One prompt might be to take an original photo and then edit a found image inside of it to create a dialogue; reference Lawson’s *Nation* (2018) and how she adds an image of George Washington’s dentures to a corner of her photograph.
 - Another prompt might be to create a family album from subjects that are not family members, referencing the constructed narratives in Lawson’s work.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- **Interviews with the Artist**
 - <https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/119>
 - https://garage.vice.com/en_us/article/paww9m/deana-lawson-arthur-jafa-interview
- **Books**
 - *Deana Lawson: An Aperture Monograph* by Zadie Smith, Arthur Jafa, and Deana Lawson
 - *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See* by Tina Campt
 - *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* by bell hooks
 - *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* by Zora Neale Hurston
 - *The Civil Contract of Photography* by Ariella Azoulay
 - *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography* by Deborah Willis

- *Reflections in Black* by Deborah Willis
- *A History of Women Photographers* by Naomi Rosenblum
- **Magazines**
 - *Cosmologies: Aperture 244*
 - *Vision and Justice: Aperture 223*
- **Essays**
 - "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators" by bell hooks

GEORGIA STANDARDS:

Photography (Levels I-IV)

VAHSPH.CR.4 Incorporate formal and informal components to create works of art.

VAHSPH.CR.5 Reflect on, revise, and refine works of art considering relevant traditional and contemporary practices as well as personal artistic ideation.

VAHSPH.CR.6 Keep an ongoing visual and verbal record to explore and develop works of art.

VAHSPH.RE.1 Reflect on the context of personal works of art in relation to community, culture, and the world

VAHSPH.RE.2 Critique personal works of art and the artwork of others, individually and collaboratively, using a variety of approaches.

VAHSPH.RE.3 Engage in the process of art criticism to make meaning of works of art and increase visual literacy

VAHSPH.CN.1 Develop personal artistic voice through connecting uses of art within a variety of cultural, historical, and contemporary contexts.

VAHSPH.CN.2 Develop life skills through the study and production of art (e.g. collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, communication).

VAHSPH.CN.3 Utilize a variety of resources to understand how artistic learning extends beyond the walls of the classroom.

Art History (Levels I – II)

VAHSAH.RE.1 Identify and describe how artistic expression is conveyed visually through subject matter, media, technique, and design (e.g. composition, color scheme).

VAHSAH.RE.2 Discuss aesthetic issues (e.g. why humans create, criteria for defining an object as art, the effect of how content affects value, standards of beauty and beauty's role in defining art, how needs are fulfilled by art in varied societies).

VAHSAH.CN.1 Evaluate the influence of historical, political, economic, social, cultural, religious, and technological factors on the development of selected works of art from prehistoric to contemporary times and in a variety of societies (e.g. Prehistoric, Renaissance, Medieval, Baroque, Rococo, Neoclassical, 19th century including Romanticism, Photography, Impressionism, Realism, 20th century including Expressionism, Cubism, Dada, Surrealism, Social Realism, Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, Minimalism, Photorealism, Postmodern).

VAHSAH.CN.2 Develop life skills through the study and production of art.

VAHSAH.CN.3 Utilize a variety of resources to see how artistic learning extends beyond the walls of the classroom.