

RAG

RICHMOND ART GALLERY
School Art Program



Teacher Guide

Meryl McMaster: *Confluence*

January 14 to March 19, 2017

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Program Overview

Dear Teachers,

This guide contains information about the exhibition, the artists, and some classroom activities that will help you to prepare your students for their visit to the Richmond Art Gallery. Please review this package with your students to get the most out of your gallery visit. The suggested activities require a minimum of materials and are adaptable to the needs of different grade levels.

Throughout the guide you will find art vocabulary words in bold that are defined in the vocabulary section, and resource links have been included for further topic explorations.

Program Goals

The goals of the gallery tour and art workshop are to encourage students to:

- Describe and respond to works of art and explore artists' intent
- Observe and share how artists use processes, materials, and techniques to express ideas
- Explore personal experience, community, and culture through art making
- Examine the relationship between art and the wider world
- Create artworks using ideas inspired by imagination, inquiry, experimentation, and purposeful play

Big Ideas explored

- People create art to express who they are as individuals and as a community
- People connect to others and share ideas through the arts
- Exploring works of art exposes us to diverse values, knowledge, and perspectives
- Works of art influence and are influenced by the world around us
- Artistic expressions differ across time and place
- Experiencing art challenges our point of view and expands our understanding of others

Before Your Visit

Meryl McMaster creates **self-portraits** to explore **identity**, and how her identity has been formed through family heritage, history, and culture. Her dream-like images remind us that we are all connected to our past, which shapes who we are today. Each image represents a different aspect of her identity, and she creates characters that embody these characteristics and tell stories about who she is, where she is coming from, and who she is becoming.

What makes you, you?

Have a class discussion about identity. First, what do we mean when we say identity? What are the different aspects that make up who we are? What makes each of us unique? Have students identify some individual characteristics that describes them, such as personality attributes, strengths, abilities, or skills.

Next discuss the ways in which our identity is formed, and the role our family, community and culture plays in shaping our identity. Have students think of and reflect on a personal example of this, for example personal values or skills learned from family, or how a personal experience has shaped who they are today.

Finally, discuss how we show or represent our identity to the outside world. How do I show others “who I am”? Ways people represent themselves can include things like the clothing they wear, photos and events they share on Facebook or other social media, the ways they act in everyday situation, and the hobbies, interests, and activities they pursue.

Some sample questions for class discussion:

- Do we always show our true selves, or do we sometimes show a “better version” of ourselves?
- How do others view me?
- Do we always view others clearly, or do we sometimes make judgements about their identities that might be wrong?

Activity: Aspects of Self

At the gallery, students will be creating self-portraits that express an aspect of their identity. Before their visit, give students time to reflect on the discussions, and to think about all the different things that make up their sense of self. Have students create a list of personal attributes, characteristics, skills, weaknesses, strengths, abilities, and descriptive words that reflect who they are. Next, ask students to think of important influences in their life, such as family and personal relationships, or events that have happened to them, and add this to the list. Finally, have students choose one aspect or attribute and share with a partner or small group what that quality is, and why it is important to them.

At the Gallery

Your visit will start with a gallery tour of our current exhibition **Confluence**. During the tour we will look at various artworks in depth, and discuss the overall themes of the exhibition.

Ideas explored through this exhibition:

- The different aspects of **identity**
- How the concept of identity can be explored through the genre of **self-portraiture**
- The way that **Indigenous** people have been represented historically, and how contemporary Indigenous artists are redefining their representation
- The medium of photography and the choices artists make in constructing an image

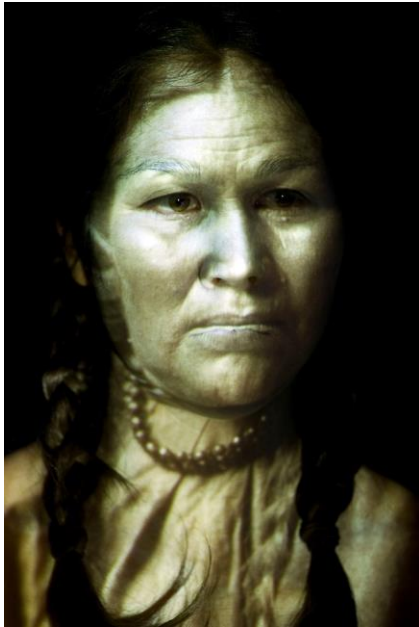
After the tour, we will go into the gallery classroom and students will be guided to identify aspects of their identity, and to explore ways to express this visually through creating a self-portrait using the mediums of drawing and painting.

About The Exhibition

Confluence brings together artworks from three different series of photographs created by Ottawa-based artist Meryl McMaster. Each series shares the theme of **identity** and how identity is represented, and explores the artist's mixed Euro-Canadian and Plains Cree family heritage. McMaster's predominant use of **self-portraiture** challenges the ways that **Indigenous** peoples have been, and continue to be, represented within a colonial framework, while opening up imaginative spaces of possibility that explore the complex ways in which identity is shaped and experienced.

The photographs from the *Ancestral* series explore the theme of representation, or how a subject such as a person is portrayed. We play with representation every time we take a selfie – we pose, pout, smile, or act silly, and decide exactly how we want to appear in the picture. When putting up a photo on sites like Facebook, we choose an image that shows others who we are, and what aspects of our identity we want the world to see. Historical photos of Indigenous peoples, however, are not necessarily representative of how the sitters chose to be seen, and were often taken by non-Indigenous photographers with their own agendas.

The *Ancestral* series uses images created in the early nineteenth century by Edward S. Curtis, Will Soule, and George Catlin. These individuals sought to create a record of the “disappearing”



Indigenous peoples of North America through photography and painting. While their appreciation for Indigenous cultures was admirable for the time, the portraits they created were sometimes manipulated and staged because they wanted to represent “authentic” Indigenous cultures, as though contact with Europeans and the adoption of new technologies, customs, and dress had never happened. The effect of their work was the creation of Indigenous **stereotypes** (a fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing) and the spread of misconceptions about Indigenous cultures. In images such as *Ancestral 4* (seen at left), McMaster has projected one of these historical photographs onto herself, collapsing the past and the present into a single moment. While the historical image dominates the frame, the artist’s eyes shine through, animating the image and imbuing the portrait’s subject

with powerful presence and individuality. The resulting picture invites us to reconsider how we view traditional depictions of Indigenous people, and to remind us that rather than disappearing, Indigenous people are very much alive and thriving.

Meryl McMaster uses the **medium** of photography to create her portraits. Photographs can have the appearance of an “objective” record of the real world (such as a picture of a sunset), however all photographs to some degree are designed or constructed because they are intentionally taken by the photographer, and are the result of many artistic decisions. The angle or height the camera is held at, the time of day the photo is taken, what the photographer chooses to include in the frame, and how close or far away they stand all contribute to the design of the image. Contemporary photographers such as McMaster go a step further by elaborately staging the contents of each photograph with the use of costumes, make-up, props, and performance to tell a story with their images or to express an idea.



My artistic practice begins with photography evoking a journey that follows a path of self-discovery....My art unravels notions of identity and subjectivity as something that is never complete, but always in process and always formed from within. - Meryl McMaster



The second series featured in the exhibition is entitled *In-Between Worlds* (2010-13). In this collection, McMaster confronts her multicultural identity and posits the question of who she is in face of conflicting historical influences. McMaster rejects the simple approach of checking one box or another and provides her own answer to the question. She is a fusion of both cultures; she is in-between worlds, a collage of identities. The fusion of European and Indigenous tradition is subtly manifested in the photographs of this series. Ethnicity cannot be boiled down to a black and white answer. Instead, individuals should be encouraged to reconcile conflicting pasts and harvest the potential of their diverse cultural inheritance.



McMaster's latest series is called *Wandering* (2015-). Culminating her earlier works with exploring self-identity, the artist now experiments with the idea of how one's identity changes with one's future choices. Central to the series is the idea that while identity is permanently influenced by one's past, it is malleable and subject to reconstruction. A recurring theme throughout these photographs is the use of red ropes. The rope signifies the inescapability of the past: one is always "tethered" to the portion of the self that was never up to one's control. We do not decide in which ethnic group we will be born; we do not decide what horrendous events had occurred among our diverse ancestors. McMaster urges viewers to both acknowledge the invisible hand that controlled our past and explore the boundless possibilities within that grasp. Indeed, in the snowy, dream-like landscape of McMaster's world, an individual can be transformed into anything.



*“I’ve been coming to a realization about the self and identity and how everyone explores that about themselves throughout their lives ... **Wandering** talks about going into the unknown and how that is a metaphor for life. I was thinking about my own heritage and where I’ve come from. A lot of times in life, we are not necessarily held back but our dreams, our past and our circumstances are tethered.” - Meryl McMaster*

Despite the use of common landscape and objects, none of her poses appeal natural to the rational world as we know it. Instead, the artist constructs an imaginary world and invites viewers to join her in exploring the infinite potential of what a human body can become. The construction of self-identity should be handled with as much freedom and imagination as the intrinsically explorative nature of the human spirit.

About The Artist

Meryl McMaster is a Canadian-based artist and a graduate in photography from the Ontario College of Art and Design. Her artistic practice begins with photography, evoking a journey that follows a path of self-discovery. She is interested in exploring questions of how we construct our sense of self through lineage, history and culture. McMaster’s practice extends beyond straight photography by incorporating other artistic media into how she build images and express her ideas. McMaster’s resulting work takes advantage of both the spontaneity of photography and the manual production of props or sculptural garments, performance and self-reflection. McMaster’s work unravels identity and subjectivity as something that is never complete, but always in process and invariably formed from within. (source: merylmcmaster.com)

Artist’s website: merylmcmaster.com

RAG Interview with Meryl McMaster: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=urja4qcZleM&t=23s>

After Your Visit

Photographic Self-Portraits

In this activity students will reflect on the constructed nature of photography, and create a photographic self-portrait that expresses some aspect of their identity through the creation of a character or a scene that tells a story.

Materials:

Camera/tablet photo capturing device
Costumes & Props
Photo paper and colour printer

1. Tell students that they will be creating a self-portrait with photography. They may choose to have their whole body in the shot or just a portion of the body. You may choose to view additional examples of photographic portraiture with the class by showing the students the work of the artists listed below or ones of your choosing.
2. These images are to be designed by the students, just as Meryl McMaster designs her images. Have students reflect on their identity, and think about how they would like to be seen by the outside world. Their image can be based in reality, or incorporate imaginative or fantasy elements.
3. Have students create a “planning” sheet, with details such as:
 - What location at or near the school will it be taken? (Inside, or outside)
 - What will they wear? Will they have a costume on?
 - What colours will be in the image?
 - What props will they include?
 - What will they be doing in the photo?
 - What angle do they want to take the photo? Looking up? Down?
 - How close to the camera do they want to be?
4. In groups, have students assist each other composing and taking their photos, and allow them to experiment with poses, angles, and framing.
5. Allow students to discuss their photos with each other, to determine which photo they will choose to be their self-portrait. Print the chosen photos and do a gallery display with each student giving their work a title.

Additional contemporary artists working with the themes of photographic portraiture and Indigenous representation for your class to look at & discuss:

Arthur Renwick: Mask series

<http://face-siem.com/the-masks-of-arthur-renwick>

Terrance Houle: Urban Indian Series

<http://www.terrancehouleart.com/home.html>

KC Adams: Perception series

<http://www.kcadams.net/art/photography/Perception/PerceptionKim.html>

Resources

Meryl McMaster

Artist's Website

<http://merylmcmaster.com/home.html>

Articles about her work and the exhibition

<http://www.katzmancontemporary.com/merylmcmaster/>

<http://ottawacitizen.com/entertainment/local-arts/meryl-mcmaster-takes-new-york-with-her-elaborate-self-portraits>

<http://canadianart.ca/features/meryl-mcmasters-next-chapter/>

<https://cheyanneurions.wordpress.com/2016/05/08/meryl-mcmasters-confluence/>

<http://gabriellemoser.com/analogical-thinking-on-photography-in-the-work-of-meryl-mcmaster/>

Powerful Pictures: Representation and Storytelling – The AGGV's Teacher Resource Guide featuring work by Meryl McMaster

<http://aggv.ca/teacher-resource-guides>

Plains Cree & Indigenous Resources

<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/aboriginal-people-plains/>

<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/cree/>

http://aboriginal.sd34.bc.ca/sites/default/files/In-Our-Own-Words-final-Apr-16-web_0.pdf

CBC Video: The evolution of Indigenous Terminology

<http://www.cbc.ca/player/play/709875267537/>

Online Portrait and Self Portrait Lesson Plans

<http://www.incredibleart.org/lessons/elem/selfport.htm>

<https://www.artsy.net/article/theartgenomeproject-lesson-plan-number-1-the-portrait>

Glossary

Confluence	“Confluence means a flowing together. In a literal sense, it's about rivers. But it's more often used to talk about the coming together of factors or ideas, or of cultures in a diverse city. Con- means "with," and -fluence sounds like "flow." When things come together like rivers do, flowing from entirely different places, you call that a confluence.” (vocabulary.com)
Contemporary Art	Artwork that is produced in this current time, generally considered to be artworks made from 1970 to the present. Contemporary art is a very broad term, including artworks made in almost any medium and incorporating many different themes and ideas
Culture	The behaviors and beliefs characteristic of a particular social, ethnic, or age group
First Peoples	A collective term used to describe the original peoples of Canada and their descendants. (Library Archives Canada)
Identity	The way we perceive and express ourselves, which changes over time
Indigenous	Originating in a particular place, the first peoples of an area or original inhabitants
Medium	The material or technique used by the artist to make an artwork. For example, paint is the medium used in a painting
Plains Cree	One cultural group among several Indigenous peoples whose homeland is the North American central prairies and woodlands, stretching from Alberta to Manitoba
Portrait	An artwork that has a person or group of persons as it's subject. A Self-portrait is an artwork depicting the artist who created it
Stereotype	A fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing

Image Credits

Cover: Meryl McMaster, *Viage* (2010), Chromogenic print, edition 2 of 5

Page 6: Meryl McMaster *Ancestral 4* (2008), Chromogenic print, edition 1 of 5, and *Phantom Silence* (2015), Ink Jet Print, edition 2 of 3

Page 7: Meryl McMaster, *Consanguinity* (2010), Chromogenic print, edition 1 of 5, and *Weight of the Shadow* (2015), Ink Jet Print, edition 1 of 3

Page 8: Meryl McMaster, *Secret Darkness of Birds* (2015), Ink jet print, edition 2 of 3.

All images courtesy of the artist and Katzman Contemporary

School Program Supporters and Partners



The Richmond Art Gallery School Art Program is one of many gallery programs made possible by the Richmond Art Gallery Association, a non-profit organization dedicated to extending the reach of our gallery exhibitions through community programming.



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