



## *Identities*

### **Overview**

*Identities* is an exhibition of art from the SBMA permanent collection dating from 1980 to the present, in which artists from Asia, Europe, and the Americas give expression to issues of personal and cultural identity. These works, in a variety of media, show how artists are seeking to express the ways in which globalization, technology, the personal and the political are intertwined, and to define what it means to be human in the 21st century.

*Discussion questions, writing assignments and art projects have all been designed to coordinate with California State Standards in Language Arts, Visual Arts and History-Social Science for grades 7-12.*



Nelson Leirner (Born Brazil, 1932)

### **Untitled, 2003**

From the series, *Right You Are If You Think You Are*, 2003

Digital print of an electronically manipulated photograph of an original collage  
Museum Purchase, with funds provided by Larry and Astrid Hammett

The Brazilian born artist, Nelson Leirner's image from 2003 works on a number of layers to remind us that outdated modes of thinking about the Americas no longer hold. Using cartography or maps as a starting point, Leirner shows us the fallacy of believing we can contain the complex reality of America within geographic boundaries. Not only does he get us to question the artificial distinctions of maps and borders but he also pokes fun of our popular conceptions of what being American means. Using icons from pop culture like Mickey Mouse and the calaveras or skeletons popular in Mexican folk culture, Leirner invites us to explore what those popular symbols stand for in today's world of fluid borders and globalization.

When Leirner flips the images (putting the skeletons in North America and the Mickeys in South) he is flipping our sensibilities as well and getting us to see that the definition of America or what is an American is all a matter of perception.

His methods of art making extend from hand applied stickers to digital photography, so that like the exhibition itself, Leirner's work transcends geography and chronology to propose a new identity.

**Maps-** Looking at historical maps provides a clue to how various societies have viewed the world. Analyzing borders and boundaries tells us how societies, including our own, view themselves in relation to the rest of the world. The role of maps in art, poetry, and literature tells us that maps can reflect a society's basic beliefs and emotions.

**Compare and contrast** versions of maps from the United States and South America from the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (teachers to select) Can you trace developing or disappearing borders to historical events such as the Louisiana Purchase, the War of the Pacific, or the Spanish American War? Look at examples of maps where California is seen as an island or vast parts of the globe remain uncharted-- where sea monsters or savages are included in the maps' design.

What connection do you think Leirner is making to maps' reliability? Can maps be emotional as well as factual? How might you map Santa Barbara as a reflection of your own knowledge and experience? What would be most prominent? Least? Would you emphasize the division between east side and west side? What would you leave out all together as if it didn't exist?

**Symbols-** Leirner uses Mickey Mouse, Minnie Mouse and the calaveras to suggest qualities of North and South America. Why do you think he chose those particular images? Do they remain fixed in one place? Why not? What do you think their movement suggests (immigration, trade, colonization, etc) Why doesn't he mix them together?

Television and advertising send images around the world so that they are recognized across cultures. Can you list some other symbols or logos that might be instantly recognized almost anywhere? What is positive about this fluidity? What is negative? Does the flow of culture go both ways- North to South and South to North? List some examples of each.

**Imagining-** If the two panels represent a kind of chronological vision of the Americas, what would a third panel include? Create your own third panel or write a description of what it would include.

How would you rearrange the icons on Leirner's map to represent your own vision of the Americas? If you could replace these icons with different symbols what would you choose?

## Self Portraits



Hung Liu (Born China, 1948)

### ***A Third World, 1993***

Oil on canvas with gold leaf on wood

Museum Purchase, with funds provided by the Twentieth-Century Art Acquisition Fund, Jill and John C. Bishop, Jr., and Lillian and Jon B. Lovelace

Hung Liu's *A Third World* addresses the complexities of personal and cultural identity that can arise from the immigrant experience. In her monumental self-portrait Hung Liu alludes to events that have shaped her, and like Nelson Leirner, she uses symbols to convey her message.

She presents herself larger than life and wearing a bright red scarf or shawl adorned with a Mao political button. The image of Mao refers to her experience as a young girl forced to leave school and work in the collective farms in order to be 're-educated' and freed of "elitist intellectual" prejudices. The gold-leaf third eye on her forehead is in the shape of San Francisco as cartographers first mapped it. In Chinese "San Francisco" translates as "Golden Mountain." (What historical associations can you make with San Francisco and gold?) By using this symbol associated with the inner world of eastern thought and then making it gold, the symbol of material aspiration of the West and the United States where popular myth suggested the streets are "paved with gold," Hung Liu suggests the conflict between these radically distinct ideologies- capitalism and communism. By connecting these ideologies with her personal story, she suggests the ramifications of relocation for herself and other Chinese immigrants.

### **Chinese Immigrants in America**

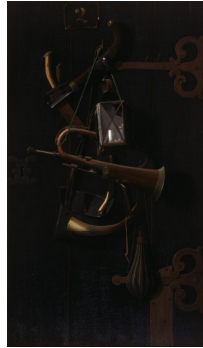
Research the stories of Chinese immigrants to "Gold Mountain" and write a description of the realities they encountered.

How do you think a member of the Red Guard would react to Hung Liu's portrait especially her reference to Mao? Write a monologue in his/her voice expressing your reaction.

### **Making it Personal**

Hung Liu uses symbols to create a self- portrait that reveals her personal and cultural history. Create your self-portrait inspired by Hung Liu. What symbols or objects might you incorporate? What size and shape would your portrait be? What colors might you use to convey emotions or mood? What cultural or historical references might you include?

### **Another artist to consider: John Frederick Peto**



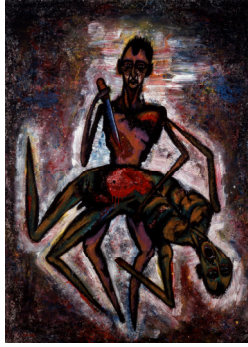
John Frederick Peto (United States, 1854-1907)

#### ***My Studio Door, 1895***

Oil on canvas

Gift of Mrs. Sterling Morton for the Preston Morton Collection

John Frederick Peto's *My Studio Door* also uses objects to create a kind of portrait or visual memoir. Memory is a foundation for identity- our family, cultural background, education all contribute to our sense of who we are. Peto arranged objects on a door that in and of themselves are a marvelous still life. But beyond the objects alone are their associations with Peto's life. The selection is deliberate. The trumpet may be a reference to his job playing cornet to lead the singing in the camp-meeting town of Island Heights, New Jersey. The bone-handled bowie knife, according to the Peto family tradition, was a souvenir from the battle of Gettysburg brought back by the artist's father. These memories charge the objects with a meaning beyond the representational. Like Hung Liu's Mao button, these objects connect to a personal and cultural history.



Luis Cruz Azaceta (Born Cuba, 1942)

***Double Self-Portrait: Aggressor/Victim, 1987***

Acrylic on canvas

SBMA, Museum Purchase, with funds provided by the Twentieth-Century Art Acquisition Fund and, in part, by Dr. and Mrs. Aaron Nisenson

Luis Cruz Azaceta left Cuba in 1960 at the age of 18, shortly after the revolution that brought Fidel Castro into power. He lived with an aunt and uncle in New Jersey taking art classes at an adult education center in Queens and later entered the School of Visual Arts in New York City. This painting is one of dozens of self-portraits that he has made over the years, seeing himself as “everyman.” He has said that self-portraiture enables him “to convey different conditions and situations, much like an actor assuming a role on stage.” In this double image, Azaceta plays at once, the Pieta, the Virgin Mary mourning the death of Christ, and the Moche spider deity associated with sacrificial rituals. Like Leirner, he mixes and layers cultural references. His work is not just an exploration of the personal but also a critique of the social structures and violence that dehumanize people and reduce them to abstractions or statistics. Like Hung Liu he extends his individual experience as an immigrant to include the alienation and anxiety felt by many.

Azaceta’s self-portrait does more than explore his own life or demonstrate his ability to identify with others: it takes apart the very notion of identity. In his portrait he creates a public self but it is not *himself*. Looking at his paintings is not like having a face-to-face encounter. It’s more like meeting on the internet—you never know who is on the other end.

**Violence**

In this challenging work, with its rough edges and “in your face boldness”, Azaceta confronts us with a figure who with glassy eyed- stare seems to be eviscerating himself. Do you think the violence of this scene contributes to its power? Detracts from it? What point do you think Azaceta is trying to make with this image? Psychologically or metaphorically we all sometimes feel the need to rid ourselves of a past “self” in order to succeed. This is particularly true during transition points (junior high to high school, single to married, student to professional) Can you think of examples in your experience? How would this apply to the immigrant experience in particular?

### **The Divided Self: A Poetic Exploration**

In his double self-portrait, Luis Cruz Azaceta gives us a powerful visual image of the division we sometimes feel within ourselves: who we are at our most private and in public, our best and our worst natures. In the poem that follows, the Spanish poet Juan Ramón Jiménez explores that same notion of a divided self, a self we may not even recognize.

#### ***Yo No Soy Yo***

Yo no soy yo.

Soy este  
que va a mi lado sin yo verlo;  
que a veces, voy a ver,  
y a que, a veces, olvido.  
el que calla, sereno, cuando hablo,  
el que perdona, dulce, cuando odio,  
el que pasea por donde no estoy,  
el que quedará en pie cuando yo muera.

I am not I

I am this one  
walking beside me whom I do not see,  
whom at times I manage to visit,  
and whom at other times I forget;  
who remains calm and silent while I talk,  
and forgives, gently, when I hate,  
who walks where I am not,  
who will remain standing when I die.

Translated by Robert Bly

How would you describe the speaker's two different selves?

Why do you think he visits his other self only some of the time?

Do you think that all people have an inner self that is different from the self they show the world? Explain your opinion.

How does this public and private version of ourselves surface on the internet on places like My Space, or the newly popular avatars?

Imagine that you are the speaker in *I Am Not I*. Turn the poem into a diary entry in which you describe in prose your thoughts and feelings about your identity. Base your entry on details from the poem.

#### ***Making it Personal***

Write a poem or create a sketch or painting depicting your own divided self or the ideal or alternative you.