

## RECORDING A CHANGING NATION

### *Extended Visual Analysis: Photographer's Choices*

**Duration:** 40 minutes

**Grade Level:** 6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade

**About this Resource:** With its focus on the artistic process, this activity serves to deepen visual analysis and an introduction to the strategies a photographer may deploy when taking a picture or editing it.

**Materials:** This activity will require access to print or electronic reproductions of select images. There is an additional online support available [HERE](#) that makes explicit some photographic strategies.

#### **Preparation:**

Select 6-10 photographs from one of the surveys below. Look particularly for images that you think would resonate with your students and demonstrate the breadth of the survey. Below are links to Smithsonian Learning Lab collections that gather a cross-section of survey images for you.

1. [Los Angeles, CA](#)
2. [Long Beach, CA](#)
3. Venice, CA (digital reproductions unavailable)
4. [Atlanta, GA](#)
5. [Lawrence, KS](#)
6. [Louisville, KY](#)
7. [Whitesburg, KY](#)
8. [Galveston, TX](#)
9. [Baltimore, MD](#)
10. [Mars Hill, NC](#)
11. [Buffalo, NY](#)
12. [Seattle, WA](#)
13. Cheyenne, WY (digital reproductions unavailable)

#### **Protocol:**

Present students with a selection of 6-10 photographs from a series that they may analyze in small groups. After each step, bring students back together so that they may share their discoveries and you can check their understanding.

1. *Warm Up:* Think about taking a photograph with your phone, camera, or other device. What decisions do you make? Make a list of 3-4 choices you make.
2. *Compare:* Look closely at each of the photographs in the analysis set. Group or categorize the photographs based on things that are visually similar. Regroup them a few times. If you get stuck, consider not just the subject of the photo but also the mood (the emotions the photograph conveys) or the strategies you listed in the Warm Up (lighting, filters, etc.).

3. **Connect**: Look at the list of strategies below to familiarize yourself with them. Of the strategies listed below, which one(s) did you list during the Warm Up?
  - Framing: Who or what is of central importance in the photograph? Where did the photographer stand in relation to the subject (near/far, above/below, etc.)? What's between the photographer and the subject?
  - Cropping: What extends beyond the frame? What is cropped out?
  - Light: Which parts of the photograph are darkest? Lightest? What is the light source?
  - Contrast: Compare the areas of darkness to the areas of light. Are they very different (high contrast) or quite similar (low contrast)? Which unlike colors, patterns, or textures appear nearby one another (high contrast)? Which similar colors, patterns, or textures appear nearby one another (low contrast)?
  - Depth of Field: How far away do the farthest-away parts of the photograph seem? Has the photographer created a deep or shallow space?
4. **Categorize**: Look closely at each of the photographs in the analysis set again. Categorize the photographs based on the strategies the photographer used, such as:
  - Closely cropped, wide angle
  - High contrast, low contrast
  - Deep field, shallow field

**Note:** If students get stuck, provide an example from the “[Uncover Complexity](#)” visual reference to model this activity to the whole group. Then turn the task back over to small groups.

5. **Observe**: Working with your small group, choose one photograph that catches your eye. Look at each part of it closely. What do you *see*? What can you point to and name? Make as long an inventory as you can, collecting input from every member of your group. Refrain from interpreting or telling a story yet.
6. **Reflect**: How have the photographer's choices guided your attention? To whom or what? Which of the strategies from Step Three most influenced your thinking?
7. **Interpret**: What's going on in this photograph? What story or message does it convey? What makes you say that? Which of the strategies from Step Three most influenced your thinking?
8. **Whole Class Synthesis**: Discuss the process of looking closely at first a group of photographs and then a single photograph. How did looking at that photograph individually rather than in a set change your thinking about it? When else might it be important to slow down and look carefully at a single part rather than a large group?

**Note:** If your students work on tablets, consider using individual tablets to access each of the photographs you pre-selected. Students may then move the tablets to make groupings during Steps Two through Five.

**Formative Assessments:** Steps Six and Seven provide two formative assessment points. Check that students are using the terms from Step Three correctly and with increasing facility. Check also that students articulate a distinction between things they see (observations) and what they think about the things they see (interpretation).