

Identity Construction and The Mirror Stage

The French Psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, argues that the Mirror Stage forms an essential, permanent part of the structure of subjectivity. When an infant (around six-eighteen months) recognizes themselves in a mirror, he argues, it is a fundamental *misrecognition*. The infant sees and forms an “Ideal I” in response to their image, and thus assumes “the armour of an alienating identity” (Lacan, *Ecrits*, 4). Their image represents a stable and autonomous version of themselves: a “Self” which they do not experience in real life.

This is the formation of the Ego, or the “Ideal I.” Lacan insists that the Ego is based on the illusory image of wholeness and mastery. Thus, for Lacan, the function of the ego is *mis-recognition*: the Ego identifies the self with ideas, images, and objects that come from the outside. The Self, the imaginary “I,” continues to be constructed from the outside as the baby develops and enters into the Symbolic order – the world of subjects and objects, predefined social roles, and language. The Mirror Stage, psychoanalytic theory, and identity construction more broadly have all had a lasting impact on critical theory, psychology, and many discipline-specific schools of thought.

Students can have difficulties understanding the complexity of The Mirror Stage as theory. Visual art, in a rich and distinctive way, can help. The following objects from SU Art Museum’s collections were pulled to help illustrate and concretize this idea of the “I” as constructed. Through a variety of mediums and artists, the objects provide visual evidence for what one means by “identity construction.” This module is designed to be adaptable to specific courses, assignments, and learning goals. They could serve as visual aids during a lecture, as prompts for discussion, as illustrations for visual note-taking guides, or as follow-up reflection tools. The suggested works can be used in tandem or on their own to help students understand—to see—what can otherwise be an evasive theoretical concept.



Object # 2019.0055

Title: “Baby, Baby”

Artist: Louisa Chase (American, born Panama, 1951-2016)

Medium: color etching and relief

Dimensions: 21 1/2 x 25 3/4 in. (54.6 x 65.4 cm)

Date: 1991

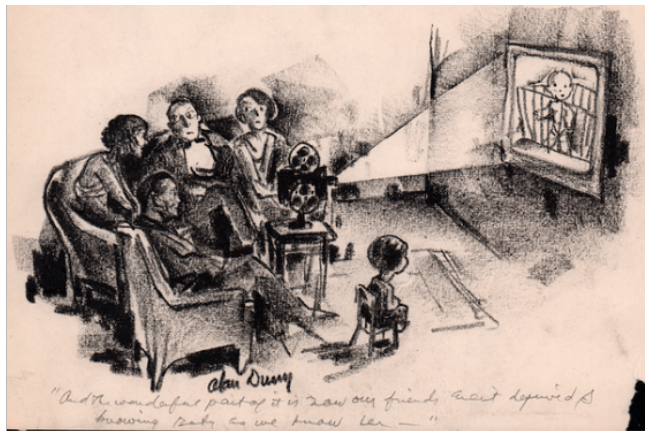
Louisa Chase was an American neo-expressionist painter and printmaker. She received her BFA in printmaking from Syracuse University in 1973. Her work combines bright colors, bold brush strokes, geometric forms, and chaotic lines. *Baby, Baby* plays with the idea of

boundedness: a geometric form of an infant’s body is juxtaposed by a wild series of rounded lines, on top of which rests a smaller, similar geometric infant-form. Around the image, Chase placed sketch-like versions of a swaddled infant alongside lightly etched non-representative shapes.

While the artwork suggests a number of interpretations, it offers a remarkable representation of identity as understood by Lacan. *Baby, Baby* in many ways illustrates the unboundedness of identity pre-

mirror stage: chaotic and uncontained by the body, as seen by the lines over and beyond the geometric shape of an infant or the swaddling blanket and the frame out of which the infant breaks (see: top right corner). The infant here has *not yet* mis-identified themselves with a whole and unified “Self.”

Discussion questions: What strikes you about this image? How do you know it is a baby? What is the relationship between line(s) and form(s)? How does Chase use color, and what effect does it have on the viewer? How does she use shadow and mirroring, and why? What might this image say about “identity?” Use visual evidence to support your answer(s).



Object # 1979.1707

Title: “- and the wonderful part of it is that now our own friends aren’t deprived of knowing Baby as we know her.”

Artist: Alan Dunn (American, 1900-1974)

Medium: crayon

Dimensions: Object: 10 11/16 × 7 3/8 in. (27.1 × 18.8 cm) Sheet: 10 11/16 × 7 3/8 in. (27.1 × 18.8 cm)

Date: 1927

Alan Dunn is likely *The New Yorker’s* most prolific cartoonist. Over forty-seven years, he created over 2000 cartoons and nine covers for the magazine. His cartoons provide fascinating historical, political, and cultural commentary over much of the twentieth century, especially the 1920s-1960s. It is worth noting that the cartoon genre offers another layer of signification: not only does the caption provide words to supplement the image, but it also encodes the work with both humor and irony.

This cartoon shows a family gathered around a projector that shows an image of “Baby.” The child, presumably slightly older, sits with them. The caption, in tandem with the image, illustrates the concept of the *mis-recognition*. Dunn writes, “- and the wonderful part of [the projector] is that now our own friends aren’t deprived of knowing Baby as we know her.” While not a mirror, specifically, this cartoon exhibits how an *image* of Baby comes to replace the Self. Dunn, in his caption and drawing, questions the idea of “knowing.” He pokes fun at the assumption that a person’s image, or representation, could *be* them. Further analysis might consider Baby’s identity as bounded (and mis-identified) by not only her image, but also by gender, age, or even class, all of which are represented visually and/or linguistically.

Discussion questions: How do the friends in Dunn’s cartoon “know” Baby? Why is that ironic or funny (ie: why would that be a cartoon)? How does this cartoon relate to the Mirror Stage? How else is Baby’s identity constructed from the outside (hint: what other external characteristics, ideas, or objects influence how other perceive and recognize “Baby”)? What might Dunn be saying about images and representation? How would Lacan *read* this cartoon?



Object # 1988.750

Title: Woman with Mirror

Artist: unknown

Medium: albumen print hand-tinted

Dimensions: Object: $5 \frac{3}{8} \times 3 \frac{11}{16}$ in. (13.7 × 9.3 cm) Sheet: $5 \frac{7}{8} \times 4 \frac{1}{4}$ in. (15 × 10.8 cm)

Date: circa 1890

This photograph was taken by an unknown photographer in Japan around the turn of the nineteenth century. Like many of the works in this module, it participates in the woman-and-mirror motif. A gendered examination of this theme could go well with a discussion of the mirror stage, in which larger questions about identity are bound. This photograph visually exemplifies

the notion that identity is neither stable nor complete. The two mirrors communicate that the notion of a “unified self” is an illusion. It helps to illustrate Lacan’s insistence that identity is always constructed from the outside, and that the idea of the “self” is not one unchanging “Other.” Rather, according to Lacan, the “I” identifies with multiple images, and it is always in the process of being constructed from the outside.

Discussion Questions: What might the two mirrors signify? How does the woman’s interaction with the two mirrors relate to Lacan’s “Mirror Stage?” What do you notice about the photograph? Where is the woman looking, and what do you think that means? How is her identity constructed from the outside?



Object # 1967.1700

Title: “Woman looking at her face in mirror”

Artist: Kitagawa Utamaro (Japanese, 1753-1806)

Medium: woodcut

Dimensions: $14 \frac{7}{8} \times 10$ in. (37.8 x 25.4 cm)

Date: circa 1800

Utamaro was a late-eighteenth century Japanese artist most famous for his ukiyo-e woodblock prints and paintings. He posthumously influenced European impressionists in the mid-nineteenth century. His work often depicts beautiful women with elongated, exaggerated facial features.

Woman looking at her face in mirror features such a subject. Similar to *Woman with Mirror*, this woodcut participates in the same aesthetic

tradition of women with mirrors. Specifically, this work highlights gendered representation via makeup, which offers another approach to teaching how identity is constructed from the outside. It could also be worth considering how and why Utamaro, a Japanese man, constructs the identity of this unnamed woman. Both nationality and gender can be examined, perhaps in comparison to the above photograph by an unknown artist. The artist/subject—or perhaps constructor/constructed—relationship provides another useful and fruitful entry into the study of identity construction and/or the Mirror Stage.

Discussion questions: How does Utamaro construct his subject? Why might he include a mirror? What effect does the shade, which covers half of the woman's face, have on the viewer? What does this image have to say about identity? How might a reading of this work change if the woman *was* named?



Object # 1976.13

Title: "La femme au miroir [Woman with mirror]"

Artist: Fernand Léger

Medium: lithograph

Dimensions: Object: 9 7/16 × 7 3/4 in. (23.9 × 19.7 cm) Sheet: 10 7/8 × 8 in. (27.7 × 20.3 cm)

Date: 1920

Léger was a French painter in the early-mid twentieth century. His early works exemplified a personal form of cubism that came to be known as "tubism" for their emphasis on cylindrical forms. *La femme au miroir* plays, or perhaps questions, the "wholeness" of identity. The fragmented forms visually exemplify how a complete, mastered identity is an illusion.

One might center a discussion on the mirror itself, or perhaps the woman's eyes, or the effect of the lines. Furthermore, Léger provides another example of the "woman with mirror" tradition. A discussion about the way(s) in which he participates and/or complicates the tradition could prove fruitful.

Discussion questions: What is the woman's relationship to the mirror? How do you think she sees herself? How do viewers see her? How does abstract art represent people differently? What *else* does it allow viewers to see? How does cubism, or in Léger's case, tubism, help us understand Lacan's idea that identity is unstable or fragmented? Use visual evidence and examples to support your answer(s).



Object # 1967.989

Title: "The Disappearing Self-Portrait"

Artist: Federico Castellón (American, born Spain, 1914-1971)

Medium: etching aquatint

Dimensions: 8 3/4 x 11 3/4 in

Date: circa 1965

Federico Castellón was born in Spain and later emigrated with his family to the US, where they lived in Brooklyn, New York. He is considered a largely self-taught artist whose talents were first recognized at a

young eighteen. Artist Diego Rivera encouraged Castellón and facilitated his discovery. He is best known and admired for his lithographs and etchings which are the first American-made examples of Surrealism. He was inspired by poetry, especially that of Edgar Allen Poe, Charles Baudelaire, William Blake, and others. *The Disappearing Self-Portrait* shows a surrealist refusal to show an ideal, whole "self." Castellón, instead of representing an ideal I, highlights the self in conflict, another important part of Lacan's theories. One might even explore the surrealist/realist movements in respect to psychoanalysis, as the art movements are deeply connected to identity, emotion, and the subconscious.

Discussion questions: How does Castellón represent emotion? How does this work make you feel—why? What do you think Castellón means by a “disappearing” self-portrait? How does that relate to the mirror stage and identity construction? How or why would a person’s identity be in conflict?



1. Object # 1965.0343.148

Title: [two women looking at window display]

Artist: Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen

Medium: color lithograph

Dimensions: Object: 13 3/16 × 9 1/4 in. (33.5 × 23.5 cm) Sheet: 15 11/16 × 11 3/8 in. (39.9 × 28.9 cm)

Date: 1896

Théophile Steinlen was a Swiss-French painter and printmaker in the Art Nouveau movement. He created several poster art pieces on commission for a cabaret and other commercial enterprises. His works often feature his daughter, Collette. [*Two women looking at window display*] depicts two women, the first of whom looks much like Collette, as they stare at

consumable jewelry. The window, a reflective surface, is a kind of mirror. Rather than seeing their own reflections, their likenesses are replaced by material objects. Steinlen’s piece thus represents the way in which, after infancy and the mirror stage, a person continues to misidentify themselves in outside objects. This piece also displays the connection between identity construction and consumerism.

Discussion questions: How is a display window similar to a mirror? How is it different? What does it mean to say that these women “identify” with the objects on display? How are their identities being constructed via consumerism? How does (or does not) Steinlen represent identity as unstable or incomplete?



Object # 1960.038

Title: Picture Admirers

Artist: Max Weber (American, born Russia, 1881-1961)

Medium: Oil

Dimensions: 25 × 30 in.

Date: 1952

Max Weber was born in Russia and emigrated to the United States at ten years old. He is most famous for his paintings, although he also created lithographs, woodcuts, sculptures, and even poetry. He worked in Henri Matisse’s studio in France and brought many French and European modernist styles back to the

United States. *Picture Admirers* exemplifies Weber’s interest in form, color, reality, and representation. It asks about the relationship between art, humanity, reality, and perception. Weber’s painting juxtaposes the color of the image (or picture) with the devoid forms of the women. Through color and movement, this work further communicates both how the “I” comes from the outside and how identity construction is a process. One could choose to draw attention to the subjects—the “picture admirers”—or to the formal qualities of Weber’s painting, namely his use of color, line, and shape, to teach about identity.

Discussion questions: What colors does Weber draw attention to, and why do you think he does so? (Hint: he uses primary colors). Why might he be interested in painting an image of people “admiring” a picture? What could this painting be saying about reality, art, or perception? How are or are not the women’s identities “constructed?” Do the women look “finished”—why or why not? What does that have to do with identity construction?



Object # 1980.507

Title: Triple Self Portrait

Artist: Norman Rockwell

Medium: lithograph

Dimensions: Object: 26 × 20 in. (66 × 50.8 cm) Sheet: 31 9/16 × 24 in. (80.2 × 61 cm)

Date: circa 1960

Norman Rockwell is one of the most famous American illustrators and painters. Known for his representation of American culture during the twentieth century, he illustrated some of the most iconic American works such as *Rosie the Riveter*, *The Problem We All Live With*, and the *Four Freedoms* series. This print offers a plethora of talking points for Lacan’s theories. One might center on the waste basket, which apparently contains discarded attempts at his self-portrait and pertains to the ideal nature of the constructed “I.” One could focus on the relationship to the mirror and Rockwell’s glasses, which seem to be tiny mirrors through which the artist views the world. Or one could choose any of the objects around him, such as the helmet or prints that allude to traditional portraiture, which expose the identity as constructed.

Discussion questions: How does Rockwell represent himself? How does he simultaneously participate in and question the self-portrait genre? What might this portrait say about identity construction? Why might he represent the process of a self-portrait rather than a “finished” product? How does that relate to Lacan’s theories about identity? Activity: choose one object in the print to focus on and write two-three sentences about why Rockwell may have included it in his self-portrait.



Object # 2020.0029

Title: Erratic Eyes (from the “Transformation” series)

Artist: Ivan Forde (Guyanese-American, born 1990)

Medium: digital inkjet print collage

Dimensions: 13 1/2 x 12 1/4 in.

Date: 2012

Ivan Forde is a contemporary Guyanese-American photographer. His work utilizes photography and new media to tell stories, investigate race, and convey emotion. He has an academic background in literature, and his “Transformation” series is based on the experience of reading *Paradise Lost*, John Milton’s epic poem. *Erratic Eyes* might be used to highlight the centrality of perception within identity construction. One could even rebrand the work as the “Erratic I” to suggest the instability of identifying with an “Other,” whether image, person, or self. The multiple directions of the gaze, or perhaps the black-and-white interplay, offer starting points to discuss identity in conflict.

Discussion questions: Why do you think Forde edited in additional eyes? Why are they all looking in different directions? How does this work make you feel? What emotions does this collage evoke—why, and how? Imagine the work was titled “Erratic I’s.” How would that relate to Lacan’s ideas about identity construction?



Object # 1966.160

Title: [Self-portrait (mask)]

Artist: Malvina Hoffman (American, 1885-1966)

Medium: Terracotta

Dimensions: 10 x 7 1/4 x 5 in

Date: 1928

Malvina Hoffman was a 20th-century American sculptor and author. She is best known for her life-size bronze sculptures of people. She won many awards and honors, and she was member of the National Sculpture Society. Hoffman worked in bronze, marble, and terracotta. *[Self-portrait (mask)]* shows a replica of Hoffman’s face. Sculpture as a medium poses new questions about the mirror stage: it is an image

and an object that has a presence all its own. One might consider, in light of the Mirror Stage, her closed eyes as an attempt to turn inward to find one’s identity. One might also consider the lack of a body, per the bust tradition, and how that impacts the idea of the “self-portrait.” The given title, with the seemingly contradictory labels “self portrait” and “mask,” further offers a chance to understand identity construction.

Discussion questions: How do you read a material object? How does this sculpted self-portrait differ from two-dimensional portraits? Why might Hoffman have sculpted an image of herself with her eyes closed? How would Lacan explain the relationship between the two nouns in the title: “self-portrait” and “mask?”