

# AS

## Beauty and the Body in Contemporary Art



GRAND VALLEY  
STATE UNIVERSITY  
ART GALLERY

**Thomas J. and Marcia J. Haas  
Center for Performing Arts**

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# About this Guide

The information below can be used as a launch pad into learning about the themes of the exhibition. The questions and prompts can be used to start a deep-dive discussion about the artwork on view.



## THE FIGURE, THE BODY, THE PORTRAIT

The human form, in art, can be understood in multiple ways. Artists study the figure and learn to render its likeness to suit their creative curiosities. Alternatively, artists utilize [the body](#) as a site for political discourse and the assertion of social and cultural power dynamics. Other artists create portraits of themselves or other real people to share specific, subjective lived experiences.

- Consider the work in the gallery. Which are portraits of real people? Which use the figure as a compositional element? Which use the body to explore political, social, and cultural issues?



## THE BODY IN ART HISTORY

Throughout art history artists have used [the human form](#) to explore, construct and reinforce concepts of gender and sexuality, ideals of beauty, cultural values, and power dynamics. In the history of western image making, a concept that historians, critics, and makers often consider is [the gaze](#); a concept that refers to how a viewer sees the figure represented in a work of art and how that vantage point reflects power dynamics between the subject, artist, viewer and broader society.

- With the idea of the gaze in mind, look at one or two works in the gallery, ask yourself, what's going on here? Who is the subject? Who is the artist? Who is looking? Who is in a position of power?



## THE BODY BECOMING

The bodies in this exhibition, depicted for various purposes, share a common condition; their interpretations change with each audience. Bodies in art, like bodies in life, are contingent upon the culture, time period, and political climate in which they exist. Further, some bodies are real, others created or imagined.

- Consider the ways you use your own body to represent your self, your ideas, values, and beliefs. How does technology filter your understanding of bodies?
- Consider an artwork in the gallery, how does your lived experience impact your understanding of the bodies depicted here, and how does that differ from someone else's understanding?

To learn more about representations of the body throughout art history, how intersecting identities influence artists, and feminist art historical perspectives check out our exhibition webpage at [gvsu.edu/artgallery/asis](http://gvsu.edu/artgallery/asis).