

Language Matters

Basquiat said, “I cross out words so you will see them more; the fact that they are obscured makes you want to read them.” Self-portraits give us the opportunity to think about how we are seen and how we see ourselves, and perhaps reveal insights during the process. Complete this portrait in a way that helps you reflect on how words have a gravity to them as you consider the words we use when describing ourselves or others.



Close Looking

Before the lesson, have the image of *Sam F* on a screen large enough for all students to see it. Refrain from adding any information about the image and begin the lesson with Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS).

Students are encouraged to spend time examining the image (a full 1–2 minutes).

Optional: Students could also write down several observations before the discussion.

Ask students:

- What is going on in the image?
- What do you see that makes you say that?
- What more can we find, or what more can you see?

Make sure all observations and comments are accepted equally. The facilitator of the conversation should stay neutral toward all comments, but can dig further into topics like the wheelchair/someone who might have a disability, the animal above the person, the use of lines or color, and how the artist used words and text in the image.

Questions to Dig Deeper

- How can we be labeled by others?
- Why do our words matter?
- What happens when we feel different than a group does?
- How can we fit in and still be ourselves?

Activity: Make a Mark

Students will be given one page from a book (most books will work for this exercise but sample pages will be included).

Ask students to mark out most words and only leave adjectives that could describe people. These can be positive, negative, or neutral in context.

Adjectives are words that describe nouns or pronouns. In other words, they describe people, places, or things. Examples that could describe a person are "old," "fun," and "cheerful," etc.

Next, have students look through the words that are left on the page and think about any of the words that stand out.

Ask students why they think the words stood out and ask them to share some of their words.

Contextual Information: Jean-Michel Basquiat

Jean-Michel Basquiat was one of the most important and celebrated American painters of the 1980s. Of Haitian and Puerto Rican descent, he is known for his dense, meaning-laden text and imagery drawn from multiple sources: pop culture, music and literature, West African and Afro-American religious practices, athletics, and art history, among others.

Basquiat created *Sam F* during a visit to Dallas in 1985. He painted the portrait for his friends Sam and Helga Feldman, who were important philanthropists, advocates for arts and culture, and art collectors living in Dallas. The painting was gifted to the DMA by the late Samuel Feldman (he's the "Sam" it's named for!). Basquiat often painted on found materials, and *Sam F* is painted with oil on a door from the apartment complex where the Feldmans lived.

Activity: Seen and Unseen

Often Basquiat's portraits resemble both masks and skulls, which represent concepts of inward and outward, seen and unseen. Use his paintings of others as inspiration and invitation to create a self-portrait—an image that represents you.

A self-portrait is a picture, photograph, or piece of writing that an artist makes of or about themselves. It is a work of art in which the artist portrays themselves as the subject of the artwork.

Discussion Questions

Is this artwork realistic? Does a self-portrait need to be realistic?

Start by drawing an outline of a head that roughly resembles a skull or mask on the marked-out book page. Think of words that can label or define you on the exterior and either write or draw symbols to represent these parts of you—write or draw those on the OUTSIDE of the skull or mask shape.

Then think about some inward thoughts, ideas, or beliefs you hold that are not always visible on the exterior. What are some colors, words, symbols, or even lines that you could use to represent those parts of you—words that lift you. Place those on the INSIDE of the head shape.

Suggested Supplies • Crayons • Oil pastels • Sharpies • Book pages • Collage paper

Additional Resources

Radiant Child, by Javaka Steptoe

Big, by Vashti Harrison

Life Doesn't Frighten Me, by Maya Angelou, illustrated by Jean-Michel Basquiat

Image: *Sam F*, 1985. Jean-Michel Basquiat. Oil on door. Dallas Museum of Art, gift of Samuel N. and Helga A. Feldman, 2019.31. © Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Licensed by Artstar, New York.