Where are these figures? What do we know about them based on what we can see? What more can we learn about someone beyond their appearance? What are invisible traits? How will you show positive and negative space in your composition?
Where are these figures? What do we know about them based on what we can see?
How will you show positive and negative space in your composition?

Deborah Roberts, *Fighting all the ISM*, 2019. Mixed media collage on canvas. 72 x 60 inches. Artwork © Deborah Roberts. Courtesy the artist; Vielmetter Los Angeles; and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Image courtesy The Contemporary Austin. Photograph by Paul Bardagjy.
OBJECTIVES:
1. Explore two mixed media collages by Austin-based contemporary artist Deborah Roberts by describing what you see using details. Compare and contrast two works of art by the same artist using appropriate vocabulary.
2. Discuss details and specifics of each figure, including clothing, posture, body language, facial expressions, and age. Use these observations to relate to the figure in the picture. Explore the concept of identity, especially the limits of what you can know about someone based on how they look. For example, what might make someone seem older than they actually are, or younger?
3. Identify and define positive space and negative space and how these two compositional elements function in the two works of art. Relate this discussion to the setting of a story.
4. Create a portrait or self-portrait that uses positive and negative space.

MATERIALS:
- Blank paper for drawing
- Any drawing tool available

WARM-UP:
In this lesson, students will be exploring what we can learn about someone based on what is visible. Reflect on how each of us has a lot to learn about each other, especially since our true identity isn’t always shown by our appearance. Invite students to share two things about themselves, either in writing or verbally:
1. Clothes: What are you wearing today that tells us something about who you are? If nothing, think of your favorite outfit and why you love it.
   a. I am wearing ________ because ________.
2. Place: Where are you during this lesson? How are you taking up space in this place?
   a. Here I am in my ____________, and I am ___________ (sitting, standing, lounging).

Now that you know these two things, explore the same two elements with the works of art. Keep in mind that we were able to speak for ourselves with clothing and placement, but the figures we are about to look at and discuss are unable to do this. Let’s remember to support our observations with visual evidence, and reflect on why we might notice certain details.

LOOK:
Show one of the mixed media collages, either Jamal or Fighting all the ISM. Ask the following questions and facilitate an open-ended conversation with both images:
- **Clothing**: We shared what we were wearing. How would you describe this figure’s outfit? What did you notice first? What colors or textures do you see? What might we learn about this person, based on how they’re dressed? How might clothing lead us to assume something about someone?
  - Context: In American society, clothing has been used as justification for disciplinary action in schools, arrests in communities, and even murder. Particularly for Black youth, certain styles of clothing are often misperceived by others as indicating that they are criminal or dangerous because of cultural stereotypes (or assumptions). Discuss how judgments based on a person’s appearance are often based on false assumptions. If helpful, explore the saying “don’t judge a book by its cover” in this discussion. Invite students to share their thoughts about judging someone based on their clothing (or other aspects of their appearance). Use concrete examples that are relevant to your teaching setting and community.
- **Facial expressions and features**: Deborah Roberts uses found images to create the faces of these figures. After finding different faces in magazines, archives, and other media, she cuts up the images into smaller parts to create a whole new composite portrait, combining multiple people to form one person. How would you describe the parts that make up the whole face? What emotions do you see in the eyes? The mouth? How old would you guess each part might be? Why might an artist combine young and old facial features to create this figure? What about the different emotions?
- **Place**: We shared details about where we are today. The artist, Deborah Roberts, placed this figure... where? What do you know about the setting or place? How is this person taking up space? How would you describe their posture, or the way their body is arranged in the picture? What might we learn about
the figure based on their body language? Sometimes people hide their feelings with body language. What might this figure be hiding? What other feelings might they have that we cannot see?

- **Positive Space**: Positive space in a work of art includes anything the artist added. What is included in the positive space in these two pictures? Why do you think Deborah Roberts chose and created these details?
- **Negative Space**: Negative space in a work of art includes any spaces between the positive spaces. It can also be the spaces around what the artist added. How would you describe the negative space in these two pictures? What do you imagine the setting or negative space to be? Why?

**CREATE AND DO:**
After spending time discussing the two works of art by Deborah Roberts, and how they relate to character analysis and identity, explore the artist’s techniques by creating a work of art. Each student will create either a portrait of someone else, or a self-portrait.

- **Plan what you want to share**: create a list of character traits you’d like to share in your picture. Who is this person? How will we know? What are they wearing? How are they feeling? Where are they? If it’s you, what do you want someone to know about you? What do you care about, and how might you share that?
- **Sketch your composition, paying attention to positive and negative space**: In *Jamal*, Deborah Roberts filled the scene with the figure. In *Fighting all the ISM*, Deborah Roberts placed the figure at the top of the picture, either floating or sitting on something tall. How will you use the space? How big will your figure be? Which areas will you add details to, and which will you leave as the blank paper? Why?
- **Create your portrait**: Use the available materials to create a portrait or self-portrait. Experiment with ways to show character traits through clothing, posture, body language, facial expressions, and age. Pay attention to the setting and how that might invite the viewer to imagine where this figure might be.
- **Share what you made**: When you’re ready, share what you made with someone. Invite them to describe the person you’ve shown using the following questions: What do you know about this person, based on what I included? What more would you want to know if you were able to ask them questions? Where might this person be in time or in space? Where would you place them?

**RESOURCES:**
Explore these additional resources to support learning.

- **The Contemporary Austin’s resources**: [https://thecontemporaryaustin.org/exhibitions/deborah-roberts/](https://thecontemporaryaustin.org/exhibitions/deborah-roberts/)
  - Watch this video of a conversation between Deborah Roberts and Heather Pesanti. Open for Discussion: Texas Art Talks: [https://vimeo.com/525685698](https://vimeo.com/525685698)
  - Watch this video of Deborah Roberts talking about her mural, *Little man, little man*: [https://vimeo.com/491854728](https://vimeo.com/491854728)
- **Black Lives Matter from a youth perspective**: [https://youtu.be/muy5zpqs1Rc](https://youtu.be/muy5zpqs1Rc)
  - Watch the above video from Jolia Bossette, an 11-year-old in California, and accompanying interview with her.
  - Specific to this lesson, spend time exploring the facets of self-awareness and social awareness.