

JESS T. DUGAN

I want you to know my story

Educator Handout: Grades 7-12

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

[*I want you to know my story*](#) presents recent photographs from St. Louis-based artist [Jess T. Dugan's](#) ongoing *Every Breath We Drew* series. The artist writes, "My creative practice centers around an exploration of identity - particularly gender and sexuality - through photographic portraiture. Drawing from my experience as a queer, non-binary person, my work is motivated by an existential need to understand and express myself and to connect with others." The exhibition title is excerpted from a creative text Dugan wrote to accompany these photographs in their newest book, *Look at me like you love me*, self-described as a "visual poem." Additional passages from the book are installed throughout the exhibition as a poetic current flowing under the works.

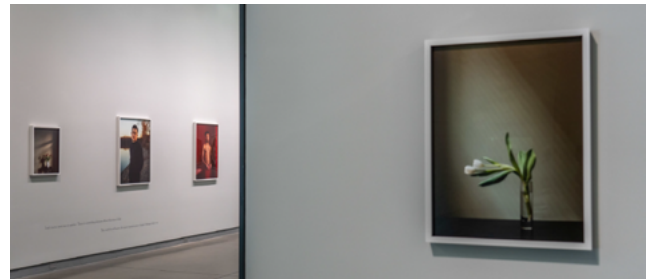
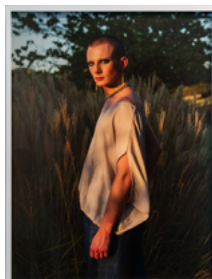
ABOUT THE ARTIST

Dugan has received an ICP Infinity Award, a Pollock-Krasner Foundation grant, and was selected as an LGBT Artist Champion of Change by the White House. Dugan has also done editorial work for *The New York Times*, *ACLU Magazine*, *Time*, *The Guardian*, and *The New York Times Magazine*. They are a co-founder of the Strange Fire Collective, which highlights work made by women, people of color, and LGBTQ artists. Dugan received their MFA in Photography from Columbia College, Chicago; MLA in Museum Studies from Harvard University; and BFA in Photography from the Massachusetts College of Art and Design. Dugan's work is represented by ClampArt, New York City, and Turner Carroll Gallery, Santa Fe.

VOCABULARY

- **Artist's book:** a work of art in a book or book-like form¹
- **Composition:** the arrangement of visual imagery in an artwork
- **Context:** the situation or setting in which something exists or occurs
- **Crop:** a compositional technique used to determine the outer edges of an image
- **Curate:** to select, prepare, and arrange images, objects, or artworks for display
- **Identity:** our understanding of who we are and where we belong. Our identities are shaped by our experiences and can change over time.
- **Still life:** an image comprised of inanimate objects
- **Symbol:** an image or object that stands for something else—such as a flower used to represent life
- **Subject matter:** what is portrayed or suggested in an artwork—such as a person, place, or thing
- **Theme:** recurring ideas, materials, or subject matter

¹Otis College of Art and Design (n.d.). *What is an artist's book?* <https://www.otis.edu/library/what-artists-book#>.



Left to right: Jess T. Dugan, *Self-portrait with Vanessa*, 2020; *Oskar at Sunset*, 2020; Installation view of *Jess T. Dugan: I want you to know my story*, University Galleries of Illinois State University, 2022. Pigmented inkjet prints. Courtesy of the artist; ClampArt, New York, New York; and Turner Carroll Gallery, Santa Fe, New Mexico. Installation view photo credit: Jade Nguyen.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

RESPOND - VA:Re8 - Construct meaningful interpretations of artistic work.

Divide the class into small groups. Provide students with the following prompts to analyze the exhibition [Jess T. Dugan: I want you to know my story](#).

1. Select a portrait to focus on.
 - What do you think the person or people might be thinking or feeling based on their body language and facial expression(s)?
 - How do the colors, lighting, and location impact the mood conveyed by the image?
 - What **contextual** information can you find in the photograph that suggests Dugan's relationship with the subject(s)? If you are viewing a portrait of two people, what do you see that suggests their relationship with one another?
 - Read the text along the bottom of the gallery walls. Can you find a section that relates to your chosen portrait? In what ways does the text impact the way you read the image?
2. Compare Dugan's portraits and self-portraits.
 - How are they similar? What differences do you notice?
 - In what ways is photographing oneself different from photographing someone else?
3. Select a **still life** from the exhibition.
 - How does your chosen still life relate to **themes** present in Dugan's work—such as identity, connection, love, loss, and aging? Consider how the **subject matter**, lighting, and **composition** impact the way you read the work.
4. If you had to represent the exhibition through one portrait, one self-portrait, one still life, and one section of text, which would you select? What ideas and themes are conveyed by your selection?

Encourage each group to share their selections and observations with the class.

CREATE - VA:Cr1.2 - Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

As [stated](#) by Dugan, portraits in this series "examine the intersection between private, individual identity and the search for intimate connection with others." Prompt students to create a series of photographs that convey aspects of their own **identities** as well as their relationships with people, places, and things in their lives that they connect with most deeply. Encourage them to include a combination of portraits, self-portraits, and still lifes in their series. Provide students with the following prompts to consider while planning and creating their photographs.

- When and where will you photograph your subject(s)?
- Consider how clothing, lighting, location, pose, facial expression, eye contact, hairstyle, and makeup impact what is communicated to the viewer.
- What techniques might you use to suggest your relationship with your subject(s)? Reference Dugan's use of eye contact, tight **cropping**, and photographing their subjects at eye level to prompt connection between the viewer and their subjects.
- When selecting **still life** objects, consider their **symbolic** function. What ideas do you want to convey to the viewer? How might you use lighting, location, and **composition** to enhance the communication of these ideas?
- Communication is an important aspect of the collaborative process. Consider how you will engage your subject(s) in the creative process. What decisions will you make independently, and which will be made together?

PRESENT - VA:Pr6.1 - Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work.

Prompt students to select photographs from their series that best convey the intended meaning behind the work. Guide students in writing supplementary text to accompany their work. Consider having students **curate** an exhibition of their work or design their own **artist's books**.

- Educator resources are available on the exhibition [webpage](#).

You can find [University Galleries](#) on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), and [Vimeo](#) and sign up to receive email updates through the [newsletter](#). Please contact galleries@IllinoisState.edu or call (309) 438-5487 if you need to arrange an accommodation to participate in any events related to this exhibition.

