

Unit 6: Politics

Ross Bleckner

Double Portrait (Gay Flag)



Ross Bleckner (American, b. 1949)

Double Portrait (Gay Flag), 1993

Oil on canvas, 108 1/8 x 72 1/4 in. (274.6 x 183.5 cm)

Francis A. Jennings Bequest, in memory of his wife,
Gertrude Feder Jennings, 2000-15

Getting Started

- Describe the abstract qualities of this painting, that is, the use of color, line, composition, texture, scale, and two- versus three-dimensional elements.
- In what ways is the painting abstract? In what ways is it representational?
- Does the painting remind you of a familiar **symbol** or object? Take another look and see if you can spot another symbol. (*Rainbow; rainbow flag; Star of David at the top of the painting in the center.*)
- What do you think about the title of this work, *Double Portrait (Gay Flag)*? Do you think of this painting as a portrait? What could the “double” refer to?
- Compare Bleckner’s work to an actual gay pride flag, also known as the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) flag or the rainbow flag. How is it similar? How is it different? (Consider such elements as material, size, proportion, color, detail, context, functionality, etc.)

Looking Closely

The canvas is divided into six even vertical stripes, each painted a color of the rainbow. The colors of the spectrum proceed from red on the left to purple on the right. Bleckner’s brushstrokes are visible, and upon closer inspection the solid stripes of color reveal some modulation. The dimensions of the canvas, the proportions of the stripes, and the specific color choices recreate the gay pride flag in painted form. The rectangular canvas is oriented vertically, suggesting a gay pride flag hanging downward or displayed banner-style rather than flying from a pole. Centered near the top of the canvas, overlapping the yellow and green stripes, a small Star of David in low relief is just visible; it is half yellow, half green, and camouflaged by the overlapping stripes.

About the Work

Beginning in the 1980s, Ross Bleckner began to make vertically striped paintings inspired by **Op Art** and the **hard-edge abstraction** of the 1950s and 1960s. What distinguishes this work is its personal **symbolism**. In *Double Portrait (Gay Flag)*, Bleckner adopts both the form and scale of abstract modernist painting and includes a nod to his own earlier stripe paintings while incorporating the rainbow colors and pop cultural symbolism of the gay pride flag (designed by Gilbert Baker and collaborators in 1978 in an effort to raise gay visibility). He also subtly introduces and overlays another symbol onto the flag; painted in three-dimensional low relief, a small Star of David is just discernible toward the top center of the painting. With *Double Portrait*, Bleckner established himself as a painter who infused abstraction with provocative references to cultural and sexual identity. By titling the work *Double Portrait*, he created a symbol- and object-based self-portrait, identifying himself as gay and Jewish and expanding the realm of portraiture beyond physical likeness to focus on personal qualities and characteristics. Bleckner’s inclusion of a small Star of David seems to play with the concept of revealing versus concealing aspects of one’s own identity. Alternatively, it could serve as a visual metaphor for the way in which certain traits clearly manifest themselves while others are kept in the background, whether by choice or necessity.

About the Artist

Ross Bleckner is known for blending abstraction with commentaries on contemporary life, investing appropriation with autobiographical twists. He rejected the approach of an earlier generation of artists in which abstraction was stripped of associative and symbolic meaning; instead, he uses formalism to examine personal and social narratives. Much of his work explores memory, loss, and mortality, especially in relation to the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, which claimed the lives of so many artists. Though Bleckner’s imagery has varied widely over the course of his career, one near constant has been his interest in the formal and symbolic qualities of light. While *Double Portrait (Gay Flag)* in many ways stands apart from the rest of his work, which often includes more ethereal and evocative motifs, his ongoing interest in the theme of light is evident in his inclusion of a rainbow, which represents the visible light spectrum; the gay pride flag, the yellow stripe of which was specifically identified by its creator, Gilbert Baker, as symbolizing sunlight, and which can be more broadly understood as an icon that increased the visibility of the gay community; and a Star of David, with both its stellar form and its layers of symbolism, which may be interpreted as illuminating various tenants of Judaism.

Sources

Anderson, Maxwell L. *American Visionaries: Selections from the Whitney Museum of American Art*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2001.

Berger, Maurice, et al. *Masterworks of the Jewish Museum*. Exh. cat. New York: The Jewish Museum, 2004, pp. 238–39.

Collins Goodyear, Anne, et al. *This Is a Portrait if I Say So: Identity in American Art, 1912–Today*, Bowdoin College Museum of Art. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016.

MoMA Inside/Out Blog Post: MoMA Acquires the Rainbow Flag
mom.org/explore/inside_out/2015/06/17/moma-acquires-the-rainbow-flag/

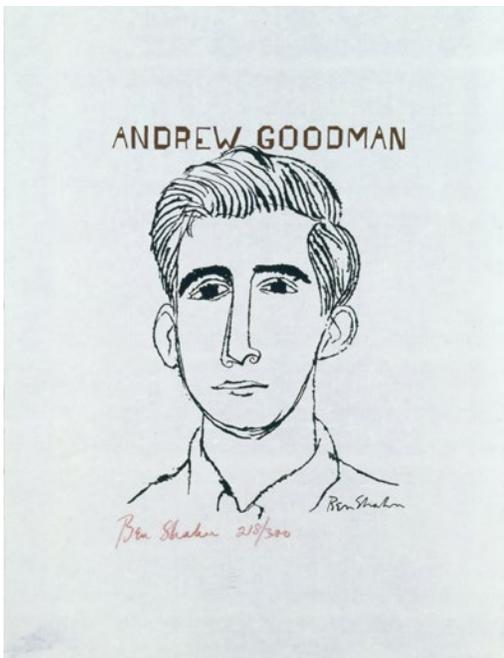
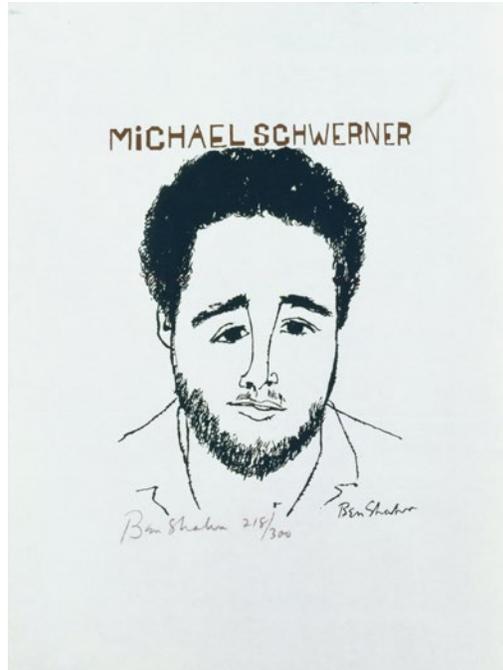
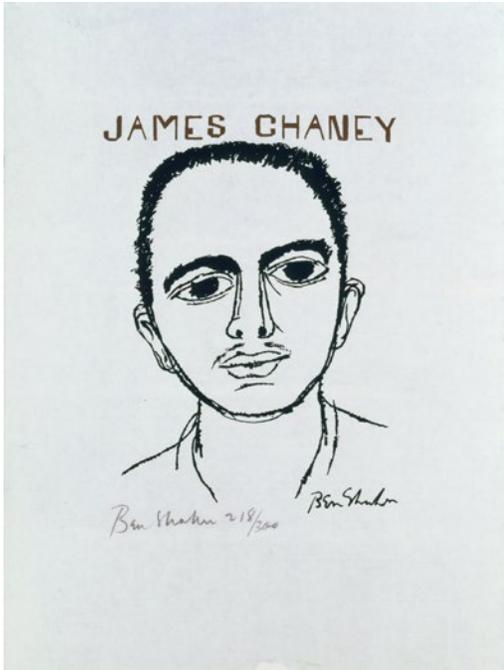
Semowich, Charles J. “Bleckner, Ross.” Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online. Oxford University Press. Accessed March 2, 2016.

Further Discussion

- Bleckner uses the symbols of the rainbow flag and the Star of David to express his identity in this work of art. What two symbols would you choose to express important aspects of your identity and why?
- Bleckner considers this painting to be a portrait, perhaps of him or of a group—a portrait that reflects the identity of the LGBT community. To learn more about the flag, read, as a class, excerpts from the interview with Gilbert Baker, creator of the original rainbow flag (1978), available here: mom.org/explore/inside_out/2015/06/17/moma-acquires-the-rainbow-flag/. How and in what ways does the flag represent and symbolize the identities of those in the LGBT community?
- Bleckner created *Double Portrait (Gay Flag)* in 1993. How might the rainbow flag mean different things now than it did in 1993? How do you think this image is interpreted by a contemporary audience? How have people’s perceptions of the gay community and the identity of those in it evolved in recent decades?

Ben Shahn

Human Relations Portfolio



Ben Shahn (American, b. Lithuania, (1898–1969)
Human Relations Portfolio, 1965
Screenprint on paper, 22 1/8 × 16 7/8 in. (56.2 × 42.9 cm)
Kristie A. Jayne Fund, 1999-169.3

Born in Lithuania, Ben Shahn immigrated to the United States with his family as a child and grew up in a working-class neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York. Shahn became a painter, photographer, illustrator, and printmaker. As a young man, he worked as a lithographer's apprentice and later used text as an important element in his images. Social and political themes are a critical part of his work; he explicitly used his art to raise awareness about social injustices.

On the night of June 21, 1964, civil rights workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner disappeared in Neshoba County, Mississippi. After a two-month search by the FBI, their bodies were discovered at a nearby dam, where they had been buried after being murdered by members of the Ku Klux Klan. Produced by Ben Shahn as a portfolio for the Human Relations Council of Greater New Haven, Connecticut, these portraits memorialize the three slain civil rights workers.

Sources

Chevlowe, Susan. *Common Man, Mythic Vision: The Paintings of Ben Shahn*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998.

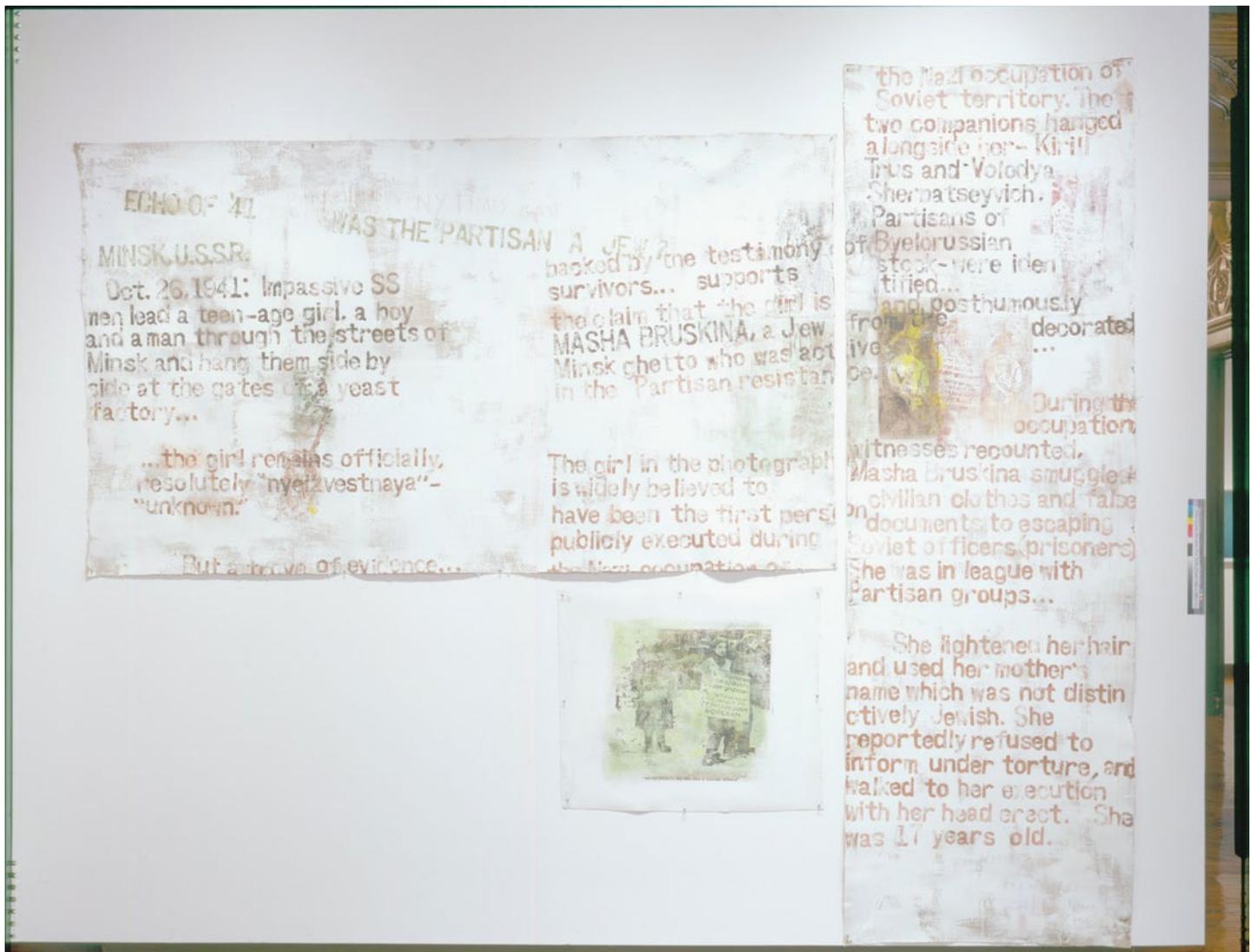
Culture and Continuity: The Jewish Journey. The Jewish Museum, New York, early 2004.

Discussion Ideas and Questions

- What does Shahn's having taken on this commission reveal about his own identity and values?
- These portraits were created as screenprints on paper, in an edition of three hundred each. Why do you think they were made as screenprints instead of paintings? (*Students might consider factors such as wider dissemination, lower cost, larger audience, more democratic art form, etc.*)
- Bleckner's work speaks to issues of civil rights for gay people; Shahn's work speaks to issues of civil rights for African Americans. As a class, discuss how civil rights for these communities have improved since the time each artwork was created. Discuss some communities where there has been little progress and the social injustices that persist.
- Discuss the merits of a representational portrait like Shahn's versus an abstract one like Bleckner's. How do they communicate aspects of their subjects' identities differently? How do they fail to communicate certain aspects of their subjects' identities?

Nancy Spero

Masha Bruskina



Nancy Spero (American, 1926–2009)

Masha Bruskina, 1995

Acrylic on linen, 122 ¼ × 146 ½ in. (310.5 × 372.1 cm)

Fine Arts Acquisitions Committee Fund, Blanche and Romie Shapiro Fund, Kristie A. Jayne Fund, Sara Schlesinger Bequest, and Miki Denhof Bequest, 2002-12a-c

Masha Bruskina was a Jew who was a volunteer nurse and a leader of the resistance during World War II in Minsk, Belorussia. At age seventeen, she managed to pass herself off as a non-Jew and went to work in a local hospital, where she helped wounded Soviet prisoners escape. Even after she was arrested and tortured by the Nazis, Bruskina did not reveal the names of her fellow resistance fighters. On October 26, 1941, she and two of her male comrades were led through the streets of Minsk wearing a large placard proclaiming that they were partisans. They were hanged one at a time, their bodies left hanging for several days as a warning to others.

Bruskina has appeared in many of Nancy Spero's works. Here, Spero intersperses images and texts from different periods and sources to tell Bruskina's story. Spero includes a newspaper article from October 26, 1941, describing the hanging of an anonymous girl, an article from the 1960s about the discovery of the woman's Jewish identity, and pictures of Bruskina's death march and execution. The painting consists of three unstretched canvases affixed to the wall with pushpins. These materials give the piece a feeling of immediacy and are more suggestive of a political banner than a work of fine art. In her native Belorussia, Bruskina is still unrecognized; the woman in the photo is identified as "unknown." By publicizing Bruskina's name and identity, Spero attempts to raise awareness about her courage and heroism.

Sources

Berger, Maurice, et al. *Masterworks of the Jewish Museum*. Exh. cat. New York: The Jewish Museum, 2004, pp. 78–79.

Feinberg, Josh. *Teaching the Holocaust Through Works of Art: Educator Resource*. New York: The Jewish Museum.

Discussion Ideas and Questions

- Spero's portrait of Bruskina is largely text based, with a few appropriated images; Shahn's portraits of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner are figurative images; and Bleckner's self-portrait is abstract and symbolic. Which strategy conveys the sitter's identity most effectively? Why?
- Masha Bruskina is a symbol of strength and resistance. She is one of thousands—some renowned, some unknown—who resisted the Nazis and risked their lives to save others. She is a hero of the Nazi resistance. James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Mickey Schwerner went to the South during Freedom Summer in 1964 to help African Americans register to vote, a civil right that was being denied them. They were civil rights heroes. Think about Bleckner's work and reflect on some heroes from the gay rights movement. (*For example, Harvey Milk, Edith Windsor.*) What qualities make someone a hero? Consider intrinsic traits, learned traits, context, circumstances, and other factors. You can discuss this in a general way, but also ask students to reflect on their personal heroes and what qualities and actions make them identify these figures as heroes.
- Do you think Spero's work effectively memorializes Bruskina and commemorates her sacrifice? Do Shahn's portraits effectively commemorate Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner? Why or why not?
- These works by Bleckner, Shahn, and Spero are politically charged, but are they activist art? Discuss what activism means. Have a class debate about each work. Is the artist being an activist in creating this piece? Why or why not?
- What current political and social concerns would your students like to see contemporary artists address? (*For example, #blacklivesmatter, the Syrian refugee crisis, climate change, etc.*)
- What are the various elements that make up this work? What do the text and images remind you of, and what do you think their sources might have been?
- What do you notice about the way the painting is hung on the wall? Why do you think the artist chose to hang the sections with pushpins instead of framing them?
- Read the text and write down all the words (adjectives or otherwise) and phrases that describe the painting's subject, Masha Bruskina. What does the text tell you about her identity?
- In what ways can this be considered a portrait? In what ways does it challenge your understanding of what a portrait is?