



Artists' Lessons to Thrive! 9.1 Sisavanh Phouthavong-Houghton: Displacement Identified

Big Idea: Displacement

Sisavanh Phouthavong-Houghton emigrated from Laos to Kansas with her family at age 4. While being surrounded by American culture, she and her family maintained their Laotian identity at home—speaking their native language and cooking traditional foods. Despite her participation in both cultures, she felt semi-detached from each one. Like so many immigrants, she became a unique individual, one who felt neither fully American nor entirely Laotian. With this in mind, she created a series of eleven paintings titled *Displacement* to chronicle the stories of Laotian-Americans who legally changed their names to assimilate into American culture (Figures 9.1.1 and 9.1.2).

She began her research by interviewing eleven participants and securing copies of their citizenship certificate photographs. The artist discovered that the participants changed their names for multiple reasons. Some sensed hostility when Americans were unable to pronounce their names.



FIGURE 9.1.1 Sisavanh Phouthavong-Houghton, *Displacement: Bonita Sphabmixay*, acrylic on canvas, 24 x 36 in. (60.96 x 91.44 cm), 2004. Source: Courtesy of the artist; www.sisavanhphouthavong.com.



FIGURE 9.1.2 Sisavanh Phouthavong-Houghton, *Displacement: Robert Phetchampone*, acrylic on canvas, 24 x 36 in. (60.96 x 91.44 cm), 2004. Source: Courtesy of the artist; www.sisavanhphouthavong.com.



Others changed them for simple convenience. A final group was assigned new names by other Americans, including their schoolteachers. Over time they became used to being called by their American names and changed them legally. Phouthavong-Houghton transformed each participant's photograph into a 2 ft x 3 ft (61 cm x 91 cm) canvas portrait. The canvases project 5-inches. (12 cm) from the wall to represent physical barriers that prohibit viewers from invading the Laotian-Americans' personal space while simultaneously demanding viewers' attention. Each portrait is filled with Ben-Day dots, a commercial printing technique that American Pop artist Roy Lichtenstein adapted in his works. The collective abstracted dots symbolize a loss of identity, yet as individual dots they represent how all humans are unique individuals. Serving as analogies for the participants, each single dot reminds viewers that people's true identities remain, even when they must adapt to living in a new culture and become one of many.

Phouthavong-Houghton has taken steps to preserve her fellow Laotian-Americans' personal heritage by asking questions, collecting evidence, and safeguarding their distinctive identities through art. *Displacement's* lessons on identity can be applied to all people who have experienced changes in life that have caused them to feel out of place and can help them discover a rejuvenated sense of self.

Essential/Guiding Questions

1. What does displacement mean to you? Why did Phouthavong-Houghton choose the title *Displacement* to describe this series of paintings?
2. How would *Displacement's* meaning change if Phouthavong-Houghton painted its portraits to look more realistic, with natural skin, wrinkles, and blemishes rather than with abstracted dots?

Preparation

Students will research how multicultural artists have presented identity in art. They will participate in a class discussion about the meanings of people's names and answer questions, including: Have you ever changed your name or used a nickname? Why did you change your name? Has anyone in your family ever changed their name to make it sound more acceptable in a given society or something else?

Daily Learning Targets

I can create an artwork that identifies a correlation between my name and my identity.

- I can cite at least one example from art history as inspiration for my design.
- I can show craftsmanship and unity in my completed artwork.

I can make valid interpretations about Phouthavong-Houghton's *Displacement* using this textbook's inclusive art historical inquiry model with guiding targets (Model 9.2).

- I can write at least one paragraph for each: (a) analysis, (b) informed speculation, and (c) validation.
- I can discuss my findings with my peers.

National Core Arts Anchor Standards 1, 6, 9, and 11

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