


art21.org/tommykha


Tommy Kha

ABOUT

Born

1988 (Memphis, TN)

Education

Memphis College of Art, BFA
Yale University, MFA

Lives and Works

Brooklyn, New York and Memphis, TN

About the Artist

With a humorous and poignant touch, Kha examines how we construct belonging and otherness through photography. The artist invents new models or self-portraiture with a critical eye toward the medium's long history of absences and erasure. Growing up as a Chinese-American boy in Memphis, Kha had often been made to feel he was different. Now, as an adult, the artist locates a place for himself, both within the American South and the tradition of photography. Kha's work is critical of the ways in which photography has been used to assert truths and historical narratives that exclude or misrepresent. As a result, the artist has found a model of picture-making through which he maintains agency as a subject of photography and questions the construction of the "self."

TEACHING CONNECTIONS

Media and Materials

photography

Key Words and Ideas

childhood
cultural icon
home
family
identity

impersonation
immigration
memory
war

Related Artists

John Akomfrah
Meriem Bennani
LaToya Ruby Frazier
Oliver Herring
Miranda July
Hiwa K
Sally Mann

Richard Mosse
Catherine Opie
Naudine Pierre
Cindy Sherman
Collier Schorr
Jeff Wall
Carrie Mae Weems

“Where do I stand in the picture? What’s the best way to arrive at ourselves through photography?” —Tommy Kha

How to Use This Guide

Art21 encourages active engagement when teaching with our films. The questions and activities below are recommendations for incorporating Art21 films featuring Tommy Kha into your classroom. Each class will likely require different adaptations for best results.

NOTE: Please view all films before sharing them with your students.

Before Viewing

Establish key ideas, in anticipation of viewing the film(s):

- ① Why use family members in artwork?
- ② When do we wear costumes and why?
- ③ How do places, such as homes, neighborhoods, parks, and schools, influence your identity?

While Viewing

Support active viewing, and pause the film to clarify particular ideas:

- ① How is family referenced in Kha's work?
- ② Why is Kha interested in icons like Batman and Elvis Presley? How does dressing up as Batman and Elvis Presley connect to Memphis?
- ③ What places influenced Kha's identity? Where do we see references to these places?

After Viewing

Follow-up on key ideas and synthesize information learned from the film(s):

- ① In what ways has Kha's family influenced his work? How are they involved in the process?
- ② Why does Kha wear masks?
- ③ List the instances of Memphis referenced in Kha's photography. What does the variety of this list illustrate about the culture of Memphis?

Related Activities

Engaging in creative activities after watching Art21 films can reinforce learning and stimulate ideas. Art21 encourages educators to adapt these activities to their classrooms.

- ✓ Choose a cultural icon other than Elvis Presley to spotlight. Consider where the artist is from, where they lived, their family, and what they represented to the larger culture. Why is this individual famous? Why do they inspire fans? Create an artwork in tribute to the values this person represents.
- ✓ How can you make a costume that represents a place? Create a costume that represents your hometown, school, or another place that is important to you. Consider using materials like paint, clay, masks, or fabric.