

# The Big Picture



# **The Big Picture**

## **Contemporary Art in 10 Works by 10 Artists**

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This book is dedicated to my wife and children: Samara, Ben, and Amina; my parents, Beth and Stephen Israel; and is written in memory of my grandfather, Benjamin Winer.



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# Introduction

Someone recently told me that I was a populist. At first I was taken aback, but then I realized it might make sense.

I have spent much of the last decade thinking about how to bridge the gap between the broader population and an art world that is often considered niche, elitist, and hard-to-understand. My interest in fighting what is often an uphill battle is probably rooted in two related facts: 1) that I was originally an art world “outsider” myself—though I now hesitate to adopt the label of “insider,” and 2) I would like the family and community in which I was raised (one generally not involved in the visual arts) to appreciate what I care deeply about.

For a long time I thought I would bridge this gap by teaching modern and contemporary art history. I spent six years in a PhD program in art history and archaeology (at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University); I taught modern and contemporary art history at NYU, Parsons, and the Museum of Modern Art; and upon receiving my doctorate I focused on securing a professorship. But a few months into my search, my career trajectory took an unexpected turn when I was hired by Artsy to direct The Art Genome Project (TAGP), an ambitious

“big data” tagging program for art that was then in its nascent stages. Like Pandora’s Music Genome Project, which powers its music recommendations, TAGP would categorize art in a nuanced way so that people could explore different categories of art and receive recommendations for artworks or artists they might like. This was an innovative, twenty-first-century melding of art history and technology that also made for a very serendipitous way to learn about art, especially for people who weren’t sure where to start. I felt a real affinity for TAGP and Artsy’s mission—to make all the world’s art accessible to anyone with an Internet connection—and I ended up staying at Artsy and wrapping my mind around what it meant to be an art historian without a teaching job. It did not hurt that my personal mission as an art historian was more than satisfied by a project that would be accessible not just to the students in my lecture hall at NYU, but to potentially millions of art lovers all over the world.

It might seem counterintuitive that I would choose—given my work with Artsy on The Art Genome Project and my interest in digital tools—to still write books, this book in particular.

Yet my experience working online has shown me the strengths and weaknesses of a digital forum especially when it comes to introductory art education. On one hand, our digital world can allow incredible (often free) access to images, information, and highly engaging multimedia and video experiences. At the same time, digital experiences can often be too big and too quick to allow for meaningful introductions to art education, particularly contemporary art.

I have also found much of the printed matter currently available as contemporary art introductions far from satisfying—surveys that involve too many artists and cannot,

by nature of their form, handle too much analysis, leading to a superficial if not distorted understanding of the contemporary art landscape. And the writing is often jargon-filled, which makes the subject difficult to approach. Additionally, these books can focus too much on the art market, the business of art, or the personal lives of artists rather than what keeps the whole art world going: the beginning and end of the art world—the artworks themselves.

Accordingly, *The Big Picture* is constructed in a very deliberate way to complement digital art education and currently available material for people seeking an accessible, comprehensive, and relevant introduction to contemporary art.

First, it focuses on just ten artworks that I have personally selected and which I believe are among the most important from the past fifteen years. These artworks are analyzed in an extended fashion to emphasize the attention needed to look at contemporary art and show how such close looking can reveal the depth and power of works of art, their many nuances and meanings. To best understand a work's significance, it is equally important to contextualize works in the broader history of contemporary art, so each chapter takes time to “zoom out” to explain a tendency or trend the artwork is representative of. Furthermore, as most new art trends bear a significant relationship to the past, they are often compared to historical art movements they might be rooted in.

*The Big Picture* is also slow. It is a book in ten chapters. It is not digital. It does not include an app; there are no notifications or endlessly updating content feeds. The purpose of the book's structure is to focus the reader on selected artworks and the stories about them—the belief being that longer, engaging narratives about a small number of iconic