

Learn with MoMA



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Step 1 Look closely

1. Divide a sheet of paper into three columns, one for each of the photos. Looking at the photos one at a time, write a list of words that come to mind (you can do this individually or as a class).
2. Compare the words in the three columns. What similarities can you find? What are the differences?
3. Refer to your list of words: What is the mood of the photographs? What stories do they evoke to you?

Step 2 Learn more

Invisible Man is a 1952 novel by Ralph Ellison about a Black man struggling to survive in a society that refuses to see his humanity. The novel has been an inspiration to many artists, such as Gordon Parks, Jeff Wall, and Ming Smith.

Gordon Parks. *Emerging Man, Harlem, New York. 1952* (page 1)

“Gordon Parks’s image *Emerging Man* offers a clear portrait of that space [where] we find Ellison’s unnamed protagonist at the end of *Invisible Man*: neither fully underground nor fully above ground, in between. Ellison begins his novel with a prologue, an introductory section that sets the tone and the theme of the work. It describes one of the settings in the book, where the main character has found himself in an abandoned basement. *Invisible Man* is transformed by the time we get to the end, and he is ready, he says, to take the next step above ground to become an active participant in the world.” —Adam Bradley

Hear more from writer Adam Bradley [reflecting on *Invisible Man*](#).

Jeff Wall. *After “Invisible Man” by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue. 1999–2000*

(page 2)

Jeff Wall based this elaborately staged photograph on the prologue of *Invisible Man*. The novel’s protagonist, an unnamed African American man, describes how he lives secretly “in [a] hole in the basement,” where he has “wired the entire ceiling, every inch of it” with 1,369 lights powered by illegally siphoned-off electricity. In addition to the prologue, Wall drew from other parts of *Invisible Man* and his own imagination to create this scene. His intention was not to make a literal illustration of the text but to give form to the picture it inspired in his mind, which he calls “accidents of reading.” As he has explained, many of his images begin “from accidents in the street—events I witnessed by chance. These pictures are like that, except that the accident occurred when I happened to be reading a book. I had the same feeling reading ... that I have had many times when seeing something occur on the street or in some other place, a feeling that an opportunity for a picture was presented to me.”¹

Ming Smith. *Invisible Man, Somewhere, Everywhere. 1998* (page 3)

“I evolved as a photographer with the series *Invisible Man* [1990–1991], just like a jazz musician who plays the head [the melody of a song] before they start improvising. Ralph Ellison’s book *Invisible Man* [1952] was an inspiration, especially the idea of what it means not to be seen, but I didn’t consciously set out to make work about it. I wanted to capture the feeling of painting and make photographs on an artistic scale. Living in a Black environment, the people I photographed didn’t have to put on any airs, they were just living their life. The series was about a feeling, an expression. Anyone could identify it. We were present but we weren’t there. We were visible but also invisible.”
—Ming Smith

Step 3

Activity: Make a photograph inspired by a book

Materials: camera

1. Think of a book you have read that had an impact on you and the way you think. Why was this work important to you? What are some scenes or passages that stand out?
2. Compose a scene that captures the mood and/or the story of this book. You can consider:
 - a. What is the setting? Is your scene indoors or outdoors?
 - b. Do you want the scene to include characters/figures?
 - c. Do you want your scene to be posed or candid?
 - d. What other objects and props will help enhance your scene?
 - e. Will your photo be in color or black and white?
3. Take a photo of the scene.

Step 4

Share!

Share your photograph with a friend or classmate, or you can email the photo to us at MoMA: schoolprograms@moma.org.



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Image: Gordon Parks. *Emerging Man, Harlem, New York*. 1952. Gelatin silver print. Acquired through the generosity of The Friends of Education of The Museum of Modern Art and Committee on Photography Fund. © 2023 Gordon Parks Foundation; Jeff Wall. *After "Invisible Man" by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue*. 1999-2000. Silver dye bleach transparency; aluminum light box. The Photography Council Fund, Horace W. Goldsmith Fund through Robert B. Menschel, and acquired through the generosity of Jo Carole and Ronald S. Lauder and Carol and David Appel. © 2023 Jeff Wall; Ming Smith. *Invisible Man, Somewhere, Everywhere*. 1991. Inkjet print, printed 2010. Geraldine J. Murphy Fund. © 2023 Ming Smith

1. Jeff Wall, interview by Peter Galassi, in *Jeff Wall*, by Peter Galassi (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2007), 157.