

# What does it mean to be an American?

AN ART AND CONVERSATION DECK

Designed by the  
**UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN MUSEUM OF ART**

with contributions from

**Chazen Museum of Art** (University of Wisconsin–Madison), **Hammer Museum** (University of California, Los Angeles), **Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art** (University of Oregon), **Krannert Art Museum** (University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign), **MSU Broad Art Museum** (Michigan State University), **Palmer Museum of Art** (Penn State), **Sheldon Museum of Art** (University of Nebraska–Lincoln), **Stanley Museum of Art** (University of Iowa), **University of Maryland Art Gallery**, and **Weisman Art Museum** (University of Minnesota)

Discussion prompts created in collaboration with the  
University of Michigan Ginsberg Center for Community Service & Learning

# ★ Introduction ★

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Our world is a noisy, polarized place. We rarely have the opportunity to gather together face-to-face to examine and explore our values and beliefs, and express our sincerest hopes and dreams for the future of the United States. What you're holding in your hands is an opportunity to do just that. This art and conversation deck includes twelve images and sixteen prompts that can be mixed and matched to spark new conversations around community, personal beliefs, art, politics, identity, civic life, democracy, and more.

This conversation deck was created by a group of university art museums from across the country who believe that museums play an important role in strengthening communities and encouraging civic participation. Our museums form a network of civic spaces where people can come together, express themselves, learn to disagree, build stronger bonds, and develop understanding across differences.

Each museum contributed an artwork from its collection that evokes the culture, politics, and history of the USA. We hope you'll use these images as a jumping off point for deeper exploration about what it means to be an American right now. We offer these images as an opportunity to create meaningful dialogue and connection with your family, friends, colleagues, and maybe even yourself.



Lead support is provided by the  
Institute of Museum and Library Services

## ★ How To Use This Deck ★

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Each card displays one image on the front, and two discussion prompts on the back. Each suggested exercise offers a different way of pairing images with prompts for conversation and reflection. While using this deck, you might devise new ways to use these cards and generate even more discussion prompts.

### **Group Exercise Version A** (select one image for the entire group):

First, lay out all cards image-side up. As a group, choose just one image to discuss. Next, choose another card at random and flip that card to reveal two discussion prompts. Then, agree on which one prompt you will discuss as a group. Discuss and debrief using the Reflection card.

### **Group Exercise Version B** (each individual chooses one image):

First, choose one card at random and flip the card to reveal the prompts; agree upon which one prompt you'll discuss. Next, lay out all cards image-side up. Each person chooses one Image card in response to the chosen prompt (it's okay if more than one person chooses the same image). Then, discuss and debrief using the Reflection card.

### **Group Exercise Version C** (choose two images and compare):

First, choose two Image cards and lay them side-by-side. Next, choose another card at random, and flip that card to reveal two discussion prompts. Choose which prompt to discuss, and use the selected prompt to compare and contrast the images. Debrief using the Reflection card.

### **For Solo Reflection:**

Choose two cards at random (one image and one set of prompts); reflect or journal on the prompts as they relate to the chosen image.



Scan the QR code to explore the online version of this dialog deck.

Share your reflections on social media and tag @ummamuseum

## ★ Reflection ★

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Our unique experiences and social identities shape our perceptions of what it means to be an American. Keep this in mind as you discuss the ways in which your political beliefs and identities were formed, and how they impact you today.

Use the following questions to facilitate group conversation after you've completed the group exercise or solo reflection:

- **What are the common threads in this conversation? How do you make sense of differences?**
- **How does this exercise ask you to think differently about civic participation? What motivates you to participate in your community?**
- **Everyone looked at the same images, but saw different things in them. We often find this same phenomenon in civic life, when two people look at the same policy or issue, and one person sees X while the other sees Y. Have you ever discussed a political topic with a friend, family member or colleague and wondered, "How can we be talking about the same thing on the surface, but seeing it so differently?"**
- **How does knowing the title of the artwork or the time period in which it was created change your perspective?**
- **What about this experience encourages you to take action? What might you do differently after this conversation?**



## Prompt A

What makes this image political and how does it relate to your personal politics?



## Prompt B

If this image was on the cover of a book about the USA, what would the title be and why?

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Joseph Patrick, *Ana Mendieta*, 1969, oil on canvas. Collection of the Stanley Museum of Art, University of Iowa, Gift from the Family of Joe and Genie Patrick, 2020.36



## Prompt A

Describe the image in a few words. How do you think someone who has a different identity from yours would describe the image?



## Prompt B

How does this image speak to our country's past/present/future?  
Why?

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Jacob Lawrence, *Confrontation at the Bridge*, 1975, gouache on paper. Collection of the Palmer Museum of Art at Penn State, Bequest of James R. and Barbara R. Palmer, 2019.77. © 2024 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation, Seattle / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York





## Prompt A

What values of the USA does  
the image question or critique?  
What values does it promote?



## Prompt B

If this image were an advertisement  
for being American, what  
would it tell you?

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Richard Mock, *We the People of the United States*, 1987, linocut. Collection of the Sheldon Museum of Art, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Gift of the artist, U-4089.1987



## Prompt A

Why might this image matter to people around you (your friends, family, community)? To your city, nation? To the world?



## Prompt B

What story about the USA does this image tell? How does this story intersect with your own beliefs about what it means to be an American?

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Kota Ezawa, *National Anthem (Denver Broncos)*, 2019, transparency in lightbox. Collection of the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University. Purchase funded by the Emma Grace Holmes Endowment, 2023.10.1. © Kota Ezawa; Courtesy of the artist, Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco, and RYAN LEE Gallery, New York.



## Prompt A

What makes this image political and how does it relate to your personal politics?



## Prompt B

How would you describe this image to someone younger than you?  
To someone older than you?

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Roger Shimomura, *American Alien #3*, 2006, acrylic on canvas. Collection of the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, University of Oregon, Museum purchase through the Hartz FUNd for Contemporary Art, 2020:71



## Prompt A

How does this image portray relationships between people and political power?



## Prompt B

How does this image speak to our country's past/present/future?  
Why?

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Yolanda Andrade, *Marcha gay*, 1984, gelatin silver print. Collection of the Hammer Museum, University of California, Los Angeles, Purchased through the Board of Advisors Acquisition Fund. © Yolanda Andrade





## Prompt A

Describe the image in a few words. How do you think someone who has a different identity from yours would describe the image?



## Prompt B

How does this image relate to your view of your community?

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Elizabeth Catlett, *Three Women of America*, 1990, color screenprint. Collection of the Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Gift of Evelyn Salk, 2001-14-2. © 2024 Mora-Catlett Family / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

**I ILLINOIS**

KRANNERT  
ART  
MUSEUM



## Prompt A

If this image was on the cover of a book about the USA, what would the title be and why?



## Prompt B

Who is represented in the image and how are they related to each other? Who isn't represented in this image and why?

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John Steuart Curry, *Our Good Earth*, 1942, oil on hardboard. Collection of the Chazen Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin–Madison, Gift of the U.S. Treasury Department to the College of Agriculture to the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, 3.1999.1



Chazen Museum of Art



## Prompt A

If this image were an advertisement for being American, what would it tell you?



## Prompt B

How does your experience and understanding of US history shape the way you look at this image?

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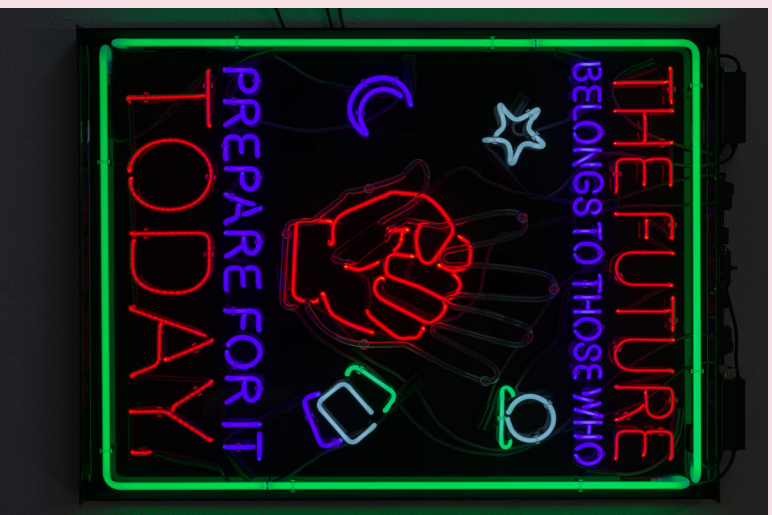
Wangari Mathenge, *The Ascendants VII (Local Natives)*, 2020, oil on canvas. Collection of the Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities, Purchased with funds given by Bob Mersky, 2021.8. Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, California; Photo Robert Wedemeyer



**WEISMAN ART MUSEUM**

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

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## Prompt A

What story about the USA does this image tell? How does this story intersect with your own beliefs about what it means to be an American?



## Prompt B

What values of the USA does the image question or critique?  
What values does it promote?

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Patrick Martinez, *Psychic Friends (Malcolm X)*, 2022, neon. Collection of the University of Maryland Art Gallery, Courtesy of the artist and Charlie James Gallery, Los Angeles. © 2022 Patrick Martinez ; Photo © 2022 Yubo Dong @ofphotostudio



ART GALLERY





## Prompt A

Why might this image matter to people around you (your friends, family, community)? To your city, nation? To the world?



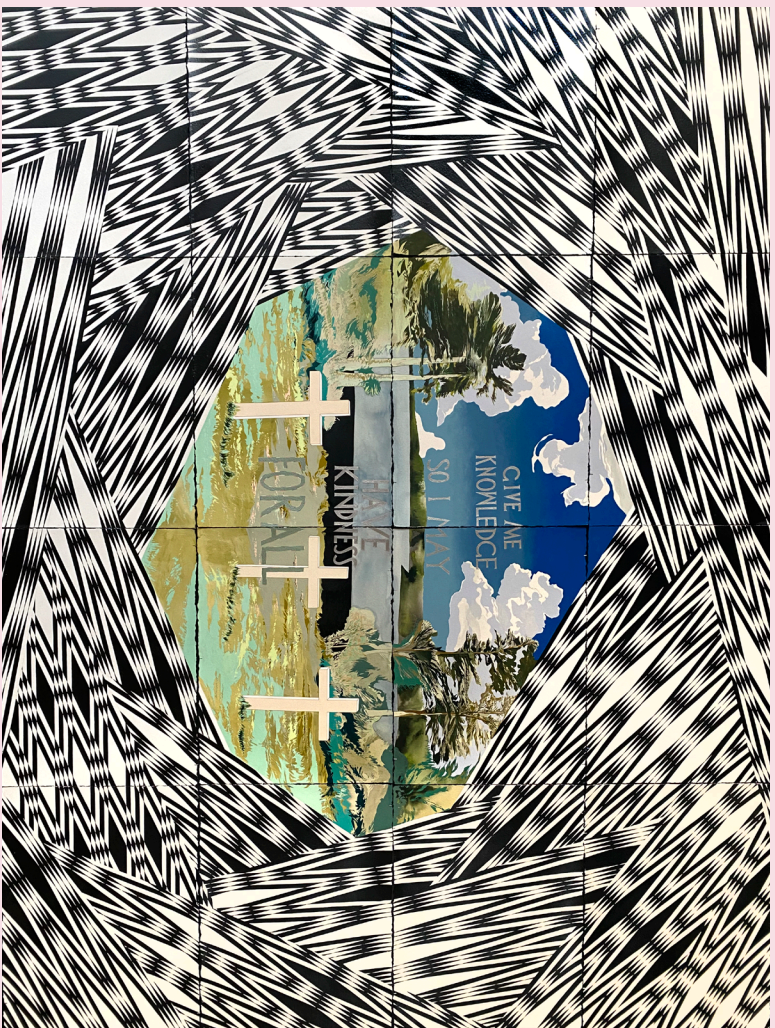
## Prompt B

What's the hidden story in this image?

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Doug Webb, *Cleanliness is Next to Godliness*, ca. 1985, screenprint. Collection of the University of Michigan Museum of Art, Gift of Jack A. and Noreen Rounick, 2004/2.40

UMMA



## Prompt A

Describe the setting in the artwork.  
How does the setting inform what  
this image says about the USA?



## Prompt B

How would you describe the  
values of the person who made  
this artwork?

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Andrea Carlson, *I'll Cut a Hole*, 2022, oil, acrylic, gouache, ink, marker, and graphite on paper. Collection of the University of Michigan Museum of Art, Courtesy of the artist, 2022/2.16

UMMA

# Complete List of Discussion Prompts

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1. How would you describe the values of the person who made this artwork?
2. Describe the setting in the artwork. How does the setting inform what this image says about the USA?
3. Why might this image matter to people around you (your friends, family, community)? To your city, nation? To the world?
4. What's the hidden story in this image?
5. What story about the USA does this image tell? How does this story intersect with your own beliefs about what it means to be an American?
6. What values of the USA does the image question or critique? What values does it promote?
7. If this image were an advertisement for being American, what would it tell you?
8. How does your experience and understanding of US history shape the way you look at this image?

# Complete List of Discussion Prompts

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9. If this image was on the cover of a book about the USA, what would the title be and why?
10. Who is represented in the image and how are they related to each other? Who isn't represented in this image and why?
11. Describe the image in a few words. How do you think someone who has a different identity from yours would describe the image?
12. How does this image relate to your view of your community?
13. How does this image portray relationships between people and political power?
14. How does this image speak to our country's past/present/future? Why?
15. What makes this image political and how does it relate to your personal politics?
16. How would you describe this image to someone younger than you? To someone older than you?

# Information About The Artworks

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2. Jacob Lawrence, *Confrontation at the Bridge*, 1975, gouache on paper. Collection of the Palmer Museum of Art at Penn State, Bequest of James R. and Barbara R. Palmer, 2019.77. © 2024 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation, Seattle / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
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