

Showing

(work x family)

Showing (work x family) **Squaring the Equation**

An essay by
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Images flood our days like insistent habits. The reflex to process and consume imagery from the infinite supply of pictures we are served up across media—including our own phone photography—can make conscious, selective looking hard to do.¹ In this fast-changing, information-saturated society, can the evolving question of how to meet the responsibilities of family and the obligations of work be meaningfully explored through a curated collection of quiet photographs? Can their creative presentation inspire dialogue and the fresh perspectives needed to help recalculate the how-do-we-manage-it-all equation? Can family photography reflect the changing definitions of both work and family, and can it play a signal role in how we recognize and adapt to those changes?

Showing (work x family) is an expression of the belief that it can. The exhibition explores the nature of love, purpose, and identity in a physical and layered documentary experience. It comprises diversely sourced photographs integrated and presented in an original way, true to its (work x family) subject. *Showing* posits that through a thoughtful process of making and looking at photographs, a renewed emotional and practical clarity is possible for understanding working families. Unlike the muddy stream of digital-age imagery we lap up and use to construct virtual truths, here family photography returns to the concerns of the everyday and is given breath, space, and shape to make the story personal.

Whatever our dreams, the requirements of daily life assert themselves without fail. We are on schedules, we have tasks; our bodies, our pets, and the people in our lives depend on us to help them thrive and even survive. Sometimes we receive money for our labor; sometimes work is



Fig. 1

Cristiana Ceppas, Neyara,
Housekeeper, San Rafael,
California, 2012. Photograph.
Commissioned for Showing:
Pregnancy in the Workplace
(see showingpregnancy.org),
and included in SHOWING
(work x family). Courtesy of
the artist.

part of the human exchange that defines family and commitment. The images in *Showing (work x family)* attend to the details of the daily because when added up those details inescapably express how the round robin of employment and caretaking feels when it is lived. Our consciousness carries the domestic sphere into the professional; and in reverse, the world of work swirls in our head back at home. Externally, we play the roles each context demands; internally, we are one person wrestling with how those demands compete and force compromise. Or better, how they mutually enrich and motivate us.

In the earliest stages of making *Showing (work x family)*, a manifest symbol was identified for when the two worlds of work and family cannot deny each other (despite the blind eye of the workplace). When a woman is at work and visibly pregnant, roles and responsibilities converge beyond the social controls of privacy and compartmentalization. She is *showing*, and work and family become palpably indivisible. This circumstance is exquisitely photographable, but surprisingly, neither historical nor contemporary practice shows meaningful interest in the subject. During a period of broad research, relatively few photographs of maternity and work—later-term pregnant women engaged in a variety of jobs—could be found. So a commission was devised and forty-nine noted photographers were charged with finding, following, and photographing women willing to be standard-bearers for this powerful social category long overdue the camera's attention. The results constitute their own significant contribution to social documentary photography, but here in *Showing (work x family)*, they are one part of a fuller, looser take on the overlap and interdependence of work and family life suggested by the titular equation.

The pregnant workers are replete with the aura of motherhood, an inescapably classical trope. Some pose in apparent reflection at their desks; some betray apprehension or bemusement at both their size and the uncertainty of exactly what is to come; others merely carry on—an ecologist in rubber boots on the bank of a river, an electrician at a job site with her tool belt strapped below her belly, a second-grade teacher giving a lesson surrounded by students on the classroom floor, or an undaunted housekeeper cleaning the vast windows of a modern home (fig. 1). While representation of the New Testament madonna and child exemplified the subject of maternity in Western art for many centuries, a roundly pregnant Mary is rather rare. One exception is the Italian Renaissance subject *Madonna del Parto*, most famously depicted by the painter Piero della Francesca in the

Fig. 2

Piero della Francesca, Madonna del Parto, ca. 1460. Fresco, 102³/₈ x 80 in. Musei Civici Madonna del Parto, Monterchi, Italy. Photo by Sailko - Own work, CC BY 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=43930063>.



fifteenth century (fig. 2). The naturalism of his expectant mother resembles today's photographic gaze on pregnancy: the fact of her condition, like in Andrea Modica's graduation-day portrait commissioned for *Showing* in 2012, is portentous, but does not overwhelm who she already is (fig. 3).

► Fig. 3

Andrea Modica, *Julie*, Professor of Occupational Therapy, Ithaca, New York, 2012. Photograph. Commissioned for *Showing: Pregnancy in the Workplace* (see showingpregnancy.org), and included in *SHOWING (work x family)*. Courtesy of the artist.

When we scroll through Instagram or search the photos of our Facebook friends, when we page through a magazine or scan Pinterest or Google Images, what are we really looking for? Is it more for the familiar than the novel? Are we looking to see what we might already share? Can we find community among strangers, a web of common threads? *Showing (work x family)* is designed to foster that self-recognition and interconnection, for viewers to either see themselves or to make associations that summon their own work and family narratives, stories they live now and those that shaped their childhoods. While cultural critics debate the utility and virtue of humanism as an organizing principle, asking if our distinctions and



Fig. 4b

Page spread from the book *The Family of Man* by Edward Steichen, preface by Carl Sandburg (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1955), 20–21. Photograph by the author. Included are photographs by Manuel Alvarez Bravo, Robert Frank, Hideo Haga, Richard Harrington, and George Rodger.



distance from one another could be where we conversely find our strength, *Showing* is an invitation to celebrate universal experience by describing its variety.

Its mid-century antecedent is *The Family of Man*, the landmark 1955 photography book and exhibition seen by nine million. Created by Edward Steichen for the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the exhibition gathered together 503 images from 68 countries to use photography “as a mirror of the universal elements and emotions in the everydayness of life.”² *Showing* likewise finds that the circle of life, the human need for love and care, and the primacy of work ring familiar across class and place and identity (figs. 4a and 4b). Steichen hoped to rally widespread empathy and recognition to prepare the world for global threats, chief among them nuclear destruction. *Showing (work x family)*’s more discrete objective is to remind us that when a society prioritizes the well-being of families and workers, the care of children, the sick, the aging, it benefits everyone. When we are immersed in its lyrical montage of hair-washing and shoe-tying, homework and housework, hand-holding and suppertimes, commuting and end-of-day exhaustion, “You might,” as poet Carl Sandburg warns the viewer in his prologue to *The Family of Man*, “catch yourself saying, ‘I am not a stranger here.’”³

As time makes inroads into the twenty-first century, nuclear threats continue, climate change piles on, and we must still square the American dream with reality as Steichen did. *Showing (work x family)* makes clear that the quotidian is what truly fills our lives, in a personal space we both control and are controlled by, in degrees that vary according to privilege, circumstance, and character. The existential global issues of the day hover and fill our screens with headlines, as do the imperatives consumer culture insists we respond to with our wallet. Despite exponential income disparity and national leadership that encourages tribalism and bigotry, we survive together in a tumult fueled by technology and insecurity. To counter this funhouse ride comes the intention to make *Showing (work x family)* an opportunity for reflection and communion, delivering a subtle yet vivid collective voice for a subject that inevitably informs the pulse and psychology of us all.

The gallery installation is not conventional. The images appear on two banks of three adjacent 58-inch 4K LCD screens, mounted on opposing sides of a giant wedge structure 28 feet long (fig. 5). Visitors can view

◀ Fig. 4a

Visitors at the exhibition *The Family of Man*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1955. Architect Paul Rudolph’s installation design was radical for its time, taking full advantage of photography’s flexibility and of novel hanging methods to encourage fluid and unexpected relationships. Like *SHOWING (work x family)*, it embraced “concepts of communication that depended on size, juxtapositions, and sequences,” said Steichen’s primary assistant, photographer Wayne Miller. Courtesy National Archives, photo no.306-PS-55-2723-box 218.

Fig. 5

Installation view of the exhibition *SHOWING (work x family)*, Mazmanian Gallery, Framingham State University, Massachusetts, November 2017. Photograph by Adrien Oneiga, courtesy of Working Assumptions.



only one set of screens at a time. The wedge, 4½ feet at the wide end, comprises a 6-foot-tall architectonic white framework stretched with a translucent white material on all sides. The ratio of transparency to opacity depends on how it is lit and what is lit around it. The wedge appears to float a few inches off the ground, “light and less obtrusive, more like a cloud than a wall,” describes its designer Tucker Viemeister. The height is important, he says, because it is human scale but tall enough “so most people can’t see over it, but you almost can.”⁴ They *can* see through it, though not clearly (fig. 6). As the public engages the people who populate the photographs onscreen, they are also aware of fellow travelers on the other side of the wedge. They see and hear the same thing but with the screen order reversed. While monolithic, like a Richard Serra sculpture asserting its outsized geometry, this triangular prism with gossamer skin unifies its subjects and its viewers. We all participate in versions of the daily dance the photographs perform, where notions of the private are crucially communal (fig. 7).

An immersive soundscape composed by musician and poet Alicia Jo Rabins emanates from within and around the wedge to accompany the looping 30-minute image program. Here, emotional content is supported

Fig. 7

Installation detail of the exhibition *SHOWING (work x family)*, Mazmanian Gallery, Framingham State University, Massachusetts, November 2017. Photograph by the author.



but not sentimentalized by a layered combination of live recordings (violin, electric guitar, upright bass, and keyboard), highly processed electronic sounds, and found sounds inspired by but not matching the image content. “These real-world sounds push up against the ambient, evocative music, illustrating the intersection of everyday labor—both in and out of the home—with the emotional currents running beneath,” Rabins explains. Sound envelops the wedge and creates a public perimeter, together becoming an incorporeal room for the experience. It helps remove viewers from the space they came from (mental and physical) and focus on the unfolding images.

I loved how the images capture moments of parting and reconnecting, moments of distance and closeness, the tenderness that lives beneath our busy daily lives. Sometimes this is hard to access in the rush of a day, and I wanted to create a soundtrack to foreground the feeling behind a simple goodbye at a bus stop or a photograph of family on a desk at work.⁵

Viewers are offered seating to watch the photographs on only one side of the giant V, where wood block stools and a bench friendly to climbing toddlers are inscribed with a rearrangeable (*work x family*) equation.

To navigate the twinned presentation—to choose a side—is symbolic of confronting the dichotomy of work and family, the push and pull between them, and the customary expectation that the two realms are best kept separate. The dramatic form and scale of the wedge underline how we can be split between worlds but are at the same time a single individual balancing, even integrating, responsibilities and roles. Sociologist Christena E. Nippert-Eng explains in the Introduction to her book *Home and Work: Negotiating Boundaries through Everyday Life* how her academic discipline wrongly supposes that:

we all know what these terms mean, as if the territories they encompass and the ways they are related are the same for everyone.... But “home” and “work” are inextricably, conceptually defined with and by each other. Exploring one without exploring the other cannot get to the heart of what it’s really like to experience either, independently or jointly, for one person or many. As a result, we have no image or language to describe the undeniably rich variations on these themes composed by real people living real lives. We have no conceptual framework that allows for ambiguity and order, sameness and difference....⁶

What Nippert-Eng submits is a fitting proposition for the *Showing* installation. It is a hybrid cultural expression that seeks to portray the organic variation she outlines, to be a “conceptual framework” that allows for “ambiguity and order, sameness and difference,” that looks at “real people living real lives,” and that began by seeking single images that reside somewhere on the continuum of work and family, or work and home.

After the *Showing* commission to photograph working pregnant women was completed, another initiative began at the organizing Berkeley-based foundation, Working Assumptions, led by founder Jane Gottesman and then associate director Apollonia Morrill. In 2013, local high school photography teacher Lucinda Daly, herself a single mother, was intrigued by the potential of the (work x family) topic to inspire her classes. And Gottesman was “genuinely curious how kids saw the multiple demands pulling on the adults in their lives. What did they know about the intimate rhythms of their families that no one else would know? How would they express it in photographs?” Together, the three women created a student assignment for Berkeley High School that asked: “How do work and family overlap in your life?”⁷ Supported with a lesson plan, resource materials, and facilitation, students answered the assignment with such moving and



Fig. 8

Sophia Bilbao, tenth-grade student, Berkeley High School, California, *My father's tools, including his boots, allow us to live as comfortably as we do. He's so exhausted at the end of his work day, he just kicks them off and leaves them on the porch*, 2013. Made in the wrk x fmly high-school program and included in *SHOWING (work x family)*. Courtesy of the artist.

direct photos that they eventually provided the proverbial fresh air for another related project at the foundation: to comb historical and contemporary photography for images that encapsulated that same work/family overlap, the issue at the heart of Gottesman's mission.

I arrived as a consulting curator along the way and observed that the best of the student photographs coexisted seamlessly with the professional work that had been selected to date. The insider access and removal of critical and aesthetic distance injected the topic with authenticity and unadulterated seeing (fig. 8). The student population was also more diverse than the professional group in origin and orientation, and their stories helped broaden tired, restricted definitions. The twenty-first century was fast making assumptions about both work and family obsolete, and the potential impact and relevance of *Showing* required inclusivity and currency. The assignment was developed further and offered to many

more schools. My experience with it as a facilitator in high-school photography classrooms in Tucson made me realize that students often assume their own life fails to meet model definitions of family and would therefore disappoint us as a subject. They had to be convinced that, “Yes, it is *you* and your unique story and vision we are interested in.” One student, who crossed the desert from Mexico to arrive with his parents at age five, wrote in response to the teacher’s prompt of “What is family?”:

Family is eating at the kitchen table together and telling each other about their day. It’s about your little sister telling the whole family how bad her day was, and how Stacy ruined her chance with Brad. At least that’s what I grew up thinking. But family to me was never eating together or telling each other about our day. It was never going out with each other and enjoying the weather. No matter how much I wished family to me was like how they showed it on TV, it simply never was.⁸

Showing (work x family) seeks to honor this boy’s place at the family table, even if he, like many participating students, eats there alone because his parents work two jobs and long hours. Virginia Rutter, a sociologist and professor at Framingham State University in Massachusetts and host to the launch of *Showing (work x family)* on her campus in 2017, explained that: “Family diversity is the new normal in the United States: sixty years ago, the dominant family type was dad at work, mom at home. Today, there is no dominant family type. This exhibition recognizes the uncertainty families experience now—that sense of ‘no fixed equation.’”⁹ By 2018, over fifty-seven schools and art centers in thirteen states were home to classes that had done the assignment and submitted student photographs and statements to Working Assumptions for its landmark archive and possible inclusion in *Showing (work x family)*.

The next challenge became how to merge, organize, and present selections from the commission, the assignment, and curated work, including contributions from student photographers and seventy-five professional artists, photojournalists, and documentarians. After agreeing to a democratizing digital platform and experimenting with common themes and subjects, Geoffrey Biddle, photographer and co-curator of *Showing*, proposed a structure that followed the arc of the day. The journey begins in the dark at 4:11 am with the earliest risers and ends in the wee hours of the night, again in darkness. Since family and work life are so often a daily cycle, it made sense to narrate an imaginary day, lived by hundreds of players in

Fig. 9

From a *Showing (work x family)* editing session where curators Geoffrey Biddle and the author tested image randomization and folder sequence in the Working Assumptions office, Berkeley, California, September 2017. Photograph by the author.



an accumulation of hundreds more routine details. The 186 photographs explore and build connection and variation. Picture style and point of view vary widely, from black-and-white to color, large format to cell phone, directed and candid. We move from city to country, coast to coast, subway to SUV. Family tables abound, as do the props that signify (work x family) convergence: calendars, keys, shoes, ID cards, cell phones, laptops, clocks, cars, clothes, food, coffee, beds, and family photos. By attaching all these images to circadian thinking, we made a human clock: people working throughout the day together and apart, at home and away, caring for themselves and each other.

Work *times* family is the equation. One multiplies the other with no guaranteed solution and the factors are interchangeable. The order of the images honors this philosophy of dynamic calculation. While the arc of the day is the structure, proprietary computer software was written so that while time-of-day folders show the photographs in a fixed linear sequence, individual images inside the folders appear in randomized order to ensure juxtapositions between the three-screen arrays never repeat. Picture relationships are constantly renewed and the message of manifold experience, of connections and contrasts, from morning to afternoon to evening scenes of (work x family) life, is synergistically delivered (fig. 9). Viewers are unaware of this strategic improvisation unless they are attentive and

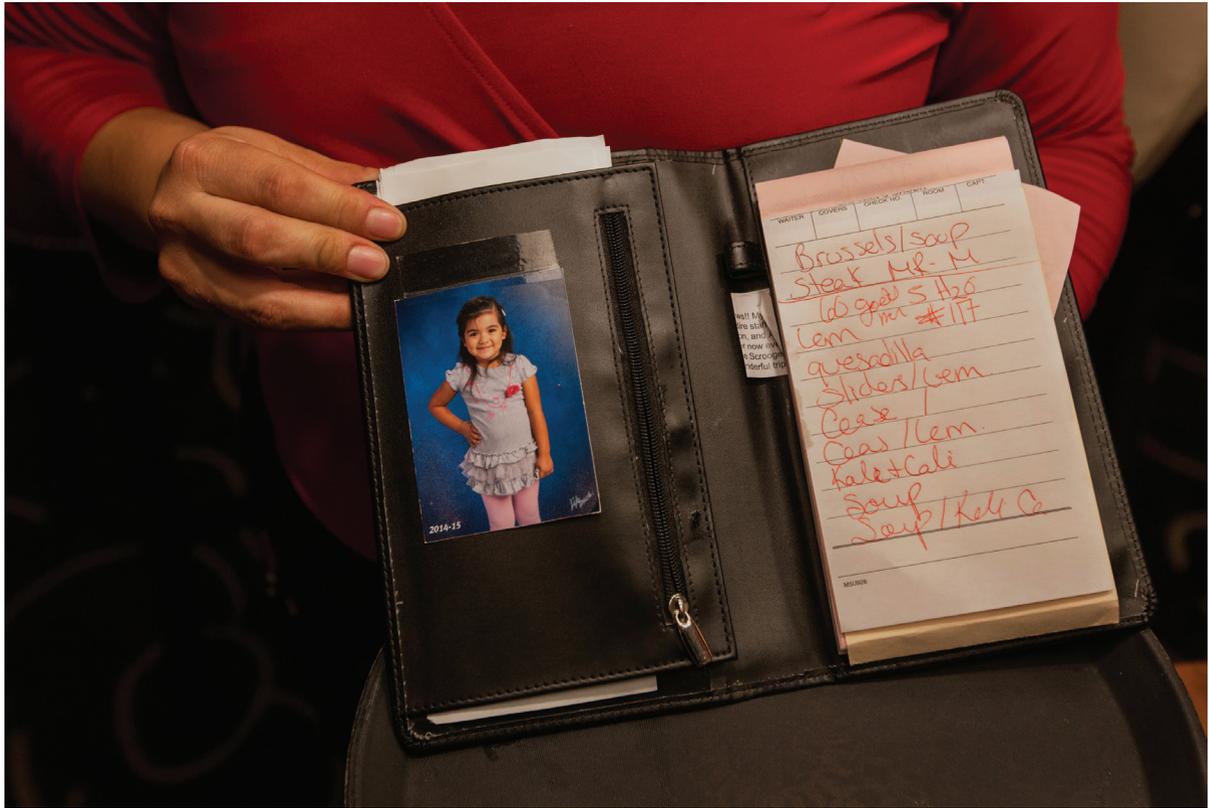


Fig. 10a

Geoffrey Biddle, *Waitress on Thanksgiving*, Sonoma, California, 2015. Photograph. Included in *SHOWING (work x family)*. Courtesy of the artist.

watch the half-hour loop more than once. The soundscape is scored to synchronize only with the collective theme and mood of the folders, not the specific images they contain. The message of interchangeability and community, self-recognition and relativity, is literally coded into the language of the image program.

The relationship of photography and family has a long history that evolved with the medium from its nineteenth-century beginning. Today, in our respective bubbles of daily obligation, photography helps family come to work. Portraits and snapshots of loved ones are workplace talismans against discouragement and give the hours added value and connect us back to an idealized home front. Whether they are pictures from that day we text each other or post, the framed faces atop office furniture, glowing computer screensavers and smartphone wallpapers of vacations, or dog-eared wallet valentines, family photographs bridge the gaps that separate us—including some divides that are irreparable or as final as death. Photographs also reinforce our group identity as a family member when we document ourselves with those we share life or lineage with. Rites of passage and holidays together are enshrined, now as much on social media as in any family album. These photographs that travel with us become family currency, real or projected. Importantly, they also present and commemorate our private lives as part of our public profile. Photography thus uniquely serves to connect love and work, a characteristic that lends itself to *Showing* and is a recurring self-reflexive subject of the project (figs. 10a and 10b).

There was a term and practice popular among 1960s feminists and other activists called “consciousness-raising.” Inspired by the civil rights movement entreaty to “tell it like it is,” consciousness-raising, in its essence, means going to the people and their personal stories to identify endemic social conditions and political challenges. By sharing the details of our particular lives with each other, it is easier to grasp the theory of structural problems and develop strategies for improvement. *Showing (work x family)* is a revisionist, art-based approach to this idea. While it does not offer prescriptions, it was born from a desire to address the isolation of working families who inevitably fall short of the time and resources required to meet the competing demands of work and family. To turn our attention to this experience brings us a step closer to dialogue and even reform. Issues of maternity and family leave, available and affordable daycare and eldercare, pay equity for women with no “baby penalty,” and validating



Fig. 10b

Michael Wolf, *View into Office Space*, from the series "Transparent City," 2014.

Photograph. Included in *SHOWING (work x family)*.

Courtesy of Michael Wolf/laif/Redux.

stay-at-home fathers are just a few of the (work x family) equations that need solving. We need “to bring to conscious awareness so many things we do and feel and take for granted as women” and men.⁴⁰ In the multitude of (work x family) moments in *Showing*, a dynamic interplay of perspectives becomes an empowering discourse on the daily; images diverse in origin are layered together, alive with sound and monumental in construction. Conceptually, viewers can contribute their own work/family references and join in the exchange.

In 1977, the playwright August Wilson had his first encounter with the collages of Romare Bearden, the influential Harlem Renaissance artist who cut and combined found photographic imagery and colored paper into lyrical, remade scenes of African American experience. Wilson later wrote about that day: “What I saw was black life presented on its own terms, on a grand and epic scale, with all its richness and fullness, in a language that was vibrant and which, made attendant to everyday life, ennobled it, affirmed its value, and exalted its presence.”⁴¹ *Showing* represents no singular vision like Bearden’s or Wilson’s, but it shares their commitment to the texture and detail that describe life as it is lived, that make drama and visual poetry out of the changing (work x family) equation that recalibrates 365 times a year. It is a meditation on the unsung heroism of getting through the day. Within *Showing* are a multitude of distinct visions ordered and reordered to illustrate how simple harmonies abound between strangers, how when we work and take care of our own we till common ground.

Endnotes

1. An estimated 85 percent of the 1.2 trillion photographs created worldwide in 2017 were made with smartphones. Cited in an online article by Caroline Cakebread in *Business Insider*, August 31, 2017.
2. Edward Steichen, *The Family of Man*, with a Prologue by Carl Sandburg (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1955), 4. For a recent exploration of the reception, critiques, and reevaluations of *The Family of Man*, refer to *The Family of Man Revisited: Photography in a Global Age*, eds. Gerd Hurm, Anke Reitz, and Shamoom Zamir (London and New York: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2018).
3. Carl Sandburg, Prologue to Steichen, *The Family of Man*, 2.
4. Tucker Viemeister, from notes on his design concepts for *Showing (work x family)*, email to the author, August 2018.
5. Alicia Jo Rabins, from a description of her approach to composing music and designing sound for *Showing (work x family)*, email to the author, August 2018.
6. Christena E. Nippert-Eng, *Home and Work: Negotiating Boundaries through Everyday Life* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press), 4–5.
7. Jane Gottesman, as quoted by the author in “*Showing (work x family)* in Preview: A Project in the Making,” *Exposure* no. 50:1 (Spring 2017): 32. The assignment was further developed by Gottesman and Morrill, with the author, educator Kim Campisano, and Venice Arts Executive Director Lynn Warshafsky.
8. Introductory paragraph to a writing assignment by a photography student at Sunnyside High School, Tucson, Arizona, March 2015.
9. Virginia Rutter, quoted in a Framingham State University press release announcing the *Showing (work x family)* exhibition launch and extensive related programming on its campus, November 2017.
10. Abigail Heyman, *Growing up female: a personal photojournal* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974), 12. Heyman’s book, including observations from the consciousness-raising groups she was part of, inspired this connection.
11. August Wilson, “On Romare Bearden,” reprinted from Myron Schwartzman, *Romare Bearden: His Life and Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990) in *Drawing Us In: How We Experience Visual Art*, eds. Deborah Chasman and Edna Chiang (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 6.



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