

The Story in the Photograph: Exploring the Work of Mary Frey

Inspiration: Mary Frey (American, b. 1948). *Girls Sunbathing* from the *Domestic Rituals* series (below), 1979–83. Gelatin silver print. Gift of the artist, 1984 ([84.22](#)). © Mary Frey.

Ages: 5+ (through adult)

Duration: Open-ended

Materials needed: Phone with a camera or a camera; paper and pencil; assortment of found objects and/or volunteers.

Introduction: Photography can be used as a medium for storytelling. A photographer can manipulate, or change, the people, objects, or background in a photo to create a final image that tells a specific story. The point-of-view or intention of the photographer also plays a part in what story is told; the person capturing the picture chooses what the viewer sees (what is in the photo) and what the viewer does not see (what does not make it into the photo).



Look

Take a close look at Mary Frey's *Girls Sunbathing*.

- What's going on in this work?
- What do you see that makes you say that?
- What more can you find?

Think

- What do you think the photographer's relationship is with the people in the photograph?
- What is the story that the photographer is trying to tell?
- How does the photographer tell that story?

Connect

In her *Domestic Rituals* series, Mary Frey seeks to question the nature of photographic truth, which is the idea that photographs capture “real” and “true” snapshots of life. As an artist, Frey is interested in experimenting with the seemingly documentary nature of staged photographs. Frey stages and directs each scene, yet takes her photos using a camera and film type that are typically associated with documentary photography, or photography that captures an unaltered moment.

Frey poses the models in her photographs to be engaged in everyday actions and activities most often associated with the means of the middle class, creating a story that may comment on specific societal values and systems. Here, Frey has monumentalized the seemingly everyday activity of relaxing on the beach. The two young women lay in oppositional harmony while the eye is drawn to the lifeguard stands behind them, creating an anchored composition.

Do

1. Take some time to brainstorm a story you want to tell with your photographs or drawings. Perhaps your story is about everyday activities and domestic (at home) rituals, similar to Frey's. Perhaps your story is about an exchange between two people, around an object, an otherworldly, or supernatural occurrence, or something else entirely.
2. Frey sets up a scene to tell her stories. In her photographs, she intentionally arranges the people and objects. After you have decided on what story you are going to tell, look for the objects and people (with their permission!) you want to include.
3. Set-up your scene! Think about how the props and people interact to tell your story. What clothes are the people in your scene wearing? What is happening in the background? What details are necessary to advance your narrative?

4. If you have a phone or camera to take a photo, or if you are drawing the scene, think about perspective and angle. Are you recording the image from down below, at eye-level, or from above? What filter are you going to use? Is the photo or drawing in color or black-and-white?
5. Continue to set-up and photograph or sketch scenes. You can make several in a series to tell a longer story, over time, with more details.

Share

Take a photo of your work and post it to Instagram using the hashtags #MaryFrey and #MuseumFromHome, and tag @HudsonRiverMuseum.