How do museums interpret art? Who writes labels?

Museum curators are important positions in a museum. Curators are subject-area specialists, researchers, writers, and creative thinkers. *Being Seen: Recent Acquisitions from The Ringling Photography Collection*, was curated by Chris Jones, Stanton B. and Nancy W. Kaplan Curator of Photography and New Media, and Ola Wlusek, Keith D. and Linda L. Monda Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art. The curators worked together to select and arrange the photographs for the exhibition, and research and write the label texts for each artwork. Below is the label text for Endia Beal’s photograph (left) *Sabrina and Katrina*. As you read it, think about the layers of research the curators would need to undertake to write the interpretive label. While writing this label the curators were mindful that, as white curators, they could not fully understand the experience of young Black women entering the workplace. Use a critical lens to consider what the curators mean by terms such as “normative,” “culturally biased,” and “white-dominated.” How have the curators used their position of power to amplify the artist’s voice? Why is that important?

**ENDIA BEAL**

Inspired by the artist’s own personal experiences, *Am I What You’re Looking For?* series of portraits presents young Black women who are transitioning to the workplace from university. Photographed in their own homes, and dressed as they would be for a job interview, the sitters are posed against an intrusive backdrop from a workplace environment (where Beal once worked) to set up a juxtaposition between black culture and a white-dominated office setting. Beal draws attention to the fact that although terms like “office appropriate” or “business attire” are presented as neutral, they are in fact culturally biased and often used to reinforce a standard that white and male is the normative. Beal’s practice is among the few to directly confront issues that women of color face upon entering office culture in a systematic way, and the photographs speak to the experience of women of color in contemporary society. “My job as an artist is to add to the existing narratives,” Beal says. “Although there are movies such as *Working Girl* and *9 to 5* that speak of women’s experiences in corporate spaces, there aren’t any about women of color. It’s the same thing in fine arts. So I thought, ‘I’m a woman, I’m black and I’m going to do this right now.’”
Curators take care of collections. As subject-area specialists, they research the collection, create exhibitions, write labels, articles, catalogues and books, and interpret the collection for the public. One of the most visible roles of a museum curator is to research and write the exhibition labels, but it's more work that it seems! You can try your hand at writing labels as well—no experience required!

**DIRECTIONS**

1. Study works by the artist Endia Beal. The exhibition *Being Seen* features three photographs (see following pages) from the series *Am I What You're Looking For?*. Curators often begin with research, and learning more about the artist, her work, and her sources of inspirations is critical to exhibition creation.

2. As you research, consider your own identity and bias. What unconscious biases might you be bringing unknowingly into your research? What aspects of Endia Beal’s photographs and ideas resonate with your own life experiences?

3. Using your research, write short labels for the photographs. You may choose to write a single long label (approx. 150-200 words) for all three photographs as the curators did for the *Being Seen* exhibition, or you may choose to write shorter (approx. 75 words) labels for each photograph.

4. After writing your label(s), share Endia Beal’s work with a family member. Why did she choose to create this series? What messages does she communicate to the viewer? In what ways does Beal address the prejudice faced by Black women in the workplace? What does the phrase “representation matters” mean to you?