

Looking At Herself:
Self-Portraits by Susanna Coffey, Anne Harris & Susan Hauptman

Catalogue essay by Eleanor Heartney

Historically, portrait painting has served a variety of functions. In the era before photography, portraits could provide reminders of absent loved ones. They could operate as affirmations of social status or position. In the case of male painters depicting wives or lovers, they might present enactments of private desire. Post-photography, painted portraits are sometimes offered as windows into the "soul" of the subject, providing glimpses, which go behind the surfaces, replicated by photography. Or, in the hands of artists like Phillip Pearlstein and Chuck Close, they may undermine markers of subjective feeling in order to reveal the artifice of all representation.

The rhetoric surrounding portrait painting often involves terminology, which implies relationships of power or control. An artist is said to "capture" his or her subjects, or to "pin them down." The painter Alice Neel was often referred to as a "soul snatcher." This idea has been amplified in feminist inspired writings about the nature of the "gaze." Theorists have examined the way that women are represented in art through the eyes of male artists. Women, it is charged, generally appear in paintings as muses or as objects of erotic desire or subconscious fear. Rarely are they presented as beings that are sentient and active in their own right.

The feminist analysis has inspired numerous women artists to attempt to reverse the male gaze or to construct an alternate female gaze. In the 1970s, painter Sylvia Sleigh created a series of male odalisques which mimicked the eroticized presentation of female nudes, while Joan Semmel painted the entangled bodies of herself and her lover as if seen looking down from her own eyes. More recently artists like Lisa Yuskavage and Jenny Saville have focused on female nudes, creating works that express the sensuousness of flesh from a female perspective. But even when created by female painters, such works are often criticized for perpetuating the idea of the female body as erotic object.

When the painter is also the subject of the painting, things become even more complicated. Self-portraits exist on a continuum which stretches from Rembrandt's probing depictions of his aging face to Cindy Sherman's theatrical disguises, and from Courbet's recreation of his studio as a microcosm of his place in the world to Picasso's mythologizing of himself in the persona of a lecherous minotaur. The work may be designed to reveal the self, or it may operate as a mask or disguise. It may also expose the degree to which the painter has internalized social conventions about the nature of identity, gender and selfhood.

This exhibition of three female painters who specialize in self-portraits suggests the complexity of the apparently simple situation in which a woman artist acts as both creator and subject. Frequently, artists maintain that they turn to self-portraiture out of simple necessity. After all, this is the one subject that is always available. And self-portraits also bypass many of the pitfalls of the traditional portrait - one need have no fear of offending the subject or failing to create a sufficiently flattering likeness. But they also expose the artist to unexpected forces. Advanced physics suggests that acts of observation changes the thing observed. When applied to the self-portrait, self-observation creates an oscillating set of interactions in which meanings may spiral beyond the artists' conscious control.

For Susan Hauptman, self-portraiture is an exercise in dispassionate observation. She notes that the use of her own face and body eliminates the need for certain decisions, thereby freeing her to focus instead on formal elements like line and tone. In this respect, her face becomes a neutral object, like Cézanne's apples or Vija Celmin's oceans, subject to the painter's endless manipulations. Hauptman also expresses an admiration for Seurat, who registered humans, animals, trees and smokestacks with the same analytic eye. In her works, we encounter the recurring image of her alert, matter-of-fact features set beneath a close-cropped haircut. The images are exquisitely drawn, with modulated shadings of light and shadow that bring to mind the effect of early daguerreotypes.

However, this description of Hauptman's work is too limiting. Her self-portraits are supplied with objects and costumes which recall the attributes found in formal and state portraits. In traditional portraits, these attributes are meant to inform us about the status and social role of the depicted individual. But here, despite the mock solemnity with which these elements are presented - (they may include such absurdist details as a feather sprouting from Hauptman's scalp, a colorful plastic beach ball levitating in space or a polka dot ruff that is simultaneously clownlike and oddly formal) - such attributes tell us nothing about either the subject's public role or her personal identity. Instead they seem designed to short-circuit any intelligible reading.

Similarly, the artist's closely cropped hair gives her an androgynous quality, which runs counter to other markers of femininity. Her boy-like visage gazes at us from beneath a flower covered garden hat or above a wasp waisted ballet dress. In some works, the presence of a man - the artist's husband - makes the sorting out of gender identities even more ambiguous. It is almost as if the two, over the course of a long relationship, have begun to merge. Such mixed signals throw us back onto the image itself -

its delicate draughtmanship, its almost antique sense of shadow and tone - which is perhaps what the artist intends.

All three of these gifted artists explore female consciousness and female form in ways that deliberately deny the satisfactions that accompany conventional representations of women's body. They present forms of beauty which run counter to the norms governing the appearance of the standardized coquettes found in contemporary advertising, movies, and television. Nor do they participate in the charade of transparency and accessibility that surrounds traditional paintings of the female form. Instead, the images they create instill a certain sense of discomfort. These artists present beings that insist on existing on their own terms. In the process they reveal how the hoary genre of the self-portrait can be reinvented to provide meanings more appropriate to our times.