

ART REVIEW

## How Artists See Themselves

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From unsparing representations of old  
age to gigantic effigies of ego

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BY WILLIAM MEYERS

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**YOU PASS THROUGH** “Presidents” at the National Portrait Gallery to get to “Eye to I: Self-Portraits From 1900 to Today.” The presidents are painted in styles typical of their periods, but all are portrayed with the deference due to their office. The 75 artists whose portraits of themselves are in “Eye to I” are, in many instances, less respectful of their persons. They work in a wide variety of styles and media with differing agendas and with differing capacities for self-revelation.

Rather than save the best for last, let me say right off that my favorite is “Alice Neel Self-Portrait”



Patricia Cronin's 'Memorial to a Marriage' (2002)

(1980). In a century whose art drifted further and further from representation, Neel made her reputation painting portraits, frequently of artists, noted for their light touch, affection and psychological insight. The oil painting was finished when she was 80, an age when many women no longer want to have themselves depicted, never mind shown naked. She spent five years on it and, according to the wall text, “I almost killed myself painting it.”

Neel sits in a chair, her floppy breasts extending to the rolls of her belly. The chair looks comfortable enough, but is upholstered in material with vertical white and blue stripes that might be the bars of a cage. Or is it her body that is the cage? I like this picture because she looks at us with the same expression as that of my all-time favorite self-portrait, the Frick Collection's 1658 Rembrandt. Like his, her brutal, revelatory self-assessment testifies to both talent and character before defiantly submitting itself to our judgment.



Alice Neel's 'Alice Neel Self-Portrait' (1980)

Seventeen of the artists are photographers, the earliest being Jessie Tarbox Beals. She presents herself in a businesslike way standing beside her 8-by-10-inch view camera and her assistant at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis (1904). Gertrude Käsebier's picture taken the next year is *echt* Pictorialism; she sits like Whistler's mother, formal and dark. Richard Avedon is much too kind to himself; the 1978 dye transfer print smacks of advertisement. And Chuck Close—wow!—needed 16 dye diffusion transfer prints in four rows of four to create one huge (107 9/16-by-86 1/4-inch) not very interesting picture of his now well-known face (1989). Ego, I guess.

Curator Brandon Fortune's witty hanging of Man Ray (1924) and Berenice Abbott (c. 1932) across the hall from each other reasserts the relationship between the mentor and his mentee; both were accomplished portrait photographers and produced credible pictures of themselves. The most visually complex photographic self-portrait is Beaumont Newhall's 1970 black-and-white picture taken outside the Museum of Modern Art. Newhall wrote the first comprehensive history of photography

created MoMA's department of photography, and later consolidated the George Eastman Museum's collection. In his picture he is seen reflected in MoMA's plate-glass window, his face obscured by his camera, and inside the museum we see hanging on the wall photographs in an exhibition he curated. To what extent are his position on the sidewalk outside the museum and his blocked face an indication of residual bitterness at the shabby treatment by MoMA that occasioned his resignation in 1947?

There are 500 self-portraits among the National Portrait Gallery's 23,000 items, and the ones Ms. Fortune selected for this exhibition include Hans Hofmann's cartoonish pen-and-ink image (1942), so unlike his abstract paintings; Louise Nevelson's dramatic ink-and-watercolor drawing (1938), the bold black lines highlighted with red; the novelist Ralph Ellison's tentative graphite picture (1941); "The Silver Goblet," Lucy May Stanton's showy watercolor on ivory (1912); and Thomas Hart Benton's "Self-Portrait With Rita" (c. 1924), an oil painting of Benton and his wife on the beach at Martha's Vineyard with his naked torso looking a lot like that of Douglas Fairbanks in his swashbuckling adventure movie posters.

The two most unusual media are "Seven Passages to a Flight," Faith Ringgold's 1998 quilt including nine images from her life and work, hand-painted etchings with pochoir borders on linen, and Patricia Cronin's life-size funerary-like double portrait sculpture "Memorial to a Marriage" (2002), showing herself and her then partner, now wife, Deborah Kass, lying together in an embrace.

The self-portrait provides a cost-free model for professional artists to demonstrate their skill, and a challenge to their self-understanding. Pele de Lappe stares at us with an inquiring expression as she must have stared at herself in the mirror while drawing her graphite image (1938). Diego Rivera is more knowing and seems to challenge us in the lithograph he produced to support himself (1930). In an era of ubiquitous smartphone selfies such as Molly Soda's "Who's Sorry Now" (2017), the National Portrait Gallery exhibition shows how professional artists see themselves or, maybe more accurately, want themselves to be seen.



Enrique Chagoya's 'Aliens Sans Frontières' (2016)

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**Eye to I: Self- Portraits From 1900 to Today**

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Mr Meyers writes on [photography for the journal.  
See his photographs at  
[www.williammeyersphotography.com](http://www.williammeyersphotography.com).