Self, Body and Portraiture

Portraiture has always been a central point of visual art. As a western society do not let the idea of body slip from our mind, in fact it is perfectly plausible to say a human being, typically, by modern day nature will think of self from minute one to the last minute. We do not ignore ourselves. As a species we are self involved, fair to say vain, and conscious of body. Whether we are concerned with our own bodies, wrinkles, fat, size, shapes, marks, etc, you name it; we have it and are perfectly aware.

We compare, we copy, we despise, we laugh, we cry, and all because of body. It is most certainly the biggest obsession in the world today. This obsession will continue, and take over lives and minds as it is already doing. One of the most fascinating art forms is, and always will be – portraiture, family, fame, regal, poor or rich. An artist's most mysterious ideas come from within portraiture. A passage written by John Berger, in his book "Ways of Seeing" states, "in portraiture an artist can put across personality traits and characterisations. The penetrating characterisations seduce us into believing that we know the personality traits."


John Berger

The body has always been an important aspect of portraiture. In the past the gestures and disposition of the body vary in many different ways. The face is seen to be a marker of

identity and as the entrance the soul; whereas bodies can often be more conventional than the individual's idea. In the last decades of the twentieth century in portraiture there has been a strong emphasis on the body. As with issues of social and private identity, the body has been subjected to new social pressures and expectations that have found their ay into the wider concerns of the artists.

There is huge emphasis on face and surface in Western Capitalist society and the contrasting power of the body in "primitive" societies and culture. They see fashionable "facility" as resulting from a rift between mind and body, in which the outer, visibilities of life have taken over the authority of soul and spirit:

"Paintings, tattoos or masks on the skin embrace the multi – dimensionality of bodies. Even masks ensure the heads belonging to the body rather than making it a face…Shaman, warrior and hunter organisations or power, fragile and precarious, are all the more spiritual by virtue of the fact that they operate through corporeality, animality and vegetality."

Body image has become a major issue in the Western world, where widespread wealth has led to extremes of body type and unhealthy obsessions surrounding food. The growth of eating disorders has stimulated aspiration for a body shape that resembles that of a starving person in the third world.
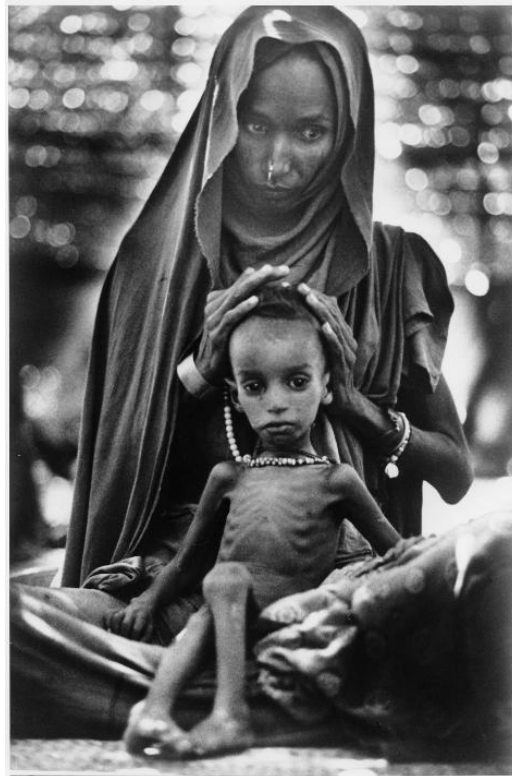
At the other end of the extreme is excessive obesity – a product of unhealthy Western

diets and the fatigue of "modern car culture". The Western desire for beauty has fuelled the business of cosmetic surgery, which offers a god – like perfecting of body parts. Artists have tapped into all these aspirations in their portraits.

In particular, with relation to cosmetic surgery is the performance artist Orlan.

Orlan

Orlan is a French artist whose life's work has been based on using her own body as both a medium and a subject of representation. In 1984 she dubbed herself "Saint Orlan" and depicted herself in the guise of female saints based on old master paintings and sculpture. In the 1990's she went a step further and subjected herself to plastic surgery that was not geared towards self improvement and perfection, but designed to make her look more like figures in selected works of art from the past, such as Botticelli's Venus. In doing this she added horns to her head and carved her face into a style resembling Mona Lisa's smile. She underwent surgery under local anaesthetic only. By doing this she exposed the pressures that modern women are under to make their bodies perfect and their willingness to undergo the pain, anxiety and humiliation of surgery.

All of Orlan's operations were filmed and projected via video link to galleries

around the world. She considers all of her work self – portraiture and carries this as self construction to the ultimate extreme.

The fascination of many late twentieth century artists with the monstrous, excessive or ugly body can represent attempts to attack this obsession with image and surface. Among many artists who have employed this idea in their portraiture, is the Austrian artist Arnulf Rainer.

Arnulf Rainer Rainer photographed himself repeatedly, and then did "violence" to those images by painting over them or scratching through them. By doing this, his work provides a representation of his body that has been cancelled out or damaged. In these works he deliberately attempts to remove the body from its socialised state and bring out more of its originality.

Self-perception is a curious idea. Over the years in our lives, our emotions and experiences ricochet around inside our heads, gradually emerging in our patterns of behaviour and in our faces: brimming with confidence or shuddering with insecurity. Artists like Freud and Saville perfectly display this idea in their portraits.
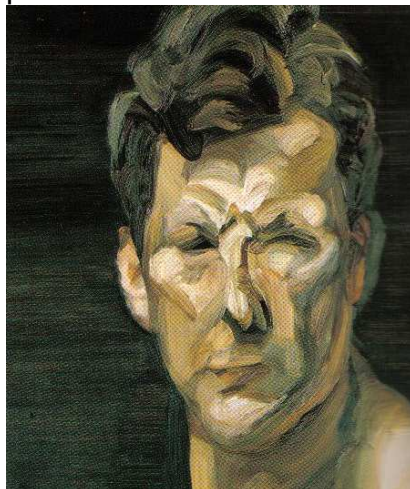
Self – Portrait, Lucien Freud

There still remains to be a debate as to the extent of which Freud's grotesque and ungainly naked figures should be classed as portraits, as opposed to nude studies. Freud's attention to detail in facial features gives a strong sense of character to his nudes. However, he challenges the traditions of portraiture by avoiding conventional poses, displaying whole length figures naked, stressing ugliness and extremes rather than the ideal of corrected face and body; he also strips the studio background of any signs of identity or status of the sitter.

Freud's paintings appear greedy and rich; he portrays this through the use of thick paint and the way his subjects are portrayed in an obese and gross manner.

In dealing with the ideas of body image artists have several strategies at their disposal. They can explore cultural expectations by presenting what many consider to be an "ugly" body, or they can experiment with the ideal bodies that wealthy Westerners seem to strive so desperately. The former strategy has been adopted by the British artist jenny Saville, who uses her own body to make a point about social expectations in the late twentieth century.

Jenny Saville – self - portrait

Saville produces monumental paintings that often cover whole walls. These works represent her body as obese, with loose hanging breasts, large folds of fat and the sorts of visible veins that are also apparent in the work of Lucien Freud. Through doing this Saville shows us a body that is exactly the opposite of the eroticised and perfected models we see in glossy magazines. The large physical dimensions of her work mean that the viewer is not able to avoid confronting a body type that they may have been conditioned to find undesirable. Through her self – portraiture, Saville finds a way of making the viewer question their own expectations about body perfection by facing the reality of an imperfect body.

In addition to the politicising of the body in Orlan and Saville's work, the late twentieth century artists have explored the mind / body duality that has been established in portraiture from its origins. Artists could, for example, portray their own body as a way of expression, something essential about their identity. This method was adopted by the British artist Jo Spence, who was diagnosed with breast cancer and used photographic self – portraiture as a way of accepting her illness.

Property of Jo Spence – Jo Spence

Spence labelled her naked body "Property of Jo Spence", as a way of stressing her anger at the disease that caused the removal of one of her body parts. Spence called this idea "Phototherapy", as she used it partly as a means of working through her own medical and psychological history

The earliest self – portraits by women artists also emphasised their professional role. The sixteenth century artist Katharine Van Hemessen depicted herself with brushes, palette and canvas; this painting became a prototype for other self – portraits by women who used a similar three – quarter – length format with a partial profile angle. At a time when male artists such as Dürer were attempting to raise their status and disassociate themselves from the mechanical aspects of their trade, women were only just beginning to gain recognition as artists. Representing themselves in their professional role may have seemed necessary as making statement or proving achievement. Yet not all self – portraits by women were of this nature, it was also common for women artists to show themselves playing music or with their families, as represented by sixteenth century Italian artist Sofonisba Anguissola.

Sofonisba Anguissola

Tracy Emin is one such artist whose works cannot be described as self portraiture in a traditional sense but whose entire work is geared towards the kind of self – exploration that characterises self – portraiture of the past. Emin's art is inevitably self-absorbed. Using a variety of different media creativity, she explores the most intimate aspects of her life history, including her sexual experiences. Her most famous work "Every one I have ever slept with", is composed of a tent, the inside of which has a series of lists, descriptions and moments of people who have shared her bed – friends, family, as well as sexual partners. Through works such as this Emin is able of challenge the traditional boundaries of self-portraiture

Every one I have ever slept with – Tracy Emin

Self – portraits can be playful, experimental, theatrical and many other things, but there is a question about the extent to which they bear any relationship to autobiography. When looking at a self – portrait viewers can be tempted to test the artist's view of him or herself against what is known about their life, and to see the artists self representation as somehow indicative of their feelings or appearance at the time the work was produced.

Europe coincided with the arrival of autobiography as a genre. As early as the fifteenth century, artists began telling the story of their lives. The sculptor Ghiberti published a "commentarii", which was a form of autobiography. By the late sixteenth century, when the genre of autobiography was well established, the Tuscan Goldsmith Benvenalo Cellini wrote a lively story of his own life, which was enriched by many details of his fellow artists and patrons. In the same century, both Catholic and Protestant theology emphasised the importance of self – examination and self awareness. Although early autobiographies existed, the use of the term to characterise the genre of narrating

ones own life was not common until the end of eighteenth century. Autobiographies could take the form of memoirs or diaries and were frequently published after the author's death. These basic developments were complemented by a public interest in the lives of artists that flourished especially in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By the twentieth century, a fascination with the private lives of famous artists increased the tendency of artists to write their own memoirs and to express their view of themselves in self – portraits. Some artists, like the Viennese Oskar Kokoschka, did both.

Oskar Kokoschka – Self - portrait

David Hockney is one such artist whose work has an autobiographical flavour. In his early career he frequently made visual reference to his life as art student and as a young man struggling to come to terms with his sexual identity. Hockney's self – portraits signal specific moments of his life, which may have

been private or meaningful only to him. However, the fame he achieved at a relatively young age meant that the audience for his private view of himself is vast, and it is an audience that knows enough about Hockney's life to be able to relate his work to his private circumstances. In his self – portraiture such as "The Student: Homage to Picasso", Hockney shows himself dressed as a trendy art student observing an oversized bust of Picasso as if he is viewing an object in an art gallery or the effigy of a God in a temple.

The Student: Homage to Picasso – David Hockney

The self – portrait is a fantasy of Hockney's first definitive encounter with Picasso's work at a retrospective exhibition held at the Tate Gallery, London, in 1960. The Homage here is both

public and private and the autobiographical reference to a moment in his influential years is thus overwhelmed by an image that carries greater symbolic, as well as personal significance. This is one of Hockey's less intimate views of his own life. He produced other works, which refer to his initially secret sexuality, but interestingly many of these were not conceived as self – portraits. Hockney's work offers a view of a definitive moment in his life, but the way he imagines that moment, as well as the nature of self – portrait, avoids moving into self – narrative. So unlike written autobiography which can appear to convey a life story over time, self – portraiture relies on the presentation of frozen moments, which as de Man says, "produce the life of the subject, rather than offer reflections of it."


Rightly or wrongly self – portraits can convey to the twenty first century viewer the idea that an artist is investigating their inner life rather than playing out social or artistic roles, or referring to specific events or moments. Self – portraits seem to suggest a form of self – exploration. Although the idea that an artist would choose to explore their state of mind through self – portraiture, is a fairly modern one and such interpretations are often read back on to self – portraits in the past.

This view of self – portraiture is illustrated by the responses to, and interpretations, of Van Gogh's self – portraits.

Self – portrait, Van Gogh

Van Gogh struggled throughout his life with his intense desire to be recognised as an artist and the constant frustration of being unacknowledged while he was living. His manic approach to his art, which led to bouts of inexhaustible production and his well documented lapses in insanity have coloured subsequent interpretations of his work. Our knowledge of these obstacles and frustrations is enhanced by the evidence of his many letters to his brother, Theo, which were published after his death, and go by the sequence of self – portraits he produced throughout his working life.
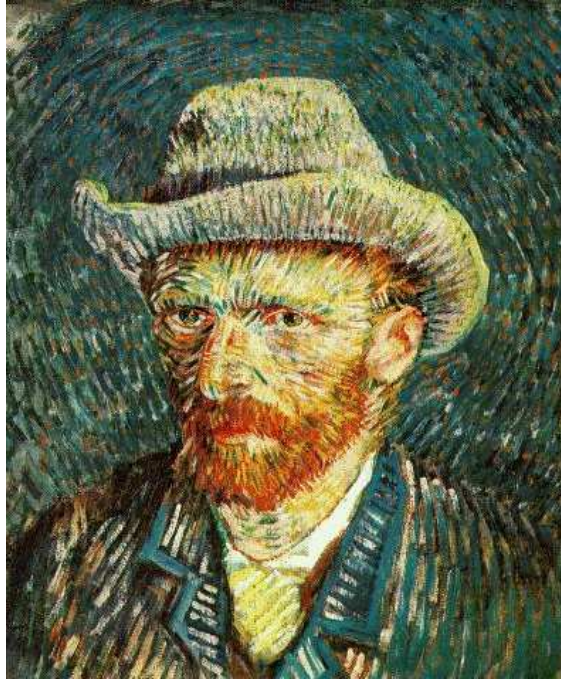
Van Gogh's work is an example of how subsequent generations could use self – portraiture as a means of exploring their lives as an artist. However, the difference between retrospective interpretations of Van Gogh and those of Rembrandt, is that Rembrandt's self – portraits are seen as rather more self conscious presentations of his successes and failures, while Van Gogh's self – portraits are more often read as catalogues of his unstable state of mind.

Rembrandt

His self portraits show artistic innovation and skill, but they also seem to reveal an artist who is intent on observing his own psychological rollercoaster.

Rembrandt is possibly the most famous producer of the "aging self – portrait". In his elf – portrait of 1640, aged 34, we see a clear – eyed, confident and richly dressed image, deliberately trying to be like that of the portraits of Raphael, Dürer and Titian. In his later self – portrait of 1669, made in the year of his death, his physical and artistic presence reflects the change in his fortune.

Whether a portrait veers towards likeness or type, all portraits engage, in some way, with identity of the sitter. The concept of identity has a complex history. The twenty first century notion towards identity in gender, race and sexual orientation unique to an individual, came from the ideas behind the work of seventeenth century portraits, when the idea of "self" began to be explored philosophically.

Previously self-identity was seen to be worked into the external features of artwork; this early notion of identity became crucial to the history of portraiture. The idea that portraits should communicate something about the sitter's psychological state or personality is an idea that evolved gradually and became common only after nineteenth century romanticism. Portraits represent the external features of a unique individual and thus also place their subjects within conventional behaviour and dress.

Portraits are filled with the external signs of personality and socialised self, something Ervin Goffman referred to as the "front of an individual." These external marks have been remarkably persistent in portraiture, even after ideas of character and personality were well developed. A perfect example of this is the series of portraits of English Grand tourists in Rome painted by the Italian eighteenth century artist Pompeo Batoni.

Pompeo Batoni

His portrait shows the young aristocrat, George Gordon Cord Haddo, standing in a cross legged pose that was a conventional posture of politeness. He is surrounded by the signs of Roman artistic greatness in the form of an antique statue, a renaissance frieze and a crumbling column. The Roman countryside is visible in the background. A very English hunting dog sitting at his feet reinforces these signals of Haddo's social status, as only men of a certain income could hunt or participate in the Grand Tour, Haddo's "front" is represented as that of a highborn gentleman.

Such a romantic concept of an imaginative journey in self – portraiture can seem obscure when applied to the discipline of painting. As Lucien Freud comments, "I think, half the point of painting a picture is that you don't know what will happen...that is that if painters actually knew what was going to happen, they wouldn't actually bother to do it."

We cannot always presume that technique is necessarily an indication of character, but this is an inevitable reaction when we view portraits – and even more so when we view self – portraits.

The history of self – portraiture is one of the most fascinating and complex of the whole genre. Because self – portraits involve the artist and sitter in one, they hold a charm of a private diary, they give the viewer a small insight into his or her own personality. While the characteristic qualities of self – portraits can be a means of self – examination, they have also been used as signatures and advertisements for an artist, and as experiments in techniques or expression.

Rembrandt Self Portrait 16th century

There are very few self – portraits before the sixteenth century, this early absence could be attributed to a devoutness

that prevented artist from glorifying themselves. In addition most artists before the renaissance were considered to be crafts people or mechanics whose primary occupation was to be responsive to the needs of their workshop and patrons. (This was also the case for actors.) When artists began producing self - portraits in the fifteenth century it was initially as a footnote or a signature to another commission.

The Dutch artist Jan Van Eyck famously included his self portrait in the convex mirror of the Arnolfini Marriage; his reflection can just be detected in the helmet of St. George in his alter piece, representing the Madonna with the donor Camon Van Der Peale.

The Italian Sculptor Ghiberti produced two self – portraits as part of his commission for the doors of the baptistery in Florence. The first of these was possibly as early as 1401, but the more famous self – portrait appears as a rounded on the so – called, gates of paradise, amidst the heads of prophets. Ghiberti's inclusion of his self – portrait on this highly prestigious commission thus acted as a form of signature that associated him with his masterpiece. Although this is one of the earliest Italian examples of this practice, according to the sixteenth century

biographer Giorgio Vasari, a number of renaissance artists represented themselves as a witness or spectator in religious commissions. It is significant that the appearance of free – standing self – portrait painting appeared shortly after the beginning of free – standing portrait in the late years of the fifteenth century, with notable examples by Albrecht Dürer and Raphael.

Self – portraiture in its very nature engages in some way with artistic identity, but how that identity is represented and perceived is heavily influenced by the gender and status of the artist at different periods in history. Because a self – portrait can be a reminder of the artist's profession, artists have used them as visual manifestos, demonstrating their artistic role or sense of place in their society.

Portraits are representations, but they are also material objects, and as such they have had a variety of functions. As objects, portraits come in a range of media. Painting remains by far the most common media of representation in portraiture, but prints, drawings and portrait sculpture in the forms of busts, tombs and monuments are also widespread. Portraits appear on objects of mass circulation, such as coins, stamps and banknotes.

They have a place on commemorative medals, plates and mugs that are meant to be preserved, as well as fans, handkerchiefs and other objects with finite use – value. Portrait photography is displayed in domestic settings and appears in popular journalism through images in glossy magazines for example. Portraits furthermore can be produced in media that do not seem particularly suitable to the close study of likeness, such as mosaic or stained glass.

A portrait is a work of art like any other, but portraits are also a special class of object that can resist classification as art. As Richard Brilliant has put it, "there is a great difficulty in thinking about pictures even portraits by great artists as art and not thinking about them primarily as something else, the person represented." One way of testing the portraits status as an art object is to look at the history of portrait collections and portrait galleries and to map the motivations behind them. Aesthetic value

- the perceived quality of the portrait as a skilful, inventive, or beautiful work of art has only rarely been the primary inspiration in the commissioning, display and reception of portraits. Portraits of family members were an important component of art collections from the ancient world, but there are a number of cases of collectors who sought out and gathered portraits as the main focus of their acquisitiveness. It is a notable point that some of the first, earliest galleries were galleries of portraiture.

From it's origins in the skull cults of ancient Jericho, portraiture has retained certain key features and undergone many changes.

Portraiture has always involved a work of art that is meant to represent or convey in some way a named individual. Portraiture has always had a sort of charming power. It has also served functions that other works of art have not, and it overlaps with philosophical and psychological issues in a way that is unique to its genre. However, unlike the late twentieth century, portraiture was largely a Western phenomenon that reflected concerns with individual character in ways that were alien to many cultures. With a greater globalisation of Western Culture, portraiture is no longer narrowly confined to the Western World. With this geographical expansion portraiture has also changed in other ways. Portraits now appear in all types of media and they serve many different purposes. Portraits are still produced for the purpose of conveying likeness and for documenting the appearance, status or profession of individuals and organisations to be displayed publicly. They remain important signals of family affection, friendship or group solidarity.

They still serve as vehicles for artistic self – exploration and technical experiment. But portraiture has also become a method for artists to explore self – conscious issues of gender, ethnicity, sexuality and the body. With globalisation, the expansion of media and co – existence of old and new functions, portraiture at the beginning of the twenty first century has become a genre of art that has more versatile and representational possibilities and functions than ever before.

Mercedes Simpson, Unit 5 3500 word contextual essay

Self – portrait inspired by Arnulf Rainer