Mirror Mirror:

Contemporary photographic self-portraiture

curated by Linsey Gosper

Artists: Hoda Afshar, Garrett Hughes, David-Ashley Kerr, Diane Mantzaris, Kobie Nel, Farrell & Parkin, Drew Pettifer, Linsey Gosper & Jack Sargeant, Jacqui Stockdale, Hannah Raisin

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Mirror Mirror is an eclectic showcase of Melbourne-based artists using self-portraiture in a diversity of styles and subject matters. The ways in which these artists treat the self-portrait are as varied as the outcomes, and it is this multiplicity that I find fascinating and transgressive.

The self-portrait is many things. As a tool the self is always ‘at hand’. Artists are accustomed to using what material is readily available to them. This is the case in David-Ashley Kerr’s work, where the ‘self-portrait’ is a tool of convenience. Kerr’s examination of the staged white male figure in the landscape draws attention to displacement felt by non-indigenous people in the Australian bush and associated environmental issues resulting from this introduced species. For Kerr the appeal of using the self-portrait is complete control over subject matter; in using the self, nothing is lost in translation.

This control also allows uninhibited performance, and the performance of the body in these specific locations is central to the outcome.

Contrary to Kerr, in Diane Mantzaris’ Fountain of Eve the use of the self is purposeful and political. The overpowering statuesque self-portrait is a rebellion against ‘a deeply entrenched puritanical streak in Australian culture, which seems to be focused against women making bold statements in art’. Mantzaris seeks to shed light on this conservatism and concurrently reclaim the territory of the female body for use by women in art. Another self-portrait that questions the representation of women in the Western art world is the work of Hoda Afshar: Untitled criticises the lack of multiplicity attributed (in this case) to Muslim women and the fetishization of their oppression as commonly characterised by the West, as a lack of knowledge and exoticism of the ‘other’.

The subjects of the gaze, control, gender and performance are components of every work in the exhibition. Drew Pettifer’s work Untitled (Holding Been) explores the relationship between desire, intimacy and vulnerability. This performative work draws attention to the power relationship inherent in the photographic gaze and the relationship of the camera to the object of desire. Themes of intimacy (without reciprocating desire), the body, sexuality and performance are also found in Hand in mouth by Linsey Gosper & Jack Sargeant. With reference to the surreal, absurd sexuality of J.G. Ballard’s novel The Atrocity Exhibition, the work playfully illustrates the fetishistic manifestations of polymorphic sexuality. The multiplicity of the self that self-portraiture affords, allows for projections of the unusual and unconditioned desires of the individual.

As in Hand in mouth, the ‘double’ self-portraits of Farrell & Parkin and Garrett Hughes, portray a connectedness of mind and body between two people. Plum Blossom Meridian explores the artists’ experience of Traditional Chinese Medicine, in this case acupuncture. The closed eyes allude to an internal experience and the associated transcendence that occurs when we look inward and also share a deep relationship. Farrell & Parkin have a lengthy history of self-portraiture and this intimacy reinforces the sense of balance and harmony in the image. A similar joy in story telling through symbolism can be found in the work of Garrett Hughes. In Somewhere in Between Hughes has joined the body of his to another creating a ‘Siamese twin’. This is a literal bonding of mind and body where two become one. Bodily modification is a common thread in the images of Mirror Mirror, which points to a desire to transcend the limitations of the body and their associated politics.

Mantzaris made Fountain of Eve in a Frankenstein like manner from a variety of sources from art history, classicism and religion. She manipulated body parts in her image, also taking on the roles of those parts that she is ‘made’ from; law breaker; defiant protestor; transgressor. The performative nature of the self-portrait can often be an empowering and healing experience. By playing a variety of roles and taking on different characteristics of the subject, a kind of ‘shamanism’ occurs. This ‘multiple’ sense of the self is contrary to the limitations placed on us by society and this freedom and expansion of identity can act as agents of change in our social fabric.

Both Hannah Raisin and Jacqui Stockdale use a part human, part animal identity in their self-portraits. Therianthropes (metamorphosis of humans into animals) have long existed in mythology and art. For Stockdale this has become a major area of exploration within her art practice, as has the self-portrait. Snow Bunny shows powerful forces of nature at play; a pregnant woman and a snow covered mountain. The rabbit mask transforms the image playfully into a fantastical world. ‘My history of making self-portraits is explored equally within my photographs, paintings and drawings, where being my own subject, I am free to become whomever I desire, and where I mark a poignant time in my own history’. For Raisin ‘trans-species appropriation’, the practice of taking on the characteristics of the animal, is a particular focus in Foxy Chicks where the wild meets the domestic. The performance of the body is also a strategic factor in Raisin’s practice. The politics of the body and how it interacts with the environment and surrounding objects becomes a vehicle to examine and interrupt entrenched and restrictive social codes and cultural ideals.
The significance of animal mythology to contemporary society also plays a part in the work of Kobie Nel. Australia, an image heavily laden with koala and kangaroo paraphernalia, is based on the clichéd representations of cultural identity found on tourist postcards. Nel intends to playfully mock national representations of uniqueness; ‘the desire to summarize the entire cultural history of a nation into a single souvenir image is both at once appalling and somehow satisfying’. The overt staging of her photographs draws attention to the photographic device and to the ‘performance’ of identity.

In conclusion what the self-portrait offers, which no other type of portrait photography can do, is absolute control over one’s image. For this reason I think it is particularly useful for (and used by) those who have unequal access to power. The self-portrait is an antidote to the implied power relationship of photography, and is reclamation of one’s image in the art world and media more generally. - Linsey Gosper, 2013

Snow Bunny, Jacqui Stockdale, 2008

Plum Blossom Meridian, Farrell & Parkin, 2009

Fountain of Eve, Diane Mantzaris, 2011

Foxy Chicks, Hannah Raisin, 2011

Australia, Kobie Nel, 2011