

Name : Heidi Lucca-Redcliffe

Student Number : 2103287

Course Title : Fine Art : Studio Site and Context

Module : Research in Context

Code : ADAD5003

Tutors : Gwenllian Beynon and Alex Duncan

Word Count : 2439

Question 5

How has self-portraiture developed through the 20th Century

Figures / Illustrations

Figure 1 – Gwen John “Self Portrait” (1902) Oil on canvas

Figure 2 - Jenny Savillie “Propped” (1992) Oil on canvas

Self portraits and paintings of the self have always been an intimate and a personal way of bringing the artist and their art together. Starting from the early 15th century, artists began expressing and portraying reflections of their self in their art, creating an image that represented them and the environment they were inside. Self portraiture during the 20th century will be the main focus of this essay, where there will be an analysis of artists, starting from the beginning of this century, using Gwen John, to begin analysing her self portrait. Then further on, artist Jenny Saville will be discussed surrounding the question of what a self portrait is to the artist and how has a self portrait developed or changed through this century. By using theorists such as Sigmund Freud and John Berger, a conclusion may form of an understanding to how to perceive and analyse the reflection of a person, and the main question, who the artist is.

A self portrait is a way for the artist to communicate through their art of how they perceive themselves. Through the texture of their medium, the pigments that are decided, scale or the presentation of how their art is shown, to even the expression of their face. There is a self analysis of the artist, a chance to identify and question how to present their self to those who view their work.

Online website, Tate, stated “A self-portrait does not necessarily have to be representational – an abstract or symbolic depiction by an artist of themselves can also be classed as a self-portrait”. (Tate, n.d). Self portraiture is a genre of art that is extremely wide, it showcases how an individual perceives their form. Comparing artists and their self

portraits will always present the beauty of their style, their individuality that pushes into their art and show the contrast between different perspectives of their self portraits.

The beginning of the 20th Century, artist Gwen John, with her 1902 Self portrait, there are crucial significant features that showcase how she viewed self portraits and how she used prior artists as reference involved within her art.



Figure 1. John (1902) *"Self-Portrait"*

Gwen Johns painting portrays herself alone starring into the viewers perspective, out from the canvas. She is portrayed with an apathetic portrait, feels quiet; delicate, intricate and perfectly placed markings that present herself as a closed off individual. Her expression is

similar to her brush strokes, not expressive or suggestive, there is clear definition of her features and there is a presentation of her but the feeling and emotion in her painting doesn't exist, it is closed off and hidden. This creates the question of what was she thinking during this painting? Her stare is soft and subtle, not a harsh or cold, but a pondering stare. Perhaps the consideration of how she was analysing her face translated into her painting, the question of who she is.

Similarly, this apathetic portrait is also portrayed into the background of the environment that she was painted in. It appears as a blur, a blank space that connects to her blank stare. There are subtle textures of a rusty yellow and brown environment. There is a slight suggestion of where the lighting was as there are shadows that appear on her portrait. The background creates this visual presentation of the sound "*brown noise*". Online website describes brown noise to "Common benefits associated with brown noise are relaxation, improved focus" (Sound of Sleep, 2021). John's self portrait portrays that "*improved focus*", intense observation of the portrait as the surroundings are bare and leaves an opening for the viewer to concentrate and only focus on the self portrait.

The way John painted her clothing, the fabric is beautiful and rich as it lays upon her figure. The fabric contrasts to the surroundings and the portrait as it is exuberant. The red glows and leaves this warming and attractive presentation of her clothing. This painting creates a different perspective of a women in art and how she is portrayed. Alicia Foster commentated "The representation of women...as merely decorative and modish" (Foster,1999, pg 16). Artwork that portrayed women provoked the male gaze, to create an

idea that a woman was not a person, but a subject and an object that was painted to become a decoration for an individual to own. Gwen John painted herself that produced this presentation of her that is not over exaggerated, but a silent pondering stare to create a connection between the viewer and herself, she has become significant as a woman in the painting.

Further on, Foster suggested “Her later self-portrait creates an image of self-contained women of psychological depth”(Foster,1999 pg 16) .There is this presentation of an individual that is concealing their emotions within the painting. As stated before, the stare is emotionless and apathetic, producing that question of self-analysis, how does an individual perceive themselves.

“Self-perception is a curious thing. Over the years, our emotions and experiences ricochet round inside our heads, gradually emerging in our patterns of behaviour and in our faces” (Rideal ,2005 , pg 9). This further supports the idea of how psychological impacts have an effect of how a self portrait is painted. It can be a self analysis and can be symbolic to how an artist wants to present their form, through their art, using their memories and thoughts involved within their portrait. This can be seen through how Gwen John worked with her paintings, “need for privacy and solitude necessary to paint....periods of time where she would go nowhere and see no one until she had solved a particular problem in her work” (Roe ,2002 , pg xvii). With her self portrait in 1902, there is a sense of isolation that surrounds her, her figure stands alone, she is framed inside a space of the canvas.

From the previous analysis of Gwen John's self portrait, using Sigmund Freud and his theories of the self, creates a different perspective of analysing the self. "Freud claimed that Jacob's death was the event that precipitated his self-analysis" (Breger ,2000, pg 135).

Traumatic events, such as loss, can create an impact to self analyse. Losing someone is similar to the sense of isolation and loneliness. There is an empty void that blurs, which is like how John perfectly portrayed in her painting of the self. The background is missing due to her closing herself off and concentrating primarily on the self portrait.

"He began to analyze himself, with his dreams as the Vedic Hal and Fliess as his sounding board".(Breger , 2000, pg 136). Due to the empty space behind John, it creates a question to where she was when she was painting this.

There is a link between conscious and unconscious seeing. The conscious state of mind focuses on the form and that is the concentrated self. Compared to the unconscious seeing of the background, which is a memory of what was once there and it is not a clear or easily painted description of what surrounded her. This is similar to the sense of dreams; they are not real or they can be easily forgotten and they are not controlled.

"His belief that "there are no indications of reality in the unconscious" was also mistaken; the unconscious world of dreams and fantasies extends in many imaginative directions, but there is always a starting place in reality" (Breger ,2000 , pg 137). This quote further supports the idea previously mentioned to Gwen John's Self Portrait.

Towards the end of the 20th Century, another woman artist, Jenny Savillie, painted a self portrait that compared to Gwen John and the previously analysed self portrait, presents a completely different perspective of what a self portrait is. The painting itself creates an impact to what the self is and how it was originally perceived as. Analysing the entire form with a huge scale, focusing and defining every detail upon the human flesh can be viewed in Savillie's painting. There are similar features of John's self portrait that appear in Savillie's, such as the blank but of a background, creating a focus mainly upon the self.

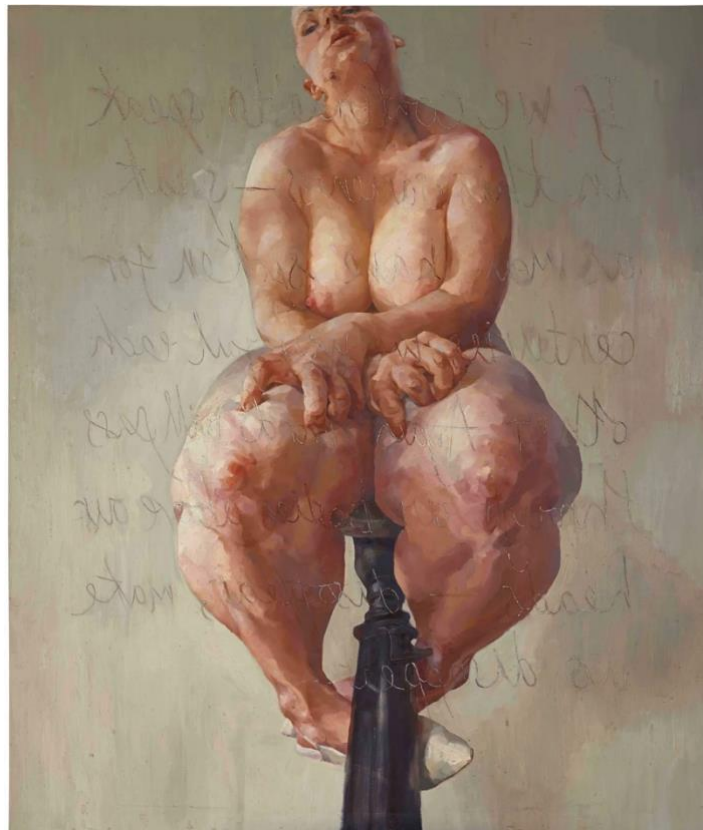


Figure 2. Savillie (1992) *"Propped"*

This self portrait presents the entire figure inside the canvas, propped and centred, and looking down at those who view this painting. Because the entire figure is sitting inside the painting, it creates this weighting, this awkward balance of the women sitting, patiently and still. This reflection of the self portrays the figure as both confident and timid. The

confidence is created from the raw naked body, that presents the form, textures of the skin, a realistic and beautiful painting of the figure. The reasoning behind the word timid is because of the stance of how the figure has been painted. Sitting with legs crossed, the arms lay upon each other and are placed grabbing onto the thighs. This suggests the figure as closed off when focused on the body, hiding the centre of the stomach, trying to not reveal any of her naked body.

The presentation of this painting appears as Jenny Savillie sitting in front of a mirror that has text written into condensation. The mist like surface on the mirror has been removed and it looks as if a finger has carefully drawn over the surface. Savillie had quoted Luce Irigaray according to Sue Hubbard, who wrote in an online article, stated "Belgium feminist writer, Luce Irigaray that say : If we continue to speak in this sameness – speak as men have spoken for centuries, we will fail each other." (Artylist, 2020). By Savillie including text into her painting, it creates a visual context for audiences to understand and brings up topics from previous conversations back into society to be thought about, as well as discussed. It additionally adds language and spoken words from another women, collaboratively including other thoughts to create an impactful image for viewers to consider and think about.

From the perspective of the painting, the view of the writing is reversed, therefore creates an idea of a mirror being reproduced. The painting is a reflection of the artist and due to the reversed text, the canvas has now become that mirror. Therefore as the viewer, it appears as those who look at the canvas are viewing the work from the perspective of the artist.

However, due to the lack of eye contact from the self portrait, it removes that conversation that some previous self portraits have had. There is no eye contact between painting and viewer, however, this does produce an opportunity for a viewer to absorb the painting more, to look beyond just the portrait and at other qualities and features of the painting.

A quote from Marsha Meskimmon explains “The mirror as a metaphor for painting itself is a significant one...the mirror mimetically reproduces the image of reality...the power of representations to mirror or simulate reality itself” (Meskimmon, 1996 , pg3-4). For the artist, it is how they interpret their reflection, the form that stands in the mirror, the chance to translate what they see visually into their art.

Referring back to a previous statement, the reflection of the self portrait is a way for the artist to communicate their own perspective of themselves into their art. Just like Savillie, there is this application of oil paint, brush markings layered upon each other to produce that fleshy thick skin, as well as the scaling of the painting. The whole entire form of her body is shown. There is a presentation of strength and courage that radiates from her self portrait. To paint her reflection, her body with no clothing, she is showing vulnerability and sensitivity through this painting. The hands grabbing her thighs, presents that insecurity of showing her entire form to an audience. John Berger explained “Perspective makes the single eye as to the vanishing point of infinity.... The inherent contradiction in perspective was that it structured all images if reality to address a singular spectator” (Berger, 1972, pg16). The perspective of self portraiture is a constant developing idea, as any reflection or viewpoint of the self and the form can be viewed differently to each individual and artist.

Further on, John Berger stated, "A woman's presence expresses her own attitude to herself, and defines what can and cannot be done to her. Her presence is manifest in her gestures, ...expressions, clothes, surroundings...nothing she can do which does not contribute to her presence" (Berger, 1972 , pg 46). Visually, a painting of the figure can express how that individual is presenting themselves. From the surroundings of the environment that a individual is in to how the expressions on their face are painted, there are ways of communicating to an audience how the person involved in the painting feels, but also, how the painter is trying to translate a message into the painting through specific brush mark gestures and even colour pallets. Observing Savillie's painting, the colour pallet radiates warmth from the figure, an inviting image to view and absorb. The skin has been portrayed as this soft and warming texture, just by the paint brush markings and the colour palette.

In conclusion, there is evidence that self portraiture during the 20th Century has been altering and evolving through observing just two artists; Gwen John and Jenny Savillie. Comparing Gwen John to Jenny Savillie's painting, there is more of a sensitivity and isolated perspective in Johns compared to Savillie's visually punctuating figure. The figures are prominent in both of their paintings, from the blurred out perspective, it adds that depth and concentration completely on the self portrait. Self portraits are these intimate and closely connected paintings, that draw a closer perspective and idea of who the artist is without talking to them. There are connections with Sigmund Freud with how he considered self analysis. It is not completely what is visually visible or what is seen in reality to the

observer, but how a person can express their emotions and feelings in their self portraits .

This links and support the ideas that were recently discussed. As well as John Berger and how perspective is completely relying on how one interprets an image, or the reflection. Self portraits are for the artist to analyse the self, to push their own ideas of their reflection into their art, through visually constructing a piece that resembles them. Using blocks of colour and textures of fabric that compliment and translate an idea of who they are into their art. As well as using their own emotions, feelings and beliefs involved and pushing them into the self portrait, as that is who they are.

Bibliography

Book

BERGER, J., BLOOMBERG, S., FOX, C., DIBB, M. AND HOLLIS, R. (1972). WAYS OF SEEING. LONDON : BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION ; HARMONDSWORTH : PENGUIN.

BREGER, L. (2000). FREUD : DARKNESS IN THE MIDSET OF VISION. NEW YORK, NY:JOHN WILEY AND SONS.

FOSTER, A (1999). GWEN JOHN. TATE GALLERY

MESKIMMON, M (1996). THE ART OF REFLECTION : WOMENS ARTIST'S SELF-PORTRAITURE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY. LONDON : SCARLET PRESS.

RIEAL, L. (2005) NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY INSIGHTS / SELF-PORTRAITS. LONDON: NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY.

ROE, S. (2002) GWEN JOHN "A LIFE" . LONDON : VINTAGE

Online

SOUND OF SLEEP (2021) SOUND OF SLEEP. AVAILABLE AT: [HTTPS://WWW.SOUNDOFSLEEP.COM/WHITE-PINK-BROWN-NOISE-WHATS-DIFFERENCE/](https://www.soundofsleep.com/white-pink-brown-noise-whats-difference/) (ACCESSED:DECEMBER 15, 2022).

JENNY SAVILLE PROPPED 1992 SIGNIFICANT WORKS – SUE HUBBARD (2020) ARTLYST. AVAILABLE AT: [HTTPS://ARTLYST.COM/FEATURES/JENNY-SAVILLE-PROPPED-1992-SIGNIFICANT-WIRKS-SUE-HUBBARD/](https://artlyst.com/features/jenny-saville-propped-1992-significant-wirks-sue-hubbard/) (ACCESSED: DECEMBER 15, 2022).

TATE (NO DATE) PORTRAIT, TATE. AVAILABLE AT: [HTTPS://WWW.TATE.ORG.UK/ART/ART-TERMS/P/PORTRAIT](https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/portrait) (ACCESSED: DECEMBER 15, 2022).

Image references

Reyburn, S (2018) A landmark achievement for a painting by a woman, upstaged by a man, The New York Times. The New York Times. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/12/arts/-jenny-saville-banksy-sothebys.html> (Accessed: 15, 2022).

TATE (1970) 'SELF-PORTRAIT', GWEN JOHN, 1902, TATE. AVAILABLE AT: [HTTPS://WWW.TATE.ORG.UK/ART/ARTWORKS/JOHN-SELF-PORTRAIT-N05366](https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/john-self-portrait-n05366) (ACCESSED: DECEMBER 11, 2022).