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Programme of Study: Graphic Design

Module: ADDA4023 Ways of Perceiving - Martin Bush

Task: Curate an exhibition = 1678 words

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Self-portraits and self-reflection.

This exhibition explores the way we perceive ourselves and how we can analyse how famous artists perceived themselves through their self-portraits. Each piece was carefully selected for their contrasting natures, highlighting the difference between each artist and providing a window into their lives. "The self-portrait remains as relevant today as it has been throughout art history," (Steer referencing Grimm, 2024) and continues to serve as a keyhole through which we can glimpse the lives of others through observing their perception of themselves.

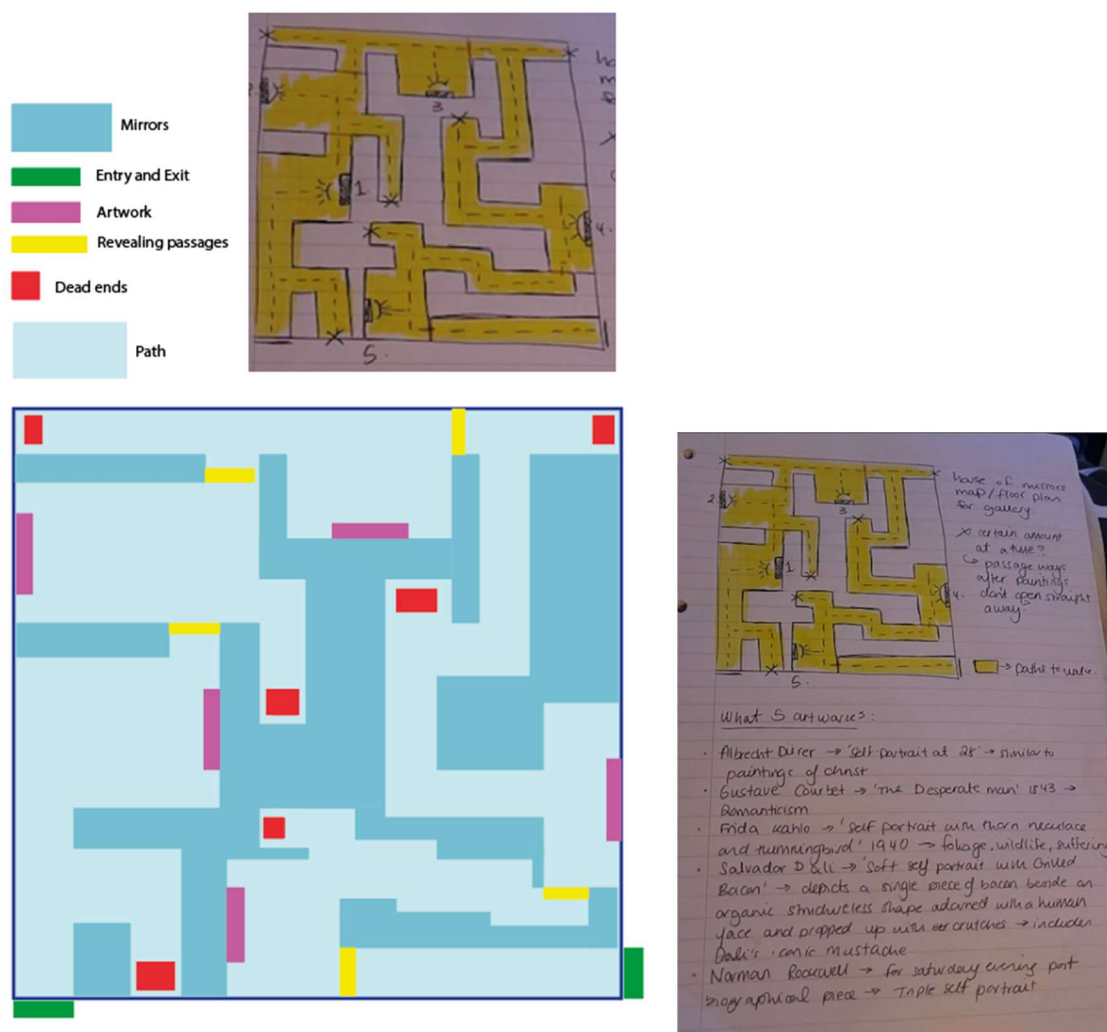


Figure 1: *House of Mirrors/ Mirror Maze Map/Plan* (Lowri Bowen 2025)

The exhibition will be showcased in a house of mirrors. Leo Tolstoy wrote in *Anna Karenina* “without knowing what I am and why I am here, life’s impossible” (Tolstoy, 1878). We cannot begin to criticize or observe others until we have understood ourselves. This exhibition serves to encourage people to observe themselves as well as the artists by surrounding them with mirrors. It’ll raise the question of whether they see any similarity between the artists and themselves when they search deeper. There will be dead ends in the maze, however each painting will be in a slightly bigger room to allow for space. At the end of the room there’ll be a wall which only reveals the next passage once people have had time to fully appreciate the art in the room before moving on. This will force them to slow down and move forwards, not backwards, appreciating each artwork as they come, knowing that they can’t return.



Figure 2: (Stanska, 2024, *Albrecht Dürer's 'Self-Portrait at 28' 1500*)

The exhibition will open with Albrecht Dürer's 'Self-Portrait at 28' (1500), “according to art historians, it is the most personal, iconic, and complex of his self-portraits” (Stanska, 2024)

partially because “it resembles many earlier representations of Christ.”(Stanska, 2024) This belief is supported by “his famous AD monogram” which could be playing on his “initials and Anno Domini, the year of our Lord.” (Brinkley, 2017) He even paints his hair brown when his other portraits suggest it’s “reddish-blond”(Stanska, 2024). This implies that perhaps he believes “his artistic talents are God-given.” (My Modern Met, 2024) Viewers could perceive this in many ways, one being that he believes his talent to be on par with a higher power. Another possible perception is that he is a faithful Christian “as his writings and life show” he’s “a devout Christian” (Brinkley, 2017) and simply believes he has God to thank rather than himself for his talent and success. Despite this, presenting himself as Christ rather than as a follower may suggest he’s a physical representation of God or his gift to Earth. Printmag describes Dürer as the “First Post-Modernist Designer” as he “utilized historical and cross-cultural influences in his work.” (Brower, 2017) This painting “combines Northern and Italian Renaissance influences” (Cliffs Notes, 2024) and was a rarity at the time as “fully frontal” paintings were “unusual” (Stanska, 2024). It is possible that it was inspired by Hans Memling’s ‘Christ Giving his blessing’ (1478) as the paintings are eerily similar in nature and pose.

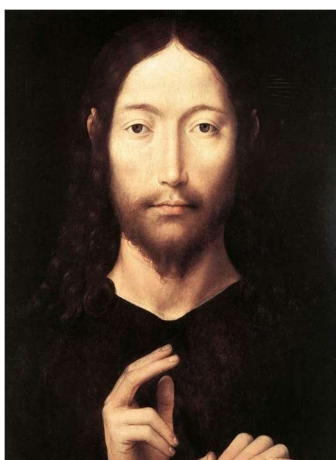


Figure 3: (Stanska, 2024, *Hans Memling’s ‘Christ Giving his blessing’ 1478*)



Figure 4: (Meyer, 2024, *"The Desperate Man" by Gustave Courbet*)

The second portrait is Gustave Courbet's 'The Desperate Man'. The painting could be viewed as reminiscent of modern art as it has an existentialist air to it with its display of "desperation and existential angst" (Meyer, 2024). It also foreshadows "the realist movement for which the artist" became famous as it "reflects the turbulent political and social atmosphere of 19th-century France." (Meyer, 2024) He presents himself as slightly crazed and dishevelled, with clear "elements of Romanticism" (My Modern Met, 2024) which shows the extent of his turmoil. A lot of artists seem to present themselves as stoic, making this portrait refreshing in comparison. He presents himself as more human coinciding with his wish to be "not only a painter, but a man as well" (Courbet, 1855 referenced by Fiore, 2018). Nevertheless, despite its fervent, busy nature this portrait also has Courbet looking directly at the viewer, a seemingly common theme with artist's self-portraits. In contrast, however, he seems to be pleading for help which is unusual and

“captures the raw intensity of human emotion” (The Art of Stitch, 2025). The art of Stitch states that “this work is often interpreted as a reflection of the artist’s own struggles... as he sought to challenge the conventions of the art world.” (The Art of Stitch, 2025). Courbet shares a part of his life and his inner turmoil with us through this painting allowing us a glimpse into his life as a human rather than simply portraying his life as a painter.

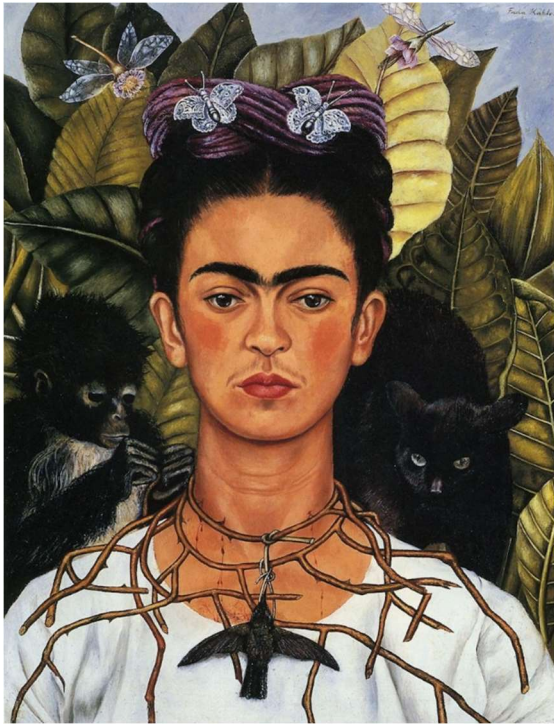


Figure 5: (Frida Kahlo Org, *Self-portrait with thorn necklace and hummingbird*, 1940, by *frida kahlo*)

‘Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird’ is one of Kahlo’s most famous self-portraits because of how symbolic it is for her. This painting could be inspired by surrealism as it draws from Kahlo’s experiences yet possesses a dreamlike quality as its realistic core is surrounded by an irrational scene. Her “expression is calm and solemn” (Frida Kahlo Org, N.d) and whilst some artists decide to relay their story through their eyes, Kahlo also used animals to contextualize the piece. Birds often symbolize “freedom and life” especially

hummingbirds with their colourful feathers, however, here it's "black and lifeless" (Frida Kahlo Org, N.d) form is attached to a collar and appears to be stripping away her freedom. There's a possible religious connotation as it resembles "Jesus's crown of thorns" leading some to believe "Kahlo painted herself as a Christian martyr" after her divorce, and that the butterflies, a symbol of resurrection, may imply that she's portraying herself as Jesus Christ (Singulart, 2019). Nevertheless, her suffering implies a likelihood that she's portraying herself as a parallel to Christ as she suffered as he did due to the wrongdoing of others. With the context of her divorce, "in Mexican culture, hummingbirds signify falling in love" (Singulart, 2019) but its dark, lifeless form could represent Kahlo's lost love after her husband's affair. This portrait is a detailed representation of her turmoil, filled with tension, with the monkey tugging her necklace and the cat with its back arched ready to pounce. She is surrounded with aggression; however, her expression implies a numbness to pain and suffering reminding us that she endured a lot in her life.

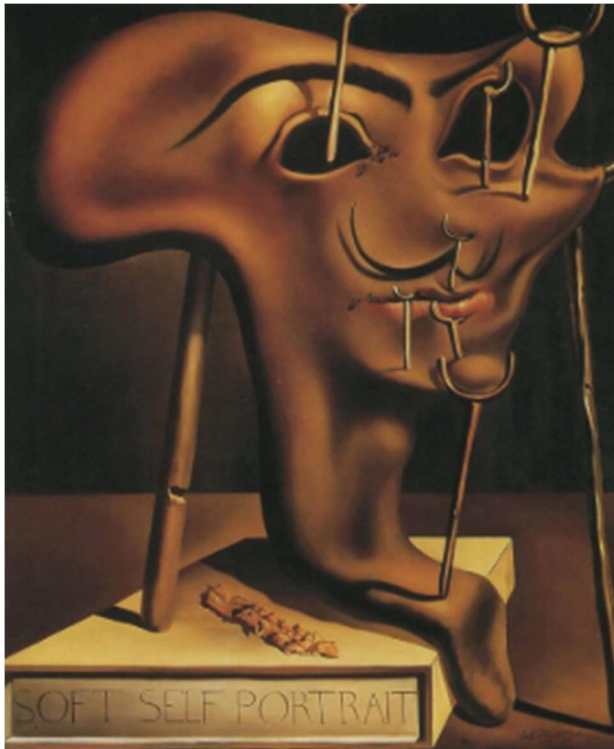


Figure 6: (Dali Painting, N.d, *Soft self-portrait with fried bacon*, 1941 by Salvador Dali)

Surrealist Salvador Dali's self-portrait is without doubt ambiguous and remains within his theme of surrealism with its whimsical quality. Some argue there isn't any resemblance to the artist without his famous upturned moustache. The painting includes a slice of bacon which is said to be "a symbol of organic matter" and his "breakfasts in New York." (Dali Paintings, N.d) providing a glimpse into his daily life in an interesting, comical way. His "caricatured" image is even referred to as "gentle self-mockery" as the painting presents him as fragile (Dali Paintings, N.d). The use of multiple crutches to support him suggests weakness, followed by the decaying atmosphere as ants surround his eyes and mouth. Nevertheless, his features seem inquisitive, and he appears to have the hint of a smile on his face. Dali's portrait "challenges traditional perceptions of identity and the self" (Artchive, 2025) As his features drip over the pedestal, it could imply an inner fear that he is unworthy of his fame.

The entire composition battles with concepts of permanence and impermanence, stability and flux, as it presents the self in a state of transformation or perhaps decay. (Artchive, 2025)

The face seems hollow and lifeless, reminiscent of a theatre mask, presenting himself as a character rather than a person. Dali had a “highly controversial identity” as he was a “domestic abuser, violent narcissist” and alleged “fascist.” (Kirpalov, 2025) This painting could hint towards the fact there’s a level of darkness behind his artistic mask. This seemingly comical and exaggerated self portrait could be more sinister than it appears at first glance.



Figure 7: (NRM, 1960, *Triple self-portrait, 1960*)

“Humor and humility were essential aspects of Norman Rockwell's character” (NRM, 1960) as seen in his self-portrait “belonging to the Regionalism art movement” (Artchive, 2025). According to the NRM, this piece is “self-deprecating” as he “was a stickler for neatness” yet is presented here with “scattered” tools. (NRM, 1960) This piece could be considered extremely humble and revealing. His references are visible on the side, highlighting his modesty as he shows his influences and the fact that he looked to others for inspiration. His portrait also showcases the process of its construction with him confronting himself in the mirror, “the inclusion of the mirror illustrates the concept of self-reflection, both literally and figuratively” (Meyer, 2024). Interestingly, his eyes in the sketch are clear unlike his eyes in the mirror, possibly suggesting that he still feels the need to protect part of himself. His portrait even shares hidden details of his life like the bucket with smoke protruding as “small fires” did ignite “in Rockwell's brass bucket” (NRM, 1960) The helmet atop his easel also serves as a reminder of his “favourite story” of how he “acquired it from an antiques dealer who sold it as a military relic” despite him later discovering it to be a “contemporary French fireman's helmet” (NRM, 1960). Rockwell’s portrait proves it’s possible to be witty and comical whilst remaining raw and vulnerable.

Sharing these varied yet powerful self-portraits whilst forcing people to confront themselves in the mirrors serves to reconnect people with themselves, creating a level of self-awareness and understanding that comes through understanding others at their core. It allows the viewer to explore how people perceive themselves, specifically, those who are revered in the eyes of others, who at their core are also humans who judge themselves, whether positively or negatively. The desired outcome for this exhibition would be for people to slow down and look deeper, whether it be in art or literature, or themselves and the people around them.

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List of Figures:

Figure 1: *House of Mirrors/ Mirror Maze Map/Plan* (Lowri Bowen 2025)

Figure 2 : Stanska, Z. (2024) *Albrecht Dürer's 'Self-Portrait at 28' 1500*. Available at: [Self-Portrait at 28 by Albrecht Dürer | DailyArt Magazine](#) (Accessed: 20 March 2025)

Figure 3 : Stanska, Z. (2024) *Hans Memling's 'Christ Giving his blessing' 1478*. Available at: [Self-Portrait at 28 by Albrecht Dürer | DailyArt Magazine](#) (Accessed: 20 March 2025)

Figure 4: Meyer, I. (2024) *"The Desperate Man" by Gustave Courbet* Available at: ["The Desperate Man" by Gustave Courbet - A Masterpiece](#) (Accessed: 18 March 2025)

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