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From Selfie to Self-Expression, exhibition review: Imaginative, rich exploration of the evolution of self-portraits

Self-portraits, performance art, celebrity photobombs — the many forms of the selfie are on display in this sprawling show

MATTHEW COLLINGS | Tuesday 28 March 2017



Just look at me: The Saatchi Gallery explores the phenomenon of the selfie *Keelin Berman*

From Selfie to Self-Expression is the result of a joint effort by the gallery director Nigel Hurst (who had the original concept) and Saatchi himself. On the day I arrived for an early viewing I found Saatchi energetically matching labels to artworks and offered to help him. He kindly took me on a tour instead.

Usually he works on a show on his computer, moving images around, and has a good sense of the final form at least a year before it opens. This one was two years in the making and he still couldn't tell with only days to go what the overall effect would be: so much was in the hands of techies, setting up complex digital installations and large wall-mounted screens bearing fine-detail images of historic Western self-portraits. These covered 500 years, from Velázquez and Rembrandt to Basquiat and Warhol. What would art-world people think, this sacred art reduced to screen images, some even with "like" buttons in the form of pink hearts?

He need not have worried. We know the selfie to be a phenomenon of great inanity and yet it is so imaginatively and richly explored here that the experience while knockabout is pretty knockout. You see a lot in the historic images: the painterly invention, all the shadows, scribbles and hatching, the signs of making and constructing as the artist creates the illusion someone was really there and is still here now, looking out.

With these self-portraits by Rembrandt and Van Gogh, through Cézanne and Renoir, to Frida Kahlo and Egon Schiele, the feeling is not only that the features of the artist are visually mapped but something much larger is also conveyed or alluded to, reality itself. As the show invites you to move into postmodernism the notion of what a self might really be gets more complicated.



(Stephanie Barry Woods.)

Austrian performance artist Gunter Brus presents himself in a series of photos called *Self Painting*, *Self Mutilation* from 1965. He's fully clothed but caked in white, and then he makes further markings in a dense black. We see a black axe, painted black stitches on his white shaved head, then his whole head covered in black with a thick black line running across his body and up the wall. It's a violent impression but also enigmatic.

Nan Goldin's self-portrait from her 1985 photo series *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* shows violence that's very real. We see her face disfigured by a black eye. We gradually realise the injuries are even worse than a first impression relays. If this is realism and romanticism jarringly combined – the artists as outsider bohemian, enviably free but also threatened – Bruce Nauman makes himself nothing but an absurd, if deadpan funny, sign. In a photo titled *Fountain* he imitates one by spouting water from his mouth.

Tracey Emin expresses a sense of self-emptiness in a self-portrait photo in which she appears to be stuffing bank notes into her vagina. A number of Warhol self-portraits, extremely well known, have their original impact refreshed by this context. We are forced to notice how estranged and dehumanised his self-image as art always was, with its unreal colouring, arch posing and glacial expression.

After the high art on screens, together with some “real” works, including Cindy Sherman’s series of mocked up Hollywood film stills and **Damien Hirst**’s photo, *With Dead Head*, 1991, there are a couple of big spaces devoted to straight-ahead selfies, one featuring celebrities and the other ordinary people – or semi-ordinary since they’re often doing far from ordinary things.

Celebrity selfies include Hillary Clinton before a crowd of supporters, making herself available for mass selfies; **Brad Pitt**, Kris Jenner and Tom Cruise simply taking their own selfies; and **Benedict Cumberbatch** photobombing U2 at the Academy Awards ceremony in 2012. In the ordinary-people room, where selfies have been sourced from the internet, we encounter the phenomenon of rooftopping: young people taking selfies precariously positioned on very high structures – Kirill Oreshkin shows himself on the very tip of the steeple of a building, leaning out in empty space 400 feet in the air, one hand holding on and the other taking a selfie. To look is to feel sick. Other works show people dodging wild bulls, giant jellyfish and sharks while selfie-ing. A manically grinning soldier gurns for his selfie as smoke from an explosion billows in the background. A young woman takes a selfie dodging groundsmen on a football pitch in the middle of a match. And idiots take selfies with their heads tied up in Sellotape.

Elsewhere, Yumiko Utsu “selfies” with a revoltingly gleaming octopus – beautiful but horrible – over his face. Alison Jackson’s ingeniously concocted photo images with lookalikes show Her Majesty the Queen manically selfie-ing with her phone protected by a cover decorated with stylised corgis; Prince Andrew capturing the family gyrating on a hospital bed as Kate gives birth to a

screaming baby; and Donald Trump grasping a daftly suggestive selfie stick in the company of three Miss World contestants. The anarchic insults to dignity that Jackson stages are so cleverly done that for a few seconds at least reason struggles to overcome a sheer willingness to believe. Her point seems to be that every public image is a series of staged moments anyway, and the solemnity and authority can easily be overturned. We often wish to do it in our imagination. She does it for us.



(Russell Russell)

Jackson is a modern comedy version of Velázquez, who shows us in *Las Meninas* – magnificently represented as a giant screen image at the start of the show – the awesome dignity of royalty at a time, the 17th century, when every action by a royal individual at every moment of the day was public and ritualised.

So many dimensions of the selfie: the monstrous, the banal, the dangerous, the famous and the faked. Apparently over a million selfies are taken each day. I had never done it until this show. I photographed my own image when it suddenly appeared on a screen as I approached it. It was an installation by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. I watched myself on Hemmer's screen for a second, and then by technological magic known only to him, the eyes of my image burst into fiery white smoke, and white patterns curled around the screen like emanations from a body in a trance in a séance. And then finally my eyes appeared on the bottom edge of the screen, lined-up alongside the eyes of many others who had engaged with this weird selfie-commenting artwork.

From Selfie to Self-Expression is at the Saatchi Gallery, SW3 from Friday until May 30; saatchigallery.com