

Portrait is not only an art genre, it is primarily an instinct. The child portrays himself and his family, trying to assign each member a specific feature: longer or shorter hair, skirt or trousers depending on gender and, if need be, glasses, moustache, hats and anything else that may help with the identification, together with actions, setting and any pets.

For an artist, too, self-portrait is, generally speaking, an “obvious” recurring activity. The reasons are many: the model is always available, day or night, at any time, and this allows respecting the unpredictability of inspiration; compared to a paid model, be it a man or a woman, it doesn’t cost a thing. What is more, making a self-portrait means taking a look inside oneself and setting on an extraordinary introspective journey.

I’ll start this brief analysis with the artists who clearly made self-portraits, then move on to those who preferred turning their attention to faces and figures other than their own. In *Gardens*, **Aziralilli**, whom I liked right from the start for her pop, self-ironic disposition, portrays herself as a modern Eve in Eden. With Adam now gone and her sunglasses on, she’s independent and self-confident and moves about a space that is not at all hostile, as one would expect from a post-original sin Eden. Looking carefully, even the fig leaves have been replaced by lotus flowers. Emancipation has happened, thanks, also, to the blossoming of self-consciousness. The theme of emancipation returns again, in full sight, in *Dirty Selfie*. The title has a relevance to the present that surely won’t be lost to those who don’t miss a chance to immortalize themselves at any time of the day or night in the most different occasions. Beyond that, the recurring number 9, prominently displayed by the third eye, just under the golden image of Buddha, reminds me of the number symbolism related to the idea of completion. Nine is the number of wisdom, of integrity, of the full cycle of transmutation. In the past, painters used to portray themselves with palette and brushes, the “tools of the trade”; in this day and age they choose to emphasize how “enlightened” the artist’s work is, to accentuate the front-rank social function that they perform.

Gaby Muhr’s *Become One* (2015) makes reference to Salvador Dalí’s *Lobster Telephone* (1936), turning it into a sort of eccentric headdress. I believe the Austrian artist didn’t intend to keep alive the sexual implications contained in the surrealist work, as much as reaffirm her professional artist’s condition by quoting one of the most debated, egocentric and genius figures of the art of the Twentieth Century.

Maria Ramos’ *Afro-Spaniard (Self-Portrait)* draws on her roots as a starting point for a wider investigation on the complex dynamics of racial and cultural identity and, as a consequence, of social harmony and tolerance. The structure of the work itself, a diptych, also reflects the same dichotomy. Similarly, the two paintings *Senza titolo (Untitled)*, dated 2015, by **GUIKNI**, an artist from Puebla now established in Italy, proudly – though indirectly, as not overtly recognizable as portraits - reflect that Mexican spirit that in our

collective imagination¹ is identified with colour exuberance. It's an uncontrollable explosion of joy and happiness, where the warm orange, yellow and red tones sprawl on and over the canvas, stirring emotions like a Mariachi song.

In *Self-Portrait of the Artist* (2015), Korean painter **Youg-Ae Yi** offers a very different interpretation of herself. All anatomical features have vanished and the only recognizable object is a pretty, meticulously described woollen hat, embroidered and enhanced by a tiny leaf. This painstaking attention to detail is missing from the rest of the composition, which only seems to make reference to the vegetable kingdom. The forms fluctuate, sliding along each other, like filaments, full of lymph. The artist is as sensitive and delicate as a flower and, as such, needing protection (not only from cold), as an integral part of Nature.

Giuliana Maddalena Fusari physically inserts part of herself in her *Autoritratto con ciglia umane* (*Self-Portrait with Human Eyelashes*, 1996). Needless to say, the eyelashes are her own. I'm reminded of Carol Rama and the organic substances embedded in her works. Here, far from any provocation, the eyelashes help emphasize the borderline dividing the face from the rest of the head, which becomes a pretext for a landscape image with tall trees standing out against the blue sky. In the second work selected for this exhibition, *Autoritratto con la testa tra le mani* (*Self-Portrait with Hands on the Head*; 1992), the lineaments have vanished and the face area is left "neutral", made as it is from natural canvas.

Despite falling entirely within the "self-portrait" category, **Alejandrina Solares'** three installations don't linger upon the physical aspect, but actually investigate values that are more intimate and deep. As an integral part of the series *Balloonhandwriting Blue – Geografia emozionale* (*Balloonhandwriting Blue – Emotional Geography*; 2014-15), they draw attention to the assumption "Io morirò" or "I will die", perceived as an inescapable aspect of the life of each of us, through the repetition of these sentences on the entire surface of the canvas. It's a self-portrait, but also a group portrait of all mankind. **Laurence Eichenlaub's** *Unity* (2015) falls, too, within a particular category of self-portrait. Moving from a personal view, the painting expresses the concept of unity (the orange circle in the middle) of mind (the red body on the left) and soul (the body on the right). When man frees himself from external conditioning, harmony rules his life, manifesting itself as a deep inner peace where the unity of all parts rules supreme. The concept of unity also inspires **Gregg Simpson's** three works, where the bodies are just hinted at or, better, inferred, as an integral part of a wider reality engulfing everything. In a crescendo of abstraction, the anatomical markers still perceivable in *Escapee* (2009) and *Red Dancer* (2012) are completely lost in *Danseur* (2014). By all means, this is a portrait of Man immersed in Nature.

The section dedicated to celebrities' portraits is splendidly represented by the Austrian artist **Eva M. Paar**. *Born on 08/16* (2007) depicts Elvis Presley in the flush of youth, whilst *The Fairytale* (2008) is the eternal likeness of Grace Kelly, to this day still an icon of elegance, on the par with Clark Gable, the unrivalled star

¹ On this subject, I'd like to mention the exhibition "¡Viva México!", which I curated in 2011 for the Atahotel Varese****, where I asked non-Mexican artists – many of whom had never visited that country before – to work on the idea of Mexico that resides in our collective imagination. The resulting works reflect the religious tradition, history and current urban environment, with overwhelming colour vibrancy as a common denominator.

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of American cinema, in *The Winner* (2009). Her truly original technique perfectly lends itself to the representation of the myths of music and cinema of all times: the “scratches” reproduced on the canvas by means of painting tend to make the interpretation of the subjects, at the very least, difficult. The observer surely recognizes the celebrities’ features, but only after focusing the image in its entirety from afar. Paar achieves the same effect of optical “estrangement” that the Post-Impressionists obtained with Pointillisme: when observed at close distance, the subjects appear out of focus and difficult to perceive, but when moving further away, the retina puts back in order the single parts and the result is a uniform, well comprehensible ensemble. I believe this technique is perfectly in line with the subjects chosen by the artist, as it helps to bring out their social distance to the observer, in light of their being icons so much loved and, at the same time, so superficially known to the wide public to whom we all belong.

Yet another famous icon appears in **Siegfried Pichler’s** triptych *Universal Genius* (2015). The face taking up one third of the composition is that of Clint Eastwood, here praised not only for his cinematic virtues, as an actor and director, but also as a music composer and politician. The large eagle alludes to this aspect of his career, as a reminder of his mayoral appointment and his support to the candidacy of Arnold Schwarzenegger as governor of California.

In *Lady Gaga Moment* **Rosslyn Duncan** draws her inspiration from a popstar, but her chosen technique is that of classical drawing. The style of the American singer is immediately identifiable in the face half hidden behind oversize shades. One could say the same for her other two works, *Sunglasses* and *Aisha*, where the attention to physiognomic detail is absolute. In the latter work though, the Scottish born, US-based artist also adds pastel, obtaining a more painterly result. **Patricia Romero** also follows the same trail. In *Abbigail*, *Sienna* and *Zapphire*, all dated 2015, her drawing is strongly marked by chiaroscuro and finished off with masterful pastel accents aiming to create a link to the surrounding environment (be it birds, flowers or an item of clothing). Untouched by colour, the face stands out as an unquestionable display of virtuosity. The result is a set of delicate and precious images, where the white background also acquires a structural value. What is more, they embody an idea of femininity constantly emphasized by the universe of mass-media. This reality similarly inspires the work of Dutch artist **Fleur Le Gros**. *Withdrawn* (2015) focuses on the face of a very beautiful young woman. In our day and age, globalization got us used to the fact that lifestyles and physiognomies once identified, for the sake of simplicity, exclusively as Western or Eastern, are now mixed in an infinite number of hues. As such, the meaning of beauty is also in a constant state of flux.

A famous couple, this time belonging to the art world, is the main subject of the painting *Frida and Diego* (2015), where **Agnese Cabano** draws upon the use of symbolism. She portrays Frida not only alluding to her well known features, which by now have become synonym with women liberation and determination, but also in the shape of a dove. In spite of the physical impediments that tormented her, she’s light and free. Diego Rivera, however, only appears as a toad, as a reminder of the nicknames under which the two were commonly known.

Before moving on to an idealized vision of the subject of portraiture, let me step back for a moment and complete the analysis of Duncan’s work. In *Grace*, she totally leaves on one side the classical drawing

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technique, favouring instead colour, used also as a substitute for chiaroscuro, as evidence of her being fully at ease with both these diametrically opposed techniques. In the work of Finnish artist **Päivyt Niemeläinen**, *Dr of Philosophy* (2015), the practice of classical drawing is also replaced by an Impressionist technique, with layers largely made of blobs of oil paint, though in some parts the colour is laid in filaments. In addition to the clothing, this technique helps to give the portrait a flavour of the olden times, of the past, of the Nineteenth Century. **Umberto Barillaro's** work, *La principessa dal lungo collo* (*The Princess with the Long Neck*, 2011) has an Oriental flavour. Gold and precious gemstones decorate her head, neck and wrist, calling attention to her noble origins, just as the landscape opening up towards the horizon, behind her shoulders, evokes distant lands and cultures.

Earlier on, we mentioned idealized portraiture. **Claudio Giulianelli's** three works, dated 2015, display timeless female figures. Busy as they are playing the violin (*La violinista di Zrasprandung di Sotto; The Violinist from Zrasprandung di Sotto*), showing a puppet (*Il Pulcinella; Punch*) or a mask (*Laura aveva una maschera, una maschera aveva Laura; Laura Had a Mask, a Mask Laura Had*), their dresses and headgear don't belong to the present day. More idealized even (for obvious reasons), the main characters of **Carla Moiso's** works, *Angelo 1* (*Angel 1*) and *Angelo 2* (*Angel 2*), both from 2013, are the only real gamble of this exhibition. We're used to admire these asexual entities in church altarpieces and Baroque domes. Well, in this case, too, the technical virtuosity, the "beautiful painting" coupled with the use of gold leaf, a technique which in our day and age is more studied than actually practiced, convinced me that this exhibition would have been "poorer" without this diptych.

After so much sweetness, **Felizitas Wermes'** works are a bit like a cold shower that takes us back to a very different reality and highlights the wide iconographic range of this show. *Mr. Roger S* (2015), and particularly the contemporary *Mr. Allan T*, portray faces with harsh colours and so incomplete that their mouths and noses are entirely erased and stains eat away their flesh. In **Vilma Landro's** drawing, characterized by quick and dense strokes, the face also appears emaciated, carved as it is against the sheet's black background, which helps give the portrait a disturbing quality.

Mauro Martin's portraits, *Reinassance Revived 1* and *2* (2015), thoroughly highlight the ideals of beauty and harmony that were typical of the Renaissance, revisiting them in a contemporary fashion. Like a modern day Madonna (aren't the white lilies in the foreground an allusion to the Archangel Michael's message?) behind a window ledge, she becomes a symbol of purity.

A fine Ariadne's thread somehow joins Martin's works and that by **Tibor Hargitai**. *Dot of Life* (*Self-Portrait with Mothers Lovers Daughters*) surely lends itself to dozens of different interpretations, but I like to see it as a tribute to the female figure, solemn and perfect like one of Canova's sculptures, a universe rotating around the traces left by man, like an unflappable presence or certainty.

In *Roxanne* (2009), by Dutch artist **Mais**, we are thrust into Picasso's Analytic Cubism. In fact, the figure has been broken down into pieces and reassembled, thus determining an overlapping of viewpoints. The work is also a tribute to Piet Mondrian, as highlighted by the yellow, blue and red-coloured rectangles. These are accompanied, almost like mosaic tiles, by other pieces with a white and grey background, which contain

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and “box in” all the different body parts. Along the same trail we find *Anastasia* (2015) by **Fabio Castagna**, the founder of Sovrapposizionismo, a pictorial current that, in the artist’s own words, «aims to represent reality through a new visual understanding of its shapes, clearly showing the overlapping of lines, objects and all that surrounds us».

In **Antonio Pamato**’s take on the theme of the exhibition, the subject of the portrait is *L’uomo sulla strada* (*The Man in the Street*, 2013). **Giuseppe Rizzo Schettino** shares the same choice in his *Clochard newyorchese. Portrait of Invisible* (*New York’s Homeless. Portrait of Invisible*). Both artists call attention to figures that are far too often relegated to the “sidelines” of our society. What is more, in the latter case, the impression of the work being unfinished helps to blur the profile of the man, whose weak and useless actions vanish under the eyes of the passers-by.

I wish to close my analysis with *Gabbia figurativa* (*Figural Cage*; 2012) by **Andrea Rizzardi Recchia**. One struggles to identify the human profile boxed in a claustrophobic black square, but it only takes one touch of colour to draw our gaze to it. We then spot a lively and featherlight flower bouquet. The mind goes to Chagall, to his many self-portraits where he explicitly alludes to his artist’s figure twice: in the flesh and under the shape of a bunch of flowers. In between such a huge dichotomy of black and white, of the unyielding black blocks floating on a white magma, a little flower calls our attention back to life.

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