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Portraits of the artists

For artists in the current exhibit at Sheppard Gallery, the self is often the first place to look for inspiration

By Brad Bynum

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Probably every artist has, at least once in their careers, decided to create a self portrait. It's not just vanity, though that's surely part of it. Self portraiture is an important part of any artist's toolbox.

"It's a way to form an emotional connection to the technical stuff you learn as an art student," says Marjorie Vecchio, the director and curator of the Sheppard Fine Arts Gallery at the University of Nevada, Reno. "Self portraits are often artists' most personal and private work. I once had a professor tell me, 'Whenever you hit a creative block, the first thing to do is a self portrait.'"

For artists, the self is often the first place to look for inspiration.

Sheppard Gallery is currently presenting *Myself*, a 66-artist survey of international, contemporary self portraiture. There are paintings, sculptures, photographs and videos. There are straightforward depictions of physical likeness, and convoluted metaphorical interpretations of psychological moods. The template of self portraiture is simple, but it provides a platform from which artists can dive in any direction.

"It's the biggest show of my life," says Vecchio.

Many angles

Though the exhibition features the work of artists from exotic locales like Macedonia, Sweden and, uh, Canada, it also features work by seven local artists, including Jen Graham, Joe DeLappe and Chris Carnel.

There are many pieces that feature faces—an eye or two, a nose and a mouth. One of these is "The Self," Funda Zeynep Aygular's bold, creepy manipulated photograph that glares across the room—it looks like a creature from some David Lynch movie, or an aborted fetus. Then there are pieces like Joy Episkalla's "winter 1992-january 1998-present," a crocheted sculpture made of human hair, or Alex Gangrow's "I am a young artist with dynamic ideas," which looks like a giant business card or gallery title card, featuring the artist's name and the title of the piece. These are pieces in which the self is represented by something other than physical likeness.

Some pieces depict the artist's likeness, but in comical, cerebral or unusual ways, like "Luck," Reno painter Ahren Hertel's portrait of the artist covered in bird shit, or "The Headaches," by Teryn Loebes, a portrait of the artist devoured by a hungry wolf—or portrait of the artist as a hungry wolf, it's not clear which.

An exhibition as diverse and large as *Myself* offers something for every taste, an accessible entry point for every visitor. Many of the pieces are very funny, like John Steck Jr.'s series of sculptures of the artist depicted on commercial food packages, like a cereal box and in place of Paul Newman on a bottle of salad dressing.



Amy Guidry

Then there's Lilly McElroy, "I Throw Myself at Men # 5," a photograph of the artist exuberantly flinging her body, legs sprawled out behind her, at a man who seems more than slightly startled. It's like a surprise attack hug.

Jackie Skrzynski

Myself will be on display at UNR's Sheppard Gallery, in the Church Fine Arts Building, through Feb. 18. The opening reception will be Thursday, Jan. 20, at 6 p.m. The closing reception will be Feb. 17 at 6:30 p.m.

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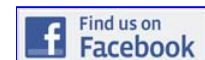
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funny.

Josh Jordan's painting "Let's Hear It for the Boy" depicts the bedroom of two teenage girls, both with apparently huge crushes on the artist, so that every surface or object in the room is adorned with his name or likeness.

Erin Riley's "Nudes 2," a hand-woven wool tapestry depicting the artist in the smart-phone-pointed-at-the-mirror cliché photo of the Facebook era.

"We needed at least one iPhone in the show!" says Vecchio.

Not all of the pieces are lighthearted or whimsical. Emma Bee Bernstein's "Self-portrait with piano," is a grainy, moody photo of the artist sitting at a piano, and it exudes sadness, all the more so because the young New York artist took her own life in 2008.

Body talk

Vecchio says she expected more abstraction and technology-based submissions.

"There's a lot of body imagery, which says something: The body still fucking matters," she says.

There is an x-ray self portrait, Maria Paschalidou's "Self."

"I thought there would be more medical imagery," says Vecchio. "Seeing inside the body? You'd think that artists would be all over that."

There's also a surprising lack of genitalia.

Running concurrently with the feature exhibition is *Myself Too*, a UNR student exhibition, in the Church Fine Arts building's secondary galleries. *Myself Too* features the work of 70 students, from MFA candidates to undergrads who aren't even art majors. It was curated by undergrads Michelle Lee and Andrew Griego.

Lee says the self portraits were a "breath of fresh air" for some students.

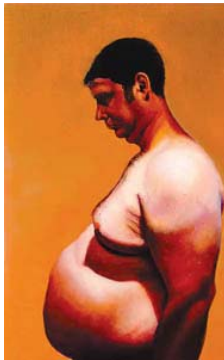
"You can look at these works and see the personalities, and you can tell they had so much fun with it," she says. "It's the artists showing us how they want to be perceived."

UNR art professor Eunkang Koh has an intaglio print in the exhibition titled "Horn Woman."

"I think self portraits can be a lot of different things," says Koh. "Many artists, over time, have approached it in many different ways. You look at Rembrandt; he really painted his self portrait. Then, when you think about Frida Kahlo, when you see her self portraits, you can tell that's her, but also [the paintings] contain a lot of psychological, symbolic and surrealistic aspects, too."

"In my work, I always describe humans as part of animals. So I was thinking, OK, if I have to describe myself as an animal, what could that be? ... When you think about the animals with horns, they're not usually like tigers or lions that hunt other animals. They usually eat like grass and things like that, but that doesn't mean they're weak, sometimes they can be aggressive. At the time, I thought of that as me. I present myself as not as aggressive, but I can be if I have to."

"It's like a litmus test," says Vecchio. "How you choose to represent yourself is not only a personal choice, it's also a reflection of the times."



Craig Cully

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