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Dakota Nanton

University of Colorado Boulder

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A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN
Explorations of identity, sexuality, and art history through self-portraiture.

Dakota Clay Nanton
Art and Art History
University of Colorado Boulder

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Honors Committee
Albert Alhadeff, Art History
Françoise Duressé, Drawing and Painting
Don Yannacito, Film Studies
Melanie Yazzie, Printmaking, Thesis Advisor
"No description is as difficult as the description of the self."
- Michel de Montaigne

A Short Preface

My first recollection of taking notice of art was discovering a collection of my father's old X-Men comics while home sick from school one day. I was at first intrigued by the bold costumes and bright colors of the heroes and soon became enthralled by the way complex stories could be told through images.

A few years after my discovery, and many superhero comics later, I finally summed up the courage to put pencil to paper and to attempt to draw my own comics. In my first true attempts at image making I expected to be able to say exactly what I wanted through image and was troubled by how shaky and awkward my own attempts were compared to those beautiful images I had come to admire. Even still, I was determined to teach myself to draw through imitation and managed to create my own seven issue comic book: The Adventures of Superkid, about a young boy who drinks spoiled cafeteria milk and gains the abilities of strength and flight, donning a mask and saving his school from an evil principal and some nasty bullies.

Though it would be years before I attempted to draw myself, I actually consider these comics to be my first self-portraits, the childhood fantasies of a young boy who felt powerless and bullied at school. Through art, I created a means of escape for myself, a new identity, with which I could become someone much more powerful than I felt, capable of great feats even if only in illustrations on ruled pages.

The creation and understanding of identity has been a recurring theme in my artwork. Through research I have attempted to understand not only my own work and compulsion to create these alter egos better, but also to open a dialog about self-portraiture throughout art history and the potential of self-portraiture to shape, create, and define one's self.

Regosin, 1977, 189.
Defining the Self-Portrait

"Men are not born, but fashioned (Homines non nascunter, sed finguntur)."
- Desiderius Erasmus

The self-portrait has been a recurring phenomenon throughout art history, dating back to medieval and renaissance art. Art historian Joanna Woods-Marsden notes that no record exists of a renaissance patron commissioning a self-portrait in this period and therefore we must assume that the many examples of self-portraiture existing from this period came from the artist's own agency. What drives the artist to depict him/herself?

Most explorations into the nature of the self-portrait have focused on analyzations of the work of individual artists or the particular historical period to which they belong rather than the phenomena of the creation of identity through portraiture. A self-portrait reveals not only a physical portrayal of the artist but also moral and psychological representation, creating a lasting document of the personal space and the period in which that artist lived.

The works presented here represent a multi-year project that has grown out of my own search for identity, and as such my own growth as an artist is visible in the works as well as evolutions in my own understanding of the self. While the works represent many different experiments in the possibilities of the mediums of printmaking and film they are tied together by a consistent search for understanding of myself.

Questions of identity have long plagued me as a direct result of my upbringing. My family could be used as a metaphor for the American melting pot, my father's family coming from Antigua, my mother's from Russia and Germany. My relatives all came to America in order to escape poverty or persecution and to seek greater opportunities in this country. I grew up in a small town in southern Utah where we were one of the only non-Mormon families in the area and my father was one of two non-white men in the county.

ii Greene, 1968, 249.
iv Calabrese, 2006, 23.
As such I felt like an outsider for much of my adolescence and these feelings only increased as I became aware of my own sexuality.

While many seek to understand their own surroundings through journaling, introspection, and psychiatric analysis, the artist has another means to document this understanding: the self-portrait. Through my own artistic practice I have attempted to understand the history of portraiture and the potential that it holds to create a greater understanding of the self.

The use of the face is one of the most common attributes of self-portraiture, as the face becomes a visible mask for the interior self. The most traditional tool of self-portraiture, the mirror, is itself a tool for self-contemplation. By taking the interior self, and making it visible one is able to communicate inner thoughts, personal histories, and hidden fears to the viewer.

The development of this series of self-portraits has been highly influenced by the collective works of Rembrandt van Rijn. Rembrandt created over one hundred self-portraits during his lifetime, including paintings, drawings and prints, encompassing more than forty years of the artist's life. He considered the works to be one, larger self portrait revealing the artist over time. In my own project I have created a number of works that over time are growing into a larger portrait of the self, and as I continue this project I will be curious to see how these depictions of the self grow and change, becoming a visual diary of sorts.

By using art-history as a framework to discuss and mask myself, I open the work to a deeper interpretation on the part of the viewer, especially one familiar to the original works and the rhetoric of the individual within art history.

"Try to put well in practice what you already know; and in so doing, you will in good time, discover the hidden things which you now inquire about. Practice what you know, and it will help to make clear what now you do not know."
- Rembrandt van Rijn

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v Eastlake, 1960, 477.
The Doubling of Self

The artist Andy Warhol's initial work with homosexuality through homoerotic imagery was disregarded as too direct and confrontational and so the artist sought other ways to open a dialogue about homosexuality through the use of familiar icons. By masking the image in familiar sights it opened up the possibility for discussion about the true subject. In his portrait Double Elvis (Plate 1) the artist created a series in which a publicity still of Elvis Presley was printed in a repetitive series of life-size portraits. The overlap of the portraits creates a disorienting effect bringing in to question homosexual desire on the part of the viewer towards the male movie star. By doubling the image the potential for man-on-man contact is created. The places where the figures overlaps create an ambiguous sexual fantasy in which it has been noted that the images come forward and recede in dominance and submission, passivity and activity.

"In Double Elvis Warhol draws out the queer appeal of a male star whose very stardom was contingent on the disavowal of any such appeal."
- Richard Meyer

As a printmaker my own work has been highly influenced by the work of Andy Warhol who was using commercial imagery in repetition to reveal greater truths about the world we live in. In my own ode to Warhol's work, Double Dakota (Plate 2), I have replaced the Hollywood icon with my own image. The repetition of self removes the familiar sex symbol and places my own image in this context, standing taller than my own true height, towering over the viewer. In doing so I am creating a fantasy of myself, as a potential object of desire to the mass public, embracing my own homosexuality and exuding a self-confidence that I have never felt outside of the created image.

The overlapping of the form is representative of my own work in the medium of film, the overlapping of image being similar to the projected flicker of film stills; also called into question is the potential for repetition that stands as a founding principle of printmaking. What at first appears to be a simple homage opens a dialogue about the potential of self-portraiture to create fantasies of grandeur.

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ix Meyer, 2002, 150.
1
Andy Warhol
*Double Elvis*, 1963
Silkscreen ink on synthetic polymer paint

2
*Double Dakota*, 2014
Silkscreen ink on synthetic polymer paint
This potential of repetition as an analogy for homosexuality is explored elsewhere in my own artwork including *Venus Redux* (Plate 3) where Canova's statue of Venus, a mythical symbol of sexual desire, is layered upon itself, speaking to unconscious desires and the search for beauty and truth in one's self. While not strictly self-portraits, these images have come out of my own experiences and difficulties in coming out: attempts to deny my own sexuality, and in such, my own nature.

As a teenager I never identified as homosexual, despite any signs to the contrary, because I didn't feel that I fit into the cultural stereotypes of what it meant to be gay. By creating my own interpretations of what it means to be my own, singular, self I can remove myself from these existing stereotypes and tap into the true nature of how I define myself in the world around me and redefine what it means to be a young, gay man in modern society.

"The myth of Narcissus, in fact, is... the origin myth of painting."
- Omar Calabrese

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*Calabrese, 2006, 128.*
Coming Out

"It is a curious thing, do you know, Cranly said dispassionately, how your mind is supersaturated with the religion in which you say you disbelieve."

- James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as A Young Man*

Religion has always been a persistent and contradictory force in my life with various family members practicing Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism and Judaism. This constant exposure to dogmatism and contrasting explanations of the way the universe worked led me to question the nature and manner of the world from a young age, and has given me a unique perspective on faith and cultural constructions that has often come through in my art.

In *St. Nanton Tormented by Demons, Levitcus 18:22* (Plate 5) I take the story of St. Anthony, a common trope within art history, who was assailed by the demons of temptation. I place myself in the role of the tonsured saint, surrounded by childhood fears, images from popular culture, and imagined demons. The subtitle makes reference to a biblical passage often used to by Christians to justify homophobia, 'You shall not lie with a male as one lies with a female; it is an abomination.'

This reference to youthful fears while coming out represents the internal struggles to recognize and define one's self as something other than "normal". James Ensor's own works often took religious themes to express personal distresses such as in *The Temptation of St. Anthony* (Plate 6), where the artist's own struggles to make a living and to gain respect as an artist were represented through masses of masked figures and frightening creatures. In my own version, I become the titular saint, surrounded by the anxieties and fears of adolescence, searching for acceptance of the self.

In *Self Portrait for Redon* (Plate 7) I pay reference to Redon's *The Cyclops* (Plate 8), representing the misunderstood monster from Homer's *Odyssey*. The print itself borrows the language of the comic book covers that so entranced me as a child. My own feelings as an outcast within my surroundings are called into context by becoming the fearsome beast.
6
James Ensor
*The Temptation of St. Anthony*, 1887
Ink and graphite on paper

5
*St. Nanton Tormented by Demons, Leviticus 18:22*, 2012
Lithograph and Silkscreen Ink
Odilon Redon

The Cyclops, 1898
Oil on cardboard mounted on paper

Self Portrait for Redon (I Was Born a Little Different...), 2012
Silkscreen
Costumes and Constructions

"One is both born and constructed as a Woman. The fact of being a woman is neither merely biological nor solely historical... 'I, woman' am affected directly and in my everyday life by what has been made by the subject of 'Woman'. I have paid in my very body for all the images that our culture has deemed fit to produce of 'Woman'... This is why 'I, woman' shall not relinquish easily the game of representation of woman..."
- Rosi Braidotti xi

The body is not just an outward form but also a web of constructed meanings, by using portraiture the artist is able to take biology and history and create new meanings from the familiar. xii The face becomes something both familiar and foreign, these concepts are familiar to the studies of feminist artwork but apply equally to works which explore belonging to any fractionalized minority within society.

The relationship one presents between "I" and the outside world through self-representation is a critical component of both life and art. xiii I am using art history as a framework to talk about my own personal space, and to create a new vision of myself removed from stereotype. By using portraiture I am not only calling into question my own self but the viewer is forced to consider his or her own social context and history. This brings forward art's central subject: human beings and their relationship to the rest of humanity. xiv

In the next series of works I have taken familiar icons from art history, replacing myself in these contexts by donning different guises. In

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xi Braidotti, 1994, 187.
xii Meskimmon, 1996, 201.
xiv Soussloff, 2006, 1-3.
creating these fantasies I not only pay homage to the artists that have influenced my own work, but place a young gay man in different historical contexts and challenging labels. By forcibly inserting myself into the cannon of art history I am creating a new dialogue of the self.

In *Self Portrait with a Red T-Shirt Wrapped Round the Head as a Turban* (Plate 10) I take a self-portrait by Jan Van Eyck (Plate 13), which art historians believe was intended as a calling card to show off the artist's skill. In my own version the title becomes a visual joke, making light of the manner of imitation by pointing out the transformation in imitating Van Eyck simply required a red t-shirt. The medium of oil painting is applied to printmaking in experimental ways to create a complex, layered print. Though a series, each print becomes cracked and flawed, and therefore unique.

*Self-Portrait as Van Gogh as a Bonze* (Plate 11) furthers the investigation of art as a means of spiritual discovery, placing myself in the role of Van Gogh, in the role of a Buddhist monk (Plate 14). The very title challenges the notion of self-portraiture, is it possible to create a self-portrait as someone else? Where Van Gogh portrays himself with a nervous stare, I stare down the viewer, confident in another's skin.

In the last of this triptych, *Self Portrait as Captain America: Faggot* (Plate 12) I take an image of the popular superhero Captain America and place it among the context of some of the greatest artworks of all time, speaking to my own views of comic books as fine art. I place myself in the mask of Captain America, a symbol of freedom and democracy, but subtitle it with a homophobic slur I heard many times growing up. This roleplaying becomes a source of empowerment for me, where earlier I played the monster and the tortured saint here I become the hero. In my own fantasies a gay, mixed-race man like myself can be a symbol for America, and here I defiantly assert myself as such.

"When a man is born...there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets."

- James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as A Young Man*
10

Self Portrait with a Red T-Shirt Wrapped Round the Head as a Turban, 2013
Lithograph, Silkscreen and Oil on Paper

11

Self Portrait as Van Gogh as a Bonze, 2012
Lithograph

12

Self Portrait as Captain America: Faggot, 2013
Lithograph, Silkscreen
13
Jan Van Eyck
*Man in a Red Turban (Self-Portrait)*, 1433
Oil on Panel

14
Vincent Van Gogh
*Self Portrait as a Bonze*, 1888
Oil on Canvas

15
Joe Simon and Jack Kirby
*Captain America Comics* #1, March 1941
Three Filmic Self-Portraits

"This race and this country and this life produced me, he said. I shall express myself as I am."
- James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as A Young Man*

The photography of scenes inspired by painting was common practice in the nineteenth century, where carefully constructed scenes based on paintings were used to legitimize the medium.\(^{xv}\) When embarking into the medium of film I used this practice as basis to explore both self-portraiture and the exploration of self through three filmic self-portraits meant to be projected simultaneously on canvas and viewed standing, as one would view a painting in a gallery rather than viewed seated as in traditional films.

In *Self-Portrait for Chuck Close* (Plate 16) I engage with the master of self-portraiture, Chuck Close (Plate 19), staring directly at the camera for the duration of a cigarette. This confrontational interaction with the camera makes it clear, ‘I am here, this is me’. This sort of self-confidence had never before shown itself in my work and came as a direct result of this search for self.

I take on the role of deceased revolutionary Marat in *The Martyr* (Plate 17), assassinated for his political journalism and advocacy of human rights. The figure is placed in a position associated with Christian martyrdom, but removed from any religious context. This self-apotheosis as a martyred figure represents my own struggles to balance advocacy and personal revelation in my work.

*Boy With a Basket of Fruit* (Plate 18) is an homage to Caravaggio, who exploited homoerotic mythology and imagery in order to make allusions to his own sexual nature.\(^{xvi}\) The young, nubile figure in his paintings were meant to be idealized visions of male beauty and by placing myself in this work I both reference the secret nature of Caravaggio, and also his tradition of hiding himself within his portraits.

These short film loops begin to question the nature of portraiture itself. Influenced by Andy Warhol’s screen tests, where he asked models to stare at the

\(^{xv}\) Respini, 2012, 43.
\(^{xvi}\) Smalls, 2012, 98.
camera for as long as possible in a single pose, but placing myself as the subject and engaging in a dialogue with the history of painting and experimental film, a complex system of references and allusions is created. By having a living, breathing figure rather than a still model, the very act of modeling for a painting is called into question. Little movements become quickly apparent to the viewer. Whereas in a painting the model is secondary to the artist, here the model and artist are one and the resulting films carry a vibrancy and life that doesn’t exist in still portraits.

There is a different level of sophistication involved in these works and as I expand this body of works in the future I will continue integrating ideas and themes from my printmaking into my filmic self-portraits.
16

*Self Portrait for Chuck Close, 2013*
Production Still, Super 8mm Film

17

*The Martyr, 2013*
Production Still, Super 8mm Film

18

*Boy With a Basket of Fruit, 2013*
Still, Super 8mm Film
19
Chuck Close
*Big Self Portrait*, 1968
Acrylic on Canvas

20
Jacques-Louis David
*The Death of Marat*, 1793
Oil on Canvas

21
Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio
*Boy with a Basket of Fruit*, 1593
Oil on Canvas
Contemporary Influences

While throughout this series my work references and pays homage to many different periods of art history, I have also been influenced by how other contemporary artists are exploring questions of identity in their own works including Cindy Sherman, Charles Ray, Kara Walker and Nikki Lee.

Cindy Sherman uses herself as a model in most of her photographs, dressing in costumes and creating new identities for herself filled with vaguely familiar allusions to characters in film and culture. The artist does not consider these works self-portraits but instead takes on different identities, removing her true self from the image and becoming purely a construction.

The sculptor Charles Ray uses life-sized mannequins to create surreal commentary on contemporary life. In the work *Oh! Charley, Charley, Charley...* (Plate 22) the artist depicts himself in a life-sized orgy with himself, revealing his own sexual fantasies in a realistic and hallucinatory manner.

Kara Walker uses paper cutouts and the mediums of printmaking, photography and film to talk about stereotypes, cultural histories, and her personal experiences as an African-American woman. These works use deceivingly simple cutouts to reveal unsettling truths about race, identity, and gender issues. This has been influential in my own borrowing of images and iconography from the past to talk about difficult contemporary subjects.

The Korean artist Nikki S. Lee questions notions of identity in her Projects series, in which she immersed herself in various subcultures including punks, skaters, and elderly tourists. The ease with which she adopts these various guises and takes full command of these roles reveals truths about the identities we assume and associate ourselves with in our own lives.

xvii Respini, 2012, 12.
A Short Afterward

"As the genre's name says, the self-portrait is a portrait of the self."
- Mieke Bal xviii

In the works I have discussed here I have engaged in a dialogue with art history as a means of entering an exploration of the self. In creating these works, I have been forced to think deeply about the individual qualities and aesthetics which make me, me and define to define my artistic practice.

While these works encompass a variety of different mediums and styles I think the individual works work together to create a better image of the whole, a portrait of the artist as a young man. Whether in the guise of a hero, a saint, a martyr or a monster I found parts of myself in each of these roles and hope that the viewer begins to think about how they define themself, both internally and externally.

As I finish my undergraduate career and begin my career as a working artist I will continue to grow and develop these themes, and will be curious to see how these definitions of the self grow and change with time. As I become more confident with the person I am becoming I hope to continue to challenge existing notions of what it means to be a young, gay, man in the modern world through the creation of image.

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Bibliography


