

Selfiephilia

words by Tara Heffernan

narcissism appears as a necessity in our society of the spectacle...

- Jennifer Allen[1]

Personal photography ... has developed as a medium through which individuals confirm and explore their identity, that sense of selfhood which is an indispensable feature of modern sensibility—for in Western urban culture it is as individuals that people have come to experience themselves... - Patricia Holland[2]

Reinforcing the resistance to painting that echoed throughout the latter half of the twentieth-century, Documenta X in 1997 was dedicated to prolific realist painter Gerhard Richter—yet included most predominantly photographs taken or collected by the artist, rather than the paintings for which these photographs were reference material[3]. As critic Robert Fleck concluded, 'not to exhibit the paintings of Gerhard Richter, but only his photographic archives, otherwise seen as a substitute for the flood of media images, offers no solution. It is precisely the paintings of Gerhard Richter that propose an intense response to mass media'[4]. This event exemplifies a pivotal dilemma in contemporary painting concerning its relationship with photography and digital-media—what is the value and relevance of painting today, if any?

In a Western cultural context, where we navigate the world so predominantly via image culture, our perspectives are often informed by representation. As Derrick Price summates of Jean Baudrillard's theory of the image, the contemporary subject's 'sense of the world is mediated by complex technologies that are themselves a major constitute of our reality'[5]. It is through representations that we perceive the world, and other bodies within it. Through representations, we develop our identity as contemporary subjects—forming these through our engagements with images and constructions of our own representation/s via personal photography and continually mutating forms of web-based social networking. *Selfiephilia* examines the means by which we explore subjectivity within contemporary culture. Featuring artists Dana Lawrie, Lee Lombardi, Nicola Scott and Tyza Stewart, this exhibition primarily focuses upon the medium of painting—addressing the challenges of engaging with a medium so entrenched in tradition and aesthetic hegemony. Evident in varying degrees, the works are defined by self-reflexivity, the artists actively acknowledging the implications of painting (primarily, painting/representing the self) in a techno-capitalist culture—a culture reliant on a proliferation of images and accustomed to immediate gratification.

In a recent article published in *Frieze* magazine by editor Jennifer Allen on the subject of culturally normalised narcissism, the commonplace practice of habitually photographing ourselves, often with a handheld device (the 'selfie'—the namesake of this exhibition) is discussed as a phenomenon re-establishing compositional convention. The vanishing point, once understood as disappearing into the horizon, has been replaced with the photographer's hand. The hand lies outside of the frame, while the outstretched arm disappears into the foreground[6]. This process of self-documentation differs in accessibility and user-influence—today, we are sharing

more of ourselves through self-directed representations than ever before. This impact provides a poignant metaphor for contemporary explorations of selfhood—a constant need to document, to explore our identity through representational medias. The article has touched upon an issue of great cultural relevance concerning issues of selfhood and narcissism in the social networking era—topics of burgeoning significance in sociological and cultural studies. Released in early 2013, *Vanity: 21st Century Selves* by Suzanne Fraser, JaneMaree Maher and Claire Tanner, is perhaps the most thorough study to date, providing an in depth overview of the research surrounding vanity and narcissism in the social-networking and new-media arena. Arguably the most poignant suggestion within this text is the contemporary subject's inevitable role within the construction of selfhood—the need to document, to record, to post, to tweet, in order to be defined as an individual[7]. To participate in narcissistic self-analysis is an expectation within Western urban cultural contexts, rather than a luxury,

“just living” is no longer acceptable, as it implies passivity and a lack of effort and responsibility. Instead, the “heroics of a project of becoming” (2011, pg 48) is the only possible ‘intelligible’ course for contemporary subjects. This process of becoming must be visible to all...[8]

We are now all expected to project ourselves, and our constant state of transition (always improving, always exciting and new), through narrative and documentation. With the speed and accessibility of technology, painting with its messy, malleable and tactile qualities, exists as a form in which selfhood is examined in a process oppositional to the instantaneousness of the ‘selfie’. Yet, the history of representational technologies has an obvious relationship with painting—particularly, self-portraiture.

Within the history of self-portraiture, there is insight into how we have accessed and understood our image throughout history. While within contemporary painting, photorealist Chuck Close replicates pixilation in his large-scale portraits, and Jenny Saville depicts the distortion and foreshortening of photographs of the body, we similarly see the imperfections of the reflected image in 15th century paintings. Often, we see self-portraits of this era as depicting the artist left-handed, as they painted themselves from their reflection in a mirror. The use of convex mirrors in this period also resulting in warped reflections, depicted in varying degrees of severity by the artists of the time. For example, *Self-Portrait in a Mirror* (1524) by Parmigianino displays the artist with his hand at the bottom of the circular frame, inflated over twice the size of his head[9] (interestingly, appearing similar to the outstretched arm common in the contemporary ‘selfie’).

Each of the artists in this exhibition engages traditional painting techniques in a contemporary context. Lombardi, whose work is strikingly realist, has used the motif of the book throughout the five paintings exhibited. While this motif (and many aspects of Lombardi's compositional and stylistic practice) may be read as cliché, it is through this familiarity, and use of anachronism, that he considers painting today—and more significantly, how we access (or how we have previously accessed) knowledge through representational forms, in carefully categorised archives and encyclopaedias. The printed book, which is suffering the threat of perceived redundancy parallel to painting in the face of new technologies, operates as a symbol of constructed knowledge—the vessels in which information is carefully ordered. In two works, *The Narrator's Hand* (2013) and *The Swan* (2013), the compositional choices of framing and cropping are reminiscent of botanical and anthropological illustration. The still lifes of books invite readings of the objects as physical forms—*The Flesh of the Page* (2013). The books, as objects, hold

information that is preserved (though may become outdated) in a resilient physical form—just as the portrait preserves the image of the subject. The effort to order knowledge in print is echoed in painting, as Lombardi states, ‘realist painting is a contradictory practice, presenting only a fictionalised vision of a perceived “truth”’[10]. In *The Narrator’s Hand* (2013), a hand is depicted in an elliptical frame. The directed reading, of course is the hand as the appendage used to create knowledge—essential in the creation of books, of encyclopaedias and of art in traditional processes. Yet, it also makes a statement about contemporary networking and information sharing—today we all (who possess a body) are narrators.

The detail and framing in Lombardi’s work, reminiscent of anthropological illustration, are also present in the work of Lawrie, who favours more bold lines and underworked aesthetics over the soft detail of Lombardi’s work. Lawrie has also engaged in still life painting. *Hair Stages* (2013), depicts three delicate, faintly drawn plaits of blond hair floating in sterile flatness of the canvas. The plaits, collected over the period of twelve years, might suggest contemplation of death, inevitably read through association with the still existing practice of saving the hair of dead loved ones. The hair, grown and cut over more than a decade represents a large period of the artist’s lifetime. Duration, time, and physical presence and absence are recurring themes in Lawrie’s work. While she often paints likenesses of herself in a traditional painting style (and inevitably, suffers from the same reading of cliché as Lombardi, and indeed, many contemporary painters), her work offers self-reflexive commentary and actively engages with (even antagonises) the resistance to painting in contemporary art. For example, Lawrie has painted a realistic likeness of her face in pink monochromes and titled this work *Too Traditional* (2013)—acknowledging the inevitable reading of such work as ‘passé’ in a contemporary context.

In dismissing the bourgeoisie claim that ‘the image’ is a universal language, Victor Burgin explained that ‘if we accept the fundamental premise that information is the outcome of a culturally determined relationship’, it becomes clear that there is no ascribed ‘intrinsic or universal meaning to the photographic image’[11]. In the same way contemporary painting relies on the viewers knowledge of painting (and photography) to be appreciated in a meaningful way (particularly painting that plays with cliché and cultural memory as Lombardi and Lawrie do) our engagement with image culture is reliant on learned visual literacy. In the arena of social networking, we recognise the specific visual language each website uses and our operation within these forums is determined by our exposure. While there are overlaps (and continually, these languages alter with upgrades and format changes—needing to be transforming constantly, just like the contemporary subject) we ascribe different social roles, behaviours and filters to these sites. While Facebook is utilised most often for the purpose of casual networking, other websites encourage more self-focused and image based projection. Tumblr is an example of a website in which (though used for a variety of purposes both professional and recreational) there is a trend in users collating images and content often not produced by the user themselves, but sourced from divergent time periods, places and contexts, to create a kind of online collage of their identity. An identity determined by their relationship with image-based culture.

Tumblr photographs constitute a significant part of Stewart’s practice. Pornographic or homoerotic images of men sourced through Tumblr have provided Stewart with reference photographs that the artist has photoshopped (with varied levels of compositional correctness) their face into. These reference photographs have slowly become more visible in Stewart’s practice. Exhibited in *Selfiephilia* are a series of

photographs from a Tumblr that Stewart updates every day with a new image of themselves, photoshopped into a pornographic, or gendered (in its original form) image. Stewart uses these images to interrogate and subvert normalised concepts of gender, using self-portraiture as both a means of locating, and destabilising narratives of gendered selves. It is significant that Stewart uses the Internet, and primarily Tumblr, as a means of sourcing and constructing their own image. Cultural theorists argue that this process of online 'selfing' may provide better insight into the authentic identity of the individual than may be possible in face to face interaction, in which 'bodies, biases and determined social locations limit the individual's capacity to shape their identity'[12]. By using internet sourced images and those from Stewart's own life to construct their identity, then using these as references for painting, Stewart is turning the authentic self (as visually realised by engagements with photography and online 'selfing') into traditional, painterly self-portraits. Within Stewart's work, the new means of accessing and actualising the authentic self, have come full circle (though continually spin) and returned to the traditional means of portraiture. The self-reflexive display of 'process' (a process which constitutes an artwork in itself—a continually morphing performance of identity and sexuality) perfectly exposes how the contemporary subject constructs selfhood in image culture, and through Stewart's role as a painter, ties this to a history of self-portraiture.

The visual languages of digital representation have an obvious impact upon contemporary painting. Each artist who engages with realist portraiture in this exhibition has used photographs in their process. While Stewart exhibits her Tumblr self-portraits, Lawrie has encased reference photographs (of herself) on a canvas in acrylic gloss. Lawrie not only acknowledges her reliance (perhaps dependency) on photography in her practice, but on contemporary realist painting as a whole—merging the reference materials with the archival treatment of the traditional painting process. It simultaneously reads as an acknowledgment of the role of photography in contemporary painting, and also as a comment upon the veneration of photography and digital-media in contemporary art. Lawrie's practice is not only confined to the act of painting, her exploration of process and duration continues in more sculptural works. *Call It A Day* (2013) consists of twelve plaster casts that Lawrie has sanded through by hand, to create a hole in the cast. Sanding through each has taken approximately two hours—the duration of the process of creating this series equivalent to a day. The work contrasts with the process of 'creating' in a traditional sense—reflecting the efforts of realist painting, a timely and laborious process that leaves a tactile impression. Tedium and failure are explored by both Lawrie and Scott as consequences, and inevitable implications, of the medium of painting.

Scott's work is the most sculptural in the exhibition, exploring the corporeality of paint as an object, and the use of materials as signifiers for cultural and historical memory. Scott renders expressive portraits abstracted by culturally proliferated signifiers through appropriated material or representations. In a portrait of the artist titled *Best Times* (2013) a likeness of Scott's crying face is depicted with a smiley face symbol painted over the image. Her appropriation of such a culturally prolific symbol emphasises the influence of visual language and signifiers upon our personal narratives and correspondence and the complex and contradictory experience of selfhood in image culture. Simultaneously, Scott explores the fleshy, malleability of the material properties of paint and wax. This tactility and malleability is utilised by the artist as a means of reconsidering the self-portrait in contemporary contexts (in relation to archival methods)—as the Scott states, 'paint and wax are ideal materials with which to reimagine the genre of self-portraiture—which has historically immortalised or fixed the self as image—as an avenue for examining the

complexities and contradictions of contemporary experiences of selfhood and identity' [13]. In *Fall/Fail* (2013) by attempting to stand on a board slathered in wet paint, Scott has used a performative physical gesture to create an abstract work, smearing glossy copper paint over an earthy red background. In sculptural work, *Figure In Motion* (2012), Scott has cast her finger in oil paint—the worm-like object tapering away where it should attach to a hand, as if the bodily form is melting. Similarly, in Lawrie's *Taking Place* (2013), beside a faintly painted self-portrait without eyes, Lawrie has included plaster casts of her fingers—sculptural impression of the body stands alongside literal representations of sight removed. Both Lawrie and Scott have left imprints of their physical body and gesture in their work, removing the separation imposed by the paintbrush between material and artist. The attention to processes, failures and durational rituals in the act of painting are highlighted in Scott's work, and reverberate throughout the exhibition. Scott's work, in both its embrace of sculptural form and of expressive abstraction, revert attention to the medium of painting through encouraging a dialogue between the medium and its art historic lineages.

Selfiephilia, while being an exhibition primarily of paintings, offers no solution to the contemporary crisis of the medium. Instead, this exhibition highlights its problematic nature as a departure point to discuss the similarly problematized issues of selfhood in contemporary sociocultural contexts. The urge to reflect, contemplate, and 'improve' the image in representational media within a culture so driven by such desires is exemplified, while simultaneously exposing the need to produce tactile impressions of the physical gesture, oppositional to the sterile and flat aesthetics of the digital age. If self-portraiture is narcissistic, this narcissism parallels that of the contemporary age in Western urban contexts. The tedium of the painting process, and the narcissistic analysis of the self in portraiture are reflective of the culture they are created within—a culture within which we are unable to navigate as social beings without our submission to processes of self-identification. While digital-media provides a platform within which we are performing a consistently altering self—in paint, these articulations are sealed with archival treatments.

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[1] Jennifer Allen, "Who, Me?" *Frieze* November/December 2011. Web. 2-08-2013. <http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/who-me/>. para. 3.

[2] Patricia Holland, "Sweet it is to scan...": Personal photography and popular photography," in *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Liz Wells. (London: Routledge, 1996). 119.

[3] Miles Hall. "The Anatomy the Image: Painting in the Digital Age." (PhD. Diss., Griffith University, 2010). 8.

[4] *ibid.*, 9.

[5] Derrick Price, "Surveyors and Surveyed: Photography out and about," in *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Liz Wells. (London: Routledge, 1996). 107.

[6] Jennifer Allen, "Who, Me?" *Frieze* November/December 2011. Web. 2-08-2013. <http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/who-me/>. para. 6.

[7] Suzanne Fraser, JaneMaree Maher and Claire Tanner, *Vanity: 21st Century Selves* (United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). Ebook edition. Chapter 5.

[8] *Ibid.*, Chapter 5.

[9] Joanna Woodall, *Portraiture: Facing the Subject* (United Kingdom: Manchester University Press, 1997), 170.

[10] Lee Lombardi, email message to the author, August 19, 2013.

[11] Victor Burgin, *Thinking Photography* (United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 1982), 86.

[12] Suzanne Fraser, JaneMaree Maher and Claire Tanner, *Vanity: 21st Century Selves* (United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). Ebook edition. Chapter 5.

[13] Nicola Scott, email message to the author, August 26, 2013.