

Reviews

About Face: Self-Portraits by Native American, First Nations, and Inuit Artists. Edited by Zena Pearlstone and Allan J. Ryan. Santa Fe, NM: Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian, 2006. 185 pages. \$45.00 paper.

Self-portraiture is considered a special subcategory of portraiture, providing the viewer with an intimate view of how artists see themselves, or how they prefer to be seen. Although a portrait attempts to represent a subject's character and history, it is an interpretation that at times is as much a statement about the artist as it is about the sitter (for example, a portrait by Andy Warhol is valued for being a Warhol as well as for the subject it represents). A self-portrait, however, provides the illusion of direct access to its subject, a vision of unmediated self-representation.

The tradition of self-portraiture is substantial within the history of Western art. However, Native self-portraiture, the subject of *About Face*, an exhibition curated by Zena Pearlstone and Allan J. Ryan, and of the accompanying catalogue, is a relatively recent development. The curators have taken up the task of asking some difficult questions about a genre that has received little attention. Given the colonial legacy of Native representation, which has produced vast discourses about and images of Natives, the examination of Native self-portraiture is an important step toward considering its role in the process of Native self-representation.

Given the logistical limits of exhibitions, the curators selected forty-eight images by contemporary Native artists from North America to begin an inquiry whose scope covers a century and a half and more than five hundred Native communities in the United States alone. (Janet Berlo, whose essay attempts to lay out the beginnings of a history of Native self-portraiture, proposes the mid-nineteenth century as the moment in which the genre begins to develop along terms similar to that of Western portraiture, as a genre based on the mimetic depiction of the subject.) The selection is varied in terms of the gender, styles, age, geographic location, and the cultural hybridity of the artists. In terms of media, there are two- and three-dimensional works in a variety of techniques. One unfortunate omission, however, is a sample of a work in a time-based media, such as film, video, or performance art.

The catalogue attempts to supplement the exhibition by including essays on the history of Western self-portraiture (Joanna Woods-Marsden), the beginnings of Native self-portraiture (Janet Berlo), the role of the body in contemporary art (Joanna Roche), and the role of gender within the genre (Lucy Lippard). The curators have written a thorough essay that provides a close analysis of the images they selected and a historical overview that incorporates discussions of important works missing from the exhibition, such as Jimmie Durham's self-portrait from 1987 and documentation from James Luna's seminal performance, *The Artifact Piece*, from the same year. Realizing the difficulty of narrating a coherent theme from such diverse perspectives, Pearlstone and Ryan develop five categories under which to gather the works they have selected: (1) "cultural celebration" includes works by artists highlighting their Native identity; (2) "cultural continuity" brings together works that celebrate hybridity; (3) "cultural separation" features works that emphasize the difficulties of reconciling Native and non-Native backgrounds; (4) "cultural response" includes work that reacts against stereotypes; and (5) "idiosyncratic" is a miscellaneous category that includes a variety of works the authors describe as "personal visions." It is this last category that fully acknowledges the difficulty of trying to organize such a small sample of works to represent such a varied field of representation. (They could have tried to arrange these works chronologically, geographically, or by medium—all equally limited approaches.)

The Woods-Marsden essay provides a concise overview of the Western tradition of self-portraiture. It is a history in which the vision offered by the artist is that of a self-defining individual, whether elaborating the artist's role as intellectual rather than manual laborer in the sixteenth century or the role of the artist as a unified subject capable of representing a coherent self in the twentieth century. What is missing from this short essay, however, is any attempt to connect this history with the history of Native art practices. This lack, however, does provoke some questions. How does one place the development of self-portraits by Native artists who exclusively employ traditional aesthetics within this Western narrative? How does one explain, for example, the development of the work of artists such as Joe David, who uses Nuu-chah-nulth iconography, or the innovations of formline design in the work of Haida artist Robert Davidson? Then there are works by artists who employ a combination of Western and Native imagery, as found in the work of Melanie Yazzie. It is evident that a more rigorous study would require that each Native group develop its own historical narrative, which would then allow for more comprehensive comparative studies.

Although not addressing these questions, Janet Berlo's essay does complement that of Woods-Marsden by providing the beginnings of a history of Native self-portraiture. As mentioned, she locates the origins of this appropriated Western tradition in the mid-nineteenth century, particularly with the production of ledger drawings by South Plains Natives imprisoned at Fort Marion in the 1870s. Berlo briefly discusses an interesting aspect of the development of Native self-portraiture: the influence of photography, a medium that plays a substantial role in contemporary Native art, and the development of what Hulleah Tsinnahjinnie describes as "visual sovereignty." (For an excellent overview of

the state of contemporary indigenous photography see *Our People, Our Land, Our Images: International Indigenous Photographers*, ed. Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie and Veronica Passalacqua, 2006.) Berlo examines an early studio-portrait photograph of the prolific Huron artist Zacharie Vincent, who is shown in the classical pose of an artist at his easel. It is an example of an image (which may have been a commissioned portrait) that directly informs the self-portrait by Pierre Sioui included in the exhibition. Sioui's work includes an image of Vincent's self-portrait, depicting himself in his best regalia, as well as his own image, a layering of portraits that provides a visual lineage of Huron artists. (Oddly, the tribal affiliations of the artists are not included in the catalogue.)

Lucy Lippard, who has written on Native art for some time, takes on the challenge of addressing the issues of gender and Native self-portraiture. She acknowledges that, given the limited selection of art, which is "for the most part stylistically and conceptually unrelated except for their authorship by Native people, it seems irresponsible to draw any overall conclusions about gender in Native self-portraits" (71). Nonetheless, she is able to identify certain aspects of this practice that are specific to gender, such as the prescribed relationship between gender and certain traditional media, the recurrence of representations addressing the legacy of sexual violence, the gendered nature of humor found in some images, the playful use of masquerade by some female Native artists, and the uniqueness of two-spirited gender identity.

The discussion of the role of gender in Native self-representation obviously leads to thinking about the ways in which the body is figured in these works. Joanna Roche's essay provides an opportunity for such an analysis. Her treatment of the works by Pipilotti Rist, Cindy Sherman, and Tom Knechtel promises to consider the representation of the body within a wider contemporary art context. She notes how these Western artists have a tendency toward the obfuscation, distortion, or even outright elimination of the face and/or body. It is unfortunate, then, that Native artists are included in her analysis only briefly at the end of each of the three sections that cover the Western artists, whom she identifies as being part of the "dominant culture." She mentions only one Native artist by name, Nisha Supahan, as someone who, through her direct, frontal image affirms "the self as Indian, as woman, and as artist" (54). Such adulation for this artist's ability to declare her "self" triumphantly becomes suspect when Roche later states that Native artists have a different approach, one prone to celebrate unified subjectivity because "these Native artists have experienced such personal and cultural pain in their lives that art has become one vital tool in the search for wholeness, rather than an exercise in self-destruction," as though the examination of the fragmented self were the exclusive luxury of Western artists (57).

In contrast, Pearlstone and Ryan note in their essay how a number of the Native artists in the exhibition fragment and even deface their own images. A fuller discussion of the representation of the face, and the body, in these works, however, would have brought this discussion more fully in line with contemporary criticism on essentialism. Contemporary critical approaches to the relationship of the body and identity are wary of making any concrete links that prescribe an essential connection between the two. Native discourses

on identity, however, often involve what would be considered as an essentialist tie between identity, the body, and the land. Clearly, the essays in this volume elicit many provoking questions and mark the beginning of a serious and long-overdue examination of self-portraiture by Native artists.

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