THE SELF-PORTRAIT SHOW

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THE SELF-PORTRAIT SHOW

A 50th Anniversary Exhibition

Simon Andrew

Victor Cicansky

Lindee Climo

Alex Colville

Joe Fafard

Colin Fraser

Lucian Freud

Fabian Jean

Andrew Hemingway

Peter Krausz

David Milne

Christopher Pratt

Mary Pratt

Phil Richards

Jeremy Smith

Takao Tanabe

March 24 – April 21, 2012

The Patient Labyrinth of Lines: Self-Portraits at Mira Godard Gallery

by

Dr. Eva Seidner

One of the great pleasures of building a personal collection is the freedom to follow your heart. Technique, medium, historical context, an artist's preoccupations and stature--all these are, of course, important facets of connoisseurship. But a work which does not engage your intuition and inspire you to see in a way you have not seen before belongs in someone else's collection.

Until I was invited to write the introductory remarks to this landmark show, I confess I had never thought much about self-portraiture. It seemed to me that the main appeal of the self-portrait was the opportunity it afforded the viewer to see the artist's face. But as the works began to come into the gallery, I was reminded that artists, like writers, have many faces, and like writers, artists disguise as much as they openly reveal. The most subtle information lies between the lines. Unless you pay close attention, you will miss the best parts of the story.

One afternoon when I was not, as far as I knew, thinking about self-portraits, I came across this startling passage by the visionary Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges:

> A man sets out to draw the world. As the years go by he peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and individuals. A short time before he dies, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the lineaments of his own face.

Borges' great insight is that the sum of all our work constitutes a portrait of our truest selves. To say that we are products of what we see and experience is easy, almost a platitude. But to see

who we really are and offer ourselves up to the scrutiny of others requires a good deal more introspection and courage. The willingness to commit oneself to this process is one of the things which sets artists apart from the rest of us.

At the time of this writing, I did not know in what order or configurations the works would be displayed. As an aid to writing about the works individually I made up my own groupings as a way of organizing my ideas. Of course any such construct is “imported,” created primarily to serve the needs of the essayist. However in this case the strategy proved enormously illuminating. Gathering works that were in some way similar helped me appreciate and make sense of their differences, as well as alerting me to some of the underlying impulses of the self-portrait and various approaches available to artists who undertake the genre.

One group of paintings I considered under the heading, “Reflections.” The pun on reflection as introspective thought and as the image given back by a shiny surface is implicit.

I: Reflections

Andrew Hemingway’s “Self-Portrait Genie,” a pastel on board, is a profoundly unsettling work, astonishing in the proficiency with which the artist has met the technical challenges he has deliberately set himself. The silvered vessel which allows us to see his face (and which appears in many of his other works) is a small, convex bottle or vase, narrow at the top and flaring out at the base. Its surface and form produce disturbing distortions in both the perspective and the scale of the facial features in relation to one another. Nor are these the most disturbing features of the painting.

The work’s clearest visual reference is to “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” painted in 1524 by Francesco Mazzola, the artist popularly known as Parmigianino. What made that work revolutionary during the late Italian Renaissance was its artist’s insistence on rendering exactly what the curved barber’s mirror he looked into showed him. Vasari reports how the young artist proceeded: “He accordingly caused a ball of wood to be made by a turner, and having divided it in half and brought it to the size of the mirror, he set himself with great art to copy all that he saw in the glass.”

“All that he saw in the glass” set the world of Renaissance art on its ear. Rather than using a flat canvas and single point perspective to depict an orderly, reassuringly coherent space--a controlled, predictable microcosm of the world subject to divine laws--the young artist produced a “bizarre” (Vasari’s word) vision in which the room he occupies is skewed and chaotic and his right

hand, occupying the foreground, is bigger than his head.

In Hemingway's painting the space corresponding to the one taken up by Parmigianino's right hand--the maker's hand--is filled with an ambiguous and somewhat amorphous white form, possibly reiterated on the side surface in a slightly different, squarish shape. It is tempting to read the frontal reflection as the artist's sleeve or cuff, looming or pushing outwards because of its proximity to the viewer. The white shape on the side would thus be simply a reflection of the table on which the vessel sits. Then again, the shape on the front may also be a reflection of the table, marred by two dark dents in the surface of the vase. In both cases, the perspective is "wrong" in the sense that it is deliberately disorienting.

For an artist as insistent as Hemingway has always been on never settling for less than technical perfection, this very ambiguity is menacing. The menace intensifies into the Uncanny when one recalls the title of the painting. Hemingway's "Genie," his magical self, the self as creator, is trapped inside the reflective vessel. Such is the power of art that a painter with Hemingway's depth and skills can manage to have it both ways: the artist is at once scrutinizing his own face reflected in the vessel (his version of Parmigianino's curved barber's mirror), and caught inside the bottle, gazing enigmatically out at us.

And what a painfully questioning gaze it is. The American poet, John Ashbery, whose beautiful poem "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" was my roundabout introduction to Parmigianino's painting in the mid- 1970s, responds to the young artist's face in this way:

> The soul is a captive, treated humanely, kept
> In suspension, unable to advance much farther
> Than your look as it intercepts the picture
> …
> The soul has to stay where it is.
> Even though restless hearing raindrops at the pane,
> The sighing of autumn leaves thrashed by the wind,
> Longing to be free, outside. But it must stay
> Posing in this place.

What can one see in the troubled Genie's face? Eyes, nostrils, mouth all held open as if straining to receive some piece of information, to discern the contours of a mystery whose complexity furrows his brow. His expression tells us something, I think, of the struggle and the price of making art. I find that even as I marvel at the virtuosity of Hemingway's self portrait, it is painful to look too long into that captive face. In Ashbery's words, "the pity of it smarts."

If Hemingway positions himself resolutely "in your face," **Mary Pratt** presents a self as elusive and fugitive as a mote in a sunbeam. In her two self-portraits she has not only distanced herself from us but given us ephemeral displacements of herself--portraits of portraits--one a distorted reflection in a silver bowl, the other a shadow in a half-lit room. The result in both paintings is the image of a woman who is there and yet not there, present yet intangible.

Pratt's "Silver Bowl in Salmonier: A Self-Portrait," appears in the guise of a still life, with the silver vessel, a glass globe (the base of a table lamp), and a ceramic vase gathered together on a polished tray or glass tabletop, which scatters light and reflections in abstract forms and patches of blues and purples and greens. The material surfaces of these objects are rendered in all their tactile diversity: the matte glaze of the clay, the subtle translucence of the globe, the crisp metallic brightness of the bowl. Of course, as the title informs us, the work is not a still life, or not exclusively so. The central object, placed just off-centre--a strategy Pratt often employs to keep the viewer from feeling too comfortably "grounded"--bounces back to us from its convex surface a small, distorted reflection of the artist. Owing to the curve of the reflecting surface, her image has a somewhat squat, truncated appearance, but we see quite clearly that she is wearing a red sweater and a blue skirt. What we do not see is her face, because it is entirely obscured by the camera she holds in front of it.

Since the early days of her career, and throughout her years with Christopher Pratt in Salmonier, she has used her photographs and slides as points of departure for her paintings. Often the images have been of domestic objects and settings, inspiring a reviewer some years ago to describe hers as a "homespun aesthetic." Yet her works, while often derived from the familiar and even mundane precincts of Home, never celebrate a warm and cozy complacency of the "be it ever so humble" variety. They have much more in common with what Henry James called the "terror of the usual." Pratt's bloodied pomegranates, her trussed and plucked chickens and turkeys, all attest to the fact that the kitchen, at least, can be a very dangerous place. Nor do the images have to be quite so explicit in order to extend their implications to the rest of the House of Life.

The colour palette in "Silver Bowl" is soothing and "cool," the group of objects (presumably arranged by Pratt herself), suggestive of a refined and orderly life. The surfaces of the objects seem to offer the very picture of serenity, but surfaces can be deceiving, and there is no doubt that Pratt is an artist profoundly engaged with what lies beneath.

To begin with, the stance of the reflected woman seems slightly off-kilter. Elbows out, she leans a little to one side, slanting the plane of her arms and shoulders as she snaps her photograph. Since she has positioned herself so as to avoid symmetry in her photo, there is a corresponding visual instability in the painting's composition. By siting the silver bowl to the left of centre, Pratt forces the other two objects off the edges of the paper, giving us only a partial view of each. The ceramic vase on the left even seems to defy gravity by floating outside the raised edge of the table or tray on which it supposedly rests. While the suggestion of an impossibly floating object is subtle in this work, it is a crucial part of the other Pratt self-portrait in this exhibition, "Early Morning in My Bedroom," of which more later.

In the convex silver bowl, Pratt presents an interaction between an "innocent" surface and the depths it can reveal. Although the bowl is immobile, its polished silver seems to dance with reflected light and images which melt into fluid abstraction around the comparatively solid figure of the woman. We see distorted, miniature versions of the walls and floor, the ceiling and the windows at the side and rear of what is most likely the living room of the Pratts' house in Salmonier. Yet as the curved lines of perspective pull away into the distance they leave us with the sense of a room which is cavernous and impersonal, too large and at the same time claustrophobic.

It is the contents of the bowl which most directly belie the uneasy stasis of the scene. Bulbs of paper whites which have been "forced" to sprout push their spiky or twisted shoots chaotically into the stillness of the room. Embodiments of growth and change, they are visually more animated than even the woman with the camera. The forms of the shoots at the left, especially, are insistent, even aggressive, as they reach upward and outward.

The bulbs themselves are orange, and in the warm intrusions of this colour into all the surrounding "cool" blues and greens, as well as in its reiterations in other parts of the painting, we have further confirmation of what Pratt is obliquely getting at. The bulbs are reflected from the hollow glass globe in a softly glowing band of orange. But most important, the red of the woman's sweater visually makes the connection between her and the striving energies that cannot be confined within the "globes" of the bulbs.

For me, it is the bulbs, rather than the reflection of the woman, that constitute the most telling aspect of the painting. Pratt is not simply presenting herself as the miniature figure we see reflected in the silver bowl. Her self-portrait goes well beyond this, to the totality of the insight she gives us into her identity as an artist. Hers is a vision filled to overflowing with explicit and implied contradictions. The truth it communicates is that whatever the appearance and circumstances of daily life, "Art will out." An artist will do what she must do.

"Early Morning in My Bedroom" is a mixed media work on paper which predates "Silver Bowl" by about a decade. The image could have come straight out of the eerie dreamworld of the German Expressionist cinema of the 1920s and 30s, or the film noir mysteries of the 40s, with their long shadows and enigmatic settings. But this painting is saturated with Fauvist colour and the shadow on the wall is not Nosferatu by moonlight but the Lady with the Camera in the golden rays of a Newfoundland morning.

Ordinarily, what would be more reassuring than a padded bedroom sofa, or sunlight breaking through the slats of the Venetian blinds? Yet we feel that we have opened the door to a room that is disorienting and unpredictable, its contents eerily spectral. The stripes of the sofa's upholstery are visible right through the dark blue cushion, and the lovely Imari jar and charger, though they seem solid enough, are not resting on any solid surface. Our eyes, striving for visual logic, try to provide a table, but a close look at the painting reveals that no table is there.

The shadow on the wall is equally disconcerting. Since the light in the painting comes from roughly where we, the viewers, are standing, Pratt's shadow looks disproportionately large. Above her head looms another jagged shadow of something we cannot identify. We are not even sure whether the source of this other shadow, which seems sinister, is behind or in front of her. The strong vertical and horizontal lines which surround her--the reflections of the blinds, the edges of a picture on the wall, the stripes on the upholstery--both highlight the curves of her silhouette and emphasize her entrapment and the precariousness of the angle at which she leans. I find in her darkened image the very essence of the damsel in distress.

As in so many of Pratt's works, most of the objects appear as fragments of themselves. Here they pull off the edges of the painting into deep mystery. Things slip out of sight before we are given a chance to fully perceive, let alone understand, them. Oddly, Pratt has included a painting on the wall but chosen not to show it to us. We see only a dark corner of this picture, but get a good glimpse of the bright matte and frame, which tell us precisely nothing.

Neither is the contrast between areas of brilliant colour and those of obscurity what it appears to be. What reads at first as "darkness" turns out to be covered with a dense, busy layering of pastel crosshatches and marks in deep reds and bright blues, agitated and random in their disposition over the darker ground. The wall to the left of the Imari vase fairly bristles with colour, although it supposedly lies in shadow. Even the outline of the molding between darkened wall and ceiling casts its own well-defined silhouette, the black lines vivid against the red markings.

Pratt defines all that is visible of her shadow-self by means of a bright orange outline, a kind of electric cloisonnism. At the same time, the orange lines define the spaces adjacent to her

shadow, the spaces over her head, beneath her upraised arm, and between her arm and face. If you adjust your focus to these negative spaces, what you see is a kind of map of fragmentation: the orange areas, scored by the lines of the Venetian slats, look like islands adrift in a sea of darkness. Small wonder that we feel "at sea" in this disjointed place, strangers in a strange land.

Once again, what is most "alive" in the painting is not the shadow-woman but the vessel, the antique Imari jar which once belonged to the artist's mother and is thus a direct link to her early life. (Pratt grew up in a prominent family in Fredericton, New Brunswick, where her father was Minister of Justice.) Floating in dreamlike suspension, the jar belongs, like Keats' Grecian urn, to another world, a world that transcends time. Delicate, exotic and perfectly intact, it is the only expression of connection and integration in the work.

Despite its preternatural buoyancy, Pratt has painted it realistically, carefully representing its pierced handles and delicately sculpted finial, and meticulously adjusting its gemlike colours to her scheme of light and shadow. While "Early Morning" is much darker in its mood and subject matter than "Silver Bowl," it strikes me as significant that Pratt has manipulated the interplay between light and shadow in order to bathe nearly two-thirds of her jar in sunlight. The delineation between darkness and light begins at the top of the painting and proceeds downward through the jar and charger, where it abruptly ends. If she had situated all the furnishings of the room on a single plane, this line would have been continuous. Instead it is broken into three segments. She has brought the porcelain object forward, closer to the source of light, in such a way that it commands the foreground. The result is that a broad wash of light is allowed to fall on the face of the jar.

In the style of its depiction, the Imari jar is "really there," while in its ghostly ability to hover in the air, it seems an unconscious projection of the artist's imagination. Characteristically Pratt's self-portrait embraces both these contradictory conditions. The jar presents itself as the embodiment of memory and affirmation. Like every cherished object, it is at once a relic and a promise.

Capturing the metaphysical--the "still" moment out of time--and giving it the appearance of a mundane moment drawn from daily life is one of **Alex Colville's** signature feats, seamlessly achieved in "Waterville." We see an impeccably dressed man--the artist--who appears to be out for a Sunday drive with his dog. He has stopped by the side of the road to let the dog out of the car, and the animal has bounded into a puddle from which it is avidly drinking. In the image, the man

waits patiently for the dog to slake its thirst in order that they may resume their outing.

The narrative seems simple and straightforward. There is even a touch of implied humour: how pleased will this fastidious man be when he has to let his wet dog back into the car?

Yet the painting does not have the "feel" of a scene from everyday life. It has that shimmering quality of stillness that always attends the presence of the numinous in Colville's work. This sense is partly the result of the opalescent quality he has given the sky, the way its light silvers the wings of the small aircraft in the far distance. There is also the long, slow curve of the road, its gravel surface rendered in pointillist dabs of colour. Its line stretches from nearly the top of the painting to the bottom and from one side to the other, defining a road endlessly open in every direction. But such reasons do not entirely account for the conviction that Colville is inviting us to share something with deeper and more complex implications.

One way to seek out the source of the work's peculiar power is to consider some individual elements. Colville has begun with two separate ideas, one a self-portrait (with car) and the other a study of a dog. Each is achieved with the artist's characteristic attention to realistic physical detail, and each would be aesthetically satisfying by itself. What gives the painting its mystical resonance is the fact that Colville has placed man and dog in a landscape which only appears to unite them. In fact they are separate and alone. They do not occupy the landscape at the same moment in time, as the dog is alive only in the memory of its master. The dark expanse of ground which divides them can never be traversed because it is a temporal and not a spatial barrier. What began, then, as two realistic studies deepens in the completed painting into a work far greater than the sum of its parts. "Waterville" becomes a meditation on Time and change which glows with the elegiac light of memory.

As in all of Colville's works, the image is organized according to a precisely worked-out geometry. In this case there are three main horizontal divisions--the far distance (containing sky, building, planes), the middle ground (man and car) and the foreground (dog)--and three vertical divisions. Two-thirds of the middle one of these vertical divisions is taken up by the grassy "no man's land" between the man and the dog. This area is twice as wide as each of the spaces given to the figure on either side. This ratio points to the centrality of the idea of their isolation from each other, their essential solitude.

Colville has loaded his self-portrait, on the left-hand side of the painting, with numerous details firmly grounded in the physical world of the here-and-now. He is immaculately and somewhat formally dressed in a dark fedora, a suit with a white shirt and buttoned jacket, brown driving gloves, and polished shoes. His car is the most recent model of his favoured Austin Minis.

(One could probably arrange Colville's works in chronological order by identifying the vintage of the car depicted.) It has the gleaming surface of a new car, or at least one that has been recently washed and buffed. The half-open door, with its raised window, is a further barrier between man and dog, and we may unconsciously perceive still another impasse created by the buried geometry of the image. The car has stopped at the border of the middle distance, just short of the foreground, which is the space claimed on the opposite side by the figure of the dog. A line drawn from the front tire of the car and extended to the far right edge of the painting would graze the top of the dog's back.

Although Colville has not provided his own facial features, there is a direct line of sight from the upper portion of his face to the dog's head. Yet the animal is clearly oblivious of the man's presence as it bends to lap water from the puddle in which it stands reflected. Its legs are attenuated by the surface of the water, which ripples out in concentric circles around its muzzle as the dog drinks. The puddle itself is the only freeform, unstructured space in the image, although a pointed projection on its left side does subtly balance the dog's pointy tail on the right. In its pale blue colour the reflecting surface of the water connects the dog to the sky rather than to the earth, in contrast to the man standing by his black car.

The dog's presence in the image resonates precisely because of its absence in the physical world. While the darkness of this paradox imbues the painting, it would be a serious misreading to interpret this work as a kind of monument to a single, specific loss. The dog we see is both Colville's lost pet and much more than that, just as the man, represented without Colville's own face, is more than one, specific man. The artist's presentation of himself as faceless invites us to see him as Everyman, to understand that his condition of solitude and loss is also our own. The painting tells us that everything that lives is subject to mutability. We come sooner or later to understand that Time is heedless of our intentions, our affections, our possessions and constructs. Time flows like water and what is gone is gone forever.

It is, I think, this irretrievable time that the dog finally represents. And while Waterville itself is a specific physical place, it also stands for the entirety of the changing world we all inhabit and to whose physical laws all living beings must submit. All our names are, like Keats', "writ in water."

Peter Krausz's "Joe and I" comprises four portraits, one of the artist himself, preoccupied with his personal and unspoken reflections, and the other three a sequence of Joe the barber, entirely

focused on providing his client with the perfect haircut. Like the figures in Colville's "Waterville," the two men, despite their physical closeness, inhabit separate and different worlds.

The longer I look at this self-portrait, the more involved I become in its depths and contradictions. Since Krausz is an unerring draftsman, the technical triumphs here are not unexpected. But what is astonishing is the compactness and directness--even a kind of deceptive ease--with which he makes the image communicate, beginning with his choice of conté and Mylar as his materials. The palette is confined to modulated greys and whites, and parts of the image (Joe's forearm on the left, for example) are treated as motion studies, with minimal shading but strong indications of gesture. The translucent property of a sheet of Mylar placed over a white backing is sufficient to convey the surface of a mirror.

In its execution, then, the work is deft and sparing. It is also fanciful in its triple depiction of Joe, and there does seem to be a great deal of energy expended in the service of not very much hair. But whatever there is of levity in this work is anchored in darkness. I find that the philosophical implications expand and billow with each successive viewing. In many ways I see Krausz's self-portrait as a visual counterpart to the work of a writer like Milan Kundera.

Given the impact of the image, the mundane nature of the subject matter is ironic. Getting a haircut is meant to be a relaxing and comfortable experience. Every few weeks we sit back in familiar surroundings, exchanging pleasantries with a reassuring professional whose job it is to turn back the clock. In addition to restoring our appearance, a visit to the stylist usually provides an interval of light-hearted social interaction.

Draped in black, Peter Krausz sits rigid and silent in front of his barber's mirror, still but not at all at ease. Joe hovers wordlessly above him, applying his scissors with the fierce concentration of a surgeon. Krausz appears to watch him in the mirror, closely and somewhat judgmentally. Both men's faces give the impression that not only is Joe an especially conscientious barber but Krausz is the most demanding of clients, a very tough customer indeed. In reality, his mind is far away from the proceedings at hand.

For all the realism and detail with which Joe's head and hands are rendered, his portraits recede and ultimately melt into the white background of the wall. Its defined hatches and blended, softened marks are sometimes carried over into the areas of Joe's shirt and even his face, as in the portrait on the left. Standing at some distance from the image I am reminded of the horizontal panels in medieval works in which a person's importance determines the plane and relative scale in which he is depicted. This is, after all, a self-portrait; it is Krausz's form which fills the foreground, while three portraits of Joe are required to span the corresponding space behind him.

For all his dense physicality, the "I" of the self-portrait is elsewhere, his thoughts adrift in a time and place much more real to him than the three Present moments which Joe so kinetically inhabits. So densely has Krausz applied his conté stick to the enshrouding dark smock that he looks trapped and immobilized beneath it, his head barely connected to his body, just as his thoughts are disengaged from the image in the mirror. If this had been one of Krausz's allusive landscapes, he would appear as a vast, immoveable boulder set against a background of rolling hills.

Indeed, like the landscapes which have occupied Krausz for the past few years, this self-portrait shows us silence where there might have been communication, solitude where there might have been community. And the source of existential division in this work is, I think, the same as that of the landscapes: the burden of history. The Past sits heavy in the folds of the artist's face, the tight lines of his downturned mouth and clamped jaw, and especially in his eyes, which are unfocused. One looks out toward the mirror, while the other looks downward and away, into the recesses of memory. We can only guess at what phantoms visit him there, but clearly loss and regret attend them.

On the artist's right shoulder (the left one, from our point of view) a feathery drift of shorn hair has alit for a moment. It is the touch of the ephemeral and fleeting Present. Gazing beyond the slanted frame and through the looking glass, Krausz does not see it.

II: The Reciprocal Gaze

Every time we look at a work of art, a subtle transaction takes place between the seer and the seen. We look at the work, taking in something but rarely all of what it has to communicate. At the same time, the work "looks" back at us with everything the artist has consciously and unconsciously put into it. We may not always take up the challenge to look again, to bring to bear all we know and think and intuit, but the challenge is always implicitly there.

Sometimes it is explicitly there as well. A number of the self-portraits in this show seemed to me to be about this reciprocal act of seeing. I wish to consider them here as a group whose common thematic element is the artist's gaze captured in the image.

“The eyes … are all I have,” writes **Jeremy Smith** in the artist’s statement which accompanies his self-portrait, “Mechanic.” “What I do in this life is to use them to paint what I see and offer it.” “Mechanic” is, in my opinion, a breakthrough work, openly personal and richly allusive. Smith has combined the techniques of realism with the strategies of symbolism to produce a work that continues to “look back” at you long after you are no longer in its presence.

Initially what seizes your attention and sets the busy, rational parts of your mind in motion is the shocking nature of the image it presents: the partly obscured face of the artist caught in the jawlike form of the open door, the looming shadows, the enigmatic air hoses. But the expression in the eyes is the true nexus of this self-portrait.

The artist’s gaze conveys a complicated mixture of emotions and questions: humility, anxiety, hopefulness, and especially vulnerability, the latter intensified by the fact that he is not wearing the eyeglasses usually included in his self-portraits. Nothing is allowed to come between his eyes and ours. He looks up beseechingly into the car where we, the viewers, sit, casting the long shadow of our judgment over him. “Do you accept what I offer you?” the gaze asks. “Is it good enough? Does my work matter? Will you remember me?” The shadow on the floor over his head is both a continuation of the shadow cast by the viewer and a symbolic expression of the artist’s doubts, his inner darkness made manifest.

If Smith had depicted himself as a swimmer, what we would see in this self-portrait would be a man with his body wholly submerged, intent on keeping his head above water. The rim of the car door comes up nearly to his nostrils, which are distended as if desperate for air. Do the air hoses on the right side of the painting represent some kind of lifeline, then? For me they bring to mind the paraphernalia of the hospital room. Overall they seem associated with life, but a life that is fragile and precariously lived. (The wrinkles and folds in the artist’s face are evidence of his age and the finite nature of human life.) In terms of the composition the hoses bring to the rigid grid of the floor tiles a flowing, feminine curve, a sinuous line of (relatively) bright colour amid a palette of dark and muted tones.

In its approach, “Mechanic” is an ironic displacement of the traditional *métier* self-portrait, in which a painter presented himself surrounded by the defining tools and trappings of his trade-- brushes, palettes, easels--sometimes adding a beret and smock in order to drive the point home. By representing himself as a car mechanic, Smith deliberately divests himself of the romantic aura which even today attaches to the figure of the artist. He stands (or rather lies) before us as the common man, performing manual labour which is often routine and repetitive. His ability to do his work, he implies, depends on skill rather than magic, diligence rather than some sacred font of inspiration.

The car seems to stand for the onus on the artist, over the course of his lifetime, to keep creating artworks which the viewer deems worthy of attention. The lower edge and inside of the car door create a visual heaviness--a burden--across the bottom of the image and most of its left side, reinforcing the sense of his entrapment.

Smith has made a frame for the work which in its emphasis on handcrafting somewhat resembles Colville's but which works, in fact, to opposite effect. Colville uses the frame for "Waterville" to "set" the image and formalize the relationship between viewer and painting, creating an emotional distance between them. The nested trio of elegant black borders keeps us at arm's length, reminding us of the fact that we are looking at an artistic construct, framed for our contemplation.

The frame of "Mechanic" has a directly opposite function. Dark and ponderous, it is an important and integral part of the painting, both visually and thematically. The architecture of the frame literally extends the car's dark interior outward into the third dimension, deliberately causing it to intrude into the viewer's space. The result is that we are emotionally drawn into the image, while at the same time getting a sense of its objective physicality. Since we are also inside the car, casting our shadow over the artist, we are implicated on a number of levels simultaneously.

If Smith's gaze in this work communicates his own doubts, it also raises corresponding questions in me as a viewer. They are questions of the sort that need to be asked from time to time by anyone who professes to love art: Do I look long and attentively enough at a given work? Do I allow it to speak? Do I make the effort to consider its implications?

A painting which inspires us to assess and reassess our ability to see what is being offered is a painting to remember.

Joe Fafard likes to say that he doesn't put any humour into his work: he just doesn't take it out. Although the focus of attention in a self-portrait is supposedly the artist, in "Here's Looking at You!" Fafard turns his astute gaze on the viewer, reversing the roles of subject and object, seer and seen. It's not only his eyes that follow you around the room. His whole head seems to swivel, catching you off guard and pinning you in his line of sight no matter where you stand. You can run, but you can't hide.

This playful work, with its spontaneous, folk art ambience, is the product of a sophisticated technical process which begins with a scanned photograph of the artist's face. The image goes to a

computer program which translates it into a somewhat flattened, three-dimensional form. A high speed drill carves into the block of Styrofoam in various levels of relief to produce the negative space portrait. Fafard completes the work by refining the surfaces and covering them with acrylic. The end result is a *trompe l'oeil* self-portrait which encompasses both sculpture and painting.

One of the things I have always admired about Fafard's figurative work is the generosity of spirit it evinces. Even in his early satiric ceramic portraits he projected an expressive and humanistic respect for life. Throughout his career, whether his subjects have been members of his family and community, public figures such as politicians or the art critic Clement Greenberg, artists who have inspired him, or the farm animals which are an integral part of the Saskatchewan landscape in which he lives, Fafard has seen them through astute and unsentimental eyes. His work has invariably captured the particular essence of each individual life.

In "Here's Looking at You!" he turns his unblinking scrutiny on us, as if considering our potential as his next subjects. Fafard has made his image larger than life--not large enough to make us feel that Big Brother is watching us, but large enough to make our initial smile waver a little in uncertainty. His head seems able to move not only from side to side but up and down as well, and the black-rimmed glasses lend a special intensity to the look he directs at us. From some angles he even looks stern.

This apparent ability of the self-portrait to change its facial expression is for me the most surprising feature of Fafard's sleight of hand. The shadows deepen or recede, depending on the angle of the light and your physical position, subtly altering as you move. In certain lights his look of neutral curiosity seems to harden into a tight-lipped stare. You may wonder what he's thinking as he sizes you up, but he's keeping his thoughts to himself. The Shadow always veils his forehead.

The medium which Fafard has used for the sculptural form is equally unexpected. I had always thought of Styrofoam, in its art applications, as a casting material, but here its texture proves ideal for directly conveying the surfaces of porous skin and rough beard. The yellow wall behind Fafard's image assumes the coarseness of stucco, while the area of his shirt has been smoothed--in order to evoke the softness of cloth--before the blue acrylic is applied. (The same combination of complementary colours appears in many of Fafard's portraits of Vincent van Gogh, of which there are more than fifty.)

Styrofoam has until recently pervaded popular culture through its use in the mass production of coffee cups and containers for fast food. Fafard's choice of this material, as well as his application of brilliant colour to its surfaces, are reminders of his leading involvement in the Regina Clay scene in the 1960s and 70s, Saskatchewan's homegrown version of the San Francisco Funk Art

movement of the time. Proponents upheld the aesthetic that Art could be made out of any material--including found, industrial or "craft" materials like ceramics--and that humour, representation, regional content and social engagement enhance rather than compromise an artist's work. (Such convictions ran directly counter to the then prevailing rules of Abstract Expressionism championed by Greenberg and the New York School.) Fafard and his colleagues held firm to the idea that a sense of fun can and does give rise to serious art. Clearly it is an idea that has allowed his work to mature and expand throughout the ensuing decades.

As I move away from Fafard's self-portrait, I find myself glancing over my shoulder. Yes, he's still watching. The shadow still slants across his brow, but I think I know what's on his mind: "Sure," he seems to say. "Looking at art can be a serious business. Just don't take yourself too seriously."

In 2007, I had the privilege of seeing an exhibition entitled "**Lucian Freud**: The Painter's Etchings" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. It was, in the curator's words, "a dramatic and unusual cross-media installation" which explored the relationship of the artist's paintings and etchings, pairing or grouping together subjects whom he had treated in both media. The etchings and the paintings were often made years apart, and while the former were often preparations for the latter, Freud did not simply translate the earlier image into the other medium. Each work was conceived separately and executed with the intention that it stand on its own as a complete and independent work of art. "Self-Portrait: Reflection" is the title of both the etched self-portrait in the present show and a painted self-portrait made in 2002. Both were exhibited at MOMA.

Freud, who died in July of last year, always insisted that every work he made was a portrait, including those that were inspired by earlier masters. (Such works he considered "portraits of paintings.") Never interested in creating a visually accurate copy of his models, he aimed instead at creating portraits that were "of" his sitters rather than "like" them, and so for him the creation of each portrait was "a truth-telling exercise." The entirety of each sitter's "truth" extended beyond the boundaries of his physical appearance, to the very air around him:

> The aura given out by a person or object is as much a part of them as their flesh. The effect that they make in space is as much bound up with them as might be their colour or smell … Therefore the painter must be as concerned with the air

> surrounding his subject as with the subject itself. It is through observation and perception of atmosphere that [the artist] can register the feeling that he wishes his painting to give out.

Attendees to the MOMA exhibition were numerous and avid, and I recall especially the vocal controversies that swirled around "Benefits Supervisor Resting," one of Freud's nude portraits of "Big Sue" Tilley. His thick swaths and swirls of paint were a revelation to me. Where another artist might have conveyed grotesque excesses of flesh, Freud gave us great mounds and hollows of paint. The colours, thickly laid on, were carefully modulated, and the effect was not repellent but moving and beautiful, ennobling the subject as she lay unguarded in sleep. Later, reading through the exhibition catalogue, I learned that Freud's intention had been precisely such an evocation of his model's complex humanity, achieved in part through the way in which he handled the medium: "As far as I'm concerned," he said, "the paint is the person. I want it to work for me just as flesh does."

In the crush of gallery patrons, it was sometimes difficult to concentrate on the etchings, but etching has been an important part of Freud's body of work since the early 1980s, when he returned to the medium after an absence of almost forty years. Freud created his etchings as if they were drawings (indeed, they eventually all but took the place of drawings in his work), propping up his waxed copper plates on his easel as if there were canvases. The process of making the image was as slow and painstaking as that of making the paintings. The length of time Freud required of the sitters for his paintings--usually the better part of a year--while he examined and pondered every inch of them, is legendary. (The writer and curator, Martin Gayford, chronicles his personal experience of the process in *Man with a Blue Scarf* [2010].) The resulting etchings are as profound and demanding as the paintings, achieving through the variety and multiplicity of line the impact which the paintings achieve through colour, texture and brushwork.

The self-portrait in either medium presented special challenges to Freud. Of the many "unsatisfactory" works-in-progress he destroyed, the majority were self-portraits. "It should get easier," he once confided, "but it never does…You've got to try to paint yourself as another person. With self-portraits, 'likeness' becomes a different thing. I have to do what I feel without being an expressionist."

In 2002, six years after he produced the etching, "Self-Portrait: Reflection," Freud completed the painting by the same name. Most of his painted portraits are of nude sitters ("obtrusively naked," in the words of one critic), and here he has given us a striking variation on the theme. In the painting he wears a suit jacket and a tie whose knot he is seen adjusting. The action is incongruous, however, because Freud is not wearing a shirt--his naked chest shows clearly beneath the unbuttoned jacket.

He is turned slightly to our right, gazing outward, his face craggy beneath a shock of grey hair. His hand, on the tie, is veined and ropy beneath his aged skin. The jacket is too large for his frame and seems shabby and outdated, with its broad lapels and heavily padded shoulders. Behind him is a wall which resembles an abstract painting and whose colours, applied in short, agitated strokes, echo the greys and blues of his costume and the flesh tones of his skin.

Freud in this painting looks like a man on a mission, too preoccupied to remember his shirt but adjusting his tie hurriedly as he heads for the door, unaware of--or indifferent to--our presence. There is a determined set to his jaw and an air of purposeful movement in his pose.

The etching “Self-Portrait: Reflection,” completed in 1996, shows us the same man, (surprisingly, he doesn’t look younger), but his act of thinking--reflecting--is otherwise oriented. In the etching, the object of the artist’s reflection is Freud himself.

In his use of this medium, Freud eschewed colour and relied exclusively on black marks and lines. (As far as I know, “Lord Goodman in his Yellow Pyjamas,” with its addition of a thin wash of watercolour, is the sole exception.) The artist’s image is tightly cropped, his head and shoulders positioned squarely in the centre of the paper. There is no suggestion of physical movement. He is facing straight forward in such a way as to receive our gaze head-on, but he is not looking at us. Nor is he looking away. His gaze is turned inward, the eyes beneath their drooping lids like bottomless wells.

Freud employs a wide range of marks here, from long, curving lines (especially those defining the collarbone and tendons of the neck) to the dense networks of cross hatchings which render the contours of the head and neck. Short, choppy strokes are dispersed over the background, which is empty of identifiable details. Instead of the oversized grey jacket and striped tie, here we see a suggestion of neither clothing nor skin, merely a sparse scattering of dots, like stippling.

In contrast, we are shown every detail of Freud’s face in a complex interaction of dense black hatchings and white paper that produces a stark, three dimensional effect. We are looking at a man whose body has become frail and vulnerable. Yet the denseness of line with which this physical fragility is communicated conveys solidity and gravitas. There is as much black ink as white space in the rendering of his head and neck, and the background strongly conveys both energy and depth. Thick black bands of marks strongly outline the head, neck and shoulders, while short, electric strokes radiate upward and outward, like swirling air currents--or ideas as yet unrealized in works of art.

“Self-Portrait: Reflection” is the self-portrait of an artist whose creative genius age could not wither.

With his jaunty fountain of hair springing from a mauve elastic band at the top of his head, **Simon Andrew's** image is the quintessential "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man." In Andrew's self-portrait we see not only the spontaneity of youth but its earnestness. The artist appears in a moment of confrontation with himself, entirely given over to the act of self scrutiny. He has the look of a man who is seeing his own face clearly for the first time.

Andrew is an artist deeply in love with what he has called "the physicality of paint." He treats the medium of oil paint, in his words, as "a physical material, like lead or water…a substance that is meaningful on its own, not merely a tool to create a desired composition." "Self-Portrait with Elastic Band" is not the product of a planned and deliberate rendering of the artist's face. Rather the portrait has evolved and been "released" through the application of paint to canvas in various integrated techniques and styles.

The face, for example, is worked in a thick, rich impasto of blended colours reminiscent of Impressionist flesh tones, including pinks, oranges, yellows, greens and greys. In some areas, these are roughly laid in with a few broad vertical or horizontal strokes, as for the nose and forehead. Elsewhere shorter strokes are used to sculpt and contour the dollops of paint, as in the cheeks and chin.

Overall the treatment is loose and rough, as if the heavy volume of paint has been maneuvered and pushed around until the underlying structure of bone and muscle becomes apparent. By pulling up and fastening his long hair, Andrew uncovers his forehead and allows the light, coming from above and to our right, to reflect from it. Highlights mark the rounded areas of forehead, cheekbones and one earlobe, drawing the viewer's eye rhythmically around the image. But there are also surprises. The lower edge of the chin and part of the throat, for example, seem to catch the light on the "wrong" side. Andrew's vibrantly yellow shirt is reflecting light upward, enlivening the lower parts of the image and making us slow down and reconsider the logic of what we are seeing. The long, bright line of reflection on the throat also provides a counterbalance to the brightness of the forehead, offering another starting point for our visual exploration of the painting.

The marks created by differences in the density and texture of paint add visual drama to the surface of the face, but areas which are less thickly painted also enhance its plasticity and interest. The hair, for example, frames the forehead and cheeks in a cacophony of brushwork that seems to imitate the haste in which Andrew created his impromptu hairstyle. The blue background, with its paler sections where paint has been taken away or redistributed, introduces a subtle interplay between matte areas and glazed ones, enhancing the play of light.

The richly worked surface of Andrew's self-portrait, especially on so large a scale, radiates the lushness and energy characteristic of his romantically evocative landscape paintings. Yet for me the work's salient power resides in the eyes, specifically in the complexity of the gaze which the artist directs at his own image in the mirror. Andrew's eyes occupy the exact centre of the composition. In rendering them he has restrained his handling of the paint in such a way that they emerge with clarity and definition from amid the flourishes of impasto. By placing a bright point of light in one eye and veiling the other in shadow, Andrew creates a look of contemplation that is at once intensely focused and dreamily speculative.

The painting strikes me, finally, as an unpremeditated revelation of an artist to himself. The process of enthusiastically exploring his medium has brought the painter to the borders of a country as yet unexplored, that is, to the beginning of a new self-knowledge.

On the wall facing my desk is a subtle, moody woodblock print by **Takao Tanabe** of a mist enshrouded island off the coast of British Columbia. It is the only picture in the room. During the course of an average writing day, I look up at it many times, especially when my thoughts are foggy and the words decline to break through. The image always looks different. Sometimes it is the land which beckons; at other times it is the placid expanse of water stretching before it. The very act of looking is always a journey and journeys sooner or later always inspire.

Tanabe has shifted ground, both physically and aesthetically, many times over the past six decades of his career. Since the early 1980s, it has been primarily the West Coast which has been his subject, and so it was something of a surprise when this self-portrait arrived in the gallery and I saw it for the first time. It is a colour linocut print, one of a series of thirty Tanabe made in 1957. For me it had the effect of a sepia-toned photograph discovered in an old album. It induced a kind of time travel that carried me from my computer keyboard in Toronto in 2012 to Robert Reid's printing shop in Vancouver in 1957, a year when I was as yet unaware of art, having just learned to read.

Tanabe was thirty-one years old when he made this image, and was already what Reid today happily describes as a master of "the black arts" of letterpress printing. The two men had been introduced in 1952 by the artist Joe Plaskett, who had been Tanabe's teacher at the Winnipeg School of Art, where Tanabe had enrolled in 1947 with the idea of becoming a commercial artist. In *Takao Tanabe: Sometime Printer* (2010) Reid recalls how quickly Plaskett's protégé became proficient in book design (including linocut ornamentation) and typography.

At thirty-one, Tanabe was not a callow youth, and indeed, had never had the chance to be one. In 1942, when he was sixteen, he and his family were forcibly evicted from Prince Rupert, where he was born, and relocated away from the coast, to the Japanese Internment Camp in Lemon Creek, in the interior of British Columbia. There he remained for two years. Tanabe has said that he "was angry for thirty years" over the experience of being treated as an alien in his own country. By 1957, thirteen years after his internment, his self-portrait shows the face of a young man who is still angry and distrustful, his eyes evasive and his jaw clenched.

But it is also the face of an artist moving inexorably forward, his profile as sharp as an arrow (note especially the dark, projecting areas of hair, eyebrows, moustache and chin) and implying an arrow's speed and upward trajectory. In 1952, when he first entered Reid's printing shop, Tanabe had already had his first one-man show of paintings at the Winnipeg Art Gallery. By 1957 he had been exhibiting for nearly a decade, both nationally (including the National Gallery in Ottawa) and internationally (Paris, New York, Milan, Washington, D.C., and the Sao Paulo Bienal, where he was one of a handful of artists chosen to represent Canada). He had been awarded public commissions in Winnipeg and Vancouver, had studied with Hans Hofmann and Reuben Tam in New York (1950-1951) and had taken part in the Abstract Expressionist "community" there. In 1953 an Emily Carr Foundation scholarship had allowed him to study at the Central School of Arts and Crafts in London and to travel on the Continent, visiting museums and absorbing European painting traditions.

By 1956 he was back in Vancouver, newly married and assembling a group of abstract paintings for a one-man show at the Vancouver Art Gallery. The show opened in 1957. Joe Plaskett, who wrote the catalogue introduction, dubbed the works the "White Paintings." While Tanabe insisted that his canvases were purely abstract, critics at the time sensed the presence of Nature and nature-inspired forms. Today we see in them Tanabe's early struggles with the boundaries between strict abstraction (in the sense that Hofmann defined it) and loose representation--in short, the emergence of Tanabe's own style of lyrical abstraction.

All this he had achieved by 1957, in a span of about seven years. In this small, laconic self-portrait I see the strength of will, the determination and, most of all, the belief in his own energies and talents that sustained Tanabe throughout his early years. The force of his character is present in his face. At the same time there is something enigmatic and elusive in his eyes.

His old friend, Joe Plaskett, might have been describing Tanabe's self-portrait or the woodblock print hanging near my desk: "His character is at once straightforward and … complex. So his art shows mastery, and behind it is mystery."

III: Being Present in the Past

Two artists in this exhibition have projected images of themselves into modified versions of classic paintings. Lindee Climo assumes her place in a detail from a Dutch Old Master nativity scene, while Fabian Jean places himself in the world of the Song Dynasty. Their self-portraits are variants of the *tableau vivant*, a kind of art-based masquerade popular in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Costumed participants were precisely posed and positioned in such a way as to recreate, "in the flesh," scenes from well known works of art.

But whereas the *tableaux* were conceived as elaborate entertainments, Climo and Jean delve more deeply into their respective antecedents even as they retain their sense of play. (Climo has used the term, "play-acting" in reference to her work). The two artists also draw upon an impulse similar to what Henry James called "the Sense of the Past"--a feeling that the Past is alive and "open" to those who conscientiously seek entry in search of some revelation or experience it may hold for them.

While both artists succeed in getting "inside" the different traditions which engage them, neither attempts to replicate the technique of the original paintings. Instead they transmute their sources in such a way as to make statements about their own identities, producing self-portraits which are at once traditional and contemporary.

In a note accompanying her exhibition at Mira Godard Gallery in 2003, **Lindee Climo** wrote:

> If I were to diagram the relationship between my interest in Renaissance painting and my animals, I would draw a figure eight with the one factor in each loop and my paintings at the intersect.

I've never encountered another painter who combines Old Masters and Animal Art in quite the way Climo does. Usually (though not in this self-portrait) her approach involves substituting animals for the human figures in Renaissance paintings. In a work shown in "Four Legs and a Blue Nose," the 2003 show cited above, Mona Lisa smiles gently from one of Climo's canvases, her brown eyes soft and enigmatic. But this La Giaconda is a cow, lying placidly in front of Leonardo's landscape of trees and water, her front legs delicately folded in front of her and one rear hoof modestly showing at her side.

When I first saw Climo's paintings some years ago, I supposed that their humour was meant to be taken as irreverent, though I wasn't quite sure whether the artist was commenting on the failings of human nature (by replacing people with animals) or criticizing the manner in which Art--with a capital A--is worshipped in Western culture. (John Updike once remarked that art is like baby shoes: when they are coated in gold they can't be worn.) However, now I believe that neither of those interpretations was accurate. Climo's animals cannot be reduced to symbols for building arguments. They don't "stand" for anything other than themselves, being neither adorable pets nor nobler-than-human beings. The focus of her attention is on revealing their individual natures, while her style, compositions and humour she borrows and adapts from the Old Masters. All Climo's paintings reveal her strong, personal connection to both her animal subjects and her Renaissance sources.

It seems to me, from reading about her early life, that the two major themes of her work were always destined to come together. While still very young, she discovered that she had a special affinity for tending farm animals, which thrived under her care. Although she did not come from a farming background, when she was nine her father bought her a few sheep on condition that "the animals pay for themselves." Her enterprise expanded and prospered, and by the time she was in her teens, she was winning state competitions and sending her prize steers to market. As her parents' marriage failed, she found solace and a sense of "family" in caring for her rabbits, sheep, poultry and cattle.

Her drawings of animals also date from childhood, nurtured by her mother's interest in art. Eventually Climo entered college, thinking to combine her love of animals and talent for drawing by becoming a technical illustrator of medical and veterinary textbooks. And then, in the Rijksmuseum in the Fall of 1968, she discovered the Dutch Masters:

> I was there, overwhelmed.... I had never really been interested in painting until that day. ... Seeing Paulus Potter's 'Young Bull' immediately changed me, connected my life to a jet path and my heart to my hand. I looked carefully for two more days at everything on the Rijksmuseum walls that had an animal in it.

Climo's self-portrait in the present exhibition is based on a Detail from Jan Steen's "Adoration of the Shepherds," painted between 1660 and 1679. His is an especially boisterous Nativity scene, complete with bagpiper and a throng of peasants in Dutch period clothing. They

are crowded beneath an archway and pushing forward into the stable for a glimpse of the new mother and her baby. Mary, serene in flowing blue garments, sits brightly illuminated in the foreground, with the Child in a manger beside her and a shepherd kneeling at her feet. Joseph is further back and to the left, standing behind the white donkey which has carried Mary into Bethlehem. As an old farmwife hospitably offers him a plate of eggs, Joseph, unnoticed by the crowd, doffs his hat to her. The rustic scene exudes warmth and earthly humanity as much as it celebrates a divine Mystery.

In the lower left-hand corner, crouched on the ground between the donkey and an ox, is a young girl feeding twigs to a fire, warming an earthenware jar of milk. "I felt immediately that the little woman that Jan painted with the sticks and the donkey and the ox was me," writes Climo. As it is the Detail containing the woman and the animals which interests her, she eliminates almost everything else: Virgin, Child, most elements of the setting and the crowd of peasants. The three shepherds have been reduced to necessary, faceless fragments, two appearing simply as arms holding a pair of lambs which Climo has "imported" into the space occupied in the Steen work by Joseph and the old farmwife.

What remains is a Nativity scene without the Nativity--in short, a secular scene of devoted animal husbandry. Besides the title and a possible interpretation of the lambs as references to the Lamb of God, only two details from the Dutch original remain to suggest religious content: the white donkey draped with a blue blanket--blue and white being the Virgin's colours--and a wooden plank that is partially obscured by a large metal vessel. Comparison with Steen's "Adoration" reveals that this unobtrusive piece of wood is in fact part of the manger in which the Baby Jesus lies.

In Steen's painting the Virgin and Child seem to radiate light, with the white donkey and portions of the ox and peasants' costumes reiterating less brilliant shades of white in different areas of the composition. Climo makes her white donkey the bright focal point of her work, with smaller areas of white on the ox's face, the two lambs and the jar of milk. Every element of her painting is carefully modulated in colour value and softened in texture, creating a mood of harmonious and gentle domesticity. Even the yellow brass vessel in the centre foreground of Steen's work loses its crisp outline and its bright highlights, taking on in Climo's hands a muted, matte surface more akin to clay than to metal. Her only metal objects, the guards on the tips of the ox's horns, end in round knobs.

The physical details of the interior of the barn have been eliminated and replaced with gentle shadows to give a vague impression of "background." Where Steen provided perspective, Climo brings all her subjects forward, reinforcing a sense of intimacy with the viewer. She pays particular

attention to the rendering of the animals' coats (note the furriness of the donkeys legs, the rippling softness of its neck, the undulating hair on top of the ox's head), and to their eyes. Indeed the animals' eyes are the only ones Climo shows us. The shepherds' faces end just above their chins, and the "little woman's" eyes look down beneath their lowered lids as she concentrates on building her fire.

Each animal's eyes hold a different expression, an element entirely absent from Steen's work. Climo's ox gazes out at us with benign intelligence, while her lambs are innocently "wide-eyed." What I find most interesting is the anxious look of the donkey-- the crescent of white showing above the dark iris, and the ridge of bone that gives the brow a tense, preoccupied expression. Nothing in Steen's painting has inspired this; his white donkey is a placid but unaware beast of burden. It seems to me that the thematic core of Climo's painting resides in the concerned gaze which the donkey directs at the little woman tending her fire.

Preoccupied with her task, she does not notice that her foot is touching the donkey's hoof. This small detail Climo has taken from Steen, but her donkey's expression lends it special significance here. We have the sense that the animal is watching over the woman, just as the woman has watched over the animals in her care. We cannot tell whether what worries the donkey is the fire, the pointed sticks or the possibility of treading on the woman's foot, but the animal's feeling of connection to her is clear. Again, this relationship does not exist in Steen's painting, in which the girl's somewhat coarse face shows little intelligence or animation as she performs what seems a routine duty.

Climo turns the face of her "little woman" so as to give us a more direct view than the profile afforded in the Old Master work. Even without seeing her eyes we know from her gentle smile that she is content and happy in the simple company of her animals. Her self-portrait presents us with that bright moment of discovery in which she sees herself through the eyes of an Old Master. Past and present come seamlessly together. She is the "little woman with the sticks," the animals are her animals and Jan Steen's world is her world. For the time we immerse ourselves in her painting, it is our world, too.

Fabian Jean is a master of painterly transformations. Speaking some years ago about his portraits, he said: "For many works, I've used the same model.... She doesn't mind that I change her into, say, a ten-year old boy or girl. I like to call some of my paintings 'fictional portraits' as they are

not portraits really--they're largely invented." Jean's method of invention involves the layering of techniques, styles and meanings, resulting in the building up, layer by layer, not only of surfaces but of images dense with narrative content and allusions to art history.

Jean has painted his self-portrait in oils using what he describes as an "egg tempera technique"--that is, applying his pigments in precise strokes and progressive layers. He writes in his artist's statement that he was intuitively drawn to the art of the Song Dynasty and interested in exploring some of its formal aspects. Eastern elements heavily influence the content and composition of the work, but his treatment of them is Western, contemporary and highly individual in its style. Jean appears at the forefront of the canvas, looking like a man who has drifted quietly into the landscape of his own waking dream.

The Song Dynasty spanned two historical periods: the Northern Song (960-1126) was a time of social, political and economic stability; the Southern (1127-1279) witnessed violent upheavals and the uprooting of entire populations by waves of invaders. In both periods, the making of art was deemed a contemplative calling, in keeping with philosophical traditions which demanded of the artist the discipline to maintain a calm mind and a cultivated sensibility. Ideally each creative effort was to be an act of reverence by an artist who strove to embody, as Daniel Boorstin writes in *The Creators* (1992), the Confucian ideal of "sageliness within and kingliness without."

The arts of painting, calligraphy and poetry--the "Three Perfections"--were considered to be philosophically interconnected and aesthetically interdependent. For example, an artist might immerse himself in a poem as a prelude to creating a calligraphic scroll. During the reign of the Emperor Huizong, himself a painter and calligrapher, all three art forms enjoyed imperial patronage, and court officials, selected through a rigorous system of civil examinations, were frequently artists and scholars.

It is from the Northern Song that Jean has derived the image of his self-portrait, basing it on period representations of Huizong and other court officials. All appear outlined in black or grey (a technique reminiscent of cloisonné enameling), wearing red robes and black hats. All are seated in similar poses and set against bright yellow backgrounds. Jean has included in his adaptation two additional elements from Taoist painting: the branch of a flowering tree, executed in a calligraphic style, and a suggestion of distant mountains "floating" in the mist.

The depiction of the figure and vivid coloration are inspired by Song paintings on silk, but Jean's handling of pigments and surface pulls the work free of its originals' time frame and allows it to range over other eras and traditions. For example, in order to create the illusion of the floating landscape, he scrapes the paint from some areas of the canvas and overpaints others in thin layers

of modulating colour (a technique called scrumbling). Without altering the overall composition, the artist thus gives his work the feeling of a Renaissance mural.

Similarly the official's expression resembles that of the contemplative Song artist-scholar, but the realistic shading and highlights whereby Jean represents his own, living face are techniques drawn from Western painting. Our awareness of the artist's individuality is further reinforced by the omnipresence of his personal "hand" and marks. At the same time, the scraping of the surface produces an effect like fog, giving the entire composition its dreamlike atmosphere.

Indeed Jean has a supple expertise in making one stylistic tool serve a multiplicity of purposes. Nowhere is this talent more striking than in his handling of the distinctive hat which the official wears. The artist has written of his fascination with this oddly-shaped object, which was designed to prevent court officials from eavesdropping and gossiping with one another when they were in session with the Emperor. Certainly the long, horizontal projections on either side of the hat instantly draw our attention to the image, but they also have another function: they establish spatial relationships. By neatly bisecting the canvas, the horizontal projections create a sense of depth and help to situate the three compositional elements on different planes: the blossoming tree is closest to the viewer, Jean in his guise as artist-official is in the middle distance, and the evanescent (possibly imaginary) mountains are farthest away. With one interrupted, minimal black line, Jean achieves both a realistic rendition of the Song Dynasty hat and an intimation of distances ranging from near to far. All this he accomplishes without recourse to Western strategies of perspective.

Fabian Jean is a fine painter, but no discussion of technique can explain the enigma at the heart of his self-portrait. Who, finally, is the man who comes toward us like a figure moving through fog? Is he an artist-philosopher from the distant past whose meditations have afforded him a glimpse of the future, opening a window into our own time? Or is he our contemporary whose studious immersion in the past has allowed him to slip into the Song Dynasty and re-imagine himself as a government official there? Is it the Past or the Future the man is dreaming?

In attaining this meditative state of transcendence over Time, the artist also calls into question the very boundaries of individual identity. Perhaps all our identities are simultaneously bound up in the impenetrable mysteries of Transformation. As the Taoist philosopher Chuang Tzu mused after recounting his dream of being a butterfly: "Now I do not know whether I was then a man, dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly, dreaming I am a man."

IV: Totems of the Self

The oldest piece in our collection is a glass vessel about three thousand years old. The newest piece is a work on paper completed a few months ago. Between these chronological signposts (which do not determine how we shape our collection), there are paintings and sculptures and objects created by artists living in disparate times and places, and working in a wide variety of media. Yet our collection is intrinsically coherent, each piece "at home" in the context we have created. This coherence is reaffirmed each time I move works around in order to make room for newly-acquired ones, or reinstall them in new configurations that somehow release meanings and affinities not apparent before. When the context changes, works of art tell a new story, or rather reveal parts of a story not previously disclosed.

During my weeks of writing this essay, I have often thought that a personal art collection constitutes a kind of self-portrait, an outward index to the collector's inner being. As I look around me I am reminded of where I was when a particular piece intersected with my life, what I was thinking and feeling and doing, what someone may have said that so moved or enlightened me that it has stayed in my memory for years and even decades. And so a personal collection is also a kind of autobiography in which years of successive moments of seeing and being touched by art are translated into a simultaneous visual Present, richly layered and always on the point of change.

Edmund de Waal writes in his deeply resonant book, *The Hare with Amber Eyes* (2010), "It is the intimacy that matters. Picking up a drawing enables us to catch the thought of the artist in all its freshness, at the very moment of manifestation... It celebrates the moment of apprehension and the fugitive moment of response." I can't say how other collectors recognize the works of art they want to have near them in their daily lives. I'm not sure that I can even articulate quite what it is that I am looking for, since "it" finds me as often as I find "it." What I can say is that this quality, though resistant to the language of criticism, is arrestingly real. "It" is what the poet Charles Simic finds in the mysterious boxes of one of his (and my) favourite artists, Joseph Cornell:

> Since the "it" in our existence cannot be further identified, since the essence of language is its poverty in the face of "it," since one cannot hold a mirror to "it,"...one strives for an art whose aim is to render the effect of "its" presence.

There are people who believe that collectors pursue immortality by associating themselves with Great Works, or what is sometimes called Timeless Art. (The literary equivalent of Timeless

Art is Deathless Prose, but that term is almost always used ironically.) No one really "owns" a work of art for more than a finite span of time and in any case, even the greatest works are not immortal, though they may outlive by centuries those who made them and those who had them in their keeping. Like human beings, works of art are made of physical materials--"things"--and time, in Ovid's phrase, "is the devourer of things." Even an object which has been conscientiously maintained and passed on to the next scrupulous collector eventually requires restoration or repair. It cannot remain forever the same work which sprang pristine from the hand of its maker.

By gathering objects together and placing them in relationship, a collector expands the story of not only his life but the life of the object. We do not seek immortality; we bestow continuity and extend meaning. This, I think, is what Cornell does when he rescues worthless articles of plastic and paper and tin from junkshops and nestles them together in his aged, open boxes. And it is what de Waal does when he places his delicate, vulnerable ceramic vessels in vitrines behind semi-opaque glass or ranges them on an aerie constructed in the dome of the Victoria and Albert Museum. Neither artist calls himself a collector, and their aesthetics could hardly be further apart. Yet while both men are makers, both are also collectors, in the best sense of the word.

The final group of self-portraits in this show gathers together objects which have autobiographical significance and which metaphorically project the essence of each artist's identity, the kind of objects Simic calls "totem[s] of the self."

Colin Fraser gives us a lyrical depiction of a still moment in that otherwise most kinetic of spaces, the artist's studio. His self-portrait, "Imprint," is a still life in which a solitary chair, squarely centred in the image, epitomizes Stillness and anchors all the other pictorial elements, which embody Life. The soft tones and long, slanting shadows impart to the work a feeling of tranquility and of memory, as if this perfect moment of rest, even as we experience it, is already slipping into the past. The living pink blossom on the worn surface of the chair reinforces the "carpe diem" theme.

The egg which rests beside the flower is another evocation of time, in this case signaling the genesis of life or, by extension, the birth of each new work of art. This is literally true with respect to Fraser's paintings, as they are executed in egg tempera, a medium which he himself prepares with yolks, pigments and water. Like the blossom, the egg is perfect in form and fragile in surface, its delicacy captured and held in the painting but fugitive in the quotidian world.

Egg tempera is a medium which demands precision in the way it is applied, as it is quick-drying and translucent, allowing little margin for error or adjustment. The artist works in layers to build up

his image and intensify tonal values. In “Imprint,” as in his other works, Fraser makes the most of these qualities, using short, precise brushstrokes to create patterns and a sense of movement so subtle as to be almost subliminal. And so while there is no suggestion of motion in the various components of the image, we sense the potential energy in the room, an energy ready at any moment to become kinetic and productive again.

For example, the woven texture of the carpet establishes regularity in the patterning of the lower part of the painting, and in a less interesting work, an artist might have built up the wall out of brushstrokes which reinforced this linear pattern. But Fraser’s brushwork swirls and rotates upward and away from the floor, creating tension between the stasis of the chair and rug in the foreground and the exuberance of the background. Moreover the wall, initially perceived as a delicate shade of grey, emerges as a dense layering of warm pastel colours, applied to different areas of the wall in varying combinations and depths.

Oblique shadows cast onto the chair and rug add a further dimension of visual and thematic complexity, even mystery. We may wonder what is outside the unseen window through which the light passes, what is casting the leafy shadow whose organic shape echoes that of the bloom, both elements suggesting the world beyond the studio. Are we in the city or the countryside? What is the season, the time of day? Fraser’s enduring, rectilinear chair thus objectifies the still point of a world endlessly revolving through the hours and the seasons, year after turning year.

The chair, with its look of a sturdy but somewhat battered workbench, bears in its chipped paint and rubbed surface the “imprint” of long use by the artist. Indeed Fraser’s self-portrait is replete with imprints, some lasting (the chipped paint) and others fleeting (the shadows on the floor, and the ethereal colours imparted by the flower to the surface of the egg). The most overt of these imprints are the smears of paint on the jeans which the artist has “carelessly” draped over the back of his chair.

Articles of clothing, even when they are not worn, always tell us something about their owners. This is so even when clothes are donned as disguises or costumes, as we have seen in the paintings by Climo and Jean. In this case, Fraser’s frayed and paint-daubed jeans convey their information with directness and vibrancy. In the imprint of the artist’s palette of colours on the denim, we are offered an imagined but clear vision of him actively engaged in the process of painting, wiping his hands and brushes on his pants as he works.

In technique the jeans are not rendered as passive objects. The sunlight not only illuminates them, it seems to warm them. The pinks and mauves which have gone into the building up of the blue colour of the denim reinforce the impression of warmth, and the play of light and shadow on

the fabric creates an active, almost animate surface. Most strikingly of all, the jeans still seem to bear the imprint of Fraser's body, the memory of his shape, especially in the rounded area around the pocket. We have the sense that he has just taken them off at the end of his day's work and that they will be there, waiting, in the morning, ready for him to resume.

This evocation of the artistic process is one of the most powerful paradoxes of this self-portrait, a source of its strength and its profundity. For it is a defining feature of Fraser's style--his particular "imprint"--that he is able to translate moods into scenes of physical reality without sacrificing the essence and apparent simplicity of those evanescent "moments" as they fly. Yet nothing in this painting is simple. Everything exists in counterpoise with its polar opposite and shares aspects of its nature: stillness and movement, the animate and the inanimate, time and the suspension of time. This, ultimately, is how memory works, too--transforming the moment even in the preserving of it.

Dancing light and the spirit of celebration infuse "Portrait of the Artist as a Very Young Man." **Phil Richards** painted this lively work just after completing the official portrait of Elizabeth II, commissioned by the Government of Canada in honour of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee. In conversation he describes the awarding of this commission as a "plum"--and cheerfully includes one of the luscious red fruits in the foreground of his self-portrait. In its quirky arrangement of richly-coloured objects around the black and white photograph of the artist as a two-year-old boy, the image balances regal pomp and circumstance with Richards' personal sense of achievement and wonder at where his life has taken him.

The image derives from a place most of us will never visit in person: the Audience Room of Buckingham Palace, where in 2011 Richards met privately with the Queen to discuss the progress of his commission and to finalize aspects of the work. During the course of their conversation, she offered him a glass of water, and this object, too, he includes in his self-portrait. Like the plum, the glass is a reference so private and specific that only Richards himself and those with whom he directly shares the information can grasp its personal significance.

The use of such references is one of the hallmarks of Richards' commissioned portraits, whose subjects appear surrounded by favourite objects charged with autobiographical associations not necessarily apparent to outsiders. However the artist has always insisted that a good portrait must be first and foremost a strong work of art. It must be able to move and communicate long

after the people and circumstances that occasioned its creation have passed into history. And so Richards assembles the plum, glass and other objects in such a way as to create a context which frees them from finite references, and releases them instead into the world of universally accessible meanings.

For me, Richards' painting has the look and feel of Theatre. The red velvet curtain seems to have opened on an intricately lit stage, revealing the actors already in place, striking their poses. There are costumes from intriguingly disparate times, and suggestions of scenic and architectural backdrops. Most of all, there is a pervasive sense of narrative mystery arising from a composition constructed around unlikely juxtapositions. Even without knowing the specific details of the "back story," the viewer understands that the artist is dramatizing an extraordinary moment or series of moments of his life's journey.

While some of the "actors" are likenesses of specific people, all are, of course, inanimate objects. In part, the image comprises the usual elements of classic still life painting: flowers, fruits, a hand-decorated porcelain vase, all arranged on a table. By providing a realistic depiction of exactly what he sees, Richards endows each element with jubilant life. The bright, vibrant yellows are balanced by deep, regal reds, a palette which creates an effect at once kinetic and stately. A slanting shaft of light renders some of the petals and leaves almost translucent, introducing further variations into the colour spectrum and giving each flower its own sharp individuality. Dazzling patterns of light thrown off by the crystal tumbler animate the table surface and encourage the viewer's eye to move across and around the image.

But if we allow our eyes to become overly infatuated with the lush surfaces of the generic still life material, we may miss the narrative essence of the work. For the luminous, rounded forms --the bouquet, the fruits, the hollow vessels of porcelain and glass--organize themselves around two central, rectilinear objects: the photographs of the artist and of the Queen. To the right are two more portraits, Richards' renditions of Gainsborough's paintings of the Duke and Duchess of Cumberland. The original Gainsborough portraits hang in their gilded frames in the Audience Room, but Richards' versions of them are reduced to the scale of postcards, precariously positioned on the tabletop and partially obscured. The idiosyncratic treatment and arrangement of these four "portraits of portraits" form the thematic core of the painting.

The snapshot of Richards was taken in 1953, and shows a "typical" Canadian youngster dressed in overalls, holding a ball and miniature bat and standing by a grassy field. The image of the Queen, presented here as a hand-coloured postcard, was made in 1952, the year of her coronation. When the photographs were taken, no two lives could have seemed further apart, yet sixty years later, they have intersected: Richards shows the two photos touching. Appropriately the Queen's

image is the larger of the two and is situated higher up in the composition, but it is Richards' likeness which is securely "grounded" on the tabletop. The postcard of the Queen seems to hover behind him (vaguely supported by the vase and one green leaf), with its lower portion obscured by the image of the boy. It is, after all, the artist who is the "hero" of this drama.

To the right of the central pair of photographs are the reduced Gainsborough portraits of the Duke and Duchess. Richards' scaled down versions retain the formal dress and posture of the originals, which as exemplars of eighteenth-century court portraiture emphasize their subjects' dignity, wealth and aristocratic status. The reduction in scale, however, robs the Duke of some of his dignity; and what remains is cancelled by his proximity to the little boy, who stands in a similar posture, with one arm raised to his shoulder (to support his baseball bat) and the other (holding the rubber ball) at his hip. The overall effect of this juxtaposition is ironic, even mildly comical.

Richards places his image of the Duchess at an acute angle to that of her husband, allowing only one corner of the card to touch its partner. The artist's interest here is in creating a gap through which a white shaft of light may pass, dividing the Duchess' image into two triangular areas, one of light and the other of shadow. Her face and figure become indistinct, almost abstract, as the acuteness of the angle produces an effect of foreshortening. What we see most clearly is the brilliant triangle of light whitening the skirt of her long dress. This area of brightness echoes the broad expanse of light around the glass on the lower left hand portion of the canvas.

Since an accurate representation, in miniature, of the Gainsborough portraits is obviously not Richards' intention, what is he up to? Again it seems to me that the inclusion of this pair of portraits has to do with the "staging" of that seminal, dramatic moment when the lives of the artist and the Queen intersected. In terms of the composition, the Gainsborough cards create a protective architectural enclosure for the other two-- the central-- portraits. Outside this sheltered enclave is the grander, public architectural setting of the Audience Room itself, which includes a window and glimpses of the world beyond: a balustrade, a rolling lawn, an expanse of water and a fragment of the London skyline, including a glimpse of St. Mary Axe, the famous "gherkin"-shaped building designed by Norman Foster. Richards visually unites all the "royal" elements of his composition by using the colour red. Red asserts itself in the plum representing the commission, in the background of the Queen's postcard, in the Duke's clothing, and in the drape at the Palace window.

A modest black and white photograph standing amidst a setting of regal red: the image epitomizes the unexpected outcome of the artist's long and dedicated journey. In the end, Richards' self-portrait memorializes an essentially private experience. A Canadian commoner has met with the Queen to discuss his official painting of her portrait. No wonder the self-portrait in which he celebrates the moment of his arrival is filled with light.

A book is a gathering of leaves intended to inform or persuade or inspire its reader.

A book is also a physical object which engages the senses. The design of a cover catches your eye, the title on a spine prompts you to reach out and take a particular volume in your hand. The binding--paper or cloth or leather--rests in the hollow of your palm as you read. The shape and slant of the typeface, its antique or modern qualities, subtly play on your perception of the meaning of the text. Your fingertips register, even if your conscious mind does not, the thickness and texture of the paper as you turn each page. If the book is new, you inhale the smell of ink and paper; if it is old, you breathe in the scent of the past.

At first glance, **Victor Cicansky's** books seem to constitute a motley autobiography, a multivolume *Song of Myself*: "My Life With Clay," "My Garden Palette," "Regina: My World," "My Bronze Age," and so on. The titles point to two of his central preoccupations: the cultivation of gardens, and the making of art in clay and bronze using "My Colours"-- glazes and patinas. Like Joe Fafard, his colleague from the days of the Regina Clay scene, Cicansky has a mischievous talent for befuddling the eye of the beholder. Even his bugs are ironically comedic, having exercised their "biting" wit upon the volume entitled "Control of Insect Pests." Upon seeing the damage inflicted by these trickster devourers, I was reminded of Bacon's famous dictum that "some books are to be tasted," while others are to be "chewed and digested."

Cicansky has written about aspects and periods of his life in artist's statements accompanying some of his exhibitions. Of Regina, for example, he writes:

> The East End of Regina where I was born and grew up had no running water, no indoor toilets, no electric lights, no sidewalks and no cars. We lived on the other side of the tracks on the margins of the city where the rural and urban met and overlapped... My people immigrated here, settled down, found work, built houses, planted big gardens and raised families... Regina was the beginning for me. It gave me my first sense of place and prepared me for life's adventure full of unpredictable twists and turns.

Similarly he speaks evocatively of his grandmother's garden, of his years in the town of Craven in the Qu'appelle Valley during the "back to the land movement" of the 1960s and 70s, and

of the satisfactions to be found in the planting of a garden, which as an “act of creation” is for him analogous to the making of art. Writing of the medium out of which he has made his ceramic books, he recalls:

> Dig anywhere in southern Saskatchewan and you will find clay. As kids we dug it, made things and sun dried them. Little did I know then as a kid playing with prairie gumbo, that this boyhood pastime would prefigure a life with clay.

In literary works, there are significant differences between an autobiography and a self-portrait, and it would be interesting to pursue elsewhere the question of whether or not similar distinctions apply in the visual arts. For the moment, however, I wish to focus on the clearest and most basic distinction between Cicansky’s books and the universal idea of “the book” as collated information printed on paper and bound between boards. For even without the benefit of Cicansky’s background notes, the viewer understands that these volumes and their titles stand for passages or “chapters” in the life of the artist. But of course, Cicansky’s books are not books in anything other than their outward appearance, which in fact belies their true nature. They are simulacra--conceptual representations of what Cicansky’s autobiography might look like, if he were to publish it in book form.

Sealed vessels made of clay, Cicansky’s hollow sculptures convey all their information in their shapes and surfaces, and so their essence is that of the *objet d’art*. Indeed the detailed, almost uncanny accuracy of “counterfeit” surfaces is one of the hallmarks of this artist’s work, regardless of medium or subject matter: (Sometimes these surfaces play with the notion of container and contents, as in the mason jars whose “glass” sides bulge outward in the shapes of pickled vegetables or eggs.) What draws us to his books is our desire to touch them, to pick them up and feel their weight, to arrange and rearrange them. The artist omits volume numbers on the covers and spines, with the result that narrative chronology is only one organizing principle we might employ in installing them. They might just as easily be grouped alphabetically, or by subject, or even by colour. In fact grouping by colour would also provide oblique references to the medium cited in individual titles. “My Bronze Age” book, for example, has a green cover (suggesting patina), while the cover of the “Life with Clay” book is the colour of terracotta.

Cicansky has given most of his volumes an air of usage and age, their “cloth” bindings and uneven leaves recalling the textbooks of schooldays long past. The sense of time and place thus evoked is surprisingly powerful. (This quality is one I most often associate with his intricate garden

sculptures, in particular his patinated bronze benches and tables, with their burgeoning leaves and nests of fragile blue eggs.) But if we allow our thoughts to drift too far, we may miss the sly quirkiness sometimes at play in his pieces. For example, “Showing My Colours” might just as well have been called “Spilling My Colours,” so exuberantly have the inks splashed over the cover of the book, not only dripping down its fore-edge but also violating the rules of Cicansky’s sleight of hand and humorously breaking the illusion. This is perhaps why the artist does not use the usual idiomatic phrase, “Showing My True Colours,” as the title of this volume. If you turn the book over and look at the back cover, you will be rewarded with a stamped cartoon self-portrait of the trickster-artist himself, looking as if he is eager to share the joke with you.

In its physical heft and dimensions, each book resembles the “real thing” closely enough that the ceramic surface comes as something of a shock to the unsuspecting touch. We truly cannot judge such a book by its cover. Although it seems to show the wear and tear of having passed through many hands, it is in fact a brittle, vulnerable object, sure to chip or shatter if dropped or set roughly down.

We are accustomed to thinking of the Great Books as somehow transcending the realm of existence in which their mortal authors and readers must dwell. But even a book whose ideas and mode of expression survive through many generations cannot endure forever as a physical object. By fashioning his books out of clay, Cicansky seems to underline their fragility and their connection to the earth, from which all things come and to which all eventually return, to come again as new forms in a new season.

In 1992 a fire destroyed **Christopher Pratt’s** recently-built studio and many of his works-in-progress. He moved back into his old studio, but the following year that, too, was damaged, by the floodwaters of the Salmonier River. For some time, his life had been undergoing emotional and domestic upheavals. “The fire and its aftermath,” he writes, “focused my attention wonderfully on the passage of time.” Changes appeared in his work as he “dusted off some very old ideas,” “touching base” and ignoring “thirty years of acquired constraints.”

“Collage Self-Portrait: Positive Spin” strikes me as the perfect title for the self-portrait of a man who can wryly describe a devastating fire as an event which “wonderfully” focused his attention. In Greek mythology, the first of the three Fates is the Spinner, who spins the thread of each person’s life. The second Fate measures out and knots the thread with complications; the third

cuts it off with her death-dealing shears. To extrapolate from the myth: from its outset every individual life is subject to limits both unavoidable and externally imposed. Foremost among these are inexorable chronology and the opacity of our futures. Pratt has worked intermittently on this self-portrait over a period of fourteen years, and has left the upper right-hand portion of the canvas veiled in fog and open to the future.

In politics, "positive spin" implies cynicism, the deliberate imposition of a pretty face onto an action which the public might otherwise consider unattractive. But Pratt banishes the cynicism from the phrase, while seizing on its optimism and maintaining a philosophical distance. In his self-portrait he presents a composite image of his "pilgrim's progress" through life. The assembled work shows us that while his experience has been varied and unpredictable, he continues to explore possibilities by embracing his public and private histories and by pursuing his art. Throughout the years and the changes, his essential self remains intact.

In creating the work, Pratt has gathered together found (and, in some cases, fabricated) photographs and objects, and collaged them onto a painting which he had earlier abandoned, but whose "ghost" underpins the composition. In its technique, though not its tone, "Positive Spin" resembles another self-portrait, completed in 1998, "Who Is This Sir Munnings?" (The title refers to Picasso's disdainful dismissal of the aristocratic English painter who had condemned his work.) The photographic image of Pratt in that earlier work appears, in his own words, "saturated with attitude and arrogance." The artist stands turned slightly to the side, eyeing us from a superior angle. His bright Order of Canada, the emblem of his success and national recognition, gleams against his dark T-shirt like a bright star in a clear night sky.

Pratt has since revealed, however, that when the original photograph was taken, he was not wearing the pin--he photocopied its image and glued it onto the shirt. Clearly he created the self-portrait in a spirit of ironic self-assessment, confronting that recurring and quintessentially Canadian question Alice Munro used as the title of one of her short stories: "Who do you think you are?"

If "Munnings" posed the question, "Positive Spin" provides the multifaceted answer. In the largest of the photographs, Pratt faces us directly, his stance unguarded and his open jacket devoid of his Order of Canada. He is a private man, offering glimpses of his private journey. If his face exhibits defiance, as I think it does, it is a defiance directed not against anyone's judgment of him or his work, but against Time itself.

The foundation of "Positive Spin" is an altered, incomplete version of "A Room at St. Vincent's" (1992), the first painting Pratt completed after the fire. It shows a bleak, narrow chamber

with a window and an iron bed pushed tightly against the wall. It is a painting which radiates anxiety and claustrophobia. “My mentors saw it as descriptive of my state of mind!” declares Pratt.

Dissatisfied with his initial rendering of the image, Pratt abandoned the effort but kept the canvas, which he began in 1998 to transform into “Positive Spin.” The self-portrait retains only the window frame and suggestions of the lines of the ceiling and floor. These provide subtle divisions which facilitate the massing of some of the objects. For example, the line formed by the right edge of the window frame extends down to the line of the floor, creating two distinct spaces along the bottom of the canvas. On the left side are included photos of his first wife, Mary, while on the right are those of his present wife, Jeanette.

Set inside the window frame and further defined by collaged dark borders is the large photo of the artist himself, balanced to the right and below by an outline in red conté on tracing paper of the model for “Night Nude: Summer of the Karmann Ghia,” a mixed media work on paper (1994). Their size and positioning create the thematic and compositional core of the self-portrait, signifying that the artist and the making of his art are congruent. In Pratt’s life, “making” and “being” are one and the same; we cannot tell the dancer from the dance.

In the swirling, nebulous space around the two central elements are arrangements of three kinds of objects: photographs, stamps, and passages of Pratt’s writings. Three miscellaneous objects also appear: an obituary clipped from a newspaper, a handwritten recipe for “orange gin,” and a fishing fly. All are evocations of past moments, assembled with an eye to visual coherence rather than to strictly linear chronology. Photos of the artist taken in different periods of his life, from childhood to the near-present, are scattered throughout.

Most of the other photographs are of his family, although one is of a young friend who died in her twenties (her image also appears in “Sir Munnings”) and another of a youthful Pratt with two identified friends, now prominent public figures, taken “around sixty years ago.” “Time, you old gypsy,” proclaims the caption, a fragment of the poem by Ralph Hodgson which begins, “Time, you old gypsy-man, / Will you not stay, / Put up your caravan/ Just for one day?” Yet another photograph is a double exposure, with a clearly visible group of people posing in front of a white picket fence, and a ghostly assembly just discernible behind them. To the general viewer unfamiliar with the identities of all these people, what emerges is the sense of a boy growing to manhood in the midst of his community, both immediate and geographical. When one thinks of Pratt, one thinks simultaneously of Newfoundland.

Aside from the various locations captured in the photographs, Newfoundland is represented by the postage stamps, with their iconic imagery of cod, boats, animals, and so on. Pratt includes

the "Trail of the Caribou," a stamp commemorating the Royal Newfoundland Regiment's losses at Beaumont Hamel in World War I, and a copy of the scarce three-cent "Queen Victoria" stamp. All but one of the stamps bear the designation, "Newfoundland," rather than "Canada," a reminder that Newfoundland was--and is--not a "Maritime province" but a distinct entity, which did not join Confederation until 1949. Pratt's family traces its ancestry to settlers who arrived in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and he is fond of saying that his parents and grandparents voted against Confederation. There is a sense even in the photographs and writings that specific individuals are always associated in Pratt's mind with particular places deeply imbedded in memory. Certainly in his paintings, one of which was adapted for the lone "Canada" stamp, Newfoundland not only provides him with his subject matter but shapes the way in which he sees and interprets the world. Although he does not include an image of it here, the official flag which the artist designed for Newfoundland and Labrador in 1980 waves in spirit over his self-portrait.

Pratt has used the iconography of stamps before, in prints he made in the 1960s and 70s, including a wall installation he created for his father, an avid stamp collector. Given the number and diversity of the Newfoundland stamps he assembles here, it is easy to miss the intrusion of an American stamp, oddly (and perhaps slyly) placed in the lower left-hand corner of the canvas, on top of a family recipe for "orange gin." The stamp, with its futuristic image, commemorates the New York World's Fair of 1939 and in the context of the self-portrait is a reminder of the Americans' welcome presence in Newfoundland during the Second World War and its Cold War aftermath. For Pratt personally, it recalls his time working at the U.S. Naval Base in Argentia in the late 1950s, around the time of his marriage to Mary, whose photos at different ages appear to the left and right of the stamp.

The recipe itself is torn from a diary, the page headed, "January 1940, Monday 29." This document, in the handwriting of Pratt's aunt, together with the pieces of his own writing, transcribed in block capitals and dispersed around the canvas, all attest to the power of memory--and to its limitations. Past moments and relationships spring back into vivid immediacy ("Let [the gin] settle for 11 days"), only to recede again into history. A diary entry inspired by John Lennon's song, "Imagine," blooms into a meditation on nostalgia ("most intense at a time in your life when you can look to a future that will outlive the past"). But Lennon's future was cut short, and in any case, how many young people today consider his song "the best pop song of all time"?

The atmospheric, ambiguous fragment of a love poem (on the right) carries Pratt back into his childhood and his earliest apprehension of image-making ("my mother making Christmas cards… the brush seemed to obey to sense exquisitely the lines…"). The poem translates into written

language the effect of the interactions among various past times which Pratt has gathered into his self-portrait, distributing them over "the drab canvas of [his] life." The photographs, the stamps, the scraps of writing "flicker like evening star[s] across the lowering distance of the Tantramar."

On the right, between a row of three Newfoundland stamps and a row of three passport photographs of the artist, a small object has unobtrusively settled. It is a fishing lure, a "small dry fly." It is also the most concise of symbols, an emblem of Pratt's connection to his land, his history, and to the commingling of the everyday and the archetypal which gives his art its enduring strength and resonance:

> If it is a calm night, the viscous fall water may still show the bubbles of his previous surfacing. [I will] give the fly a little twitch—and that is it. I never keep the fish; I rarely bring it to the boat. It is a kind of ritual, a communion… I am the angler and the trout. I do this in remembrance of myself.

> To you, I am a not very nice man
> Who was lucky enough
> to marry a beautiful woman from Graz
>
> But to myself
> I am a painter
>
> who sleeps in a small room
> adjacent to the long corridors
>
> of a yellow night

That is the American poet and art critic John Yau, speaking in the imagined voice of the German painter Max Beckmann. Yau has Beckmann proclaim, with no trace of apology, the ascendancy in his life of making Art over the importance of every other human need, desire and goal.

Like Beckmann, **David Milne** refused to join any art movement or school, once responding to a question about the Group of Seven by declaring that he was and would ever remain "one of

one." As a young man living in New York, he had worked as a commercial artist and had briefly attended the Art Students League. He was conversant with the revolutionary changes taking place in the world of painting--Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism and the rest--many of them on display at the Armory Show of 1913, in which five of his own works were exhibited.

To this knowledge of the *avant-garde* he added his own keen interest in the American Transcendentalists of the nineteenth century, sharing with them the belief that meditative immersion in Nature inspired and cleansed the human soul, opening the path to self-reliance and moral and spiritual enlightenment. Emulating Thoreau, Milne in 1920 had built a crude shelter, the "Alander cabin," in an isolated valley behind Boston Corners and had spent the winter there. The following winter, after some months at Dart's Lake, he and his wife Patsy moved into a friend's summerhouse in Mount Riga (note the initials "MR" to the right of his signature), a village immediately south of Boston Corners, where Milne painted the watercolour included in the present show.

"Window and Easel" (the title given to this work in the catalogue raisonné) is not a deliberate self-portrait. Nevertheless it is included here because its image speaks so strongly of the life Milne had chosen for himself, the life of an artist in hermetic retreat from the outside world, which he regarded as fraught with corrupting artistic influences and distracting societal pressures. The painting is a drybrush watercolour of the kind Milne described as a "line drawing in colour," in which the artist has squeezed most of the water out of his brush in order to avoid the flowing quality of traditional watercolour paintings. Milne here confines his palette to blue, black and brown, applying the pigment in short, textured strokes ideally suited to defining the predominantly straight lines and sharp angles of the image.

As a viewer with longstanding interests in both American Transcendentalism and the Arts and Crafts Design movement, I find many things in this painting to engage me. The first which attracts my eye is the wallpaper.

The repetitious geometric design, reminiscent less of William Morris than of Frank Lloyd Wright, would in the hands of another kind of artist raise questions of a narrative nature. A few such questions might be: Whose taste does this room reflect? Was it used as a personal refuge or a place for social gatherings? What does the rest of the house look like? Most important, how would it feel to stand or paint or simply sit and read in such a room? The decorative pattern on the wall might, in another painter's hands, fix the image in a particular era and link it to a specific social class.

But since this is a painting by David Milne, the most important question has nothing to do with domestic decor. The real, right question to ask is this: Assuming that the wallpaper is really

there, why does Milne include it? Or, conversely, if there is no paper on the wall, does Milne deliberately supply it in order to meet the demands of his composition? Whether painting an interior or a landscape, both of which are present in this work, Milne was never interested in duplicating physical particulars for the sake of mimetic accuracy. His aesthetic aimed to evoke from the viewer an emotional response, not to the actual physical place depicted but to the reimagining of that place as a work of art. In this context, the interplay between areas of pattern and areas of white space or void gives the image its cohesion, holding the composition in a kind of kinetic balance. Considering that we are not shown anyone actually doing anything, this bristling room seems a very active place indeed. And so it is--as an artistic construct.

Beyond the wallpapered wall and outside the framed window lie a landscape and a band of sky. In fact, the upper and lower half of the window, separated from each other by the horizontal line of the sash, seem to offer two different landscapes, the upper one more densely worked than the lower, in which areas of line and void are obliquely partitioned and given roughly equal space. In the two landscape areas we see a freer hand and a less rigid use of pattern-- even a subtle tendency toward abstraction, especially in the lower portion--than in the rendering of the interior.

Lacking depth or perspective, the wallpapered surface and the view outside the window are painted as if they occupied the same plane. Milne's image thus seems to contain not a painting (on the easel) and a window (opening onto a view of Nature), but three individual paintings. This way of flattening the image may have come from Milne's earlier exposure to Japanese styles of indicating distance in landscapes (possibly by way of Whistler), and he was certainly familiar with the strategies of Matisse, who achieved a similarly flattening effect in works which feature his patterned textile *(toile)*, as in his painting "*Harmonie rouge*," for example.

What does create depth in the image and draw the eye forward is the painting on the left, with its nested, Chinese-box arrangement of a painting within a painting. Taken together, the picture on the easel and the figured wallpaper create a *repoussier* effect which is irresistible to a viewer like me, who tends to "read" paintings in much the same way as I read a page. The eye moves logically and naturally from the left side of the image to the right, taking in the window and landscape(s), which as the loci of Milne's artistic inspiration are rendered with a concentration of blue pigment. (Emerson, the Father of American Transcendentalism, had written feelingly of the contemplative effects of moving blue water and "the blue sky…with its everlasting calm.") Having scanned the whole of the image, the viewer can then concentrate on its constituent parts. My eye seems always to return to the intriguing painting with the smaller painting nestled in its embrace.

Milne has set the painting on its easel at an oblique angle, introducing another plane into

his image. Yet he has taken great care to integrate this "projecting" element, connecting Art to Nature and interior to landscape, the subjects of both the "outer" painting, "Window and Easel," and the "inner," depicted one. In doing so, he has made them reflect each other as macrocosm and microcosm. There are other visual connections as well. The top of the easel, for example, almost exactly reiterates the motif of the wallpaper, even accommodating two decorative dots within the triangle formed by the easel's wooden frame. The blank space around the picture (which I take to represent the board to which the still-unfinished watercolour is affixed) echoes the "frame" created by the lines defining the edges of the paper, as well as echoing the window frame. And there is yet another, partial frame to the overall image, in the patterning of the frieze that runs along the top of the wall, implying but not showing another projecting plane, that of the ceiling

I find Milne's artistry in this painting utterly dazzling, but for me the *pièce de résistance* is the "inner" painting propped up on its board against the easel. In its arrangement of individual elements it seems to hold up a mirror to the world of the "outer" painting. In fact it does just the opposite, because in its style and aesthetic it is primarily an abstract work, a miniature in which Milne has hurriedly sketched in the essential spatial relationships but abandoned representation.

Abandoned it, that is, with one crucial exception: the piece of paper which awaits the artist's inspiration and his touch. The paper is blank but it is not empty. Void, for the present, of brushstrokes, it is nevertheless charged with expectation. It defines a space of creative possibility, open and beckoning to artist and viewer alike.

Conclusion

John Updike, who in addition to his novels and poems wrote luminous essays on art, believed that "writing criticism is to writing fiction and poetry as hugging the shore is to sailing in the open sea." He was referring to the fundamental difference between navigating a work of art whose contours are already there for you to see, and launching your craft directly into the deep Mystery of the creative act, never knowing what awaits you.

In writing these pages, I have often come face to face with that Mystery and have felt the limitations of language to define it. I do not regret those limitations. In the end, it is not possible to anatomize or explain the power which art exerts over the human spirit. As Jeanette Winterson puts it, "Art objects"--it refuses to submit to tidy critical theories and expert formulations. That is

why its ability to move, enlighten and sustain us is not subject to time.

If I were able to paint my self-portrait, it would show a woman happily immersed in the act of looking at works of art. My shore-hugging journey has been for me a voyage of discovery. All the rest--the unfathomable Mystery--I leave to the artists, those daring souls whom Updike rightly calls “adventurers on behalf of us all.”

Eva Seidner is a writer and collector with a doctorate in English Literature and a range of collecting interests spanning the late nineteenth century to the present. In addition to Contemporary painting and sculpture, areas of special interest include the Symbolist objects of Emile Gallé, Art Nouveau Architecture and Decorative Arts, and European and North American Art Glass.

Coincidentally, the American Studio Glass Movement also celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2012.

Dr. Seidner is currently writing a book about collectors and their obsessions.
She lives with her family in Toronto and Salt Spring Island, British Columbia.

Colour Plates

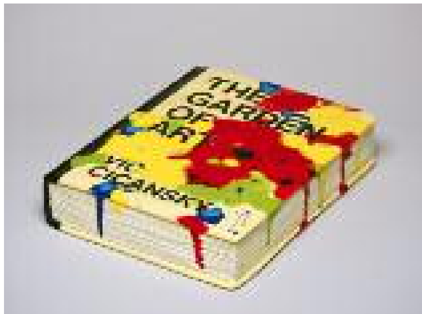
JEREMY SMITH

Mechanic
2010
egg tempera on masonite
13 ⅝ x 17 inches

VICTOR CICANSKY

Self-Portrait, A Small Library
2011
glazed clay

The Garden of Art	9 ¾ x 7 ¾ x 2 inches
Control of Insect Pests	8 x 6 ¼ x 2 inches
Regina: My World	8 x 6 ¼ x 2 inches
Late Bloomer	8 x 6 ¼ x 2 inches
Showing My Colours	8 x 6 ¼ x 2 inches
My Life with Clay	8 x 6 ¼ x 2 inches
My Bronze Age	8 x 6 ¼ x 2 inches
The Craven Years	8 x 6 ¼ x 2 inches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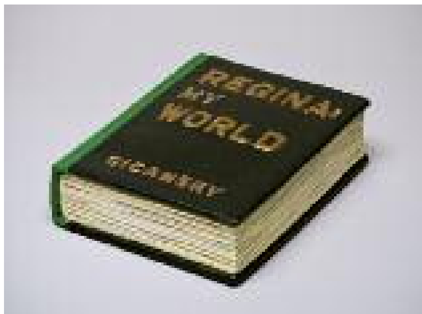
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WORLD
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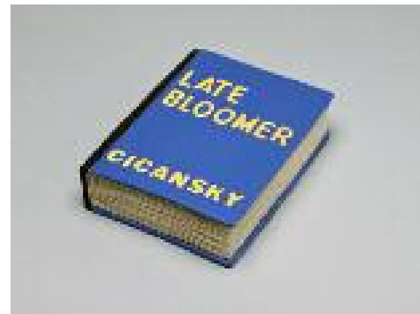
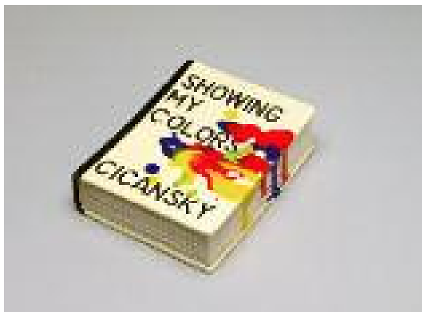
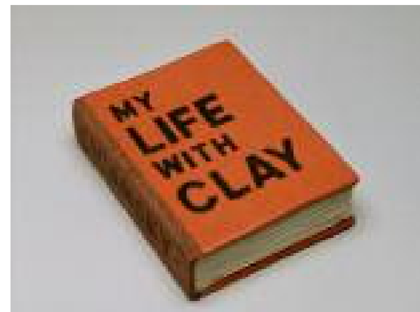

LATE
BLOOMER
CICANSKY


SHOWING
MY
CICANSKY


MY
LIFE
WITH
CLAY

MY
BRONZE
AGE
CICANSKY

THE
CRAVEN
YEARS
CICANSKY

TAKAO TANABE

Self-Portrait
1957
original signed woodblock print
7 ⅞ x 5 ⅝ inches
edition 30

Self portrait 20/30

PHIL RICHARDS

Portrait of the Artist as a Very Young Man
2011
acrylic on canvas on board
45 x 30 inches

PETER KRAUSZ

Joe and I
2011
conté on mylar
36 x 24 inches

CHRISTOPHER PRATT

Collage Self-Portrait: Positive Spin
1998 - 2012
mixed media on canvas
36 x 36 inches

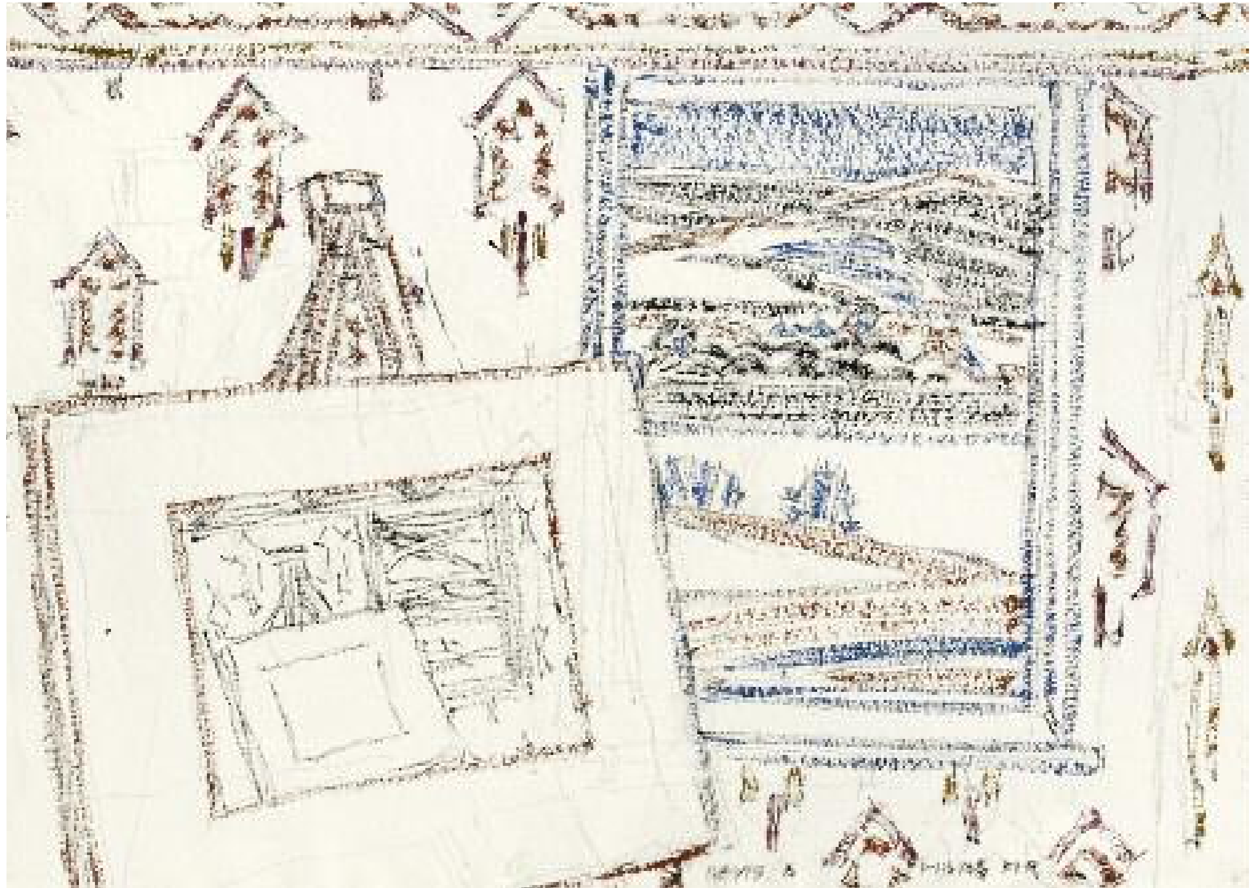
JAN STEEN
Adoration of the Shepherds 1660-1679
collection: Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

LINDEE CLIMO

Self-Portrait in a detail of Jan Steen's Adoration of the Shepherds
2011
oil on canvas
53 x 39 ¾ inches

DAVID MILNE

Window and Easel
December 1921
watercolour on paper
11 x 15 ¼ inches



FABIAN JEAN

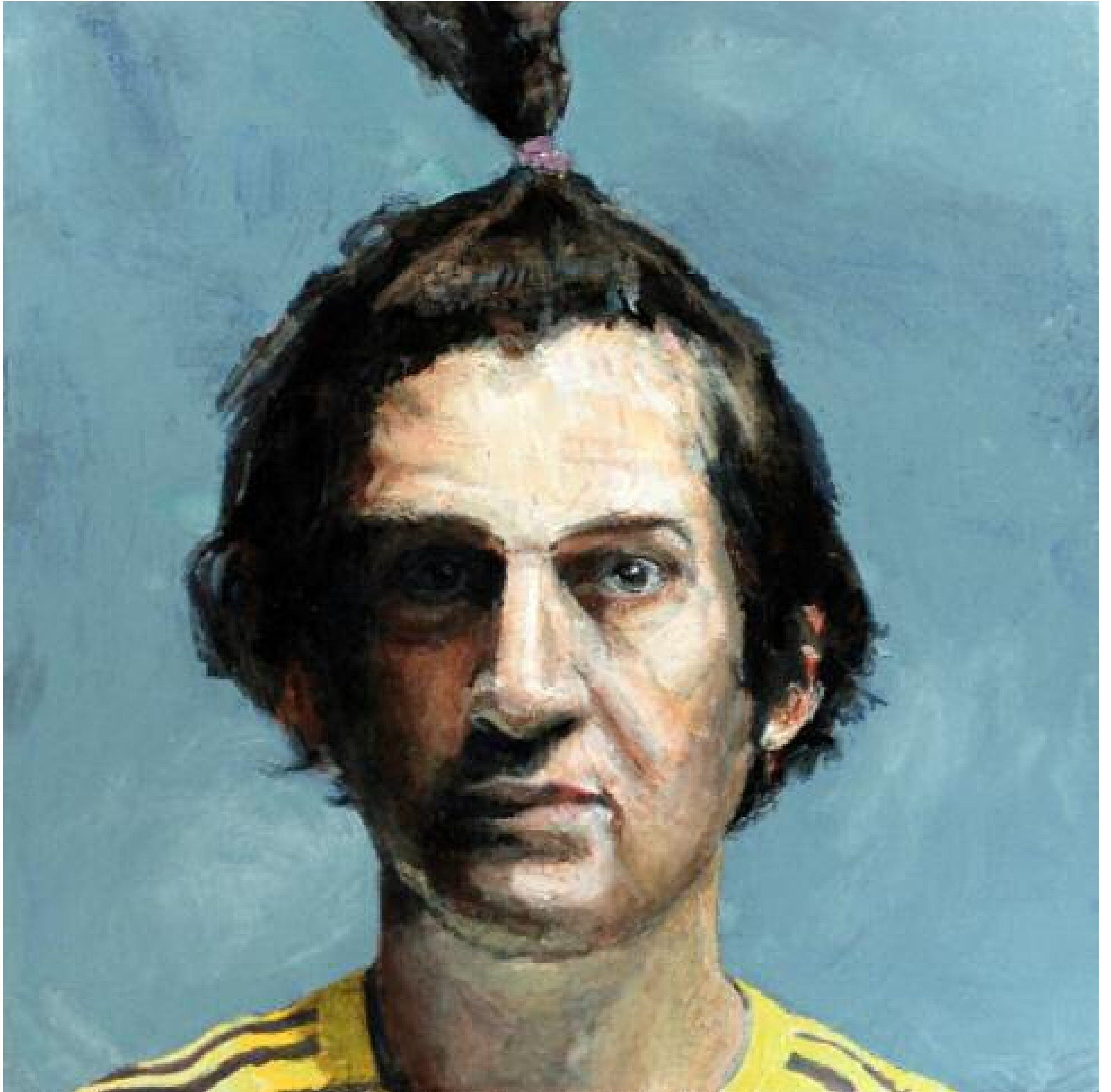
Portrait of Artist as Song Dynasty Official
2011
oil and egg tempera on linen
22 x 24 inches

ALEX COLVILLE

Waterville
2003
acrylic polymer emulsion on hardboard
13 ⅜ x 29 ⅜ inches

SIMON ANDREW

Self-Portrait with Elastic Band
2011
oil on canvas
40 x 40 inches



ANDREW HEMINGWAY

Self-Portrait Genie
2011
pastel on board
10 ¾ x 7 ¼ inches

MARY PRATT

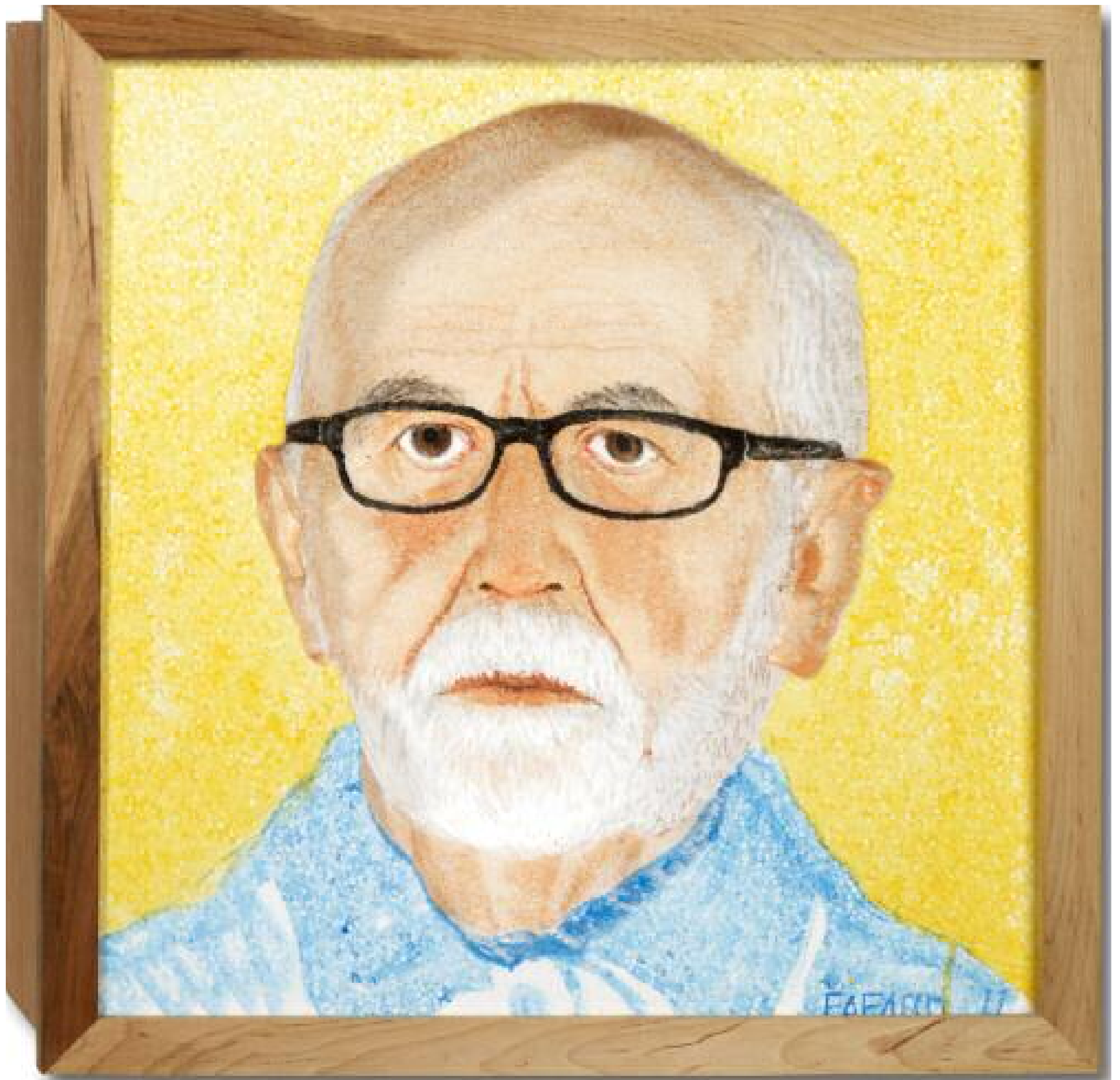
Early Morning in My Bedroom
2000
mixed media on paper on canvas
30 x 22 ¼ inches

MARY PRATT

Silver Bowl in Salmonier: A Self-Portrait
2011
watercolour on paper
22 5/8 x 30 1/8 inches

JOE FAFARD

Here's Looking at You!
2011
acrylic on styrofoam
22 ¾ x 23 x 7 inches
edition 3



COLIN FRASER

Imprint
2011
egg tempera on board
41 x 31 ½ inches

LUCIAN FREUD

Self-Portrait: Reflection
1996
original signed etching
23 ¼ x 16 ¾ inches
edition 46

List of works

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Self-Portrait with Elastic Band 2011
oil on canvas 40 x 40 inches page 67

VICTOR CICANSKY
Self-Portrait, A Small Library 2011
glazed clay

The Garden of Art	9 ¾ x 7 ¾ x 2 inches
Controle of Insect Pests	8 x 6 ¼ x 2 inches
Regina: My World	8 x 6 ¼ x 2 inches
Late Bloomer	8 x 6 ¼ x 2 inches
Showing My Colours	8 x 6 ¼ x 2 inches
My Life with Clay	8 x 6 ¼ x 2 inches
My Bronze Age	8 x 6 ¼ x 2 inches
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ALEX COLVILLE
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COLIN FRASER
Imprint 2011
egg tempera on board 31 ½ x 41 ½ inches page 75

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Self-Portrait: Reflection 1996
original signed etching 23 ¼ x 16 ¾ inches, edition 46 page 77

ANDREW HEMINGWAY
Self-Portrait Genie   2011
pastel on board   10 ¾ x 7 ¼ inches   page 69

FABIAN JEAN
Portrait of Artist as Song Dynasty Official   2011
oil and egg tempera on linen   22 x 24 inches   page 63

PETER KRAUSZ
Joe and I   2011
conté on mylar   36 x 24 inches   page 57

DAVID MILNE
Window and Easel   December 1921
watercolour on paper   11 x 15 ¼ inches   page 63

CHRISTOPHER PRATT
Collage Self-Portrait: Positive Spin   1998 - 2012
mixed media on canvas   36 x 36 inches   page 57

MARY PRATT
Early Morning in My Bedroom   2000
mixed media on paper on canvas   30 x 22 ¼ inches   page 70

MARY PRATT
Silver Bowl in Salmonier: A Self-Portrait   2011
watercolour on paper   22 ⅝ x 30 ⅛ inches   page 71

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JEREMY SMITH
Mechanic   2010
egg tempera on masonite   13 ⅝ x 17 inches   page 47

TAKAO TANABE
Self-Portrait   1957
original signed woodblock print   7 ⅞ x 5 ⅝ inches,   edition 30   page 51

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"The Patient Labyrinth of Lines": Self-Portraits at Mira Godard Gallery, Dr. Eva Seidner

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