

What is a self-portrait?

Helga Novelli



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Introduction

Self-portraits have not always been the result of the only need of depicting our outward appearance, but they may be the outcome of different motivations. Self-portraits have not always had the function of exploring the self, but they may also be a means to conceal one's personality, staging what the artist wants to show. The latter grabs my interest and lead my research into some artists of the postmodern era.

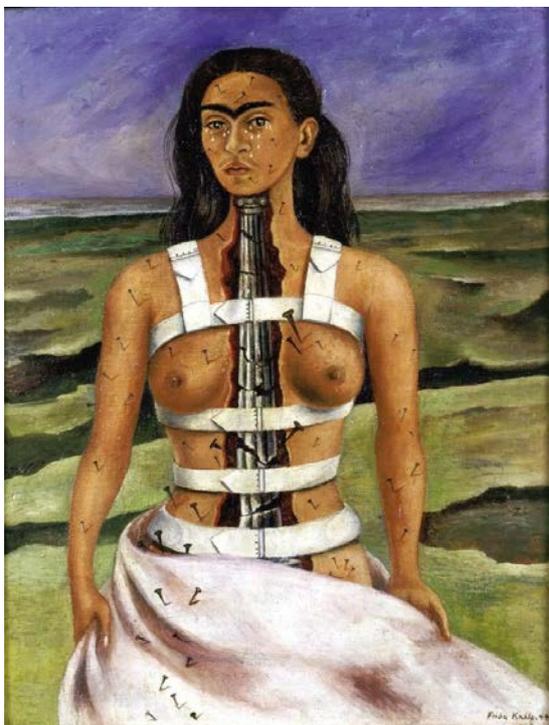
How many am I?

To understand how a self-portrait can hide one's personality, it is interesting to juxtapose the example of one of the most relevant female artists of the 20th century, Frida Kahlo, whose pain of her tumultuous life is reflected on all her paintings.

Most of her self-portraits were a means to cure her mental condition which was affected by her illness and solitude. All the troubles of her life were displayed in her work without restraint as a way to alleviate her suffering. This also shows her different identities due to her cultural heritage, being herself mestiza. As she deeply explores into her personality she reveals different personas (Carpenter, 2007).



Yasumasa Morimura, *An Inner Dialogue with Frida Kahlo (Will to Live)*, 2001



Frida Kahlo, *The Broken Column*, 1944

Similar in trying on different personas like Kahlo, to whom he pays homage, but different in his purpose, is the Japanese artist Yasumasa Morimura, who makes of his self-portraits a form of theatre.

Since the art education he received in Japan was shaped around western art, its influences are evident. A sense of unbalance insinuated itself into his mind making him unable to develop a defined style.

His work consists in reviewing classic western masterpieces and revitalising them almost in a caricatural style, breaking taboos, not without provoking the public sensibility in regard to institutionalised identities. While by some he is considered a megalomaniac, others see his work as a homage to western art (Kuspit, 2003).



Yasumasa Morimura, *Daughter of Art History (Princess A)*, 1990

However, creating these disturbing images must not be seen as a superficial and careless imitation of classical masterpieces. He investigates works of art playing different roles, transforming himself, using cross-dressing; this is the consequence of his interest in exploring different grey areas, running on the line that separate child from adult, old from new, woman from man.

Being grown up in Japan, he is obviously influenced by its aesthetics and sometimes sets his characters in Japanese scenery (Morimura, 2003). As we can see in his “Actress” series (1996), he deconstructs iconic celebrities of the 20th centuries to devalue the excessive importance we give to hypersexuality. He does not blend himself disappearing in the background; on the contrary he states his asian identity almost to present a challenge to the Japanese consumeristic assimilation of western culture.



Yasumasa Morimura, *Self-portrait (Actress, after Brigitte Bardot 2)*, 1996



Kimiko Yoshida, *The Lily Bride. Self-portrait*, 2003

Similar to Morimura in mixing her Japanese culture with western art and to Andy Warhol in the emotionless approach to self-portraiture (Kelly, 1987) is Kimiko Yoshida, who defines her work still life. Her outcomes are not what she is, but what interests her: the process of transformation assumes high value in the development of her work. Of particular interest is the element of infiniteness in her photography which is achieved with the use of monochromatic tints that make her almost disappear, removing any residuum of the personal. Absence, disappearance, abstraction, detachment, metamorphosis contribute to the achievement of a non identity. She represents herself disappearing under a mask that erases individuality (Actes Sud, 2007).

Her work also deals with a social issue, since it is a feminist reaction against common stereotypes of gender and identity dictated by her native country which is Japan (Yoshida, 2009).



Kimiko Yoshida, *Painting (Queen of France Marie De' Medici by Rubens)*. Self-portrait, 2010

Conclusions

While we can have an intimate dialog with Kahlo's self-portraits, Morimura and Yoshida remain an enigma. It seems like disguise is a recurrent element in the latter two artists who, even though influenced by western aesthetic, have a solid cultural background rooted in the history of the traditional Japanese theatre.

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