

Peter Grziwotz
Self Portrait with Pillow Creases

Abstract

My work revolves around self-portraiture and the artist's studio. The current working title of my project is "Exposure, Scrutiny, and Interrogation-The Self Portrait and the Studio".

The work in progress is an ensemble of prints, drawings and sculptures which will form an installation.

As part of my research I have become intrigued by an essay on self-portraiture by Louis Marin titled "Topic and Figures of Enunciation: It is Myself that I Paint", which has stimulated ideas about the issues of arrogance, doubt, and narcissism projected by the genre of self-portraits in which artists depict themselves as autonomous and solitary figures. Alongside this particular look at Montaigne and Durer, however, arose the spectres of the Vampire and the Invisible Man, courtesy of late night television, which made me wonder whether or not a literal and symbolic lack of reflection had any implications in regards to the use of the mirror and its role within self-portraiture.

If picturing the self means grappling with time and an attempt to catch a glimpse of one's being in order to engage some notion of self knowledge, then perhaps the Soulless and the Diabolical were at least free from the head-aches and pains of having the self for company and subject. It's not like they need to exhibit any desire towards "Knowing Thysel". They're completely self-satisfied.

Sometimes I ask myself, whether I ought to be trusted to make myself visible by drawing out my keeper and I have to laugh when the murderous Hollow Man of the film says,

"It's amazing what you can do, when you don't have to look at yourself in the mirror anymore."

Biography

Peter Grziwotz was born in Sunshine in the western suburbs of Melbourne and is currently in the first year of a Master of Fine Art degree at the Victorian College of the Arts. He completed a Graduate Diploma in Visual Art at the V.C.A in 2002 and a Bachelor of Fine Art (Painting) at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in 1986.

He has exhibited in group and solo exhibitions. His work reveals his interest in the issues of anxiety and narcissism in relation to the procedure of self-portraiture. He is prone to messing about absent-mindedly with whatever is at hand and has yet to find a paper clip that does not arouse his urge to bend and unbend.

Self-portrait with Pillow Creases

Selling door to door

From within his slumber, he dreamt that there was a knock at the door, and the sound of a single tap on the glass pane woke him up. He began at once to remember the lines, which had been accidentally erased from the computer last night. The paperclip icon had lured him to his doom. It wasn't his fault. Typing with two fingers had worn him out. He railed and cursed at his stupidity, and then resolved to sleep on it, convinced that sleep alone could retrieve his lost information.

The resolution or lack thereof, between the fixed and the contingent relationships of the extant parts of a self-portrait tableau, is an ongoing problematic concern. There is a dialectic concerning the activity of picturing the self and the means an artist employs to create a representation of the self. Self-portraiture is by necessity a self-aware procedure. Louis Marin, in *Topic and Figures of Enunciation: It is Myself that I Paint*, states that the representation of the self by a self involves a dialectic that is without synthesis; without reconciliation between two elements and processes. One is a represented moment that entraps the self and defines it for all time and the other is:

A moment of presence, the uncertain and problematic limit of an 'already more' and a 'not yet', the representation of which is the frivolous, disturbing and anguished attempt to grasp and fix, through an unstable figure, what already approaches in the distance, the troubling and troubled apparition of an image of the self in its momentous truth and sincere transcription, without repentance or desire, the image of the self in the process of disappearing.¹

He kept staring at the lines and rubbing his eyes. He felt as though he was spinning out and becoming trapped in a web of verbiage. He needed to unwind, so he went to the video shop and rented an armful

of horror movies and a film-noir. *Chinatown* and *The Exorcist* ought to do the trick, he thought to himself.

Lianne McLarty in *Beyond the Veil of the Flesh: Cronenberg and the Disembodiment of Horror* expresses a relationship between the genre of horror films and theoretical writing:

The contemporary horror film is said to articulate postmodern anxieties for “mass audiences, in a manner analogous to the way theoretical postmodernism articulates intimations of instability for intellectuals.”²

The question then arises, of how might theoretical writings and “intimations of instability” interact with the nerves of an artist? It seems possible that theoretical writings themselves can be a source of irritation when and if an artist feels over-exposed by their presence. This raises the problematic issue between representation and reflection; the tension between what one wishes to see in the mirror and what it is that one actually happens to find there.

Rising damp

It was immediately on his mind when he awoke and the bullshit began as he stared at the bathroom mirror. The shower had been too hot and could aggravate the skin condition, which required a regime of cream applications to most of his body.

Sorbolene, Vaseline and cortisone were parts of an anti-inflammatory diet designed to ease the rub, and they made him look shiny. Just like frog’s skin.

One recent morning, a broad scratch appeared on his jaw and he resolved to answer any public enquiries with an explanation. It must be a smear of jam from breakfast.

The Death of Marat is a death mask, a portrait of a dead man, who was assassinated whilst writing in the bath, which he took for his skin condition. Jacques-Louis David pictured a martyr and turned painting into a classic form of death trap.

Invisible

His finger was inserted into the hole beside his navel. Doubled-up at the foot of the bed, he struggled to keep it sealed. He pressed harder, afraid that the worm might escape.

Safety in numbers

Surrounded by a pile-up. The deadline was closing in and the desk was littered with stuff that spilled onto the floor. Folders, photocopies, bits of notes, old essays, guidelines, memorandums, transparent slides, and screwed up paper just waiting to be ironed out. Astrological chart, map, sextant, candlestick, hourglass, toothless skull, lens, mirror, pouch of tobacco, keys, a treatise on perspective, and some soap bubbles, completed the picture. Beside his elbow, scribbled onto the pad were two lines by the poet, Peter Huchel, as quoted by the poet, Joseph Brodsky in an essay entitled *In Praise of Boredom*.

“Remember me,”
whispers the dust.³

The sentiment was like those Latin inscriptions *Vanitas* and *Memento Mori* that could be found lurking inside some Seventeenth Century Dutch still-life paintings. For an asthmatic, however, the very idea of dust itself creates shortness of breath and the desire to flee.

Remembrance of Things Past, Vol.3 by Marcel Proust pinned down *Notes from Underground* and *The Double* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky and he noticed that an old payslip had been torn up and inserted into Proust’s book. His attention was drawn to the possible reasons for such a gesture. The stubs were like pressed flowers and may have been denoting something worth recalling, but he kept the book closed and savoured the moment.

His green tea cup was resting on the Mike Parr monograph *Identities*.⁴ On the cover was a photograph of the artist doubled up, spewing blue bile onto a sheet of cotton wool and it seemed a fitting image; a good introduction to the theme of Nausea. Imagine two fingers being pushed into the back of the throat as the patented dust turns Yves Klein International Blue.

The pox

What stops reflection... Black Holes. Things that are so unbelievably dense, they can only be described in terms of forces and gravitation. They’re the light drains, the plugholes of the universe.

The sand kept pouring in until he was heavy and listless. No, it wasn't just like that. All the delays, the putting off, the whole performance of procrastination was taking it out of him. The instrument in his hands kept feeding back a sonic wall of over amped electric noise. He could taste the reflux and the static and he became used to it.

On the pages of Book 7 of *The Confessions* by Rousseau there was an announcement:

Whoever you may be that wish to know a man, have the courage read the next two or three pages and you will have complete knowledge of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.⁵

Thereafter, the reader can follow the story of how Rousseau fell head over heels for a beautiful Venetian courtesan, who “adopted” him because he looked like someone else. Rousseau recounts how besotted and over eager he was to stand in for a man whom she had been madly in love with, and yet “foolishly” abandoned. The transports of Eros rocket his sickly frame into a blinding heaven where the supposed object of his desire then stands bewildered on an impossible pedestal. He weeps and gnashes his teeth at his own unwholesomeness, but then something weird happens:

But just as I was about to sink upon a breast which seemed about to suffer a man's lips and hand for the first time, I perceived that she had a malformed nipple.⁶

In a split second, Rousseau's alarm bells were triggered and he became completely unravelled. The reader witnesses how he convinced himself that the woman in his arms had suddenly become a monster “rejected by Nature, men, and love”. He tried to regain his composure but the comedy of errors continued and his overreaction was duly noted when he wrote that Guilietta told him to: “Give up the ladies, and study mathematics.”⁷ He confessed that his sole regret was that she only retained a scornful memory of him. Rousseau's story shows that he was worried about how he might be remembered and it contains a self-portrait of the anxiety and fear of being misrepresented. His desire and attempt to set his own story straight exposed and defended his neurotic temperament, whilst his writing became the surface in which to embed the image of his ambivalence. He showed how to behave oneself in a farce of lust and surrogate role-playing.

Negative creep

He wondered what it might be like to be in a garden somewhere, upside down, hanging with all the other bats, eating fruit and flapping his wings. He mused on how an artist's development seemed dependant on the ways one integrates and, or rejects the styles and influences of certain others, whilst somehow remaining in possession of ones self. In this sense, the anxiety of influence may be reflected in the dreadful figure of Dracula. The presence of the vampire arouses the fear of the loss of subjectivity and the horror of anonymity, because of his ability to propagate himself by transfusing aspects of his being into his victims who, once deprived of both life and death, become grim reflections of his own parasitic immortality. Since Dracula is beyond the light of reflection his diabolical narcissism strips his victims and casts them into the mirror of his own condition.

Joan Copjec in *Vampires, Breast-feeding, and Anxiety* provides a series of insights into the nature of anxiety and says that it “is a signal of danger” and “registers the non sequitur, a gap in the causal chain”.⁸ Her essay begins with a quote from *Emile, or On Education* by Rousseau which advocates breast-feeding as the source of moral wellbeing and is a reminder that Rousseau, whose birth cost his mother her life, was not contradicting himself when he found himself beside himself at the sight of a prostitute's deformed nipple. Copjec, meanwhile, argues that the Eighteenth Century political advocacy of breast-feeding must be understood in the light of the Gothic forms of vampire fiction.

The self-portrait picture can be regarded as a type of vampiric object. A thing whose purpose is to feed off, and also fuel, the artist's anxiety and by doing so creates a schism; a problem of recognition between the artist and the body of his representations. Surrounded by self-portraits, the work continually attends the artist in the studio, providing and reflecting the evidence of his compulsions. There is a difficulty in identification with the self-portrait heads; it's as if the artist can't accept that they are of or from him. The vain activity of their execution becomes an act of deprivation, a hypnotic denial from the possibilities of exposure and interaction with something other. Attempts at explication slide into solipsism, the retreat trumpeting a ring of ambivalence.

Inflation

It was his habit to become acquainted with the most uncomfortable seat in the house. To complain, and to shift and squirm at the mere thought of being at a dinner party where someone might ask a perfectly

straight question such as, “What is your about?” The reply would be a deflection, an attempt to draw attention to the picture of *Saturn Devouring His Children* by Goya.

Remember that feeling of being stuck, like it was going to take forever to finish dinner, knowing that the rule meant that you couldn't leave the table until your plate was clean?

At last he would shrink towards the door, his pockets bulging with cold, boiled Brussels sprouts and spitefully hurl the little cabbage heads over the castle wall. God only knows what would have happened if the Count had served boiled milk.

In *Powers Of Horror An Essay On Abjection* Julia Kristeva explains that food loathing is a primal form of abjection and comments on how something seemingly innocuous can create a disproportionate sense of fear:

When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk – harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring – I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heart beat, cause forehead and hands to perspire.⁹

He was annoying her. The writing was going badly and he felt disconnected. Things didn't seem to be assuming their proper shape. He was hallucinating and the surface of his skin was beginning to dissolve. “Is this what happens?” she said plainly, half amused. “You keep beating yourself up. It's as though you're gorging yourself on self-loathing.” He was turning into a mosquito feeding on anxiety.

Dawn

In the half-light of morning he groaned and pulled the bed covers up until only his sleep encrusted eyes remained exposed. Turning his head slightly caused him to wince as the small narrow bit moved inside his skull. What ...anxiety ...what...execution...what...self-portrait...what...role. The question had barely been ...before the issue of propriety arose.

Was it proper? Did it represent the correct relationships between, I and the self, between the artist and the viewer, etcetera? Was it healthy? Such questions presented themselves as part of a slavish monologue, a type of appeal, a desire to be palatable. On the other hand there existed the correlative desire to spread, infect, and contaminate.

For him, self-portraiture was the presentation of a situation in which attempts to constitute oneself degenerate into a fiasco of manners and a natural logic of disruption. The pretzel as procedure. The work of self-portraiture exhibits the absence of presence within a scene of activity; time becomes substance, and substance becomes an endless utterance:

The rage of Caliban at not seeing his face in a mirror, he said. If Wilde were only alive to see you!

Drawing back and pointing, Stephen said with bitterness:

It is a symbol of Irish art. The cracked looking glass of a servant.¹⁰

James Joyce's breakout into the sprawling mass of *Ulysses* revealed his own sense of disfigurement and it's attendant rage. It is a book that resists being read in its entirety because it succeeds so well as a stumbling block.

Pebbles.

It was like trying to follow the bouncing ball as it touched on the words of a song and the thought lured him into the melody of a popular song:

I re-mem-ber when rock- was-young
Me and Su-zey had so- much- fun
Holding ha-nd -s and skim-ming- stones
We were hop-ping and bop-ping to-the crocodile-rock¹¹

When he thought about timing, he realised the superiority of the hourglass over digital clocks, because you could see the affect of gravity and watch time form a symmetrical pile of dust.

Suspended animation

In his discussion of self-portraiture, Marin, refers to Michel De Montaigne's revelation that what he (Montaigne) has “painted”, in his work, *The Essays*, is his own day-to-day transition. Marin's analysis addresses the notion of the fugitive and the skittish nature of self-portraiture and he identifies these

elements as the ‘moment of presence’ and the “movement of a momentarily suspended transition”. This idea is something, which he finds, exemplified in Montaigne’s writing because Montaigne, by focusing on the “ paths of so flighty a thing as our mind”, attempted to take and represent something “as it is” and as it occurred to him according to his interest. It was through studying himself and his ways, that he pieced together a mode of self-reflection and presented his philosophy on life. Speaking of his project, Montaigne called his work a “new and extraordinary kind of entertainment that withdraws us from the common occupations of the world”¹². Self-portraiture then, can be thought of as an intelligent escape: An escape from that which got him into his predicament in the first place: The pressures of his self initiated solitude and the resultant melancholia.

Stress rehearsal

He found himself in a place where the scenery chopped and changed between a mechanic’s garage and a Polish restaurant. Three gymnasts had hidden his shoes. He pleaded with them and searched high and low, but in the dim light was constantly mistaking his shoes for those of others. The trio had built an improvised tower with a diving board on top and placed his shoes on the end of it. He practised crawling out to retrieve his shoes and shuddered at the precariousness of his exposure. Suddenly he was staring at the back of the head of one of the gymnasts and he noticed the stitches on a wound running completely around their neck. The next face that was speaking to him was completely covered in lesions. In a cold sweat he pondered the genealogy of the modern self and decided to give himself a shave.

¹ Louis Marin, “Topic and Figures of Enunciation: It is Myself that I paint”, in Stephen Melville and the Estate of Bill Readings, *Vision and Textuality*, London: MacMillan Press Ltd, 1995, p. 213.

² Lianne McLarty, “Beyond the Veil of the Flesh : Cronenberg and the Disembodiment of Horror”, in Barry Keith Grant, *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996, p. 223.

³ Joseph Brodsky, *On Grief and Reason: Essays*, London: Penguin, 1997, p. 110.

⁴ The cover photograph is of a performance: “The Emetics (Primary Vomit) I am Sick of Art (Red, Yellow and Blue), 1977, Watters Gallery, Sydney. In David Bromfield, *Identities: A Critical Study of The Work of Mike Parr 1970-1990*, University of Western Australia Press, 1991.

⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*, J.M. Cohen, trans. Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1965, p. 300.

⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*, p. 301.

⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*, p. 302.

⁸ Joan Copjec, “Vampires, Breast-Feeding, and Anxiety”, *OCTOBER*, No. 3, 1998, p. 26.

⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers Of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Leon S. Roudiez, trans. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, pp. 2-3.

¹⁰ James Joyce, *Ulysses*, London: Penguin Books, 1988, p.6.

¹¹ Elton John, *Crocodile Rock*.

¹² Louis Marin, “Topic and Figures of Enunciation: It is Myself that I paint”, p. 213.