

Hugh Mendes
Autorretrato: The Female Gaze

No. 5



Hugh Mendes
Autorretrato: The Female Gaze

Private View
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Exhibition
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CHARLIE SMITH LONDON

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Obituaries

Gwen John



Obituary: Gwen John, 2019 Oil on linen 40x30cm

THE INVERTED GAZE

Sue Hubbard

'For in its afterlife...the original undergoes a change.'
Walter Benjamin

In 1972 John Berger suggested that 'The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled'. The male gaze, he argued in *Ways of Seeing*, for centuries defined the way we looked at the female subject. That subject, in turn, aware that she was being looked at, stared out from the picture space – whether in Ingres' *Grande Odalisque* or a porno pin-up – with an expression calculated to titillate the male viewer. In both post-Renaissance European painting and contemporary girly magazines a woman, Berger suggested, 'has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life'. Yet all images, he implied, are ambiguous because there are always alternative narratives, alternative stories. Other ways of seeing. Past and present coalesce in a turbulence of contradiction.

Imagine two mirrors facing each other. You stand in the middle and your image multiplies, becoming more and more distant from your original self. Each reflection is watched by those in the other mirrors, becoming further removed. Meaning is distorted, modified and gradually changed. As Walter Benjamin argued, in an age of pictorial reproduction, the initial reading of a painting or object is altered by the making of copies. It

Obituaries

Sofonisba Anguissola



Obituary: Sofonisba Anguissola, 2019 Oil on linen 40x25cm

Obituaries

Artemisia Gentileschi



Obituary: Artemisia Gentileschi, 2019 Oil on linen 35x25cm

is within this prism of reflected meanings that Hugh Mendes has created his series of female self-portraits in the form of obituaries. These follow on from his recent show where the subjects were almost all men. After the death of his father Mendes went back to art school to do an MA. He had been painting newspaper-based images since he graduated in 2001. The first was an iconic photograph of Princess Margaret by her, then, husband, Lord Snowden. Around this time, he also began to notice the often unconventional images used by *The Independent* newspaper in their obituaries. Until this point he had been painting still lifes. Now he was to move from *natures mortes* to painting death notices.

Pre-photography the only way for an artist to record their presence was through the self-portrait. For a female artist to paint herself, rather than be the subject of a male painter, was to take agency over the way she presented herself to the world. Within art history it has all too often been stated that there were few women artists of real talent. Yet the structural sexism of art schools and academia actively contributed to the perpetuation of gender hierarchies. In this series Hugh Mendes not only acknowledges female artists of exceptional talent from Sofonisba Anguissola to Frida Kahlo but inverts the proprietorial ownership implicit in the male gaze into a complex conundrum. Here a contemporary male artist paints copies of historic female self-portraits taken from images reproduced in newspapers. In this hall of distorting mirrors, we are left with

Obituaries

Vanessa Bell



Obituary: Vanessa Bell, 2019 Oil on linen 30x20cm

Obituaries

Alice Neel



Obituary: Alice Neel, 2019 Oil on linen 35x25cm

more questions than answers. Who is doing the looking? What is truth and what fiction? With whom does the narrative voice lie? If it is the case, as much feminist art history claims, that the male gaze bestowed on the female subject is a form of consumption and paternalism, how are we to read this intricate interplay, or understand gender and (re)production when the images being produced are self-portraits by female artists of the far and near past, used by a contemporary male artist?

In his essay *The Task of the Translator*, Walter Benjamin suggests that: 'translatability is an essential quality of certain works, which is not to say that it is essential that they be translated; it means rather that a specific significance inherent in the original manifests itself in its translatability...by virtue of its translatability the original is closely connected with the translation; in fact, this connection is all the closer since it is no longer of importance to the original'. It is this act of translation that lies at the heart of Hugh Mendes' enterprise. As he stated when I visited him in his studio, 'Art is an act of the imagination. What matters is to get into the headspace of my subjects'. In so doing he brings fresh expression to the way these images are read, and these women are reassessed in an era of the copy and social media.

Mendes finds most of his images online, prints them out and makes a collage using the original newspaper typeface. The first were accurate transcriptions of the source image but, more

Obituaries

Lee Krasner



Obituary: Lee Krasner, 2019 Oil on linen 35x25cm

Obituaries

Berthe Morisot



Obituary: Berthe Morisot, 2019 Oil on linen 30x20cm

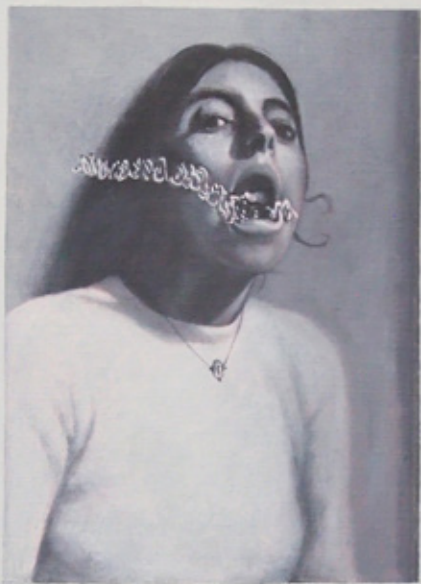
recently, he has begun to make them up. All his subjects are of personal significance to him. He tries to give a strong sense of the person. He looks at their notebooks, watches videos, and attempts to create dialogues. The original newsprint obituaries are flimsy and ephemeral, but his careful, studious paintings become a form of reincarnation where the impermanent becomes permanent, the transitory ossifies into a lasting *memento mori*.

Hugh Mendes is a great craftsman and a teacher at the City & Guilds of London Art School. He knows about colour theory and how to draw. His academic prowess is visible throughout this project. It is not simply a question of making copies. These paintings are not taken from life but from a flat photo, already at one remove from the subject. He subtly alludes to and understands the different styles and techniques, how each artist used colour, while making the work recognisably his own.

Stand in front of these paintings and the subjects all make eye contact with the viewer, challenging assumptions about the self-portrait, the role of women in art and our understanding of the copy. In this hall of mirrors truth becomes multi-layered, a complex palimpsest of meanings where the ephemeral is rendered permanent. Through this transformative process of looking, these women artists are not only returned to themselves, but create a haunting discourse on gender, history and reproduction.

Obituaries

Francesca Woodman

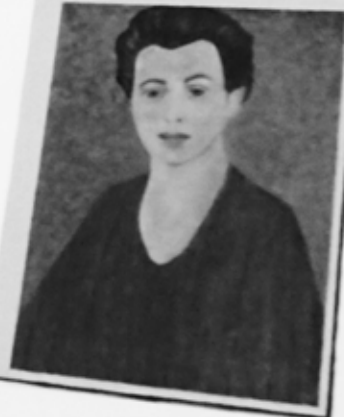


Obituary: Francesca Woodman, 2019 Oil on linen 30x20cm



Obituaries

Agnes Martin



Obituaries

Rose Sélavy



Obituary: Rose Sélavy, 2019 Oil on linen 30x20cm

AUTORRETRATO PART 2

by Edward Lucie-Smith

In my text for the previous version of this exhibition of work by Hugh Mendes, which consisted almost entirely of recapitulations of self-portraits made by male artists, I noted that it was 'paradoxical that an artist should now choose to repeat, as exactly as he can, these originally self-generated likenesses'. I also noted that 'in part this belongs to a recently established tendency in the visual arts, where "appropriations" - more or less exact copies of pre-existing images - are put forward as embodiments of contemporary originality'.

The paradoxes accumulate here, in a new series devoted to self-portraits by women. A major paradox, of course, is that all these borrowed images have been made by a man. Or, to be exact, almost all. The image of Rose Sélavy is of course a portrait of himself in drag by Marcel Duchamp, indubitably male. The image of Georgia O'Keeffe is not direct appropriation from one of O'Keeffe's self-portraits, but is instead, as research on the web discloses, based on a likeness in the style of O'Keeffe made by a male artist called Jacques Moitoret. The image offers a few tweaks, which distinguish it from O'Keeffe's own self-likenesses.

What strikes one about these images of women, originally created by themselves and now skilfully appropriated here, is that they seem much more polemical than their male equivalents. They all have something to say about the female condition, in terms of the time when the image was made.

Obituaries

Georgia O'Keeffe



Obituary: Georgia O'Keeffe, 2019 Oil on linen 40x30cm

Obituaries

Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun



Obituary: Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, 2019 Oil on linen 35x25cm

To choose just a few examples, starting with two of the earliest - Artemisia Gentileschi (soon to be the subject of an exhibition at the National Gallery), and Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun - one notes what they had to say about the situation of the female artist when women as professional participants in the art world were rare. Gentileschi uses herself as the model for a saint, complete with halo and martyr's palm. There is a sidelong reference here to the fact that female models, in the studios of early Baroque Italian art were, more often than not, women of easy virtue. In contrast to this, the portraitist Vigée Le Brun working at a somewhat later epoch, presents herself as a woman of fashion, fully the equal of the sitters who came to her. Closely associated with Marie Antoinette in the years just before the French Revolution, Vigée Le Brun prudently exiled herself from France in October 1789 and spent the following twelve years living and working in Italy, Austria, Russia and Germany. In these locations she made likenesses of many royal and aristocratic clients, chiefly women. In her elegant self-portrait, made as testimony to her own skill, she portrayed herself as fully the equal in social rank to the members of this exalted clientele.

The bulk of the images in the show offer likenesses of Modern and contemporary women artists. One of the earlier examples in this category is the portrait of the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, who painted a large number of self-portraits (they form the

Obituaries

Frida Kahlo



Obituary: Frida Kahlo, 2019 Oil on linen 40x30cm

Obituaries

Eva Hesse



Obituary: Eva Hesse, 2019 Oil on linen 30x20cm

majority of her output). They often, as here, show her in some form of generic Mexican costume, to emphasise her immersion in indigenous Mexican culture, as opposed to what might be offered by the European and North American art of the same period. Kahlo has had a remarkable posthumous career. Patronisingly referred to as 'dear little Frida' by her husband Diego Rivera, the celebrated Mexican muralist, she has now probably outstripped him in worldwide renown, and has become the best-known of all the Mexican artists of her time.

Kahlo is the only Latin American artist included. Many of the others are British or from the United States. This is reasonable, both in terms of the fact that the show is being presented here in London, and of the fact that North American female artists have been, in recent years, leaders in the struggle for full recognition of women's creativity in the visual arts. To a certain degree, artists in this category have tended to oscillate between the wish to produce a likeness and the (often contrary) wish to make something that seems radically new. The early self-portrait of the radical American abstractionist Agnes Martin (1912-2004) seems to have little to do with the kind of art she produced through most of the years of her career.

Similarly, the brutal self-image by Eva Hesse (1936-1970) has not much to do with the Post Minimalist style with which she is usually associated. The Wikipedia article on Hesse tells one that: 'Hesse's work often shows minimal physical manipulation

Obituaries

Agnes Martin



Obituary: Agnes Martin, 2019 Oil on linen 30x20cm

Obituaries

Carolee Schneemann



Obituary: Carolee Schneemann, 2019 Oil on linen 30x20cm

of a material while simultaneously completely transforming the meaning it conveys'. There is no trace of such a process in the self-portrait by her repeated in this exhibition.

Paradoxically, however, more and more self-images are now being produced by the leading artists of our time, male as well as female. The hunt for the self has never been more voracious.

Obituaries

Maria Lassnig



Obituary: Maria Lassnig, 2019 Oil on linen 35x25cm



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