

MASTER'S THESIS

Digital Photographic Self-Portraiture is My Authentic Self

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ABSTRACT

The research aims to investigate the influence of digital photographic technology upon the artistic practice of self-portraiture today. By adopting a practise-led approach in my research, I intend to inquire after my own intentions in the field of portraiture and furnish myself with the resources necessary to engage in further work as a research-based artist. Guided by insights gained from a review of the relevant literature, I will proceed to engage in the creation of a series of works and experiments, all of which feed into a continuous process of research which locates my work within a broader art-historical trajectory. Beginning with a retrospective review of the development of self-portraiture in Western art, this project situates its exploration of photographic portraiture, the performance of gender, the relationship of subject and object in the production of photographic self-portraits and the significance of cumulative self-representation in digital form in a broader art-historical perspective.

Today, portraiture and self-portraiture are no longer the exclusive domains of the artist. Following the rise of digital photographic technology and the internet, all of us are now engaged in the continuous production of digital content- including but not limited to plenty of portraits and selfies- in an effort to document our lives and generate representations of ourselves. One's existence is no longer verified only by the presentation of a birth certificate or identity card, for one's proof of being now derived from the self-manifestations and photographic information of this existence that are intentionally accumulated and hence displayed for all to see. This fact struck me with especial clarity when, in a conversation that I was having with a friend, she remarked that she tended to think of the digital, edited images of me when I came to mind, rather than the 'real me' that she encountered in person.

When the photographic portrait began replacing the painted self-portrait in the 19th century, the ramifications of this development, with the adoption of the photographic portrait as a proof of identity, could hardly have been foreseen by men and women living in the 19th century. What had hitherto been a form of recording one's appearance in a certain time and place would be entirely transformed by the proliferation of digital techniques, the means of manipulation that they afford to their users and the ceaseless circulation of these images in daily life. Take, for example, the metamorphosis undergone by the self-portrait, which has traditionally been considered as a means by which an artist can observe, explore and express themselves. The self-portrait captures the presence of the self at a particular moment, and provides evidence of the previous incarnation of the self for a self in the future. The artist, then, attempts to assert control over the self-image of the future through the control of the self-image in the past and the present.

The theoretical architecture of this research is structured around four guiding questions- the definition of self-portraits made by artists, the performativity involved in the taking of forced self-portraits, the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity in photographic self-portraiture and the authenticity of cumulative digital photographic self-portraits. This research culminates in 4 sets of works which are then displayed in the assessment exhibition.