

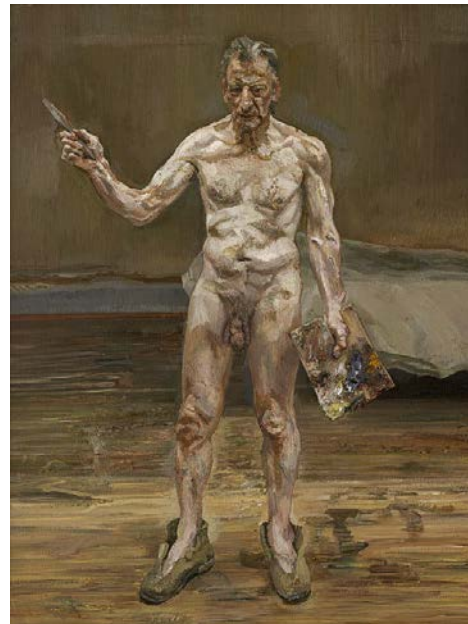
# The Divided Self

Lucian Freud: The Self Portraits, Royal Academy of Arts

Robin Richmond, October 29, 2019



*Lucian Freud, Reflection (Self Portrait) 1985*



*Painter Working, Reflection, 1993*

*“In portraits you try to paint the person in front of you, whereas in self-portraits you’ve got to paint yourself as another person.” Lucian Freud*

I started off my professional life as a portrait painter, earnestly committed to the scrutiny of the Real. Quite apart from that lofty aim it was comforting to have a fellow human being in the lonely studio. I burned out after a few years. The burden of achieving a likeness was a strain, and the reactions of my sitters and their families to my coruscating “truthfulness” was sobering. A worshipper of Rembrandt, I was dead set on archiving every mole, every wrinkle, and every scar in my models. Human imperfection was my subject. As it is in the work of Lucian Freud. The great artist of my lifetime.

This quest of mine was not what most people want when they commission a portrait. The pact between me and my sitters frequently broke down, and I found it was ultimately psychologically damaging. I needed to find another way to be an artist. I applied the same earnest rigour to myself in a series of self-portraits over several decades and these excursions into self analysis still lurk somewhere in the back of a storeroom, stacked up against each other like ghostly apparitions. It was with great relief that people gradually walked out of my work, leaving me alone with nature and

landscape. No speaking, no needs, no ego, no vanity. No more divided selves, no more R.D. Laing. Thank goodness.

Lucian Freud was much braver than I. Some find his work brutally carnal. Viciously mocking. Even gruesome. Ruthlessly cruel. The overflowing folds of fat in his paintings of Leigh Bowery and Sue Tilley have disgusted large swathes of the public and his notorious portrait of the Queen, complete with 5 o'clock shadow, was the butt of many a philistine joke. His numerous self-portraits are no less challenging. He was notoriously demanding of his sitters, requiring months and sometimes years to finish a portrait. He felt bound to apply the same tortuously long sessions of scrutiny upon himself. Freud might have minded this public misunderstanding and mockery privately (I very much doubt this) but he certainly took no heed of this excoriation. In this important tribute to his life's work he is as true to himself at the age of 88, when he was painting two weeks before he died in 2011, as he is at the very beginning of his working life in the 1940's. The method changes but the honesty of his vision is the same. His subject is mortality. The melancholy transience of our fleshly selves. His paintings are a scorching analysis of the carapace of skin that encloses our spirit and soul. The divided self. There are never any smiles. What strikes me most is the sadness.

Freud applied the same truthfulness when painting his own body and face as he did with his other sitters. Like his famous grandfather before him he was fascinated by the very nature of identity. Like Sigmund, he questions. What is the self? Where does thought manifest itself in the corporeal realm? His sitters are always very sentient. They look like they could burst out from the picture frame. He paints the surface of the body and the face (his face in this show) to determine what lies beneath the skin. His painting style, graphic in his early career with hard edged linear drawing, and later - gloppy but NEVER floppy or sloppy - his almost sculptural use of oil paint examines what animates the human soul. No concepts of Ego, Id and Super Ego burden him like they did the father of psychoanalysis. The vivid pleasures and pain of the body are his subject matter. As they are in Rembrandt, Velasquez and Caravaggio.

This show brings together 56 works on paper and canvas and spans almost 70 years of work. It's the first time a show has concentrated on his self-portraits and it uses the term both literally and metaphorically. He paints himself full face, fully frontally nude, as a shadow, as a reflection in a mirror and even as a pair of worn-down boots. His work is always about looking at something real, in this case himself, and he is unflinching. He is also honest about the limitations of art. A feeling I share.

*"A moment of complete happiness never occurs in the creation of a work of art. The promise of it is felt in the act of creation but disappears towards the completion of the work, for it is then that the painter realises that it is only a picture that he is painting. Until then he had almost dared to hope that the picture might spring to life."*

It does. They do.