

GAGOSIAN

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Versions of the Self: Rembrandt and Now review — a high-cultural cocktail party

A star-studded exhibition of self-portraits at the Gagosian is thrilling

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Rembrandt's Self-portrait with two circles, c1665 © HISTORIC ENGLAND PHOTO LIBRARY

It's a rather unlikely encounter. Rembrandt van Rijn, the painterly master of truthful profundity meets Andy Warhol, the poster boy of mass-produced superficiality. What sort of conversation can they hold? That is the sort of question that the visitor to the Gagosian gallery's latest show is invited to ponder.

At the heart of the exhibition, *Visions of the Self: Rembrandt and Now*, hangs the Dutch master's formidable *Self-Portrait with Two Circles* (c 1665). This picture, normally at Kenwood House in north London, is frequently cited as arguably the greatest painting to be seen in our capital.

It brings the ageing artist before us, harrowingly vulnerable yet sturdily present — undefeated by the financial failure and family tragedy in which Rembrandt had lost not only his grand townhouse, fine-art collection and high-society clients, but also his much-loved wife, Saskia, and three of their children.



Glenn Brown's Sex, 2003, is on display at the exhibition

Rembrandt wears a rich velvet costume with fur trim for the portrait, but it could hardly feel farther in mood from the playful theatrics of his earlier works. With no trace of self-pity, the artist scrutinises his position. He makes no attempt to hide age or sorrow. The deeply creased brow and the bulbous nose; the grey hair, crinkled and brittle; the rough, pitted skin are all captured.

This image of unsparing human truth is the focal point of this exhibition of self-portraits by modern and contemporary artists. Picasso, Freud, Bacon and Basquiat; Damien Hirst, Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince are among them — a new alliance between the highly commercial Gagosian gallery and English Heritage, a charity entrusted with the care of historic paintings and artefacts across Britain.

The show offers a lively opportunity to consider the self-portrait, which has its roots not in classical antiquity (the Greeks had little interest in questions of individualistic identity), but in the wry and often self-mortifying scrutiny of the Middle Ages. The genre grew more popular over the centuries; with the selfie pandemic of today it has become ubiquitous.

The Gagosian's curators bring together 33 works. The earliest (bar the Rembrandt) is a fierce little 1910 gouache from a private collection, in which the maverick Egon Schiele examines his features with analytical ferocity.



Howard Hodgkin's Portrait of the Artist, 1984-1987 © HOWARD HODGKIN ESTATE/GAGOSIAN/LUCY DAWKINS

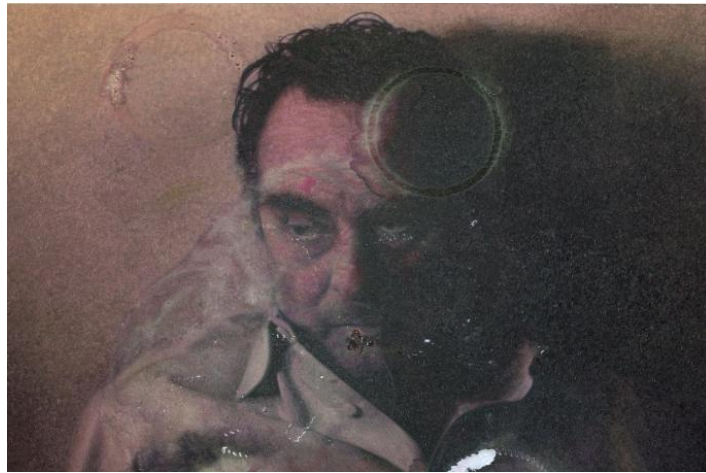
The most recent is that by Jenny Saville. In a canvas completed barely a week ago (beyond that layer of protective glass, the paint is still wet) the woman who last year became the most expensive living female artist at auction (a self-portrait fetched £9.5 million) responds directly to the Kenwood House portrait. Like Rembrandt, she combines descriptive precision with painterly freedom. Raw swatches of pigment are churned up with almost photorealistic patches.

About half of the works are paintings or drawings. Among the most notable are: a tiny Lucian Freud canvas in which, on an even tinier painted mirror in the middle, he captures a reflection of his face in miniature; a haunting 1972 Picasso, the last known self-portrait of a master who stares with unflinching honesty at the skull beneath his skin; and, from the same year, a Francis Bacon canvas in which his smashed features are smeared, in the colours of a bruise, across blackness. A couple of abstract works are included — the most salient being an exuberant canvas by Howard Hodgkin.

The range of media is wide. Hirst is represented by the photograph that launched his attention-grabbing talent. He poses grinning beside a severed human head in the morgue. Urs Fischer transforms himself — as well as the table he slumps beside and its wine bottles — into a life-size candle.

Ellen Gallagher projects her image as reclining odalisque on to a wall. Charles Ray is a shop-window mannequin. But if you are wondering whether he can really look so stereotypically square-jawed and standard, then glance down. It's the penis, not the physiognomy of this piece, that makes the self-portrait here.

Visions of the Self makes for an entertainingly diverse flick through some of the more famous of the fashionable faces in our contemporary art world. And as you progress you will find more profound themes emerging. As you stand before the Rembrandt, for instance, you may discover that rather than you looking at him, he appears to be looking at you. With the authority of age and artistic genius and worldly experience, he seems to scry into your soul.



Rudolf Stingel's Untitled, 2012 © GAGOSIAN/TOM POWEL

The self-portrait, flipping expectations, can lead to a contemplation of your own character. This idea of self-reflection crops up again and again — most obviously captured in the many images of mirrors: in the Jeff Koons replica of a Rembrandt self-portrait before which a glossy blue gazing ball has been set; in Gerhard Richter's simple square of mirror, *Spiegel*; in Giuseppe Penone's photograph of his face with tiny reflective fragments set inside the eyes.

Perhaps the best way to see this show is as some high-cultural cocktail party. What, on one level, is merely fun can be the beginning of future conversations. For a start, there is the one between Gagosian and English Heritage.

The loan of the Rembrandt came about in return for the gallery providing the funds (an estimated £30,000) for the restoration of the portrait's 18th-century frame. In return, artists whom the gallery represents gain a new gravitas — and hence, it is presumably hoped, a higher commercial value — from being shown in the context of the old master.



Untitled, 2011, by Urs Fischer © GAGOSIAN/ROB MCKEEVER

So what do Rembrandt and Warhol have to chat about? Does that deep-thinking old man in the white linen cap have something to say to the American in the crazy fright wig? It's hard not to

imagine that the postmodern master of utter detachment might seem suddenly more poignantly human when confronted with the Dutch master's deep moral gaze.

Each meets the stare of the other, directly across gallery spaces. What gets said in that silence that swells up between them? Do they converse across the centuries of shared human fears and frailties? You will have to go along yourself if you want to find out. But one thing is for sure: the self-portrait is far more than a mere record of appearance.