

Robert Lenkiewicz (1941–2002)

Self-Portraits

Ocean Studios, Royal William Yard, Plymouth
2 April – 3 May 2016



www.robertlenkiewicz.org

 **OCEAN STUDIOS**

'The two directions. – When we try to examine the mirror in itself we eventually detect nothing but the things reflected in it. When we wish to grasp the things reflected, we touch nothing but the mirror. This is the general history of knowledge.'

Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Morgenrote' Book 4, 243.

'Art reveals above all else the person who made it. It is always a form of self-portraiture.'

Joseph Leo Koerner, *Northern Renaissance: The Birth of the Artist*, BBC Scotland, 2015.

'All paintings are self-portraits, only I do not believe in 'self'. We identify an individual by the boundary their body forms. But that is nothing to do with 'Self'. 'Self', like 'Justice', 'Truth', 'Beauty', is poetry.'

Robert Lenkiewicz, *Notes: Self-Portrait / Death-Bed*, 1977, p.22.

The first version of this exhibition, curated then as now by Francis Mallett, was shown at the Ben Uri, The London Jewish Museum of Art in 2008. Ben Uri chairman, David J. Glasser, wrote: 'The collected self-portraits here represent a distributed 'project' that allows us to witness Lenkiewicz recording the passing of time in his own life; from the open gaze of a fifteen-year-old in Cricklewood to the harrowing image painted shortly before his premature death, aged only sixty, in Plymouth in 2002.'

Regrettably, that late self-portrait (see *Robert Lenkiewicz: Self-Portraits 1956–2002*, White Lane Press, p. 83) was not available for this show; and though there are other omissions, there are also gains. For instance, the Ben Uri was too compact to house the centrepiece of this show *The Deposition – The Burial of Education* (1986) which, at nearly three and a half metres in height, required a new frame to be fitted with a tolerance within a half-centimetre of the Ocean Studios' ceiling. And in place of the late oil self-portrait we find the remarkable trilogy of watercolours painted in St Bart's Hospital in September 1995 in which Lenkiewicz tries to mitigate the pain of major heart surgery with the 'consolations of my skills'.

Lenkiewicz' writings on the topic of self-portraiture would not embarrass any professional art historian. His broad knowledge of the history of painting informs the many ironic references to old master paintings and self-portraits which echo through these works. The gold-framed *Self-Portrait* (1978), for instance, mimics the direct gaze out of the canvas of Albrecht Dürer's renowned self-portrait from the year 1500. But what Lenkiewicz alone adds to his academic understanding are the insights of a practitioner and teacher of painting. 'Cézanne painting Cézanne is painting more a Cézanne than a portrait of Cézanne, whereas the portrait of Dürer is first and foremost a portrait of Dürer before it is a Dürer by Dürer', remarks Lenkiewicz – a comment any competent critic might make. But this sly observation, made of his 1978 *Self-Portrait Project*, is pure Lenkiewicz: 'I wondered what it would be like just to paint myself; to paint what I saw in the mirror repetitively. Well, within half a sitting I became aware that all I was doing was painting a picture of a mirror; there just happened to be something there reflected in the mirror.'

It is notable that even the *Self-Portrait Project*, described by David Glasser as ‘an ironic look at the notion that the self-portrait (or any portrait, for that matter) is somehow revelatory of the ‘essence’ of the sitter’, contains at least as many self-portraits with a companion as works in which the painter sits alone. For Lenkiewicz, ‘The reflecting surface of a mirror is an optical variant of the reflecting surface of your companion. ... I look into the mirror, I speculate, I reflect upon the reflection.’ The reflecting surface is all there is: there is no ‘self’ in a self-portrait; there is no ‘other’ in a relationship, for the relationship can only be between ‘oneself and the mirrored image of oneself – disguised as the other person.’

These ‘complex formulas’ of the two senses of ‘reflection’ are deployed throughout this exhibition. The ‘other’ as a mirror to ‘one’s own predilections’, and the optical ironies of mirrors in painting, are explored in works such as *Self-Portrait with Lover* (1975) and *Self-Portrait with Myriam* (1978). In the later work *The Painter with Benedikte* (1989), Lenkiewicz highlights one of his earlier relationship works in the reflection of his studio bedroom – the yellow and blue jigsaw formula of *Lovers’ Meeting* (1980).

Thanks to a happy accident of the hanging arrangements in this gallery, the two lovers in *The Painter with Mary in Newspaper Magi-Fools’ Hats* (1981) look across the space at this significant work on paper inspired by Mary almost a decade before. The image bears the legend ‘*The yellow and blue moods do not meet – both move within the red passion*’. Benedikte sits upon the painter’s knee above a carpet rendered as a sea of red passion, wearing an ivory shawl once worn by Mary, as artist and model try to complete the jigsaw with their interlocked fingers. Did ‘lovers meet’ this time, perhaps achieving what Lenkiewicz ironically referred to as ‘the whole two-becoming-one *schmaltz*? No matter – the writer of the *Love & Mediocrity Project* (1976) exhibition notes was already prepared for mediocre outcomes to grand passions:

‘The experimental lover finds that a constant sequence of breakdowns in relationships is supported by the softened edges of previous ‘reflections’ and ‘refractions’. Each time the mirror is employed the memory resituates or ‘refracts’ the experience through the image of the following one. ... It is a startling thought that as we suffer so deeply from the withdrawals of the ‘present’ scenario, the next situation is heading inexorably towards us from the future; and it too will be replaced by a sequel!’

The Lenkiewicz Foundation would like to thank Ocean Studios, The Somerville Gallery, The Smithsonian Collection, Hackworthy & Sons, Glass!!/ Art2Frame and Bearnes, Hampton & Littlewood for their support of this exhibition.

Gallery Talks + Events

There will be a gallery talk each Saturday throughout the show starting at 12 noon (about 25 minutes duration). See our website for details of artist talks and events on Sunday 10 April.

Open: Tues–Sun, 11am–5pm
Closed Mondays
Open Bank Holiday Monday 2 May
ADMISSION FREE

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