

**Who is Projecting? : The Self-Portraits  
of Lucian Freud**

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When Lucian Freud turned 70 he decided, “Now the very least I can do is to paint myself naked.” By then he had done at least twenty self-portraits, and about these self-portraits he commented, “It’s more difficult (painting myself) than painting other people, I find. Increasingly so. The psychological element is more difficult. I put all sorts of expressions in and obscure them.” In exposing himself, an artist’s defenses may lead him to conceal and disguise what he perceives. In the case of Lucian Freud, his self-portraits put him not only on view but on trial.

The private life of Freud generates much interest, although it also can obscure the significance of his work. Moralizers love to have a good dig at Freud by way of his paintings, looking for evidence of his human failings. It is hard to see the work and forget the half-remembered stories of the gambling, and the girls, and the fancy cars. But, as one level-headed critic has accurately put it, “We have brought him down to our banal level by reducing the complex dynamics of his life into tabloid pap about his lusts.” (Januszczak, 2002, p 4).

Much of modern art is preoccupied with issues of identity and it is therefore an art “fraught with narcissistic issues in general and the artist’s narcissism in particular” (Kuspit, 1988, pp xviii-xix). Contemporary artists reflect not only a culture of narcissism but a pervasive need for self-definition. By being the subject of their paintings, artists become the primary object of their art, and the self-portrait becomes both an artistic

and a psychological act. I have chosen to focus specifically on Freud's self-portraits even though one has to recognize that every painting of his, or of any artist, can be regarded as a kind of self-portrait. Freud himself has said, "Everything is autobiographical, and everything is a portrait - even if it's a chair." (Feaver, 2002, p. 27). I have also chosen to examine the ubiquitous projections onto Freud's work by the public, psychoanalysts, the art historians and critics, and as I hope to show, by the artist himself. How does this projecting come about?

In the ongoing contact with the work the artist loses a sense of his own boundaries and fuses with the subject matter. Lucian Freud is quoted as saying: "I wish my portraits to be of people, not like them. Not having the look of the sitters - *being* them". While the artist is trying to get to the truth of the object by *being* it, he can't help project aspects of himself into it. Freud's early portraits had most of his models depicted with very big eyes. An art critic writing for the Sunday Times in 2002 believes that the wide eyes in his early portraits represent an affectation that seems at odds with Freud's hunger for realism. On the other hand, a fellow artist who studied with him in London many years ago told me that Freud himself had amazingly big eyes, that those eyes in his early portraits were, in fact, his eyes. I can think of another instance of how the artist can project himself into the work. I recently saw the figurative drawings an artist friend has been making of Sara, a model we share. I commented that Sara's slim body seemed much heavier in the drawings. Smiling sheepishly in recognition, my friend said, "I guess I give my models my own body". I can also offer a more personal example of how, while trying to get a true representation of the model, the artist projects aspects of himself or herself into it. A few years ago another artist friend did a portrait of me but the face she painted didn't

quite resemble my face. After examining it carefully we decided that the problem was in the shape of my nose, which wasn't right. We scheduled another sitting for her to try to correct it and after trying and trying to change my nose in the portrait she exclaimed in disbelief, "I gave you my nose! That is my nose!"

All of this to illustrate how in the mix up with the model the artist can't help projecting aspects of himself, even more so when the model is the artist himself. A good example of this is "Interior with plant. Reflection Listening" (1965). One can see how in this painting Freud engages in a literal putting of himself in the midst of the plants and, when we notice that he is holding a hand to his right ear, one is left to wonder what the listening is about. Perhaps it represents his search for an elusive truth he is trying to capture, now through hearing in addition to his eyes. Thirty two years later in "Garden. Notting Hill Gate" (1997), he doesn't need to be obvious about himself, perhaps recognizing what he tells his future biographer, that each painting is a self-portrait, that he exists in everything he paints. To me, the richness of the shapes, colors and texture in this painting stand for Freud's own richness.

Early paintings entitled, "Evacuee Boy" (1942) and "The Village Boys" (1942), done when Freud was twenty years old, give us an idea, in the choice of subject matter and their portrayal - fellows in exile - of Freud's own feelings of displacement and alienation when he left Germany with his family to live in England. But this is hardly an explanation to account for the feelings that must have gone into these paintings. "Hotel Bedroom" (1954), "Ill in Paris" revisited, gives us another instance of a young and unsure Freud, standing in the background looking at his second wife, Caroline Blackwood.

These vulnerabilities are defended against in the rather defiant and arrogant stance in "Reflection with Two children. A Self-portrait" (1965). He was here 43 years old. His depiction of his children Rose and Ali, so small and in the lower corner, might be taken as a straightforward sign of their lack of importance to him. But it might be also an indication of a rejection of his own infantile feelings, projected onto his children and still present in his adult life. Freud's denial of dependency in his early years seem confirmed in an entry in Weaver's essay for the catalogue. At age seventeen Freud was described as, "... keen to impress, already spoken of as a day wonder...fly, perceptive, lithe, with a hint of menace" (Feaver, 2002, p 17). Freud's defiance was evident even earlier when he was expelled from Bryanston at age fifteen, not for having redirected a pack of foxhounds into the school hall and up the stairs all flapping around, but as Feaver tells us (ibid, p.17), a consequence of dropping his trousers in a Bournemouth street. The hint of menace is still present in his early 40s and in his early 60's and also in the large scale of his portraits of Leigh Bowery and his friend Big Sue, in the 90s. He has a great eye for memorable types, an eye for human originality that leads him to single out unmistakably rare specimens and to celebrate their freakishness.

Arrogance reappears in "Reflection. Self-portrait" (1981), in which he looks at us sideways with an eagle eye. These two paintings, Reflection with Two children (1965) and the 1981 self-portrait bring to mind some of the self-portraits that Max Beckmann did in the early 20's: "Self-portrait with Cigarette on a Yellow Background" (1923), or a "Self-Portrait with Tuxedo" (1927). Like Beckman, Lucien Freud seems to have defended against his own need and dependency on his objects. When Freud's mother visited Lucian at the Emergency Services Hospital at Ashridge where he had his tonsils out, he says to his biographer, "It was good because I had such a strong sedative, I

was asleep when she came” (Feaver, 2002, p. 20). In his early life he seems to have avoided his doting mother, denying her importance to him. This certainly changed later in his life when his mother seemed to have lost interest in Lucian after the death of his father. Her depression is evident in half a dozen tenderly rendered paintings of her in the late 70’s in which she stares blankly ahead as if she were dead inside, like “The Painter’s Mother II”, in 1972 and ten years later, some exquisite etchings of her face like “The Painter’s Mother” (1982). He even did a drawing of her dead, “The Painter’s Mother Dead” (1989), as he also did of friends of his who died. Freud says of her and his portraits of her, “She barely noticed, but I had to overcome a lifetime of avoiding her. From very early on she treated me, in a way, as an only child. I resented her interest; I felt it was threatening. She was so intuitive...” (ibid, p. 20). We can dare speculate that by projective identification Freud had experienced his own early intrusive and attacking unconscious phantasies toward her as coming from his mother toward him. In light of his revelations, we can imagine that her disinterest about him must have been a relief from his feeling threatened by her intuition, probably experienced as an intrusive attack on him. The paintings of his mother seem to be the result of a reparative urge to love her back, to give her back all the devotion she showed him in his early years.

For psychoanalyst Hanna Segal (1952) the act of creation is actually a re-creation. What is felt as a lost past and a lost or dead object, the product of rage and destructiveness toward it, must be adequately mourned in order to be successfully re-created. Guilt and despair generated by the artist’s attacks on the object drive him to reparative activities. The actual process of creation is experienced as infusing dead objects with new life, rejuvenating them, reviving them and restoring their lost, destroyed and depleted

potency. It would seem that in the exquisite paintings of his mother Freud was mourning both his early intrusive attacks on her and his neglect and avoidance of her. He manages to depict her as being dead inside but the paintings also bring her back to life.

Critics have commented on his affectation, eccentric posing and manipulation of the viewer with these paintings. This is corroborated by Freud's response in 1987, "What do I ask of a painting? I ask it to astonish, disturb, seduce, convince". As New Yorker's art critic Peter Schjeldahl writes, "His glumly pungent nudes have a challenging air, as if daring anyone to judge them less charitably than the proud, brooding artist judges himself" (2002, p 72). However, the arrogance and omnipotence one also senses from the large scale of these paintings is amply counteracted by the sensitive and honest portrayals of both himself, his subjects, and especially his mother. One example is "Interior with Hand Mirror" (1967) painted when he was forty five years old. Here he gives importance to the oval mirror that reflects an apparently troubled face with eyes barely open. The small size of the face in relation to the overall painting and the bar across the handle of the mirror suggest a move away from omnipotence. The mirror is a self evident intermediary for the artist who paints self-portraits. It becomes a confidant, truth teller, distorter, friend or enemy. The mother, acting as life's first mirror, gives back to the baby the baby's own self. The self-portrait is a means by which an artist acts as a mirror to himself, reflecting his need for self-definition and his attempt to achieve it.

Like the paintings of Egon Schiele, fifty years earlier, Freud's paintings of bodies, including his own, have been seen as indications of a disturbing vision where the network of veins and the gray tone of the skin is marked with the

pitiless signs of aging. In his confessional self-portraits Schiele engaged in a merciless confrontation with his sexuality and mortality. He laid his life out on the canvas and embarked on an analysis of his personality as deep and ruthless as Sigmund Freud's analysis of himself (Knafo, 1993). Like Schiele, Lucien Freud clearly tried to get away from the idealized, healthy and clean body promoted by totalitarian ideologies. He succeeded in staying away from prettiness and glamour and his self-portraits constitute another compelling and intimate exploration of the truth in himself. Again, as far as the projections, Januszczak, reviewing the retrospective at the Tate, wrote in the Sunday Times, "From the start, he had a talent for discovering a sense of incipient madness or breakdown in his sitters". And he concludes, "It is, of course, his own incipient madness projected onto whomever and whatever he is observing..." (2002, p 4). Although he may be right, the 'of course' in his conclusion makes one suspect the reviewer's projection of his own incipient madness into Freud's paintings.

In many of his paintings Freud seems devoted to a hunt for elusive moments of sensuality and delicacy. About his nudes and self-portraits art historian Jean Chair, who curated the Venice Biennale in 1995 says, "It is the problem of deformity, monstrosity, alienation, suffering but raised to such a degree of beauty that it is even more shocking in the end. With Freud, we are in the realm of a terrible beauty that is almost paleontological " (In Ferrier, 1999, p 897). What impressed me the most in seeing the actual paintings at MOCA was that coupled with signs of aging and decay there is also life -- bursting, searing life, conveyed in the way he uses paint, not only in his models but in the plants, objects, and particularly in the self-portraits. This life force is not apparent in the reproductions of his work or in a slide presentation. It requires seeing the work in the flesh. At the MOCA retrospective one can

notice for example how the signs of decay and aging and of life and renewal are represented on a recent painting, "Armchair by the fireplace" (1997). One could make much about Freud's portrayal of absence, but I want to highlight his amazing use of paint which reveals his love for this aging chair, a love that may be coupled with an appreciation of himself and his own aging. This is more directly expressed in "Reflection. Painter working" (1993). More than defiant, this painting seems to be the epitome of a true statement about himself: "Here I am, much older, but still at it, painting, like a warrior". A recent review by Christopher Knight in the LA Times describes it this way: "A 1993 self-portrait shows the artist naked saved for an unlaced pair of floppy shoes, wielding palette knife and palette like some ravaged mythological hero with pathetic sword and shield - Mercury, perhaps, the messenger-god of eloquence and commerce as a ramshackle lunatic" (2003, p E6). This review shows again that not only the artist projects unwanted parts of the self in his paintings but that the viewer also finds in a painting a receptacle into which to project undesirable traits of his own personality. For who is the ramshackle lunatic here?

Another instance of projection seems to be present when in a *New Yorker* review entitled "Naked Punch", Peter Schjeldahl says of this same painting, "...he stands naked in his studio at night with a palette knife in hand, a beast at bay and possibly dangerous" (2002, p 73). Whose dangerous impulses are we talking about here? I remember some years ago reading essays about Max Beckmann in preparation for a paper I was writing (1992). I was amazed to find out how various and relentless were the projections into his work by art historians. This is not different in Freud's case. Writing for the Sunday Times in London last year Januszczak recognizes the projections into the work by the viewers when he says, "Freud doesn't find ugliness in the true

flesh he records. We are the ones who do that. In the world of airbrush, we find it so easy to mistake truth for ugliness. Freud doesn't" (2002, p 5). Not only art critics and viewers in general use paintings to project undesirable aspects of themselves. Sometimes the painter finds a model that will allow him to project his own undesirable traits. Freud himself used such a model for a proxy self-portrait entitled "The Procurer" (1954). The man was someone Freud happened to come across in a bar. He said of him: "...Possibly the most revolting person that I had ever seen in my life. Repulsive. So then I took some trouble - though none was needed - to get to know this horrible man...I thought, well, I can do a self-portrait without all the bother of looking in the mirror" (Feaver, 2002, p 28). Here Freud gives evidence that he seems to be quite comfortable confronting the different aspects of his personality and finding a way to express the whole range of it in his work.

Freud's most recent self-portrait, "Reflection" (2002), just finished before his retrospective, also depicts a thoughtful, aging man through the juxtaposition of thin brushstrokes and the use of lumpy and clotted paint. As someone has pointedly observed, this retrospective represents 40 years of increasingly tactile art. Something seems to have crept up into his paintings, a coarsening of touch that we experience as a new richness. But this latest self-portrait goes even further. Freud is standing in front of his wall of chaotic paint scrapings. The paint coagulates on the wall and across his own face. As much as he emerges from the paint, he disappears into it. As Adrian Searle writes in *The Guardian* last year, "Freud's last self-portrait is a grim, wonderful, extreme, unforgettable, unforgiving painting" (June 18, 2002, p.12). There emerges Freud's determination to accept death and to hold onto and celebrate life. But who is doing the projecting here?

We can go back to Hanna Segal and her belief that the artist's ultimate aim is in establishing a truth about his inner reality. It is the contact with this truth that accounts for the experience of satisfaction for the artist and of aesthetic pleasure for the viewer. The viewer identifies with the work of art as a whole and with the whole internal world of the artist as represented by his work. It is an experience of intimacy. The artist may want to be truly objective and depict the truth of the object, but the object's truth and the artist's own truth become indistinguishable. Taking back from the work on a conscious level that which has been projected into it on an unconscious level is perhaps the most fruitful and painful result of creativity. And this applies not only to the artist at work but to the viewer. Just as they did for him, Freud's self-portraits give us a chance to project unwanted aspects of ourselves. Even when these projections may constitute instances of 'projections into reality', they can be, if we can take them back, the opportunity that Freud so candidly offers us for a new appreciation and acceptance of all aspects of ourselves.

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