

Selfportraits and other Reflections

Solo exhibition by
Georges Sgitcovich Soler
at the Gympie Regional Gallery
26 April - 19 May 2018

For over fifty years Georges Soler has been drawing self-portraits. Again and again he has put pen to paper to explore his own self-image. In recent years he has also been able to work at a larger scale and with paint. For the first time brought together in an exhibition, the scope and depth of his self-enquiry through art become apparent. What is immediately evident is that these images are about more than achieving a likeness.

In his essay "*Exactitude is not Truth*" (1) the artist Henri Matisse highlighted how drawing the features of a face correctly does not necessarily convey the true character of a person. To illustrate this he drew his own face in four very different ways so that the individual features are quite dissimilar but the four images all carry an unmistakable overall resemblance to the subject.

Christopher Alexander suggests that the ability to capture the underlying character of a human face rests on an artistic intuition about the whole. (2).

Following his artistic intuition Georges has explored many different ways of finding and drawing out this wholeness from within himself.

Georges was born and grew up in Casablanca, Morocco in a fifth generation European North-African family. His ethnic origins are Spanish (agriculturalists from Andalusia) and Dalmatian (traders and diplomats from Ragusa). His formative experiences are deeply rooted in a vibrant, multicultural mediterranean society. At the age of seventeen he moved with his family to France, and a few years later migrated on his own to Australia. Here he continued to explore self-portraiture as a vehicle to draw out and develop ideas about different aspects of his identity, building over the years a remarkably varied body of work. There are several aspects of his work which invite further examination.

The Gaze

In many of the images the gaze seems to be that of classical self-portraiture: directed outwards so that the viewer is enticed to return the gaze, drawn into an intimate and at times uneasy exchange with the artist. This mutual looking triggers an awareness of self-awareness in the viewer, a realisation that although the gaze appears to be looking out of the picture it is in fact the look of someone looking at himself in a mirror. Timothy J. Clark has described it as "the look of someone looking at himself looking at the look he has when it is a matter of looking not just at anything, at *something else*, but back to the place from which one is looking ..." (3). Yet Georges rarely uses the mirror, relying on a remarkable capacity for using his inner eye, what Laura Cumming has described as "a gift for seeing from within". (4) This goes some way towards explaining the wide-ranging variation in his selfportraiture.

Obscuring

Quite the opposite approach is that of deliberately obscuring the eyes or other facial features. In some images vigorous hatching overlays the features, drawing attention to the trace of the artist's hand, bringing the dancing calligraphy of his drawings into his paintings to represent his creative force, his identity as an artist. In other works, areas of scumbled paint obscure features, leaving the viewer up in the air and drawn to resolve these voids in their own mind's eye. The artist describes this as "effacement" (which in French means both erasure and withdrawal), an eclipsing of parts of the physical self in an attempt to make place for what will arise. (5) This is a way of engaging the viewer to bring part of themselves into the work.

Somatic Expressiveness

A further notable aspect of some of these self-portraits is their body-expressiveness. In some cases almost devoid of facial features and verging on silhouette representations these images still carry a clearly recognizable resemblance to the artist. Body postures are not staged or performed, but subtly suggest imminent movement into the haptic space of the viewer. Marks and colours convey feeling, highlighting "emotional" areas of the body like throat and heart, inviting the viewer into his inner world and at the same time inviting her to tap into her own feelings.

Included in this exhibition are several works which are clearly not self-portraits but portraits of women. These images present women not as sanctified or objectified "others" but as fully embodied, present and partaking of his world of sentience, empathy and emotion.

Backgrounds

None of these images are “fraught with background” (6). Backgrounds, if present, are quite minimal and verging on the abstract, representing to the artist “spaces of memory and reverie”. (5) Simple lines act as framing devices which set the stage for reflection on a wide range of life experiences. In some works a lone figure stands in a landscape of wide horizons, “places of solitude and reminiscence”. (5).

Several series are titled “Saudades” and “Morriña”, words for which there is, perhaps tellingly, no equivalent in the English language. For Georges these paintings are reflections of the feelings of emptiness and longing which arise when remembering his first “place of belonging” (5), feelings which are particularly poignant for first-generation migrants whose place of origin is irretrievably lost.

Later works include floating fragments of energized mark-making. These fragments are akin to what Gilles Deleuze has described as “asignifying traits...devoid of any illustrative or narrative function”. (7) For Georges they represent floating traces of selves in distant places and times. (5)

Imaginary Ancestors

In recent years Georges has been able to access online records which have enabled him to piece together a partial family tree dating back several hundred years. Many documents were lost or destroyed and family members dispersed in various wars. Georges has not been able to trace any early family photographs. Shown in this exhibition are small house/icon-shaped portraits, a re-imagining and re-construction of a visual family history glimpsed through the rich inventiveness of Georges’ imagination.

Place and Presence

Around 2005 landscape elements started to appear in the backgrounds of Georges’ paintings. These are not the actual landscapes surrounding his studio, but landscapes made up of generic shapes that are clearly hills, mountains, horizons, trees, clouds. These shapes are rendered with such expressive intensity that they become like characters, like bodies which draw life from the same wellspring as the figures. Together the figures and the shapes collapse time by connecting memory, emotion and feeling to place and presence.

In Georges’ most recent work the figures have started to merge with the landscapes, so that a hill and a head become interchangeable. Increasingly, a vital rhythm pulses in the work, a choreography of movement between figure and ground, subject and place, inner and outer worlds.

Feeling

It is this developing direction in Georges Soler’s art which gives a clue to the powerful forces at work in such a lifelong quest to give such profound expression to the self through self-portraiture.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty proposes the idea of “Chiasm”: an intertwining, a reciprocal becoming and holding between the body and the things of the world. (8). Through his art Georges is drawing and painting into being his own place for this entanglement between self and world. His marks, his colours, his light, his subtle body gestures speak of an interior life-world which flows outwards to embrace his environment through his expansive, resilient love of being-in-the-world and those he shares it with.

It has been a great joy and inspiration for me to follow this remarkable artist’s journey, his enduring quest towards “The I, that blazing one” (9).

Marguerite de Mosa, March 2018

Notes

1. Illustrated catalogue for the exhibition *Henri Matisse, Dessins* held in Liege in 1947, with the first publication of his essay *Exactitude n’est pas la Verité*, later translated and re-published as *Exactitude Is Not the Truth* in the catalogue for *Henri Matisse Retrospective* at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1948, reprinted in Jack D. Flam *Matisse on Art*, 1978.
2. Christopher Alexander, *The Nature of Order, Book One: The Phenomenon of Life*, published by The Center for Environmental Structure, 2002.
3. T.J. Clark, essay *The Look of Self-Portraiture* in *Self Portrait, Renaissance to Contemporary*, Anthony Bond and Joanna Woodall, published for the exhibition held at the National Portrait Gallery in London, 2005.
4. *Laura Cumming on Self-Portraits: A Face to the World*, published by Harper Press, 2009.
5. *Studio conversations with the artist 2002 - 2018*
6. Erich Auerbach quoted by T.J. Clark in *London Review of Books: World of Faces*, 2014
7. Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon, The Logic of Sensation*, 1981, 2002
8. Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *The Visible and the Invisible*, Alphonso Lingis (trans.), Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968.
9. Christopher Alexander, *The Nature of Order, Book Four: The Luminous Ground*, published by The Center for Environmental Structure, 2004. Quote from p 246 : “ The I, that blazing one, is something which I reach only to the extent that I experience, and make manifest, my feeling.