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the quotidian



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Behind Each Selfie Is a Self

Keira Sinclair

A painter paints a writer in oils,
while a writer paints a painter in words.

On a chilly Saturday morning, inside Project 504 in St Leonards, three artists are in the zone. With the lauded Archibald Portrait Prize deadline under a month away, a calm and focused energy fills the space. The intermittent rumbling of trains below, and the occasional thud of weights hitting the floor of the gym above, are reminders of the noisy and conventional world beyond the walls. Nestled among corporate businesses, the studio feels like a resistance of sorts: a space of colour, expression, contemplation, experimentation, and meaningful connection with other humans.

As I sit still in the chair and look ahead, two great muses of art history come to mind – Vermeer’s maid and Lisa Gherardini. I wonder if this is how they felt: a bit self-conscious, excited by a novel experience, wanting to sip from their cup of tea without moving. In preparation, I had straightened my natural curls and carefully applied makeup. The artist, Michael Simms, sits behind his easel to my right, his slender frame a blur of activity in my periphery. He glances across from his sketch to concentrate on one or other of my features. I’ve left my comfort zone at home, as the soft box spotlight shines on me. Being drenched in light comes as a surprise, considering Michael’s work typically communicates a signature darkness.



Portrait by Michael Simms, June 2017.

I am conscious of being watched, studied. Michael's thoughtful gaze lands on me, his eyes wide behind his smart black frames. He cocks his head for different angles, then transfers his perceptions to canvas with a palette of oil paints and a brush. There are scratching noises, and the movements are repeated as he lays down the foundations of my face. Broad strokes. Abstract shapes without sharp definition. An exercise in familiarisation, like dot points sketching a thesis.

With his focus momentarily on the easel, I surreptitiously survey the studio. My eyes are met by the static, two-dimensional faces that have compelled one of the five resident artists. Nick Strathopolous's large replica of Isla Fisher radiates girl-next-door charm from one corner, while Deng Thiak Adut hauntingly conjures his memories as a child soldier from another¹ – a portrait

1 Nicholas Strathopolous, *Portrait of Deng Thiak Adut*, the 2016 winner of the People's Choice at the Archibald Portrait Prize.

that earned Nick the 2016 People's Choice at the Archibald Portrait Prize.

I try returning to position before being caught out of place, but don't always succeed. Sitting next to me is stage actor, Paul Capsis, who dons two canvases. His soulful eyes meet mine with a piercing wryness beneath his luscious hair. The two profiles are works in progress, with a tough decision to be made about which piece will compete to join the winners at the Art Gallery of New South Wales later this year.² The concentrated silence is broken momentarily when Marie Mansfield happily declares she has achieved a 'likeness' to her subject, *Lion* director Garth Davis. In the time I have been sitting, she has let his wild curls loose to splash a lively energy across the canvas. Nick Stathopoulos takes a break from sanding his canvas for his second portrait of Isla Fisher, to sidle over and congratulate Marie. Playful humour and words of support intermittently drown out the ambient music. Before returning to work, Nick pops by to watch Michael sketching, and nods with approval as he saunters back to Isla.

Michael is emerging from anonymity. At just twenty-nine years of age, he is enjoying a year of increased recognition in the Australian art scene. The turning point was his portrait of celebrated author Thomas Keneally AO, selected for the 2016 Black Swan Prize in Perth. Since then, he has been a man in demand. A month ago, he was interviewed for Maria Stoljar's podcast, *Talking With Painters*. The same week, he put his paintbrushes down and sent eleven canvases to Flinders Lane Gallery to be 'hung',³ artist lingo for being exhibited, for the current 'Exploration 17' exhibition. His pieces are selling well; he has been invited to return in 2018 by the gallery director, who purchased a portrait of a music student Michael. It is a stylish piece, featuring lighting reminiscent of the lower half of Magritte's *L'Empire des lumières*.⁴ For the second time since Easter, Michael's art graces a Melbourne gallery's wall.

2 In October 2017, this painting was one of 30 shortlisted pieces for the Doug Moran National Portrait Prize.

3 As an outsider I liked this terminology so wanted to include it.

4 Michael Simms, *Untitled I* painting.

In April, he won the Who is Looking At You Prize, and hosted his first solo exhibition at the Cambridge Studio Gallery in Collingwood; a charming space that obviously champions emerging artists. ‘Support Australian art’ is scrawled on a chalkboard in the kitchen, with a heart around art; a small token of the owner’s advocacy of Australian artists since her doors opened in 2007. A selection of his landscapes, portraits and charcoals look at home with the wooden floorboards and Victorian fireplace. For the first time, Michael stood alone, without his peers from Julian Ashton Art School, who have shared a dozen exhibitions in Sydney with him. Esteemed artist Godwin Bradbeer proudly opened *Brink*; an exhibition title he felt was apt because he sees the darkness and isolation in Michael’s art as a neo-*fin de siècle* commentary on the fragile state of humanity among fractured global politics. As Michael stood beside his painting – *The Selfie* – to welcome his guests, his discomfort with the spotlight screams he is not the ‘selfie’ type.

The Selfie shows a male figure in the dark, lit by the glow of his iPhone. He takes his photograph with a confident stance, but his face is constricted by a material that both obscures his features and appears to cause suffocation. Michael reveals his insights into the psychological impact of selfie culture that has swept the globe. It is now an expected performance from people with a smartphone and internet access. To go a full day without spotting the selfie-to-social-media cycle is a challenge. This piece, and its companions *Self Love* and *Love Stick*, critique the pressure people feel to present their lives as something special for an audience. Or, perhaps capture a version of themselves that sparks admiration – envy even – among their ‘friends’ and ‘followers’, but risks suffocating their soul. As selfie culture has quickly become the norm, to not participate risks being deemed irrelevant as social media and real life become increasingly interwoven. Forget keeping up; this contemporary movement seeks to outdo the proverbial Joneses.

This new narcissism both fascinates and saddens Michael. On a rainy Friday evening, at a cozy Surry Hills pub, he tells me about the book he is reading. Anne Manne’s *The Life of I* is about the modern epidemic of narcissism; selfie culture ‘has spread so quickly

because people want to prove they are not missing out.’ FOMO is a real condition among millennials, for whom a world without the internet, and constant feedback on their appearance, seems as odd a concept as life on Mars. ‘People are subconsciously aware of their morbidity,’ he says as he pauses to sip his beer, ‘and want to leave a personal legacy that proves to themselves, as much as it does to others, that they are *alive*.’

Is it ironic that with so many people plugging themselves on the internet, they become invisible in the competitive racket? Selfies project the image people want to broadcast: being ‘seen’ at a particular place;⁵ the picket-fence trifecta (significant other, kids, house); exotic holidays; statements about their lifestyle; being on-trend. Alternatively, something that sets them aside from convention: a quirky hobby, a contribution to a global conversation by rallying for refugees’ rights, or protesting the new #POTUS. The flip side of selfies is that they conceal what people want hidden.

Selfies maintain the twenty-first century business card: the ‘personal brand’. Camera technology has evolved to accommodate the craze. The smartphone camera app is a big leap from the camera’s original size and purpose of capturing incriminating evidence in the early 1900s. The selfie phenomenon no doubt causes the people who enjoyed their heyday in decades gone by to scratch their heads in bemusement. If – because film was expensive, and there was no need to prove yourself remarkable – you snapped memorable moments sparingly to share with family, perhaps displayed a frame or two on the mantel, then selfie culture looks like an alarming obsession with self.

In 2017, everyone with a smartphone carries a technology that encourages them to share their experiences widely. This maintenance of ‘personal brand’ perpetuates a dependency between an individual’s self-worth and shameless marketing opportunities for businesses, for whom our social media input provides invaluable free promotion. This loop is what the CEOs of Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and others, need to keep people using social media

5 The craze is real. Sydney Film Festival is currently screening a documentary called *Austerlitz*, which examines footage of visitors to Auschwitz taking selfies.

in order to maintain their pedestal in the business world. When Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg are revered as pseudo-leaders in a world focused on ‘I’, it says much about the human psyche.

Considerable energy from software engineers has prevented bad hair days from being immortalised with smartphone screens doubling as a mirror. Add a selfie-stick for flattering angles, and the kit is complete. Anti-selfie campaigns are starting to pop up among the noise on Facebook, hoping to be heard. One animated video, ‘Control This Madness Before It’s Too Late’, depicts a lonely young woman flashing a fake smile to capture a façade of happiness to broadcast.⁶ The photo is not for the network’s benefit, but hers. Positive responses boost her self-esteem, while negative feedback crushes her. Both feed her vanity in an increasingly isolated social world. What, exactly, does the animator warn it might be too late for? Falling into the mythical pond and drowning, perhaps. At the time of writing, Cutts’ video has been viewed 37.7 million times globally, suggesting a strong resonance with the suffocation of the selfie culture that technology encourages. Michael’s paintings capture this.

Our studio session shifts to Michael’s home in Darlinghurst. I settle before an unfinished painting of Esther Hannaford – the lead actress currently starring in *Mr Burns* at the Belvoir Theatre – who joins Genevieve Lemon, Paul Capsis and Kerrie Anne Greenland in Michael’s ‘Actor Series’. I observe that his unpretentiousness is as clear as his intellect. Never one to shamelessly self-promote, he worries his talent and success is a fluke that cannot be recreated. Ah, the familiar one-hit-wonder anxiety of a creative mind. He is not sure how, but the painting appeared from a creative burst, as if from an outside force. For an artist working in the age of social media, his humbleness presents an interesting dilemma. But, with hundreds of paintings completed and several currently on display, his talents are no happy accident. To my eye, Esther looks finished. She could be standing in the room, very still. He assures me this is her ‘likeness’; an important milestone that can

6 Steve Cutts’ “Control This Madness Before It’s Too Late” video. The whole thing is relevant, but especially 00.46–00.50.

take weeks to achieve. The exciting part follows – the texture and finer details of what makes Esther, Esther.

As a graduate of psychology and film from Flinders University, an avid film and theatre buff, and a film/television extra – including *A Place to Call Home*, and perhaps a personal highlight, Angelina Jolie’s directorial debut *Unbroken* – Michael, not surprisingly, puts the emphasis on *mise-en-scène* and colour theory. The main lights go out, and my skin is bathed in colour. Cellophane panels cover angled studio lights and make the room red, green, blue, purple, or a combination. Like an auteur, Michael captures the effects ‘in-camera’, instead of recreating tricks in post-production. I could be sitting for Bill Henson, except I am fully clothed. Staying passive like a yogi, my face relaxes to its natural state. As a muse, a ‘life is peachy’ smile is not necessary. Michael moves around to capture different angles that interest him, or that bring out my character, to convey my ‘warmth and inquisitive nature’, showing me as he sees me, ‘empathetic and lost in thought’. He applies light to me as a film director would an actor or set. He settles on green because it instinctively feels right, he thinks that is because he associates me with ‘growth and renewal’.

A week after our session, we catch up at the Sydney Film Festival. Sitting in the State Theatre waiting for *I Am Not Your Negro* to be screened, we chuckle about how we have been working on our intertwined art projects since we last met. ‘It’s nice to see your face again,’ he half-jokes. ‘I’ve been working my way through your forehead today, and I also noticed a shape in your chin that I’ve not seen before.’ I reply that I, too, have been deeply absorbed in working on him: analysing his artistic processes, considering what makes him tick in new ways. Our shared creative experience has formed a new layer of insight into each other’s character. He has scrutinised me, taking time to study my nose or lips, and how they compare to other people. While he has been capturing me, I have also been capturing him.

There is a symmetry here, a discovery. Thumbing a screen to ‘like’ a selfie does not compare. That fleeting split second is not a

special connection. A cursory glance to kill time on the bus, or a distraction from monotonous work, even sitting at a café with a friend or lover. Scrolling photo after photo across social media streams interspersed with news articles, and commentary on everything from the minutia of daily existence to world politics – in all the variation and sameness it provides – is more about living vicariously through another person’s image, which may or may not portray their reality. Adding a now-iconic little thumb, or one of five rudimentary emojis, does not signify a deep reflection of another person’s existence, nor give that person adequate thought if they are one of several hundred ‘friends’ or ‘followers’. That fragment of mental energy just registers, and subconsciously judges, what another person is doing by comparison with us. Approving a selfie strokes the ego of the ‘self’ on the screen as much as it does our own self; before sweeping to the next item, in a constantly replenishing feed of distractions, we offer a public justification of an image that aligns with our values or desires.

Michael texts some photographs to show me his progress, saying he is having ‘lip problems’ he needs to tweak because he thinks he accidentally made me look ‘too sour’. How he creates something so life-like I cannot fathom, but looking at my face under construction asks me to see myself differently – from another person’s point of view, which a ‘selfie’, as the title suggests, does not provoke. Next, Michael will cover the canvas with a layer of colour, add the background, let it dry overnight, add another layer, tweak my features, and give it richer colours and more detail. A likeness is achieved, the flair will follow. He texts, ‘looking forward to getting stuck into your hair’, and it is good to know that he, too, is having a good time.

What might become of this portrait? If hung, people might follow age-old traditions and consider the artist’s brush strokes, or relationship between the painter and his muse. Portraiture takes time and reciprocal energy: the hours in the studio together, followed by the artist’s hours in solitude. It is a unique experience in this era. Cultural trends cause people to drown in a stream

flooded by selfies. Of ‘selves’ seeking ‘likes’ to approve their existence. Of ‘personal profiles’ suffocating individuality with pressure to be accepted by the stream. ‘Friends’ are more likely voyeuristic online ‘followers’, whose ‘friendship’ obligations are reduced to an occasional finger tapping a machine. As Michael’s career continues to gain more traction – art students of the future may study my portrait as we study the *Mona Lisa* or the *Girl with a Pearl Earring* . . .

Or is that what selfie culture tells me I should desire?⁷

⁷ Disclosure: I am not a selfie type either, so have no desire to be publicly consumed.