Shifting Subjects

Contemporary Women Telling the Self through the Contemporary Arts

Sarah Lucas | Wendy Elia | Miranda Whall | Margaret Ashman | Linda Ingham

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With Essay and Texts by Anna McNay

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One of the characteristic features of women's self-portraiture lies in the production of imagery which suggests the shifting and provisional nature of identity, rather than its unity or fixity.

The most common issues addressed by women artists through their self-portraiture concerns their personal identity as 'women', constructed in and through representation. Many of the self-representations of women artists directly engage with the ways in which 'woman' as a sign operates in visual culture, the ways in which the ubiquitous representations of women structure and control the very definitions of 'woman' in our society. Not only do these works take part in defining and redefining sexuality, gender, maternity and concepts of beauty for women, they reaffirm the crucial role of visual representation in the acquisition of female identity and any attempt to subvert or challenge it.

Extracted from **Marsha Meskimmon**, *The Art of Reflection - Women Artists Self-Portraiture in the 20th Century*, 1996, Scarlet Press

Following Page:
Sarah Lucas*, Self Portrait with Fried Eggs, 1996* from *Self Portraits 1990-1998,* 1999, Iris Print with Colophon, 80 x 60 cm
Arts Council Collection, South Bank Centre, London, Copyright the artist, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London

Introduction
Shifting Subjects - "The Whole Thing …"

In April 2004, Sadie Coles interviewed Sarah Lucas at Tate Modern as part of the events surrounding the show *In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida* at Tate Britain in which Lucas exhibited alongside Damien Hirst and Angus Fairhurst. The interview brings forth an insight into Lucas's approach to her work and to exhibiting; and how the artworks she makes reflect her life: Coles comments on how it often seems that Lucas's artworks might be, "a response to, or with, the people you are knocking around with."

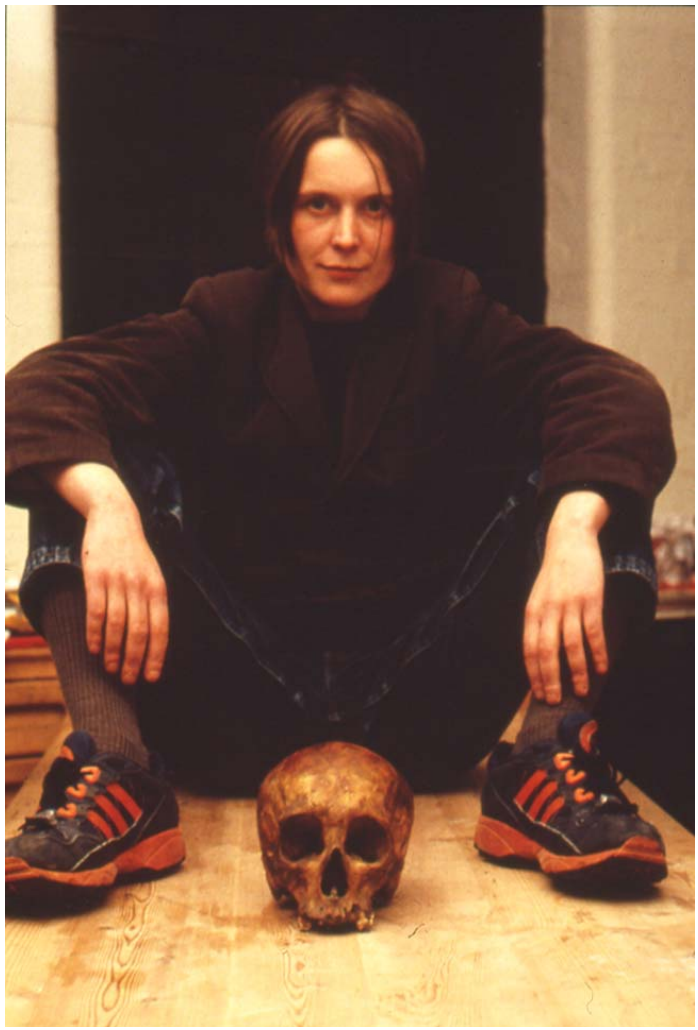
It is apparent from what Lucas says that her work arises from her life and the people she associates with: "… it really is about your actual life … I see the whole thing as being completely part of my life and how you spend time with other people."

For her, a lot of ideas, sometimes good ideas, come out from who she is spending her time with, their relationships, outlooks, etc; and, as she says: "it's nice to run with the ball sometimes."

Since 1986, Lucas has been taking part in group shows in sometimes unconventional spaces, embracing what seems to be a real team spirit, often working collaboratively as well as taking on ever more prestigious solo shows, including representing Great Britain in the 2015 Venice Biennale with the exhibition *I SCREAM DADDIO*.

The consistent thread through much of Lucas's work is the playful adoption of vernacular language and objects, and a reconfiguration of visual symbols in popular culture, particularly those relating to sex, gender and death. By harnessing this visual language, she re-presents 'identities' of women and men, alternately caricaturing and unravelling stereotypical understandings of gender.

Shifting Subjects includes two works from Lucas's 1990 – 1998 series of 12 photographic self-portraits; a group which rather represent an identity which challenges stereo-typical representations of gender and sexuality. As in Lucas's early sculptures, food sometimes stands in for sexual body parts, and is employed to reveal and subvert the objectification of the body. Fried eggs, for example, feature as breasts in sculptural installations such as *Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab* (1992), and as surreal appendages in *Self-Portrait with Fried Eggs*, 1996.



While there are myriad complexities built into Lucas's work, much of their impact is in how easily they may be understood and related to, depending on the onlooker's experiences. As she 'reveals' aspects of her 'self' through the portraits, Lucas reveals aspects of who we are to us in the reading of them. Both *Self Portrait with Fried Eggs* and *Self Portrait with Skull* also, simultaneously, confront the viewer with symbols of life and death - those most visited of subjects in the arts throughout history.

Her work being very much about 'the whole thing', through conversation, collaboration and social relations also very much links to the work by the four women artists who are also exhibiting as part of Shifting Subjects.

Miranda Whall's recent and current work includes drawings, paintings, video, photography, animation and sound through which she recurrently plays out representations of herself, presenting self portraits that explore the representation of both her body and her experiences. By constructing fantasy scenarios where she co- exists with other things, inanimate objects or living creatures Whall makes humorous, unlikely and uncanny connections, dynamics and relationships. Whall constructs fictional contexts in which she can play out both extremely personal, exhibitionist and explicit representations of her sexual, fertile, expressive and intimate self in order to draw attention to and discuss the appropriateness and place for these dimensions of ones' self as well as both the politics surrounding feminine identity and of trying to be the author and owner of her own sexual and feminine image.

Opposite Page:
Sarah Lucas, *Self Portrait with Skull*, 1996, from *Self Portraits 1990-1998*, 1999, Iris Print with Colophon, 80 x 60 cm.
The Arts Council Collection, South Bank Centre, London. Copyright the artist, Courtesy of Sadie Coles HQ, London

Following Page:
Miranda Whall, *(Untitled) Birds on my Head #1*, 2011, German Etch on Watercolour Paper, Edition of 4, 42 x 29 cm.
© the artist, Courtesy of Paper Gallery, Manchester.

The three commissioned artists have all taken very different approaches, but each in some way has parallel concerns with Lucas's position.

When, during the Tate interview, we are able to view the *Supersensible* piece - exhibited for one night only at Anthony d'Offay gallery - one also brings to mind Wendy Elia's commissioned piece for the project, *Portrait of the Artist as an Old Woman*. Notable is the confrontational nature of Elia and Lucas's self-portrait pieces, or more, the self-portraits of women taking confrontational poses or stances. Elia's portrait, in which she is seated on a concrete throne, may be seen to also confront issues of power surrounding women and in her Q&A with Anna McNay, she speaks of the piece as being about survival. Taking the title as a direct reference from Rembrandt announces a position, as well as nodding towards mortality. Surrounding herself with warrior symbols, family images and references to melancholy and class makes somewhat visible the complex network of constructs; for her, this is 'the whole thing'.

Linda Ingham's approach has been more to use the testimony of others through which to frame aspects of herself. Her installation *Conversations with my Mother* which draws upon conversations of some 144 women – mothers and daughters – who have taken part in *The Listening Project* recorded and broadcast by the BBC and archived at the British Library. The *Mother & Child* works on paper which accompany the installation (book-works and vintage telephone table) draw upon images provided by 35 women in her social circle, reflecting concepts of 'place'. Ingham's *Profile Pieces* also draw upon texts from various means – local news from Page 3, online national newspapers, and the Magna Carta – notably, Ingham has omitted her image by subtractive means, presenting the remaining stain of a profile, a silhouette, with echoes of power and usage throughout time.

In Margaret Ashman's commissioned work, the printmaker/artist has also become subject/dancer/ the observed; the woman that the viewer sees in the film and in the photo etchings challenges and redefines concepts of beauty for women. She is not young, nor super slim, she wears no make-up, wanting instead to reveal a real woman in all her fragility, vulnerability, with anxieties, emotions and self-doubt on view to all. She is not a trained dancer, but chooses to present herself through this unfamiliar medium as she becomes the model in her own artistic creation.

Ashman says, "Making the collaborative film for this project was rather like going on a journey. As I wrote in my diary over weeks and months, I tried to capture my thoughts and feelings which flitted from subject to subject and rode a roller coaster of emotional highs and lows. The resulting poem presented a multi-faceted prism of my identity, presenting various versions of me as the focus shifted."

For Abbey Walk Gallery, in a way, the Sarah Lucas self-portraits have acted as a catalyst for us to begin a project which brings together work by selected women artists – our first show by women about women, through which they tell, through their artworks, what to them is 'the whole thing'.

We hope that the show and the conference based upon it at Leeds Art Gallery and the resulting film shown in Lincoln's Usher Gallery will prompt and encourage questions and reflective thought about women working in the visual arts now and the subjects they have adopted and adapted throughout time.

On taking questions as part of the Tate interview, Lucas was asked about the impermanent nature of some of her art, such as the fried eggs. She answers: "It just has to be that way. I find myself very dissatisfied with other people's eggs when I'm around them. But I'm not going to make a career out of frying eggs. I suppose making art is something to do with immortality, or something, but nothing's really forever, it's only for longer or shorter, isn't it?"

Gillian Hadwin
Abbey Walk Gallery,
July 2015

Contents:

The Semiology of Portraiture

by

Anna McNay

Anna McNay is a London-based freelance art writer and editor. She is Deputy Editor at State media, Arts Editor at DIVA magazine and a regular contributor to Studio International, Photomonitor and RA magazine, among others. She writes reviews, previews, profiles and interview features, presents interviews to camera, and hosts and participates in panel discussions and in conversation events. She has written forewords and essays for a number of catalogues and exhibitions, including at WW Gallery, Espacio Gallery and the Royal Academy.

Anna comes from a background in academia, as a doctoral candidate, tutor and lecturer in linguistics at the University of Oxford, and an Alexander von Humboldt Research Fellow at the Humboldt University in Berlin. She also has an MA in History of Art from Birkbeck, University of London. Her areas of special interest are representations of the body, gender and sexuality and the crossover between art and mental health.

Introduction

Self-portraiture in art, like autobiography in literature, offers a means of discovering, creating and defining oneself, carving out an identity, stabilising some sense of 'truth'. In her critical essays on the subject, Estelle C Jelinek claims that, because women's lives are characterised by fragmentation, interruption, and discontinuity, so too are their autobiographies.[i] Similarly, Marsha Meskimmon speaks of the 'shifting and provisional nature of identity' that is 'one of the characteristic features of women's self-portraiture'.[ii] While Meskimmon speaks of *shifting identity*, the title of this exhibition, which brings together self-portraits by five contemporary women artists – three of whom have been specifically commissioned – is *Shifting Subjects*. Are we therefore to assume an equation between *subject* and *identity*? In this essay, I will present a semiological analogy to suggest that while this is not the case, there is, in fact, a tight bond between the two concepts, neither of which makes sense without the other. With this model in mind, I will look at the works of the three commissioned artists – Margaret Ashman, Wendy Elia and Linda Ingham – in terms of communication, the split-subject (self/Other, mother/daughter), place, diachrony and authorship, never losing sight of the additional complexities added to the thematic of self-portraiture by virtue of the artists at hand being women.

The Sign

According to the Oxford Dictionaries, a *subject* is 'a person or thing that is being discussed, described, or dealt with' and 'a thinking or feeling entity; the conscious mind; the ego'. Of course, there is also the grammatical definition, such that a subject is 'a noun or noun phrase functioning as one of the main components of a clause, being the element about which the rest of the clause is predicated'. A subject can be active or passive, which suggests it can be created both by itself and by those around it – people and place, space and time. But can a subject just *be*? Can it exist without a context? Certainly it can exist alone, without need for companions (be they fellow subjects, or objects at the receiving end of some action), but, linguistically at least, a subject cannot exist without a verb – be it explicit (*Mary ate the cake, Miriam daydreamed*) or implied (*Who knocked at the door? Karen [did/knocked at the door].*) The question thus arises, given the continually changing context in which it is to be found, whether – and, if so, how – a subject might ever be constant or fixed. Here, again, there seems to be some underlying equation being made between subject and identity – but are they the same thing? I would argue not.

The Oxford Dictionaries' definition of *identity* is 'the fact of being who or what a person or thing is' or 'the characteristics determining who or what a person or thing is'. It is not, then, the same as the subject at all, rather it's *the fact of being the subject*, or *the characteristics determining this subject*. To return to Meskimmon's statement regarding the 'shifting and provisional nature of identity': if it is the identity that shifts, that is, the characteristics defining the subject, does this necessarily entail that the subject too must shift? Meskimmon goes on to suggest that: 'The most common issue addressed by women artists through their self-portraiture concerns their personal identity as "women" constructed in and through representation. Many of the self-representations of women artists directly engage with the ways in which "*woman*" as a sign operates in visual culture…'[iii] It is this notion of woman as sign that I believe holds the answer to the riddle.

In his course on general linguistics, given at the University of Geneva between 1906-11 and later published as a seminal textbook, Ferdinand de Saussure introduced the concept of the linguistic sign as a two-sided entity or dyad, made up of a signifier (the material aspect of the sign, i.e. the word) and the *signified* (i.e. the mental concept). The bond between the two is arbitrary, bidirectional and inseparable: one part without the other is useless. Meaning is only rendered communicable through the encoding of the sign. Might not then the relationship between subject and identity be understood in the same way, with the subject as signified (that which is to be presented and understood) and identity as signifier (the way in which this is achieved)?

$$\frac{\text{signifier}}{\text{signified}} \rightarrow \frac{\text{identity}}{\text{subject}}$$

These signs, of course, must also form part of a larger context, one whereby they are interpreted and understood by a third party. As the Russian philosopher and semiotician Mikhail Bakhtin notes: 'In point of fact, word is a two-sided act. It is determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant. As word, it is precisely the product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee.'[iv] When speakers speak, writers write, or artists produce works to be viewed by others, it is this audience, with which they communicate, that must interpret, define and complete the existence of the sign; it is the audience that functions to stabilise the sought after autobiographical sense of truth.

Communication

Out of the three commissioned artists, Margaret Ashman deals with the notion of artist-audience communication the most directly. The sign dance she performs in her film comprises an artistic combination of dance steps and sign language for the deaf, rendering a rough translation of a poem she wrote in the journal she kept as part of this project. Acknowledging the impossibility of direct translation between different sign systems, Ashman notes: 'Just as sign language has its own grammar, which is very different from English grammar, the sign dance says things in a different way from the poem. The poem was in some ways a starting point for the dance rather than a translation of it – and yet is very true to what the poem says.' Throughout the dance, Ashman seems partly to be communicating with, partly to be unaware of her audience. As a devout Christian, whose religiosity infuses her work, she might perhaps be deemed to be in communication with God. The sequence could be a slow meditation, a yoga-like salutation. Holding her hands together in prayer, uttering 'Amen', and then, towards the end of the film, a sudden burst of spoken speech: 'In the beginning was the word'. Ashman makes explicit the significance of language and communication as a means to define the self. Her choice to show the film alongside photographs and photo etchings gives rise to a multiplicity of languages and different levels of metarepresentation, emphasising the many possible translations and modes of expression of the self: there is no one sign, or subject+identity, that defines an autobiography. Across time and space, everything shifts.

Linda Ingham's works also revolve around the notion of communication, taking as their starting point Radio 4's The Listening Project, a sound archive of intimate conversations between close friends and relatives. For *Conversations with my Mother*, Ingham has produced a book, sealed within a telephone table, containing memories and remembered conversations between herself and her mother. This idea of the family and genealogy as significant to a woman's identity has a long tradition in artistic self-portraiture. In *My Grandparents, Parents and I* (1936), Frida Kahlo defines her 'self' in relation to her position in her family tree. The American photographer Judy Dater, in *Self-Portrait with Parents* (1981), places herself beneath photographs of her parents on their wedding day, while Marikke Heinz-Hoek uses similar family photographs as historical documents in her self-portrait *From the Foundations of the Second World War* (1979). More recently, Tracey Emin's film work, *Conversation with my Mum* (2001), is precisely that: a recorded conversation between herself and her mother. Clearly, it is more than just coincidence that brings so many women artists to include their mothers in their self-portraits.

The Split-Subject

The mother-daughter relationship is one that has been analysed on many different levels. The process of creating one's corporeal identity, of recognising a sense of selfhood and subjectivity is known in psychoanalysis as abjection. This process of separation of the self from the Other – of the subject from the object – is symbolically linked to the child's separation from its mother. In order to become a subject in its own right, the male child must separate from the mother, first by abjecting her and then by making her sublime in order to desire her (and, accordingly, other female beings). As such, the mother becomes split: she is first abject and then sublime; first detested and then desired. According to Julia Kristeva, if a daughter tries solely to abject her mother (since, in a heterosexual narrative, she needn't render her sublime), she will also abject herself because of her physical identification with the maternal body.[v vi] If she seeks to split her mother, however,

she splits also herself. To heal this split, Kristeva contends daughters should re-embrace the mother figure, the female Other, the reflection that is both the self and not the self. It is hardly surprising then, that, in an attempt to produce a self-portrait, so many women artists end up introducing their mothers. In terms of our model, a split-subject might be seen as a subject adrift from its identity: meaningless and without a sense of self.

Place, Space and Time

For Wendy Elia, family also features, albeit somewhat less prominently than in some of her previous works. A black and white photograph of herself and her mother is perched on top of the mirror, in front of which she is sitting on her concrete throne, and the painting taped to the wall to the left, itself a painting within a painting within a painting, shows the artist with her three children.

The artistic trope of pictures within pictures and frames within frames is used by Elia to introduce different time zones. Her studio, on the other hand, represents a constant throughout her career. For Ingham, too, space and place play a vital role in the definition of self, with the palimpsest of layers in *Profile Pieces* combining scriptovisual elements, portrait and landscape. Living near the bank of the Humber estuary, she describes the horizon line as burnt into her consciousness. A portrait of this is therefore a portrait of part of herself.
Set within her studio, Elia's painting abounds with references: to her younger self, to hobbies, to interests, to her working class roots, to other artists. Her self-portrait introduces the concept of diachrony (interestingly, another of Saussure's linguistic dichotomies is that of the diachronic versus the synchronic), representing the self across time – the shifting subject with its various temporal identities: some so conventionalised as signs that they might be recognised as motifs. In his psychological study of narration and its contribution to self and identity, Michael Bamberg draws

a distinction between the *synchronic self* (presumably akin to our subject – instable and context-bound) and *identity*, which is the 'diachronic, temporal self'. He suggests: 'Self, as differentiated from other, developing the ability to account for itself (as agent or as undergoer), self-reflect and self-augment, can now begin to look for something like temporal continuity, unity, and coherence, i.e., *identity* across a life.'[vii] On the one hand, Elia's painting might be read as an autobiographical chronology; on the other, as a series of signs representing the shifting self of the artist through time, epitomising the paradox of Kierkegaard's observation that life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.[viii]

Elia presents not only images of her younger self, however, but also references to other artists from the art historical canon. This offers a perfect example of what the critic Edward Lucie-Smith describes as: 'The contemporary self-portrait […] reaffirm[ing] the artist's right to link his own work to that of the great masters of the past.'[ix] Elia speaks, among others, to Rembrandt, known for his long series of self-portraits, stretching from his first period of professional activity in Leiden right through to the end of his life; Dürer, the first artist to make self-portraiture a major part of his activity in the late fifteenth, early sixteenth century; and Angelica Kauffman, one of the two female founding members of the Royal Academy of Arts in London in 1768. As with any conversation, these references to art history presume some mutual knowledge – a shared context – required by the two interlocutors, the artist and the viewer, in order to make sense of the signs.

Authorship and the Audience

While poststructuralist critiques of authorship, primarily those by Roland Barthes[x] and Michel Foucault,[xi] radically rethink the concept of a stable 'I', self-consciously controlling the production of a text, and introduce the reader as the agency by which texts gain meaning, this only partially carries over to the self-portraits in this exhibition. The authorial, artistic hand, the subjective 'I', is very much present in them all. As the painter and poet Julian Bell said of Frida Kahlo, '[she] treats her subjectivity as subject-matter, like another painter might treat light'.[xii] Certainly Ashman, Elia and Ingham have all tackled their subjectivity head-on, creating their personal signs and weaving their personal languages. Bell continues: 'It might be more accurate to say that we are looking at fictions, in which the evidence of the mirror has been masterfully edited.'[xiii]

As noted earlier, just as the sign comprising subject and identity has two sides to it, so does the understanding and communicating thereof. In the process of communication, the artist becomes both an internal and an external subject, presenter and presentee, portrayer and portrayed, subject and object, self and Other – the split-self or Kristevan mother-figure. This conflict is noted by the feminist artists Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, who write: 'There is a contradiction in the experience of a woman who is also an artist. She feels herself to be "subject" in a world which treats her as "object"'.[xiv]

As with any sign or form of communication, self-portraits require a third party, interlocutor, interpreter or viewer to read the sign and understand their meaning: 'nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign.'[xv] The model is thus that of a double dyad:

Artist < [subject~identity] > Viewer

The subject is bound to the identity, through which it is expressed, but this identity is continually shifting, thus rendering the subject itself unstable. This [subject~identity] unit, or self, if you will, is a sign within a system of communication and, as such, requires someone both to produce and someone to interpret. Meaning, or understanding, is the product of this whole complex, and this too, perforce, is never constant. As Elia says of some of the objects in her self-portrait that have also appeared in previous paintings: 'They are the constant elements of my experience but it is for the viewer to assign meaning'. Shifting subjects; shifting identities; shifting meaning.

[i] Estelle C Jelinek (1980) Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press)
[ii] Marsha Meskimmon (1966) The Art of Reflection. Women Artists' Self-Portraiture in the Twentieth Century (London: Scarlet Press) p92
[iii] ibid, p102. My emphasis.
[iv] Valentin Nikolaevich Voloshinov (1986) Marxism and the Philosophy of Language, trans. Ladislav Matejka & I R Titunik (Cambridge: Harvard University Press) p86
[v] Julia Kristeva (1982) Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection (New York: Columbia University Press)
[vi] Mary Green (2007) Diamela Eltit. Reading the Mother (Woodbridge: Tamesis) p96
[vii] Michael Bamberg (2011) 'Who am I? Narration and its contribution to self and identity' in Theory of Psychology, 21 (1) pp3-24, p12
[viii] Short – and more often cited – form of a longer passage in Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter (1997) (Søren Kierkegaard Research Center, Copenhagen) vol 18, p306. The Danish short form, 'Livet skal forstaas baglaens, men leves forlaens', is attributed to Julia Watkin.
[ix] Edward Lucie-Smith (1987) 'The Self-Portrait – A Background' in Edward Lucie-Smith & Sean Kelly, The Self-Portrait: A Modern View (London: Sarema Press Ltd) pp8-25, p24
[x] Roland Barthes (1968) 'The Death of the Author' in Image, Music, Text (1977) (London: Fontana Press) pp142-8
[xi] Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?' (1969) in Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984: Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology (vol 2) (1998) (ed. James D Faubion), pp205-222
[xii] Julian Bell (2000) 'Introduction' in Five Hundred Self-Portraits (London: Phaidon) pp5-10, p9
ibid, p6
[xiii] Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro (2014) 'Female Imagery' in Womanspace Journal, summer 1973, pp11-17, reprinted extract in Amelia Jones (ed.) (2014) Sexuality. Documents of Contemporary Art (London: Whitechapel Gallery; Cambridge MA: MIT Press), pp73-75, p73
[xiv] Charles Sanders Peirce (1931-58) Collected Writings (8 vols) (eds. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss & Arthur W Burks) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press) vol 2, p172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Q & A

Anna McNay & Wendy Elia

Wendy Elia works in series, exploring the socio-cultural contexts of our times: half-naked women in confrontational poses that defy voyeurism and subvert the traditional role of the female nude; the taboo ageing female body seen in minute, unflinching detail; windows on to sixties' tower blocks and ill-lit alleys from a home on the wrong side of the tracks. In her portrait work, she often confronts our gaze and asks questions about painting's relationship to authenticity and illusion. Elia moves from the personal to the political not only in the range of content and form but within individual paintings. For Shifting Subjects she has produced a larger than life self-portrait entitled Portrait of the Artist as an Old Woman.

Opposite Page: Wendy Elia, ***Portrait of the Artist as an Old Woman***, 2015, 210 x 150cms, Oil on Canvas, © the artist

Anna McNay: Your portraits are always confrontational in one way or another, making the viewer feel uncomfortable in his or her voyeurism. A lot of your portraits are of naked subjects and you've painted yourself unclothed before. How significant is it to you whether or not a subject is dressed? Was this a factor up for consideration when you were planning this self-portrait?

Wendy Elia: People always appear more vulnerable and inevitably exposed when naked. As I had already painted a naked self-portrait quite recently, I wanted to counteract it with a clothed one for this commission, in order to allow me to focus on other issues.

AMc: You've said before that your work asks questions about painting's relationship to authenticity and illusion. To what extent is the viewer seeing 'the real Wendy' in this painting and to what extent is it a construct, presenting a side (or sides) of yourself that you want the viewer to see and editing out the parts you're less keen on?

WE: All painting is a construct. That is not to say that the artist doesn't sometimes reveal more about themselves or a state of mind than intended. I cannot possibly be a witness to myself. Nor to a multiplicity of selves. Perhaps that's why artists do self-portraits? I am reminded again of the famous Barnett Newman quote here: 'Aesthetics is to artists as ornithology is to birds'.

AMc: How do elements such as the frame within the frame and the mirror (on the left-hand side) feed into this notion of constructedness?

WE: They allow me to introduce subtexts, different time zones and symbolism of the conscious and the unconscious. If the studio represents my creative space, it remains the only constant throughout my painting career, as do the objects and space therein.

AMc: You've also spoken about your work moving between the personal and the political. How political is this self-portrait?

WE: I can only present my experience of the world to the viewer. I am witness to massive changes in the social make up of London. The high rise flats (which my mother lived in), so prominent in my previous work, are mostly being pulled down or redeveloped

Wendy Elia, ***Portrait of the Artist as an Old Woman***, (detail)

to make way for shared ownership blocks or des res luxury flats. The centre of London has already transmuted into a playground for the world's wealthiest. What of the rest? Because my generation of women is much more educated, economically independent and healthier than previous generations, we have more power. Past prejudices, attitudes, assumptions and expectations of what it means to be an old woman will need to change - and fast!

AMc: There are so many magnificent details to the painting that it is hard to know where to start, really. Firstly, how did you go about painting yourself? Did you take photographs? Is the Wendy we see you as you are now?

WE: It is a construct. I find it particularly hard to see and paint myself. It's a compromise, I would say, between the best and the worst.

AMc: Tell me about the concrete throne. Did you build that especially for this portrait? Will you use it again for anyone else or was it just for you? Does it have any special significance beyond its utility?

WE: Most of the people I paint are my friends and family – they are not famous or wealthy. By placing them and myself on a throne, I elevate our status, worth and importance. I built the concrete throne from breeze blocks. It is an iconic symbol of power throughout religious and secular imagery and texts, from the thrones of Solomon and David to rulers and leaders throughout history. There is even a TV series *Game of Thrones*, all about the pursuit of power.

AMc: Tell me about some of the key objects and reference points included around you in the painting. The photographs, the view from the window, your necklaces, the metal ibises, the lottery ticket, the red band, the warrior figure and the rabbit fur.

WE: That's another essay! These are my set of symbols and signifiers - some personal some more universal - alluding to painting's major themes of life and death. The Wendy in the painting is putting on red boxing wraps. Here we have the painter as a female warrior, taking on the (art) world, referencing the struggle to paint. (And perhaps - through the crumpled lottery tickets on the floor - the idea that luck and economic

Wendy Elia, ***Portrait of the Artist as an Old Woman***, (detail)

success are also intertwined.) She traces the narrative of a fighting life through the use of smaller images and objects which allude to both the personal and the cultural: a photo of my younger self as a martial artist; a figurine of a female fighter; the arrow head around her neck; a rubber bullet; a tube of paint crushed beneath her foot.

On the left of the mirror is the artist (again my younger self) painting, my children in the frame. There is also a dustpan and brush in the image she is painting, a reminder perhaps of the struggle between domesticity and professional practice ('the pram in the hall').

The other images above the mirror include the painter as musician, recalling Angelica Kauffman's *Self-portrait of the Artist* hesitating between the Arts of Music and Painting. There is also a photograph of myself as a child.

Dürer's *Melancholia*, appropriated and placed on the right, parallels the main image, depicting, as it does, a woman surrounded by tools. As well as inserting myself into this masterpiece, I am alluding to my own temperament as an artist.

Below it, one of the images placed on a block appropriates Walter Dahn's *The Painter (in Search of the Icon of the Twentieth Century)* – herself headless and naked balancing on a tightrope with paintbrushes.

Below that, one of Holbein's 1526 engravings from his *Danse Macabre* series depicts a duchess being dragged to her deathbed.

AMc: When you paint portraits of other people, do you also try to include objects that carry meaning?

WE: Yes.

AMc: What are the key elements of your identity that you're hoping to pull out in this self-portrait?

WE: Survival.

Wendy Elia, ***Portrait of the Artist as an Old Woman***, (detail)

AMc: *I Could Of Been A Contender* is a family portrait. How important a part of your identity do you think your mother and your children represent? Do they appear in the new painting in any way?

WE: Yes they all do. My mother is the first image on top of the mirror with me. My children are all present in the left-hand image on the wall as I paint. Of course, these are a major part of anyone's identity from childhood through to adulthood. I am also making a comment on the 'pram in the hall' syndrome continually alluded to by artists and critics. Yes, it's harder for women to develop anything creatively if they are the main carers of both the young and the elderly – but it's not impossible, it just takes longer to develop. Note the dustpan and brush in the front of the painting of the family group in the portrait.

AMc: The title of your painting, *Portrait of the Artist as an Old Woman*, references Rembrandt's self-portrait *Portrait of the Artist as an Old Man*. What is it about his portrait that appeals to you?

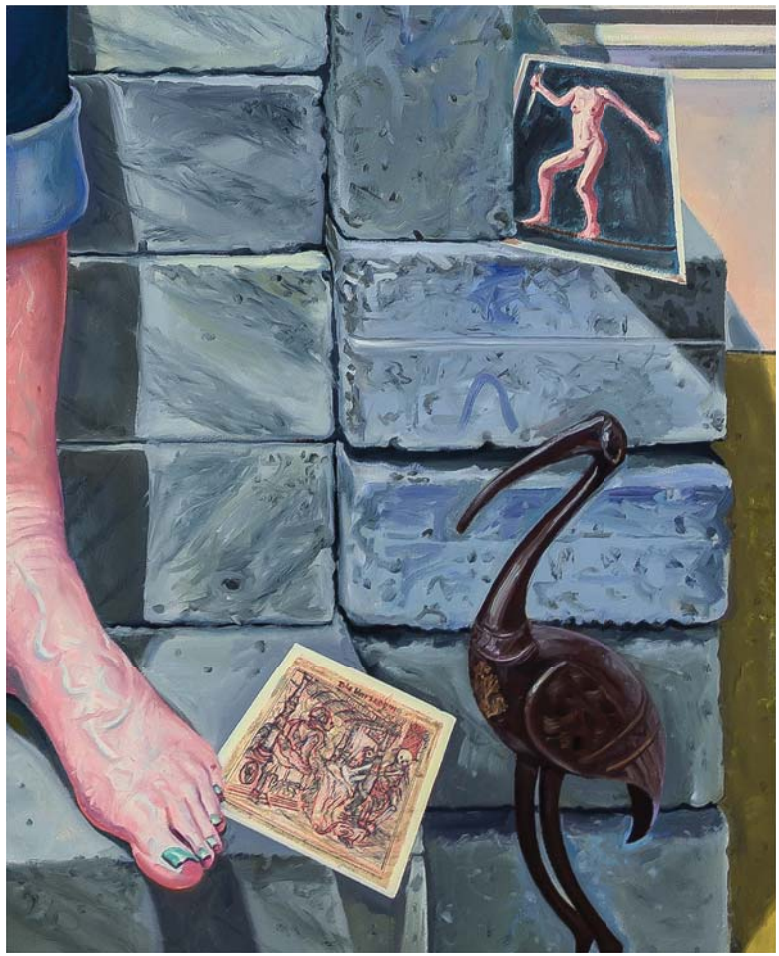
WE: All of his late portraits are interesting, particularly *Self-Portrait with Two Circles*. If you think about what had happened in his life up to that point – that's why he is a true painter's painter. He made no money in painting those last self-portraits, he just had the belief in his ability and will to paint.

AMc: How has the concept of self-portraiture changed since the 17th century?

WE: In the 17th century, the sense of self was defined by one's place in the world. The concept of self-portraiture didn't exist as such (or, at least, not in the sense of the Romantic notion of the artist's subjectivity).

AMc: How important is it for you as a contemporary artist to (a) have a knowledge of and (b) demonstrate this knowledge of art history? Do you see this as part of your own history, in a way? Do you consider Dürer's *Melancholia* to be an accurate representation of the contemporary artist as well as the artist in Dürer's time? Do you find it fitting as a portrait of yourself as well?

WE: Yes to all of this!



Wendy Elia, ***Portrait of the Artist as an Old Woman***, (detail)

Q & A

Anna McNay & Margaret Ashman

Margaret Ashman is an experienced printmaker, specialising in photo etching. She trained at the Universities of Hertfordshire and Brighton and is also an Oxford graduate. Her work with dancers has led to ethereal images capturing ephemeral moments and spontaneous bodily gesture. Her studies of deaf people signing have led to work in which she addresses issues of religious faith, spirituality and emotion. Hands feature as a recurring theme in her images, whether reaffirming positive qualities of human nature or as a means of expression. For her self-portrait for Shifting Subjects*, Ashman put herself in the spotlight for the first time. She learned to sign dance and was filmed performing a translation of a poem she wrote in her journal. Photographs were taken of this performance and she has turned a selection of these in photo etchings.*

Opposite Page: Margaret Ashman, ***Look***, 2015, Photo Etching, Edition of 10, 39 x 55 cm © the artist

Anna McNay: You described the project as 'rather like going on a journey'. How interlinked do you consider time and place to be with ideas of identity and self? Do you believe there to be something recognisable and fixed that forms your identity or is it always changing, as ephemeral as time itself?

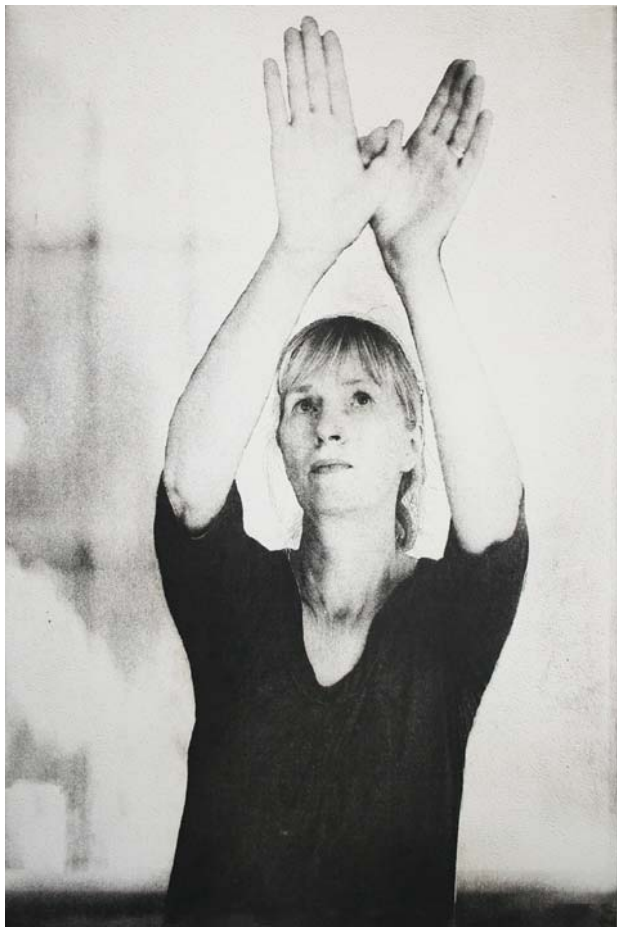
Margaret Ashman: As a Christian believer, the life of faith is often described as a journey – think of the Pilgrim's Progress, in which life's obstacles act as formative influences in terms of character. I think that there is a recognisable 'me' who was there at the very beginning as it says in Psalms – 'Before you were in your mother's womb, I knew you' – and this 'me' will pass into the next life. However, over the course of a life's journey a person can undergo enormous changes in personality, in the roles they play, and in their ideas and feelings. My roles have included those of daughter, sister, wife, mother, physicist, artist, arts organiser and, in as much as my identity is defined by these roles, it has shifted with time.

AMc: The starting point for this project was a diary, in which you recorded thoughts and feelings, emotional highs and lows. Have you always kept a diary?

MA: I have kept a diary from time to time but it's not something I do regularly. When the children were young, I tended to keep one, and found it useful to record their progress as much as anything. Sometimes I have kept prayer journals. When I travel I sometimes keep daily notes of the places I have visited. I guess my diary habits have changed over the years.

AMc: To what extent do you feel your diary – and the resulting poem – present a true vision of yourself and to what extent have you created, edited and crafted a presentation for the outside world?

MA: I decided to keep a diary with the project in mind so it began in a rather self-conscious way. As I wrote, it became easier to write more naturally and I found it cathartic. It is a presentation of myself, but I believe it to be an honest one.



Margaret Ashman, ***Spirit***, 2015, Photo Etching, Edition of 10, 39 x 55 cm

AMc: When and why did the element of sign dance come into this project? Can you explain a bit about what exactly sign dance is?

MA: I had worked with choreographers and dancers who write and perform sign dance but I had never performed it myself before. Sign dance is an artistic combination of dance steps and sign language for the deaf. It is an expression of ideas and often has a narrative element. It was invented by David Bower and Isolte Avila, who call themselves Sign Dance Collective.

AMc: Is the sign dance a literal translation of your poem?

MA: No. Just as sign language has its own grammar, which is very different from English grammar, the sign dance says things in a different way from the poem. The poem was in some ways a starting point for the dance rather than a translation of it – and yet it is very true to what the poem says. Chisato, the choreographer, worked with me to form the exact movements. Some of her initial suggestions I found unnatural or too difficult to remember. Sometimes she asked me to improvise some movements, which she refined, and so the piece took shape.

AMc: Will the poem be included in the exhibition as well?

MA: I don't know how to include the poem without visitors assuming that the dance is a literal translation. I think it would give them more of an insight into what the dance is about, so perhaps it should be somewhere, either on the wall or as a printed hand out.

Margaret Ashman, ***Mirror***, 2015, Photo Etching, Edition of 10, 39 x 55 cm

AMc: You are a printmaker who specialises in photo etching. What made you decide to produce a film for this project?

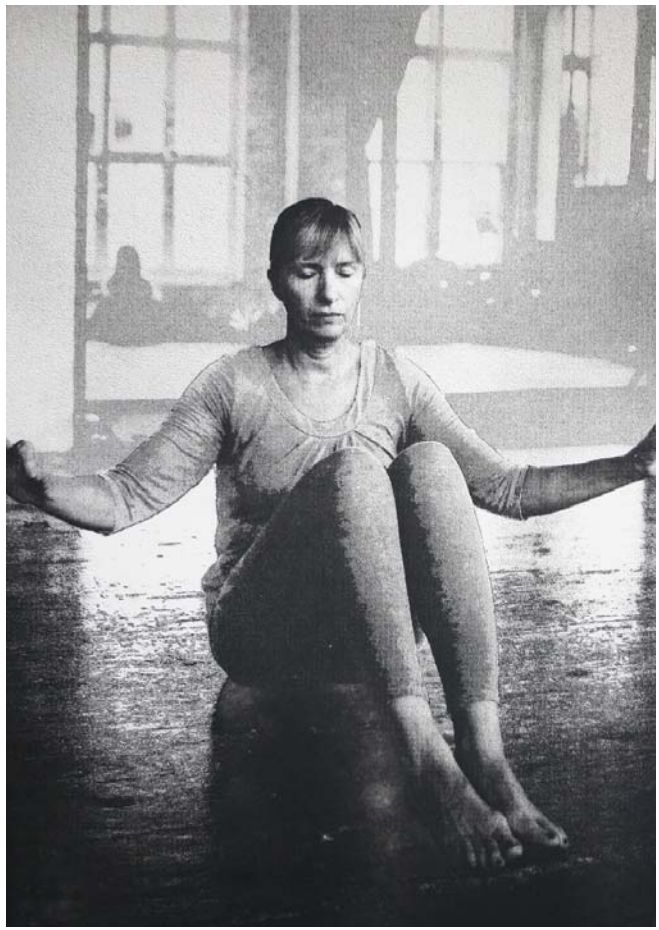
MA: I was initially going to just make photo etchings from the sign dance. Then I had the idea of asking Chisato to perform the sign dance, live in a gallery. Next, I decided to record her dance on film but, of course, it made much more sense for me to perform the sign dance for the film as it's a self-portrait with me as the subject. I could have used stills from the film as the basis for the photo etchings but I decided to commission a separate photographer as she would be shooting with a different intention.

AMc: A lot of your works have had elements of dance in them. Have you ever been a dancer yourself?

MA: I have never been a dancer and so learning and performing the dance did not come naturally to me. I was very much in the hands of Chisato, to show me what to do. I felt it was an entirely appropriate thing to do to embody the dance myself and put myself into the model's role.

AMc: How difficult or enjoyable did you find the experience of learning the dance and being filmed and photographed?

MA: I found it very challenging to begin with, in terms of physically making the movements in a graceful way, in trying to remember sequences and in not being self-conscious. At the beginning, I almost felt like giving up and I would have done if I hadn't been so determined to make the film. One of the sequences was particularly hard - the one which references my late parents, particularly my father. By the end of the week I began to enjoy myself and feel more at ease with my body and the dance.



Margaret Ashman, ***Seek***, 2015, Photo Etching, Edition of 10, 39 x 55 cm

AMc: You've collaborated with numerous people on this project – the sign dance choreographer, Chisato Minamimura; the filmmaker, Emil Kunda; and the photographer, Rachel Manns. Are you used to collaborating with others? What challenges did/does this present?

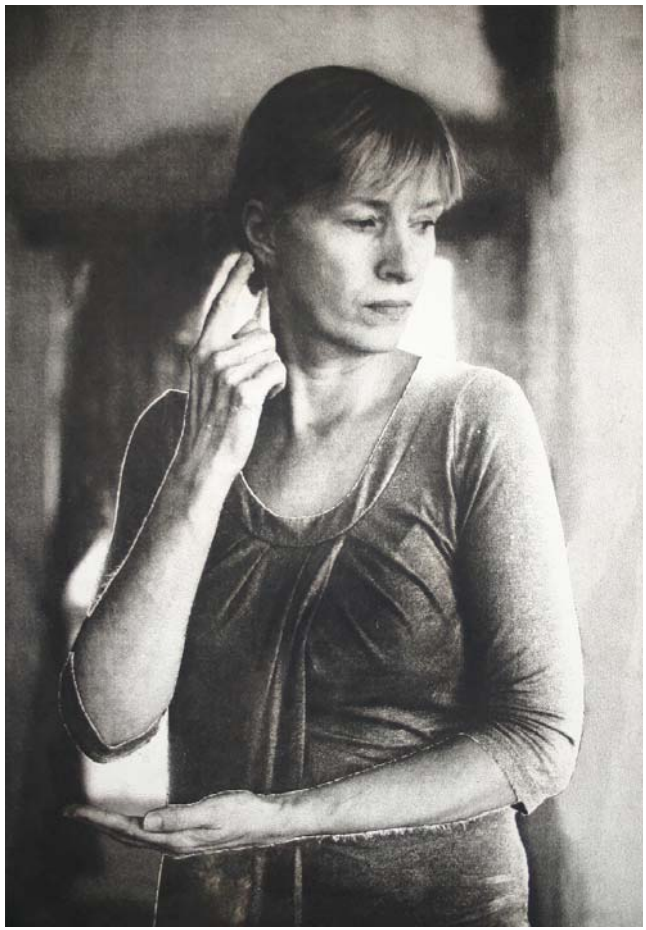
MA: I think it was relatively easy to collaborate with the other people on this project, partly because we all had very well defined areas of working. I know nothing about choreography or filmmaking and, although I take photographs, I don't consider myself to be a professional photographer, so I was happy to hand over the reins to Chisato, Emil and Rachel. They were very gracious about accepting my feedback as well and so I was able to influence the outcome.

AMc: Your daughter, the professional musician Hannah Ashman, composed and recorded the piano soundtrack for the film. Do you see her involvement as representative of another integral part of your identity?

MA: It is certainly lovely to have the family connection but I would not go as far as saying that Hannah represents part of my identity. She is her own person and I had no influence over the music she wrote for the film. Of course, we have a very deep bond as mother and daughter and I have loved observing her musical talents develop over the years. In one sense, her music is very familiar to me.

AMc: How significant do you think the mother-daughter relationship is to the concept of identity and autobiography? Were you aware of Linda's work while producing your own?

MA: I was not aware of the work that Linda was producing for the exhibition and it is a coincidence that there is a mother-daughter element to my work. It is rather nice that my work links to hers in this way. As well as the mother-daughter relationship between me and Hannah, I was also conscious of my relationship with my own mother. A line or two of the poem speak of her death. I lost my mother a couple of years ago and I began the diary when the loss was still relatively raw, so, in a sense, the mother-daughter relationship exists within my work at quite a deep level.



Margaret Ashman, ***Turn***, 2015, Photo Etching, Edition of 10, 39 x 55 cm

AMc: Can you explain the process of making a photo etching?

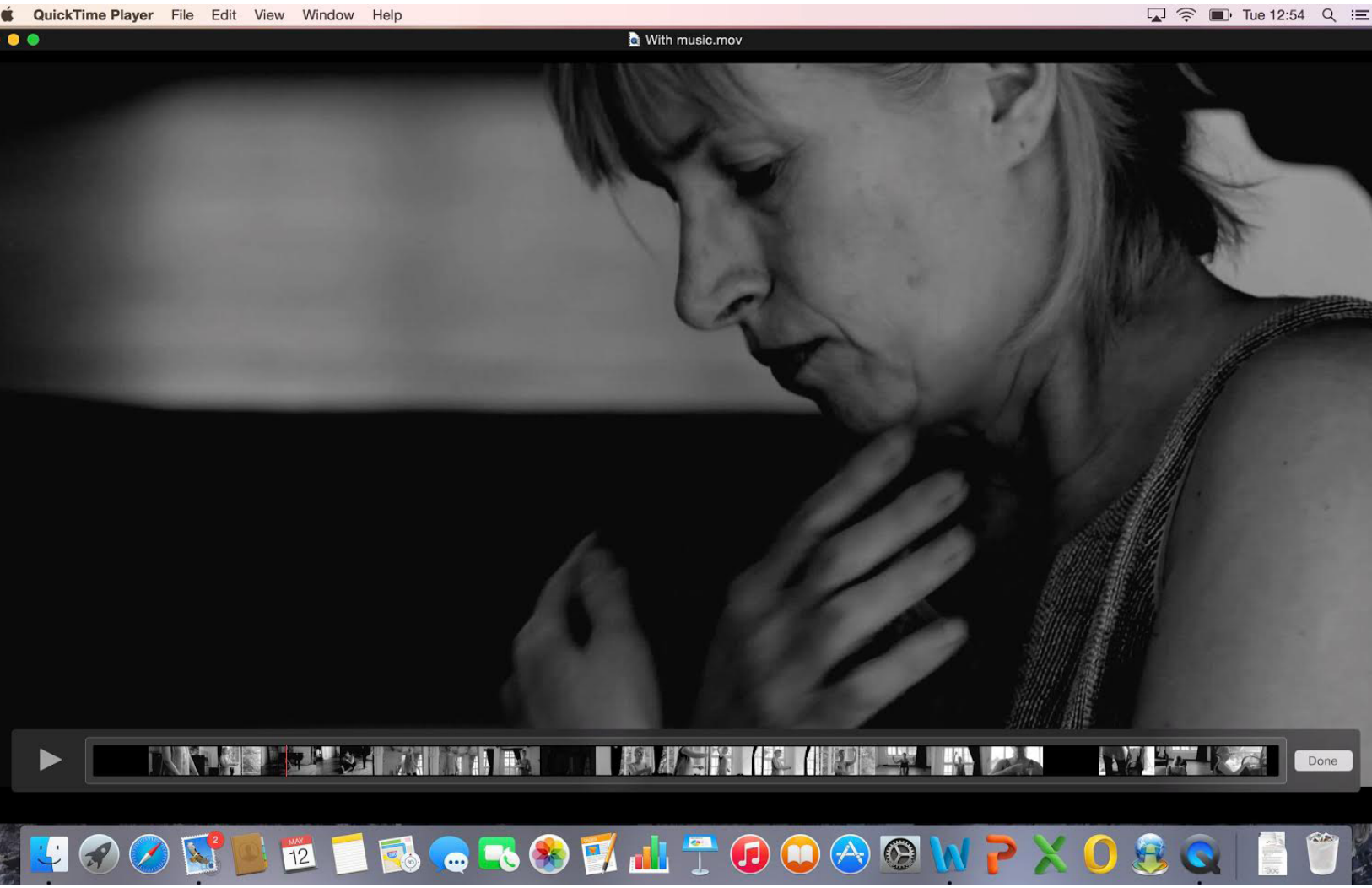
MA: I start from a photograph as a digital file and make changes such as cropping and altering the tones or removing background detail. I make the image black and white and change the tones into a random half tone. I get this new file printed at a copy shop on to a transparency the same size as I want the finished work to be. I take this to a print workshop, where I spend a couple of days transferring the image on to copper or steel. The photo etching process involves coating the metal plate with a light sensitive medium, which is then exposed to UV light and developed chemically creating a photographic stencil on the plate. The plate is then aquatinted and etched until the black areas are etched deeply enough to hold sufficient ink. Finally I experiment with different inks and papers until the plate prints correctly.

AMc: Had you ever made a self-portrait before? How do you feel about the experience now the work is complete?

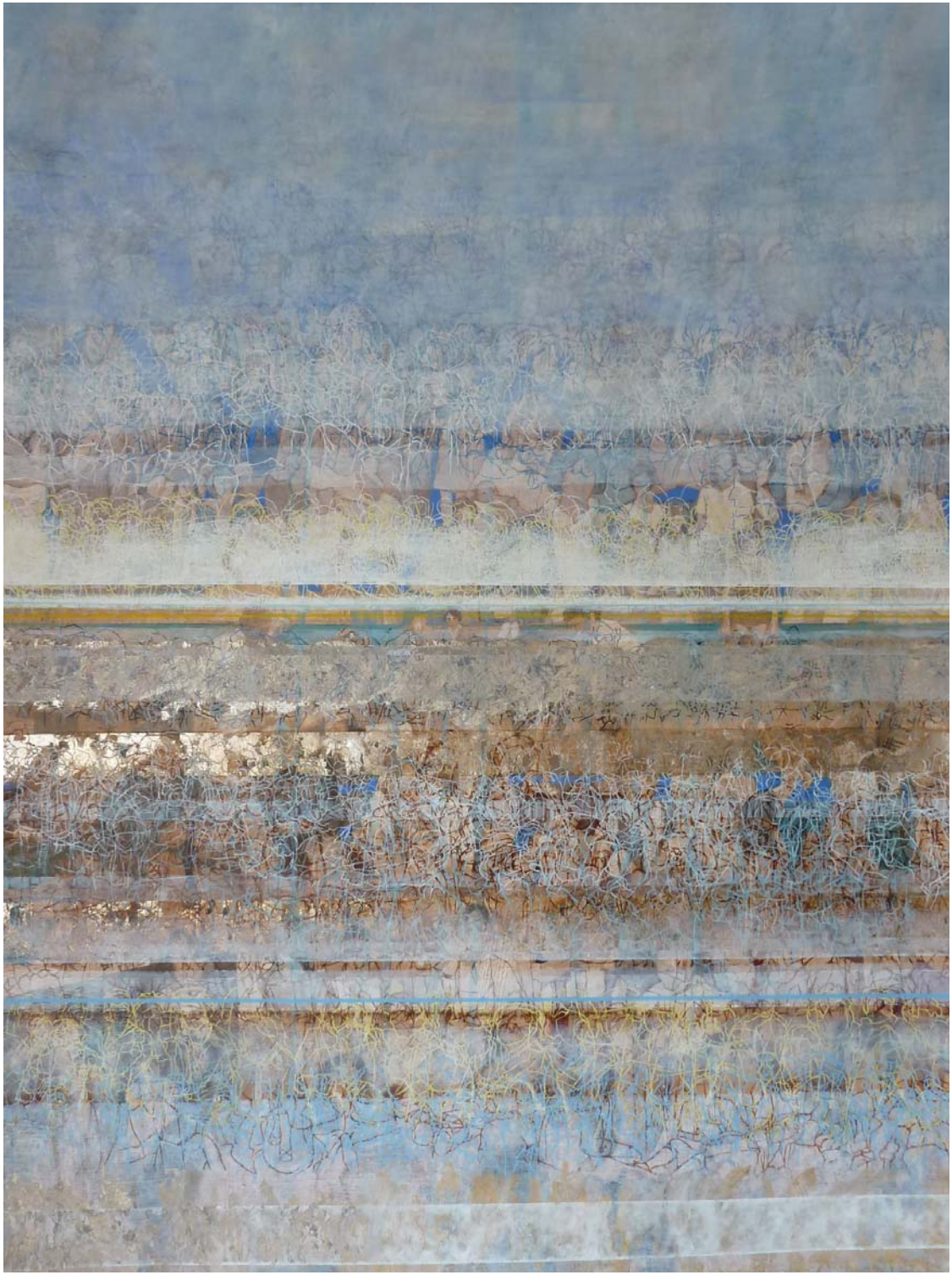
MA: No, I hadn't made a self-portrait before, apart from the odd drawing sitting in front of a mirror. It is more exposing than making other kinds of work. There is always a sense of exposure when putting up any kind of artwork for public scrutiny – but this is more intense.

AMc: What sort of questions do you hope your work – and the exhibition at large – will raise about women's self-portraiture and sense of identity (on the whole and as artists)?

MA: I hope that the work engages with other women, whether artists or not. I hope that they can identify with the artists portrayed in these self-portraits and find them self-affirming. I hope that women viewers come away with a greater sense of self and self-worth.



Margaret Ashman, ***Film Still***, 2015



Q & A

Anna McNay & Linda Ingham

Linda Ingham is a visual artist and curator, who lives and works in her coastal studio in Lincolnshire. The passage of time, location and place is represented in Ingham's work through process and systems of recording and the use of materials, such as jet, gathered from the beach; silverpoint and handmade gesso; collage from antique books & found objects. Her drawn and painted constructions are often gathered together as composite pieces and installations, which may change over time. Self-imagery is also a regular feature of her work. Works for Shifting Subjects *include a telephone table containing a book filled with memories and remembered conversations she had with her mother and a pair of profiles, shaped from her cast shadow, surrounded by the abstracted landscape of the Humber.*

Opposite Page: Linda Ingham, ***Mother & Child I***, 2015, Oils & Mixed Media on Paper, 98 x 75 cm, © the artist

Anna McNay: You speak of your work 'concentrating on place and time through conversation and autobiography'. Is it more a case of using place and time to help define an uncertain and shifting identity, or do you use your identity and sense of self to try to grasp such ephemeral concepts as time and space?

Linda Ingham: I think this depends, as I have used self-imagery in several series. The *Profile Pieces* became my way back into something alluding to self-portraiture but in which the image of 'me' is actually closer to being subtracted; a 'space' shaped a bit like me. It is more about using place and time to define an 'identity'. I tend towards a depressive nature and swing between putting myself out there and wanting to hide. The collaged elements and stylistic references to my home landscape put something of 'me' into the *Profile Pieces*. I'd like to think that the inclusion of this material in some way resonates and communicates something to the viewer – maybe a sense of authenticity? It doesn't matter to me that the viewer can't see what the material is and I don't think it is necessary to know this in order to have an understanding of the work. I like the idea that not everything within the work is on show; I like the hidden.

AMc: Can you explain a bit about how the *Profile Pieces* are made? You've touched upon it just now, but there are many layers to them, and you've included collaged snippets from *G2* and the *Magna Carta*, creating an unlikely conversation between the two.

LI: The paper has been primed with several layers of gesso and then had four layers of jet applied, before being worked into with a combination of silverpoint and graphite. I think of this as a first layer. The jet is found on the beach close to where I live. I like the way it looks within the work and I enjoy working with it. The first layer of imagery is of multiples of shells and shadow using an additive and subtractive technique. Then layers of oil paint, silver leaf and collage are applied. Some of the collaged content is quite playful, such as the *G2* texts about Theresa May and the break up of Chris Martin and Gwyneth Paltrow's marriage; the March piece is a bit more political as it contains text from the lead up to the election. Meanings within a work develop as they go along – it's an on-going communication between the person making the work and what is being made.

Linda Ingham, ***Profile Piece I – May 14th***, 2015, Oils, Silverpoint & Mixed media on Paper, 75 x 56 cm
Profile Piece II – March 26th, 2015, Oils, Silverpoint & Mixed media on paper, 75 x 56 cm

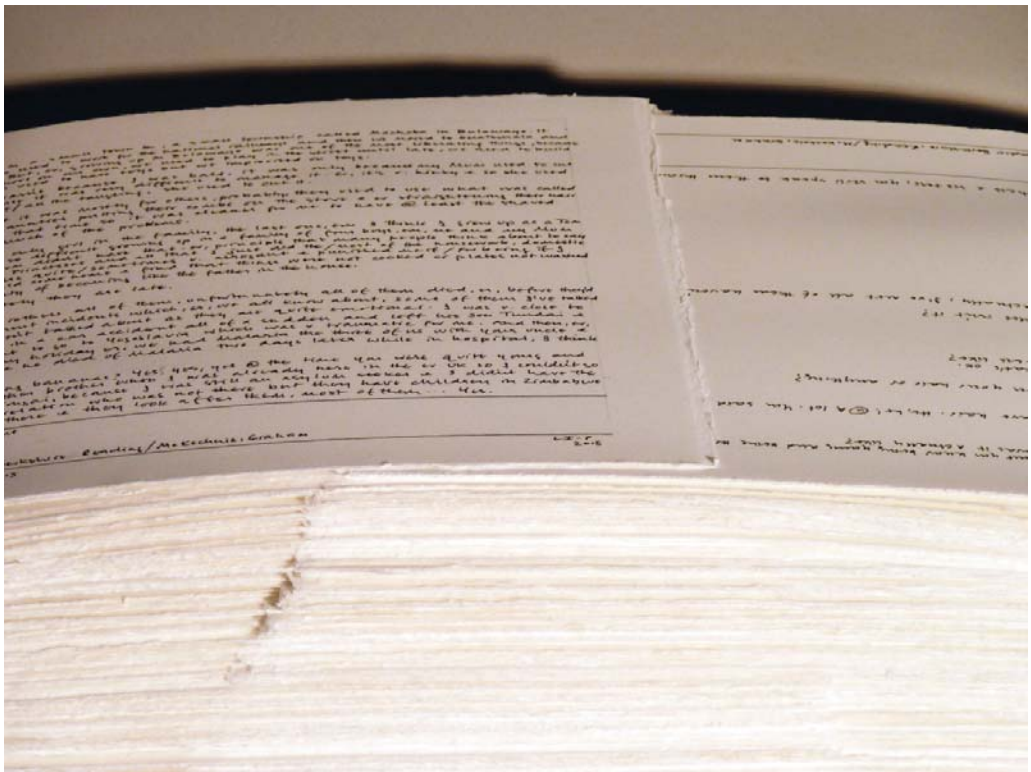
I should add that oil paint should not go over graphite and that, through trial and error, I have found that jet yellows and fades with time, especially if in the way of strong sunlight, but I am interested in building a certain amount of anticipated change into the work and I try to find various ways to do this. While I use the best quality materials I can, the idea that a piece of work has a life of its own and will likely be different in ten years' time to how it was when it left the studio attracts me.

AMc: Can you explain a little about *The Listening Project*? Were you actually involved?

LI: I haven't been involved in *The Listening Project*, no, but I discovered it through listening to Radio 4. I love archives and the fact that there is a sound archive of conversations between contemporary people, related to each other in different ways, and about a wide range of subjects, fascinates me, as does the notion of 'capturing' a conversation. It is a collaboration between the BBC and the British Library. The idea to use it came through meditating on just why I had bought a vintage telephone table that I knew I must do something with, the importance of communication, and how the nature of conversation has changed as media have developed.

AMc: Tell me about the conversations that you had with your own mother.

LI: My mother died six years ago now and I am struck by how difficult it is to remember our conversations and how it always seems to be the painful ones that are remembered, although, once someone is gone, what you want to remember are the happy times. I can easily remember what she said to me when I had just found out that I couldn't have children, but I can only remember a sort of sense of our happier conversations. By listening to conversations between mothers and daughters in *The Listening Project's* archive, I am attempting to access my own apparently forgotten memories. But what I do for my practice is create constructs. Some of what I 'remember' might therefore not have actually happened.



Linda Ingham, ***Conversations with my Mother - Mother & Daughter***, 2015,
Hand-Made Books, 25.5 x 29.5 x 10 cm

AMc: How would you describe your relationship with your mother?

LI: We had a good relationship, certainly not a combative one, and we loved each other very much, but, like many mothers/daughters/sons/fathers, we were very different people, and I'm not sure how well we understood each other. When she died, I couldn't work for a while. I had a solo show coming up, for which I had hoped to make all new work. This meant I had to seriously consider the work I had done to date and what I would be happy to exhibit. Through the process of reviewing my back-catalogue up to that time, I discovered that the work I considered to be most successful was that which somehow came out of difficult times, such as some of the *Red Roar* pieces I made after finding out that I would not be able to have children. The first pieces I made after my mother's death were a series of drawings entitled *Losing & Finding*, now in the modern & contemporary collection at Swindon Museum & Art Gallery, for which I photographed myself without make-up, with my eyes closed, thinking of my mother, and then used the image to develop the drawings.

AMc: To what extent would a portrait of your mother be a portrait of yourself? How much of how you are now is due to her?

LI: That's an interesting question. Her death has undeniably affected me massively in many ways. I suppose you could say that a lot of who I am now is down to her, both to who she was when she was here and to losing her. As I have grown older, I have made physical discoveries about myself that seem to echo elements of her physicality. Certainly, the realisation that the work I consider to be the most successful has often developed from life's more painful moments has changed the way I work now and the subjects that I choose.

Linda Ingham, ***Conversations with my Mother***, Hand-Made Book, 2015,
Oils & Mixed Media on Paper, 25.5 x 21.5 x 4 cm

AMc: For *Conversations with my Mother*, you are concealing your own memory book in a drawer in a vintage telephone table, allowing visitors to view it only through frosted glass. Is this purely a decision based on aesthetics and artistic concept or is it also another form of veiling and protecting your privacy?

LI: I want the book to be viewed through frosted glass, partly because of aesthetic reasons, and partly because of my belief that not everything needs to be on show. The retrieval of memories often brings up things that are not clear; mis-rememberings and uncertainties – the frosted glass and concealment are more to do with this and the experience we all have of feeling that something we are attempting to remember is close to the surface but often just will not quite emerge. It's not really to do with privacy.

AMc: How much of your work is portraiture? And how much is self-portraiture?

LI: I would say that, for the past twenty years or so, my visual preoccupation within my practice has manifested itself in terms of human form. Sometimes this has been bodies, but the power, for me, is around the head in some way. I did a series of some two hundred works, derived from more than eighty participants, just concentrating on their facial features, but I'm not sure I'd call them portraits. I have done portraits of other people, but perhaps, as an only child, who often had to entertain herself, the self-portrait has been most consistently prevalent throughout my practice.

Linda Ingham, ***Conversations with my Mother***, Hand-Made Book installation 2015, and Mother & Child I, 2015 Oils & Mixed Media on Paper, 98 x 75 cm

Most recently, I have been making work about place, the objects I find, and the social history. For *Shifting Subjects*, I have attempted to apply some of these methodologies, to bring 'place' – which as much as a piece of land is formed by the people who live within it – into work with an autobiographical aspect.

AM: What sort of questions do you hope your work – and the exhibition at large – will raise about women's self-portraiture and sense of identity (on the whole and as artists)?

LI: As a whole project, perhaps questions might arise around how women are presented and represented, and how we present and represent ourselves. Wider than that, I hope that the body of work on show will demonstrate issues surrounding class, social structure and social constructs; the changing nature and methods of communication; and the structure of the art world and women's place within it.

Linda Ingham, ***The Beach***, 1970

Lauren Printy Currie, ***undoing dark green, twisting to right***, Photo- Andy Weekes

A Place that Thinks Differently

by

Ashley Gallant

The year is 1985. The Guerrilla Girls, masked and holding banners, stand outside museums and galleries, pasting the east village in posters, fighting against the inherent sexism and racism in Museums.

This was the year before I was born.

A historic collection will always be inherently biased. The work collected was collected in a time where only few women had the opportunity and privilege to be able to train and could afford the luxury of time to produce art works, and curated by a male audience that did not value the work.

But how does work by today's female artist relate to an historic canon which is mostly male?

I have decided to work with this bias, to provide opportunity.

Women, although underrepresented as artists in historic collections are over represented as subject matter. So in my first rehang of the portrait gallery at the Collection and Usher Gallery I have displayed only women as the subject matter. Although the lack of female artist in historic collections means that many of the images are produced by men, it is still shocking to see only women as you enter the first room of the museum and sets the tone that this is a place that thinks differently.

It is jarring to be confronted by women and only women (hung at a lower more female eye height). No brave heroes or lords of the manor but mothers and daughters, dancers and working women. We took this opportunity to work with a young female curator and two female artists to produce new works for this gallery. Allowing them to shift the depiction of women in the museum space from male to female. Purposefully shifting from portraiture to self-portraiture. The work by Lauren Gault in particular riffs on the absence of the female maker in the gallery. Ceramic pieces, created by the artist's body forming depressions in clay, lay colourfully glazed internally, darkly externally. Representing the internal/external life of the subject but also the missing maker. As in the portraits on the walls created by males, the female is both present and removed.

We are thrilled to be working with Abbey Walk Gallery to further the discussion within our own gallery around female representation in museum collections.

The Guerrillas are now part of the canon for me, something I studied at school and something that feels removed and past, a movement to consider. They were protesting at an exhibition which stated that it was an overview of 'international contemporary painting' but in which only 13 of the 169 artists were female.

Today we invite female artists in to actively question and challenge the sexism of the past.

But as a curator who grew up post-Guerrilla girls I'm still hoping for the day when I'm asked the demographics of the artists I show and I can answer simply; they're all great artists. And this answer be seen as correct, not naïve because we have reached equality.

Ashley Gallant
Collections Access Officer (Contemporary Art)
The Collection Lincoln and Usher Gallery

Gillian Hadwin & Elaine Munson, Directors of Abbey Walk Gallery

Thanks & Acknowledgements

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It has been a pleasure also to work with staff at Sadie Coles HQ, the Lincoln Collection and Usher Gallery, and Leeds Art Gallery with regard to the catalogue and extending the reach of the exhibition and wider project through exhibiting the film and providing conference facilities.

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Special thanks go to Wendy Elia, Margaret Ashman and Linda Ingham for their hard work and commitment to the project,to Anna McNay for a magnificent essay, and also to David Power at Lincs Inspire for his welcome support throughout.

Wendy Elia, ***Portrait of the Artist as an Old Woman***, (detail)

Abbey Walk Gallery

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