

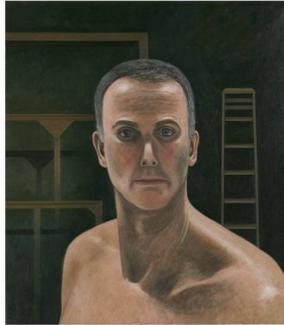
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A Collection of Artists' Portraits, Car Engines and Notes to Self

Picture: Scott Kahn's 'Self Portrait in Storage' (2004)

By Peter Plagens

Introspective: A Show of Artists' Self Portraits



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Through March 19

A long time ago, a painter I know was asked, by a freelance curator who was getting up a show of landscapes, if the painter had any landscapes in the racks. "I'm an abstract painter," the artist said. "Well, yes," the curator replied, "but do you have anything you can call a landscape?"

Although it's doubtful this gathering of nearly 60 self-portraits, each by a different artist, was assembled in an equivalent matter, only a few straightforward, painter-looking-intently-into-a-mirror paintings are in the show. (Those by Scott Kahn and Catherine Murphy are especially welcome.) Most of the pictures feature, to the contrary, novel takes on the genre. There's a trademark fictional self portrait by Cindy Sherman (as Lucille Ball); a midbody photograph of the painter Betty Tompkins, dressed in black, holding a small painting of female genitals at crotch level; and—a bridge way too far—Carl Ostendarp's painting of a big question mark.

In a chockablock way, however, the exhibition is rich. Such well-known contemporaries as Janine Antoni, Chuck Close and Mark Greenwold mingle with such recent heroes as Robert Arneson and Leonard Baskin, who rub shoulders with art-historically approved artists Lovis Corinth and Kathë Kollwitz, who share egalitarian wall space with such emerging artists as Beverly Mclver.

Gallery press materials profess the self-portrait is "the lingua franca of the smartphone era." I'd go one layer deeper and say that the mode's putative resurgence has to do with the contemporary obsession with personal "identity." As to whether the show's manic diversity also signals an exhaustion in self-portraiture, I'd say no. After all, there are no boundaries to what you can call a "self portrait."