



ART REVIEW

Reversing the camera

Self-images made without a smartphone in intriguing display

By Charles Desmarais

One could argue that it started with photography: the realization that our self is, in large measure, cosmetic. That our identity, essential as it may be, is nevertheless a choice, and its outward manifestation a display.

We are dealt a hand, of course. Nature and nurture assign the role; the self is the performance. We perform many selves, adapting them to the moment. Could we know that without the ability to inspect an image of the self in the context of the rest of the world? Without the photograph?

An entertaining exhibition opening this week at the San Jose Museum of Art is, underneath it all, a deeply perplexing one. "This Is Not a Selfie: Photographic Self-Portraits From the Audrey and Sydney Irmas Collection" is on view from Friday, Aug. 25, to Jan. 14. It implicitly makes the case



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Top: Yasumasa Morimura's "An Inner Dialogue with Frida Kahlo (Collar of Thorns)." **Above:** Claude Cahun's "I.O.U. (Self-Pride)."

that the average selfie of today is less a picture than a byproduct of social interaction (see Snapchat, where viewing an image causes it to disappear). The works in this show, the title announces, are something more.

The 66 works presented (some works comprise several individual pictures) were chosen from among nearly 200 donated by Audrey and Sydney Irmas, beginning in 1992, to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Their daughter Deborah, a historian of photography, advised her parents in building the collection; she is also guest curator of "This Is Not a Selfie."

A piece by Yves Klein, "Leap Into the Void" (1960), is at the gallery entrance. It's a famous fake — Klein manipulated the scene and the negatives to show him in full swan dive from a building's high story into the

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© Lisa Anne Auerbach / Gavlak Gallery

Lisa Anne Auerbach's "Take This Knitting Machine and Shove It" (2009) presents multiple selves in the same picture.

Look at me: a display of self-images

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street below.
A significant work of conceptual art, though less familiar in the context of photography, it is the perfect introduction to the topic of the self-portrait as art: a persona constructed for the event, an image of an idea, a design that concentrates the viewer's attention. Klein, never shy of embellishment, depicts the artist as a flying shaman, a spiky-haired demigod in a dark business suit.

Claims to the heroic, or send-ups of that idea, are an important sub-theme of the exhibition. There's the requisite Cindy Sherman "Untitled Film Still" from 1977, in which the artist assumes the role of movie actress. Yasumasa Morimura assumes the persona of a famous artistic forebear in his spectacularly decorative "An Inner Dialogue with Frida Kahlo (Collar of Thorns)" (2001).

More astonishing is the famous French studio portraitist Nadar's "Self-Portrait in Indian Costume" (ca. 1863), wherein the artist supposedly portrays himself as a noble American Indian — though his slack-bellied pose, head full of long, curly tresses and mustache give him away.

The Argentina-born Amalia Pica is represented by an 8-by-11-foot mural. The artist stands atop a stone plinth, back turned to the camera, a megaphone in her hand. A landscape of field and forest unfolds before her. She is the orator, the oracle, the heroic sculpture, yet this grand mural is undercut by the dull gray tones of its material — pasted-together office copies — and the only audience she faces is the unseen horde of bugs and beasts amid the grasses and trees.

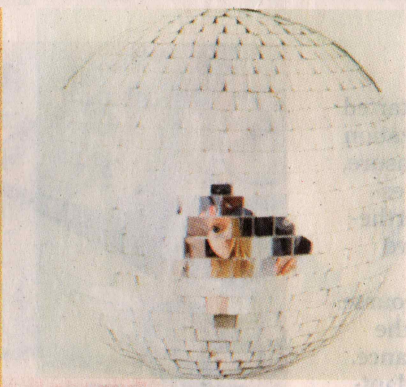
The artist Orlan, notorious for choosing to become living sculpture by subjecting herself to multiple plastic surgeries, made "Holy Shroud #3" in 1993. The photograph, a transfer to bloodied gauze of an image of her face, is displayed in a wall-mounted light box. The reference to a sacred visage



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© Anne Collier / Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Above: Anne Collier, "Mirror Ball" (2004).

Above, center: Chino Otsuka, "1976+2005, Kamakura, Japan" (2005).

Left: Nadar (Gaspard-Félix Tournachon), "Self-Portrait in Indian Costume" (circa 1863).

is obvious.

The notion that we are more than a single self — that we can don and doff identities at will, or maintain several at once — is highlighted by several of the artists in the exhibition. Bettina Hoffmann's "Untitled" (1997)

and Lisa Anne Auerbach's "Take This Knitting Machine and Shove It" (2009) make use of photo-editing software to present multiple selves in the same picture. In "1976+2005, Kamakura, Japan" (2005), the 33-year-old Chino Otsuka joins her 4-year-old

self on the beach.

Warren Neidich, in his 1993 series "Unknown Artist," used a clumsier early version of the technique to insert himself into documentary photographs of groups of artists. The rough doctoring sets the new pictures on

This Is Not a Selfie: Photographic Self-Portraits From the Audrey and Sydney Irmas Collection: 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays. Aug. 25-Jan.14. \$5-\$10. San Jose Museum of Art, 110 S. Market St., San Jose. (408) 271-6840. <http://sjmum.art.org>

an uncertain edge between an existential world and a manufactured ideal.

A picture from 1929-30 the size of a standard postcard is by Claude Cahun (born Lucy Renée Mathilde Schwob), who defined her whole life and career as a gender-bending shape shifter. It jams together at least 14 Claudes, some apparently masculine and at least one decidedly feminine. She wears her hair in a Roaring Twenties bob, her bright lips are straight off a Kewpie doll, and she wears a skintight shirt with nipples painted too high on the chest. "I am in training," a legend on the shirt reads. "Don't kiss me."

The list of photographers of note, from Berenice Abbott to William Wegman, is too long to catalog here. The show is a remarkable assembly, spanning some 150 years. It includes pictures most committed fans of photography will know, such as Lee Friedlander's 1966 image of his shadow contained within the bulk of a woman on a New York street, the shadow's head apparently sprouting hair as it falls upon a fur collar.

It is the many surprises, though, that make the exhibition so worth a visit. Like the image Diane Arbus made in 1945, "Self Portrait in Mirror." She is partially nude, her belly and breasts displaying a pregnant swell. The camera is visible in the picture, one tripod leg provocatively between her legs. Her head is tilted. Perhaps she is playing the coquette, but I don't read the gesture that way. She has asked a question, awaits an answer about this picture. This child of the union of woman and camera.

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