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Considering Triple Self-Portraiture in the Work of María Izquierdo

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Born in San Juan de los Lagos, Jalisco, María Izquierdo's (1902–1955) (Morales) artistic style blends the folkloric with the modern, integrating cubist and surrealist elements into depictions of the self, which she colors with earthy tones and motifs reflective of Aztec mysticism.¹ Of Izquierdo's painted self-portraits, *Prisioneras* (Prisoners, 1936) and *Sueño y presentimiento* (Dream and Premonition, 1947) appear in the current analysis as case studies for activating my developing theory of *triple self-portraiture*.² The likenesses between the two works showcase the artist's distinct style and reoccurring use of multiplicity when rendering the self. They share the following qualities: they similarly integrate indigenous motifs and surreal renderings of space, life, and bodily forms; both include pictorial narratives wrought with crisis imagery, such as physical entrapment or corporeal dismemberment; and the works contain multiple renderings of the artist's face within one composite frame. Together, these multiple visualities and pluralistic

¹ Though I continue on my exploration into Izquierdo's use of indigenous motifs in art historical contexts, on a biographical note, according to her daughter Aurora Posadas Izquierdo, the artist "adorned her house with traditional Mexican decor and even appeared in traditional Mexican dress in many photographs and self-portraits" (Ferrer 17). Izquierdo's story takes place against the historical backdrop(s) of Mexico's postrevolutionary era (1920–1940)—a period of political transformation for Mexico that exceeds the perimeters of this essay. For broad historical overviews, see Franco; Olcott; Olcott, et al.; Tuñón Pablos; Beezley and Meyer; Bethell; Joseph and Henderson; Knight (vols. 1 and 2); and Lomnitz. Izquierdo was one of the first women of the Mexican Renaissance (1920–1930s), a period when artists and thinkers set out to reconstruct Mexico's post-war national identity (Charlot), to sustain a successful career as a painter (Ades 119; Ferrer 6). She studied at the Escuela Nacional de Belles Artes, where Diego Rivera became president in 1929. His support culminated in a 1929 exhibition of her paintings that was held at the Galería de Arte Moderno del Teatro Nacional ("Las últimas exposiciones" 47–48). Thereafter, Izquierdo traveled to the United States where a solo exhibition at the Art Center in New York began a series of accomplishments, including exhibitions at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Ferrer 52). On Diego Rivera: Rivera, along with artists José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros, became known as *Los Tres Grandes* (Greeley 51; Anreus, Folgarait, and Greeley) muralists and were commissioned to paint the façades of federally funded educational institutions with nationalist imagery in a style known as *mexicanidad*. The style combined visions of modern industrialization and indigenous motifs with cubist, futurist, and other European avant-garde influences (Charlot 253–268). They became "virtually the sole visual architects of post-revolutionary Mexican national identity," but they "neglect[ed] the rich cultural dynamic of which they were an integral part" (Greeley 51).

² These works also depict chaos and fragmentation—both key characteristics of modernity in Western painting—with indigenous motifs and subject matter to render a juxtaposition of styles, nationality, and cultural identity distinct from other female artists painting in Mexico City at the time. "It has been documented that the figures and heads within the work are, in fact, likenesses of the artist, herself (Poniatowska 86). The dimensions for *Prisioneras* are 20 x 27 cm (Izquierdo 1936). The dimensions for *Sueño y presentimiento* are 45 x 60 cm (Izquierdo 1947). Though it is certainly possible to extend beyond the 'triple,' I suggest that three, synchronous (triple) visualities appear in these painted works as an appropriate starting point number from which seemingly singular, dualistic, and triple visualities may become quadruple visualities, and so on.

meanings culminate to what I call *pluralistic visualities*.³ Pluralistic visualities include several depictions of singular aspects of the artist's physicality (multiple renderings of the physical self), and each rendering of the artist's physicality signifies meanings in the plural (pluralistic meanings). In the context of this analysis, meanings exist on constantly changing continuums, though not without matrices within which they develop in signification (or not). In activating my theory of triple self-portraiture, I found in Izquierdo's self-portraits not one but three forms of the self: the self as oppressed (the past); the self as oppressing (the current); and the self as an emancipator (future). This theory exposes plurality in the seemingly singular significations of the self to culminate in a *triple* self-portrait. Triple self-portraiture illuminates pluralistic visualities within historically singular visualities to disrupt homogenous thinking about the self and others.

Singularity actually reflects an urgent need, a sort of angst in struggling to maintain a single sense of self that, perhaps, does not exist. If the human experience is inherently plural, then I must ask: how does one signify the plural self in one's own terms? What can the idea of plurality as seen in the triple self-portrait for example, teach us about our own methods for signifying the self and understanding others? Izquierdo's paintings included in this essay scream plurality but beg for interstice, suggesting a desire to live a life beyond the singular, beyond the multiple and plural, and into the interstice. Painted more than thirty years ago, the artist's desire for an interstitial existence is most evident in her use of multiplicity and the plural meanings arising from within one composite frame. Triple self-portraiture provides a map for locating plurality in the seemingly singular, and it requires a consistent interrogation of the absence of presence. this process of interrogation opens the sign and exposes the interstice as a space for possibilities in seemingly impossible worlds.

In *Prisioneras* (1936) Izquierdo includes indigenous iconography to communicate feelings of desertion and oppression. In the background hangs a crescent shaped moon slumbering in profile against a moving night sky of brown, purple, red, and blue shades.⁴ Izquierdo renders the earth with goldenrod, brown, and sienna hills. Haystacks consume the land and occupy the remainder of the image. Embedded in them, are five columns of white and gray, three of which support four women bound to the columns, "suffering under the influence of the moon" (203). A fourth woman in a magenta skirt lies at their feet. Her legs are bent, forming the shape of a heart. Her face rests pressed into the ground as she returns to the soil.

The work of twentieth-century philosopher Michel Foucault illustrates the

³ I use italics in this analysis to signify a Spanish-language terms, the titles of books or works of art, for emphasis, and to introduce new key terms within the context of this analysis.

⁴ According to Mexican folklore, the moon controls the menstrual cycle (Grimberg 203). Despite its great power, the moon sleeps, perhaps reacting to the supposed deaths of the women below.

seemingly unlikely pairing of patriarchy as a form of power and art as a form of liberty in his text, “The Subject and Power” (790). Pared down to just power and liberty from the powers that be, Foucault’s theory on the association between power and freedom enriches my point and informs my usage of power, oppression, and emancipation in this essay. Foucault writes:

The relationship between power and freedom’s refusal to submit cannot, therefore, be separated. The crucial problem of power is not that of voluntary servitude (how could we seek to be slaves?). At the very heart of the power relationship, and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom. Rather than speaking of an essential freedom, it would be better to speak of an “agonism”—of a relationship which is at the same time reciprocal incitation and struggle, less of a face-to-face confrontation which paralyzes both sides than a permanent provocation. (790)

Izquierdo’s imagery, when taken with Foucault’s theory on power, calls into question whether the painting might similarly depict patriarchal power not as a paralleling force but as a “reciprocal incitation and struggle” (790) between the artist and the authorities of Mexico’s nationalized artistic institutions.⁵ The artist does not include a visual narrative to explain why the women are bound to the columns. The viewer must guess, read, and do the connecting. This painting, when paired with Foucault’s idea of power and freedom appears as an incitation on the part of the artist to draw audience awareness or to ignite action for the viewer.

⁵ Izquierdo’s use of columns provides insight into the social context for the work. As quoted by art historian Robin Adèle Greeley, Rafael Solano notes that a work such as this might represent female enslavement to men, writing in 1937 that, “man never appears in María’s painting except as represented by a column or, more valiantly, by a horse” (69). One column appears on the earth but in a tilted perspective, while a larger and brighter column occupies the left perimeter of the image. The larger column stands on a red platform. Considering Solano’s words, it is possible that Izquierdo’s binding of the women to the columns can be understood as a visual metaphor for a cultural ideology that historically bound women’s independence to men, rendering women as lifeless from the social constraints imposed upon them. Furthermore, the columns could very well symbolize the regimes of power normalizing art as an historically male-dominated field. It is quite possible that the columns symbolize the diffuse web of power that, at that historical moment, Los Tres Grandes imposed upon some women in the arts, including Izquierdo. On Izquierdo’s relationship with Los Tres Grandes, Greeley writes, “in the late 1930s and 40s, the stylistic similarities she developed first to one then to another of the Muralists’ visual languages demonstrate, not an attempt to fit her work within their dominant paradigm, but rather the necessity of engaging in a public dialogue with the discourse provided by the Muralists in order to state her differences from it” (59).

Izquierdo's later *Sueño y presentimiento* (1947) exemplifies this notion of power as a binding and perhaps oppressing force between the artist and the social world(s) with confrontation as an artistic device for incitement. The artist takes on all three roles of power, rendering the self as, at once oppressor, oppressed, and emancipator. The work features a terrifying, nighttime image of a small pueblo set within a racked and desolate landscape of uprooted trees and stumps. In the building's walls are two windows. A woman in pink attire extends a decapitated female head from the open window to the right. With one eye open and long, mangled hair, her head appears strikingly colorful and alive, as its gray and black hair wraps around the branches of intertwined trees growing out of a smaller window to the left. More heads, alive with frightened expressions, hang from the branches extending from the tree. Below the pueblo's walls, lies a reddened and decapitated body, while several more decapitated brown bodies flee towards the distant horizon. Two small crucifixes, set on mounds of earth, punctuate the background and mid-ground of the landscape, while in the foreground, directly beneath the larger window, a blue crucifix is set within in a small, sienna-colored boat. A large tree to the rightmost perimeter stands amidst the chaos, shooting from the golden-colored earth. Its thick trunk appears bountiful; rich green leaves flourish from its branches, and a single downturned flower of deep red hangs silently in fatigue.

It has been documented that the figures and heads within the work are, in fact, likenesses of the artist, herself (Poniatowska 86).⁶ Thus, the woman in pink is a depiction of the artist as she takes part in the act of holding her own head out of the window. Greeley refers to this representation as a "double self-portrait" (71). Highlighting the burgeoning plurality of Izquierdo's methods of self-representation, this characterization recalls Susan Stanford Friedman's understanding of "dual consciousness" in women's identification process in autobiographies (75–76). Together, Greeley's and Stanford Friedman's dualistic visualities reflect W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of "double consciousness" (2–3). I suggest that Du Bois's text supports Greeley's and Stanford Friedman's conjectures to provide a possible means to see the process of othering at play in women's art and biographical texts. Women's identification processes for postrevolutionary artists in Mexico were, in part, deeply affected by the society in which they lived, but it is the act of recognizing the self as both a part of and distinct from society that a plural interpretation of the self can be developed. Stanford Friedman writes, "Not recognizing themselves in the reflections of cultural representation, women develop a dual consciousness—the self as culturally defined and the self as different from cultural prescription" (75). Her

⁶ "In this 1947 painting, Izquierdo figures herself into the architecture and landscape . . . to represent the devastation of Mexico, in the form of a horrific double self-portrait—the artist holding her own severed head" (Greeley 71).

use of “dual consciousness” (Stanford Friedman 75), as a consciousness affected *and* reflective of one’s culture, can prove particularly useful in expanding upon Greeley’s “double self-portrait” (71). It is likely that these dualistic visualities provided a safe, yet critical distance for the artist to render confrontational imagery in the forms of “severed head[s]” and decapitated bodies (Greeley 70–71n51; Spivak 250). In Izquierdo’s confrontations with the culture in which she lived, her work represented a new lens from which she viewed herself in such a way that saw the self in its plurality. The artist develops a dialogue within this work that indicates the presence of a developing “dual consciousness” (Stanford Friedman 75), but it is from this consciousness that the artist developed a “double self-portrait” (Greeley 71)—not only in duality but also in plurality and the porous spaces between the seemingly two consciousnesses.

As if to dominate this headless version of herself, Izquierdo appears in a stance that mirrors that of the trees located to our left. In her domination of this decapitated body part, the viewer sees a depiction of the artist as she, simultaneously, becomes her oppressor and experiences the effects of a self-inflicted oppression. Furthermore, trees take on a significant role in many of Izquierdo’s works and typically signify a male presence, while the images of her decapitated body refer to the “fate of the artist to that of her country” (71). Seemingly bound to the male-dominated paradigm of postrevolutionary patriarchy, as seen in politics, high art, and throughout popular culture in the forms of cultural patrimonies and nationalisms, the artist acknowledged paradigmatic oppression by becoming it. What is the greater function of this gesture? Although some scholars believe that this work can be thought of as a premonition of the heart attack Izquierdo suffered after the completion of the painting, such a claim is grounded in myth and does not provide solid bases for critical analyses (Greeley 71n53; Debrouse 53; Tibol 25).⁷ As not much has been written on this painting, the key function of this work in this analysis is to showcase—through theoretical development and formal analysis—the ways in which multiple self-portraits of the artist appear within one frame of pluralistic visuality.

Moving to the left of the image, the headless bodies, now detached from their overhanging heads, disappear into the distance. The fleeing bodies are representations of the artist as she flees the scene. It is here that she attempts to

⁷ To be clear, neither Greeley, Debrouse, nor Tibol make *definitive* claims that the work was, *in fact*, a psychic precursor to Izquierdo’s heart attack (author’s emphasis). They do, however, suggest that a premonition to a heart attack could have very well been the case. The painting might have also been a way for the artist to reconcile her personal (non-socially or culturally inspired) demons as they appeared in a dream to her. A psychoanalytic reading of the painting might prove useful here. The still growing body of reliable information available about the artist’s personal life, thoughts, and desires, at times, necessitates an alternative, yet equally as useful analytical approach.

free herself from her oppressors and from oppression by any means possible; even if she risks ‘losing her head’ in the process. As if to signify the artist’s love for a land now desolate, she rests her salvation upon it in the form of crucifixes dug deep into the soil. In the form of green leaves, life drips from her aging locks. Yet we must not be fooled, for it is the dominating presence of the flourishing tree lining the right perimeter that reminds us of the persistent existence of the very social paradigm that contributed to her death. Downturned, a red flower suggests the sadness of the female spirit, as it appears hanging and ever attached to the debilitating limbs of patriarchy.

It is possible that events surrounding the painting influenced its creation. By 1947, Mexican president Miguel Alemán Valdés granted women the right to vote in municipal elections, as “capitalist growth required legal equality among individuals” (Tuñón Pablos 105). Although women were granted this freedom, they continued to be considered as second-class citizens and were warned to maintain their traditional roles as caretakers and wives despite their newfound freedoms. As Tuñón Pablos explicates, the icon of the “eternal woman” was sustained, and although women were granted freedom, it “was a limited sort . . . that ensured they would stay close to home” (106). With this in mind, Izquierdo’s *Sueño y presentimiento* (1947) can be interpreted not just as a premonition of a health condition, but rather, as a visual narrative for the unjust gender ideologies that women were bound to at the time. Furthermore, as the artist flees the events occurring upon her beloved Mexican terrain, two parts of her remain within it. The walls represent nationalist structure within which her intact body exists. Instead of removing herself from these walls, she chooses to free only a portion of herself from them—her mind. Detached and yet alive, she consciously removes her head from the rest of her body. Her awareness of this is apparent in the scene of her physically complete body holding her head out the window. She renders herself in pink with flowers in her hair as if to signify her femininity. Therefore, as her highly feminine self removes the portion of her that is entangled in the branches of the masculine presence of the trees, she cerebrally disassociates herself from them. Water and life fill the blessed boat beneath her and will facilitate her escape. The repeated presence of her heads hanging on the trees’ branches and of her decapitated bodies occupying the left portion of the composition.

Highlighting the burgeoning plurality of Izquierdo’s methods of self-representation, this characterization recalls Susan Stanford Friedman’s understanding of “dual consciousness” (75) in women’s identification processes in women’s written autobiographies. Perhaps to extend from W. E. B. Du Bois’s notion of double consciousness, Stanford Friedman remarks on the process of othering at play in women’s biographical texts (Du Bois 2). Women’s identification processes for postrevolutionary artists in Mexico were, in part,

deeply affected by the society in which they lived. However, it is the act of recognizing the self as both a part of and distinct from society that permits the development of a plural interpretation of the self. As Stanford Friedman writes, “not recognizing themselves in the reflections of cultural representation, women develop a dual consciousness—the self as culturally defined and the self as different from cultural prescription” (75). The author’s use of “dual consciousness” (75) signals a consciousness affected *and* reflective of one’s culture. In Izquierdo’s confrontations with the culture in which she lived, her work represents a new lens from which to view herself. Through this lens, she sees her self in its plurality. The artist develops a dialogue within this work that indicates the presence of developing dual and double consciousness. It is from these consciousnesses that the artist reveals her pluralistic visualities; her many selves appear throughout and from the porous spaces between seemingly two consciousnesses (Jay).

Izquierdo’s pluralistic visualities in *Sueño y presentimiento* extend from the dualistic visual regimes proposed by both Greeley and Stanford Friedman. I extend from their conjectures to suggest that the artist’s use of self-portraiture includes a third visual component more akin to author Fatima Tobing Rony’s concept of the “third eye” (16). This concept helps to conceptualize Izquierdo’s pluralistic visualities.⁸ Rony’s idea of the third eye signifies the multiplicity in seeing the self as the self, the self as the Other, and the self as witnessing the self as the self and as the Other. The third eye, as the viewer, is slightly objective in the act of viewing. Yet, the viewer exists in the condition of his or her subjectivity as the viewer of the self, who (the viewer) upon realizing that he or she is viewing the self, becomes the viewer of the viewer, viewing the self as both the viewer and the self, and then seeing the self as the self *and* as the Other (but also as the viewer). The third eye describes the following pluralistic experiences, as they appear, perhaps, simultaneously: double consciousness; an awareness of oneself viewing one’s self (as an object); an experience of the self as the self as viewing the self as object (Rony 4; Du Bois 2). Rony explains that “the boundaries blur as those with a third eye attempt to put together all the dispersed fragments of identity into other—never seamless—selves” (17). How does the third eye function in the case of Izquierdo’s use of self-portraiture in *Sueño y presentimiento* (Izquierdo 1947)? Izquierdo’s indigenous identity and coinciding cultural traditions were, like many other inhabitants of Mexico, both appreciated and underappreciated in Mexico’s increasingly modernized postrevolutionary society. As the federal government intervened in the cultural sphere of twentieth century Mexico, *mexicanidad* (footnote 1), as well as *indigenismo*, were used as tools for political propaganda for a nascent governmental system claiming

⁸ “Third eye” will appear without quotes for the remainder of this text (Rony 16).

independence vis-à-vis nationalist imagery, yet still mired in pre-Revolutionary colonialism (Greeley 51).⁹ Artists like Izquierdo connected with their indigenous roots as they struggled to maintain indigenous cultural identities, despite the ever present Western modern canon of power in technology, scientific innovation, and Eurocentricism (Fabian 140). Izquierdo rendered herself as paradoxical—as both the oppressor and the oppressed—as alive but dead with eyes wide open, as her head appears decapitated but not necessarily lifeless (Fabian 140), as if to patch the pieces together into, “other—never seamless—selves” (Rony 17).

Izquierdo’s works exemplify what art historian Dina Comisarenco Mirkin refers to as artworks that relay women’s “most intimate and painful experiences” (21). Through them, Izquierdo manipulates traditional methods of self-portraiture as means to negotiate female autonomy and challenge Mexico’s canonically patriarchal social paradigm.¹⁰ Furthermore, they defy and, yet, embrace the style of *mexicanidad* (footnote 1) by offering images of the artist as she confronts this paradigm by becoming it, submitting to it, yet, at the same time, quite literally emancipating herself from it. Though just by looking at the image, one cannot answer the simple questions: why or to what end?

It may prove useful to explore the unsigned in any given visual work, wherein, both plurality and multiplicity are quite present, albeit fragmented, but a cohesive pictorial narrative remains virtually absent for the viewer. Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction of the sign (*Of Grammatology*) aids in elucidating the presence of absence, as it might appear in the form of fragmented selves in Izquierdo’s *Sueño y presentimiento* (1947). Her use of repeated selves as fragmented and dismembered creates gaps or traces in meaning for the viewer.¹¹ Repetition and multiplicity in Izquierdo’s use of the sign mobilizes the oppositional relationship between signifier and signified such that interstitial spaces appear, thus destabilizing the sign. For Derrida, the trace is the gap or that which is not present in the sign, and this trace is a trace of an origin, which does not exist (65). Thus, the sign only builds upon itself, leaving absent or unsigned

⁹ “Footnote 1” indicates the first footnote of the current essay.

¹⁰ Commenting on the purpose of her works in 1947, Izquierdo stated: “I avoid themes that are anecdotal, folkloric, and political because they do not have poetic or expressive strength, and I think that in the world of painting, a work is an open window to the human imagination” (qtd in Ferrer 17). She painted what she experienced and imagined, but the resulting conceptualizations appear today as unavoidably affected by the very themes she mentioned. Unable to avoid outside influences, Izquierdo’s visual imaginary was inextricably interwoven with the “anecdotal, the folkloric, and the political” (17). Thus, her works *are* political and socially aware despite the artist’s apolitical claims. The contradiction between what she said and what she painted invokes many questions: why did an artist, so eager to avoid these themes, create works that might appear indubitably political to our eyes today?

¹¹ Here, the viewer might ask: how can the artist cut off her own head and remain alive to cut off her head once more?

the space of lost presence between the signifier and the signified. Repetition appears in multiple but slightly distinct renderings of the artist's head, making meaning in the context of the head essentially plural. As each head appears slightly different than the next, each appearance of the head remains *similar* (non-identical) to the next but certainly not the *same* (Derrida, "Différance").¹² In the case of Izquierdo's painting, her use of repetition appears in multiple but slightly distinct renderings of her head, making meaning in the context of the head essentially plural. Multiplicity and plurality contribute to both the gaining and losing of meaning, but no two things are same, and Izquierdo's trope of including many renditions of her head(s) in one work exemplify that idea. That is, although the sign loses its original meaning, it gains meaning, but meaning appears slightly different each time the sign repeats. Izquierdo's head is gone but always there, living in its repetition. What does this mean? Derrida's idea of the supplement extends from his idea of absent presence, as that which tries to fill absence but never really does, elaborating the trace and the operation of repetition. It is possible that Rony's third eye, as a lens, aids in locating supplement, as the supplement strives, yet fails to fully occupy the interstitial spaces where meaning never ceases to transform.

CONSIDERING TRIPLE SELF-PORTRAITURE: RECONSIDERING THE SELF-PORTRAIT, DISSECTING PLURALITY

In rendering the self as her own oppressor (the Oppressor), Izquierdo acknowledges the paradox of her existence within the web of power that was Mexico's authoritative federal government in the 1930s and 1940s. To depict her place within this web, she paints a narrative of her submittal to the Oppressor, and it is here that she, from this representation of herself as the Oppressor, renders the self as what I will refer to as the Oppressed. As the Oppressed, seemingly, has no choice but to submit to the Oppressor, she must now attempt to emancipate the self from the constraints of the state as an institution of power regulating the social body in the Foucauldian sense ("Part Five: Right of Death and Power Over Life"). Although visually wounded, her figures in the image flee from her Oppressor in what I read as attempts to emancipate herself (or selves) from the state's highly masculinized national rhetoric for visualizing *mexicanidad* and Mexican women during Mexico's postrevolutionary decades, as this rhetoric collided with Izquierdo's female-oriented themes of Aztec indigeneity.

Returning to the figures in the composition, despite the hopefulness of the bodies as they flee the scene, they appear to remain symbolically linked to the horrors they left behind. Their heads hang in the foreground for all to see, creating

¹² The terms *similar* and *same* appear in italics for the purpose of noting that they carry somewhat distinct meanings in the context of Derridean deconstruction.

a tension within the work. The viewer struggles to pair the bodies with the heads; the heads are visually linked to the full-body version of Izquierdo. These heads appear as multiples of her own head and seem alive and connected to her body to the right. The viewer struggles to piece together the otherwise horrific images of self-induced dismemberment, as visual multiplicities take on plural significations. The third component to Izquierdo's visuality is the Emancipator. The Emancipator is in the unsignified that exists within the interstitial spaces of fragmentation, leading to an occurrence of *haptic visuality* (Jones 378; Marks, *Skin of the Film* 192–193; Marks, *Touch*). Never completely severed from the self, each version of the self interacts, simultaneously, with the other and within the same diffuse web of power, and the three interactive self-subjects (the Oppressor, the Oppressed, and the Emancipator) appear in plural form. Can we consider a self-portrait that includes depictions of the artist as all three of these at once a *triple self-portrait*?

Self-portraiture has the capacity to provide great insight into ontological ideologies of an era. As an artist renders his or her self-portrait, we, as viewers, are provided with syntheses of varying perspectives of identity particular to the artist. We are called on to navigate the origins of such perspectives and explore the realities of their creators, for the art of self-portraiture provides depictions of a reality contingent upon the artist's phenomenological experiences. As we will see, a third party is often included, which is that of the political and social climate in which self-portraits are created. From a juxtaposition of the internal, external, and socially constructed selves, the artist's phenomenological, introspective, and socially imposed perceptions of the self unite to offer the viewer private glimpses into a world otherwise hidden. Each part of the self mirrors the other, and a visual conception of the self is developed upon a two-dimensional picture plane that includes three concurrent acts of becoming.

The internal self is understood as what Jean-Luc Nancy refers to as the *origin* (14–15), and it is within this origin that the artist retains his or her perceptions of the surrounding world. Subsequently, the desire to depict this origin in the form of a work of art is realized as a sum of the artist's internal, external, and socially constructed selves. Artists reveal these selves to viewers by way of self-portraiture. One's origin is singular, but it is presented to the world as plural. Nancy reflects on this singular notion of origin with respect to art when he observes, "It is access to the scattered origin in its very scattering; it is the plural touching of the singular origin . . . 'Origin' does not signify that from which the world comes, but rather the coming of each presence of the world, each time singular" (14–15). As an artist renders his or herself, the artist's singular origin is displayed before us upon a canvas in its many shapes and forms; therefore, that which the artist presents to the viewer as a self-portrait is pluralistic. Art historian and theorist W. J. T. Mitchell writes, "suppose we thought of representation as a

trace of temporality and exchange, the fragments as mementos, as ‘presents’ re-presented in the ongoing process of assemblage, of stitching in and tearing out. It might explain why representation seems to ‘cover’ so many diverse things without revealing any image of totality, other than the image of diversity and heterogeneity” (419). Furthermore, that which contributes to the desire to begin a painting and, therefore, precedes the painting, itself. It exists as a result of the many experienced sensations as internalized by the creating artist, and leads up to and culminates in the artist’s desire to paint what he or she sees or has seen, experiences or has experienced. Birthed, first, from experience and, later, from the internalization of such experiences, the internal, singular self that is the origin is presented to us always scattered and resting in its plurality upon the artist’s canvas. Therefore, it is the self-portrait that provides access to an artist’s internal self.

The external self is the artist’s perception of his or her physicality that is experienced when the artist takes part in the act of looking at his or her reflection. Upon painting a self-portrait, the many aspects of it, including depictions of one’s outward appearance, are depictions of the ways in which an artist perceives his or her inner self. Such visual signifiers can be but are not limited to the color of one’s skin, one’s height and one’s physical shape, for example. Often referred to by art historians as *form*, the way in which an artist formally portrays a vision of the self, thus, provides access to the internal self via the external self. As an artist exists in the world, the way in which he or she perceives and, later, renders his or her self is influenced by the social climate in which he or she lives. The resulting form is a visual translation of both the artist’s internal conceptions of the self and his or her external perceptions of the physical self, and it is this third version of the self that I refer to as the *self by way of another*. The work of theorist Judith Butler helps to conceptualize this type of identity as “an *effect*, that is, as *produced* or *generated* . . . For an identity to be an effect means that it is neither fatally determined nor fully artificial and arbitrary” (187). The resulting work of self-portraiture is a rendering of an identity that is neither predestined nor isolated from the impositions of the outside world. The outside world contributes to the formation of one’s identity and influences an artist’s perception of his or herself both internally and externally, thus affecting the artist’s construction of his or her identity. When this identity is challenged and rendered in conjunction with one’s origin and physical form, we are offered access to the artist’s internal, external, and socially constructed selves via triple self-portraiture as both a trope and a lens for more lucidly visualizing the plural.

CONCLUSION: POSSIBILITIES IN PLURALITY

Comparative and trans-ideological, trans-methodical, and trans-historical lenses

expose interstitial spaces, wherein, the artist's many selves discreetly appear in visual languages all their own. My theory of triple self-portraiture, while rooted in art historical methodology, reflects how plurality arises in the singular or in single significations of the self, not only to disrupt homogeneity in thinking about art but also to disrupt homogeneity in thinking about the self and others. Triple self-portraiture aids in elucidating the many ways a work is interpreted, despite the artist's intentions or the work's trajectory (or what inspired the artist to create the work at all). One way that this theory of triple self-portraiture, as a visual cultural theory and method, benefits humanity is that it illuminates a self-portrait as more than a rendering of the singular self. For example, I explore the idea of the self-portrait as more than a rendering of the self but rather as multiple renderings of the self-contained within one frame. Simply put—the self is not a self but a *selves*. One goal underpinning my development of this theory is to acknowledge the pressures felt by many people today to signify the self in monolithic terms, before knowing one's self at all. This recalls the question: who am I? I suggest that one must, instead, ask: What is am, and how, pray tell, is it I? There is more than meets the eye, and this “more” is in the presence of absence.

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