

ARUSHA

GALLERY

felt cute, might delete later

I encounter my image in a mirror and, despite the many times I've met only displeasure there, I find this time something beautiful: myself beautiful.

The beautiful creature in the mirror has come over me like a visitation. She looks so much like a person, so much more real than I do, more myself than me. She is a me reiterated: a me me.

Familiar with the visitation and its significance, I make haste to capture her with my phone's camera and upload the selfie to Instagram.

What does it mean to title an exhibition after a popular meme?

In some way, it declares a correspondence between these seemingly disparate practices: the production of these silly internet pictures and the serious labour of art.

As all cultural phenomena express something of the period they were made into, it could be argued that the silliness of memes articulates a certain generational nihilism. That its aversion to seriousness is an expression, in fact, of a greater solemnity. If the meme could be serious it might say, 'there is only me in the world, and I have found myself shored up on some dark island, alone and resentful.'

In fact, the paintings, sculptures, collages and cookie tins of this exhibition share an understanding that being too serious is, in some sense, in poor taste, if not a complete fallacy. Instead, they perform, they

She (my beautiful selfie) excites me with a peculiar pleasure. Fulfilling, overflowing excessively the cup of my desire: to be seen as 'other' in the eyes of others. The lack of what I possess, my own desert, is what suffuses her in equal measure with desire. In a word, she is full of what I want: a want of presence. She is full of absence and this palpable impalpability, her bodiless body, is what we call a ghost.

She places her hand on the balustrade, the wrist arched, an indian silver bracelet worn loose.

I suckle at these thick honeydewed signs; symptoms of a person, so real, hard and glimmering. I want to say to her, to this beautiful ghost -teach me how to live! I am a dumb porcupine with rank spit, hot rapine on my breath. I snuffle her velveteen slippers and gob the white stockinged feet inside: The Image Repertoire, lays heavy over my eyes like scales.

dress-up. They paint not for literal likeness, but they perform a sincerity, humorous, whimsical, nostalgic, even cute, but only to mimic what these qualities first stirred within us, the dormant moods, before they stood in as the place-holders for what was always inscrutable.

Writing in the 60s about Rauschenberg and his peers, Susan Sontag wrote the following, which in many ways could be written about this exhibition: 'Because the new sensibility demands less "content" in art, and is more open to the pleasures of "form" and style, it is also less snobbish, less moralistic—in that it does not demand that pleasure in art necessarily be associated with edification.' This witty sensibility which runs through these artworks, seems at times aloof, or aesthetically careful of identifying too readily with extreme states of feeling. Emotion, if it is being expressed here, is held behind mannerism.

I imagine myself as seen by your eyes. Therefore, I only imagine an aggregate, a conglomerate, a glut of images. A self of images, made up of the Other. I have seen, and heard the clicking of your long acrylic nails, how you hold your cigarette, and when I bend to light my own this is the mould I pour myself into. I hear the ease with which you say the words 'home', 'history', 'self', which in my voice ring with affectation: 'my soul frets in the shadow of your language'.

All I can see in the image of myself are the inconsistencies when compared with the beautiful ghost, which, despite my attempts to be her, like Walter Benjamin's hunchback, by the nature of its hidden machinery, its artifice, its trickery and deceit, wins everytime.

It's the form itself, *how* something is said, represented and seen, rather than *what*, which gives meaning and nuance to the subject matter. And behind the apparent coolness or 'cuteness', there is a vulnerability, at times, something close to despair; a plaintiff longing for something lost.

You will find here allusions to various pasts: ancient, mediaeval, myths, legends, fantasy worlds, and idyll pastoral scenes. A desire for a lost time or an innocence, with full knowledge of it never having existed except as light emanations spangled on a screen.

'felt cute, might delete later', was first used on social media as a caption to reframe a 'cute' selfie. A way to mitigate the inherent vanity (the cringe element) involved in posting a picture of oneself in the throws of attractiveness. The caption therefore performs, or signals, a degree of self-reflexivity. Whether the selfie is 'deleted later' or not becomes of little importance. What is important is the performance of this reflexive signalling.

A meme, like a painting, is constantly rewriting itself, undermining, eating, even annihilating itself. It is never a fixed or finished product but constantly in a state of becoming.

Therefore, when the beautiful creature leaves me, as all spectres must dematerialise, I am returned to the corporeal reality of my cattle-heavy flesh; the brute substance, the object of myself as far away from the beautiful version of myself as I have ever felt: I feel hideous, a failed object, a broken door handle, a fallen christmas tree, but more disgusting: a cum sodden sock, a bin oozing foully into an alley.

And so I reject myself, spit myself out, vomit it up, find myself abject. What a visceral reaction! To Cringe! And so, in a moment of symbolic and real suicide, I delete the selfie I had posted earlier. I delete myself, I delete the smallness of myself, my reduced self.

This constant re-writing of the meme corresponds to an idea of art making that I believe is shared by the artists of this exhibition. Namely, that art is procedural, made up of many erasures and reiterations. In the end, though, nothing is lost because a colour removed, painted over, remains as a trace, readable in the paint or returning in an entirely new work. Each instance of reflection, removal, restatement reflects the tiny life of the soul. Every day we too assert and delete many selves and reinstate older ones in a kind of loop, which perpetuates, or maintains, *now* [*maintenant*], who we are.

There is a liberty in simply producing despite the 'might delete later' which hangs threateningly on the horizon. In the face of catastrophe there comes a politics in simply continuing, proliferating, spreading.

- Noah Swann 2023

'Noah Swann is a writer and collage-poet from Cape Town, South Africa. They hold a BA(hons) from the University of Cape Town, and a MA in Poetry from The Seamus Heaney Centre at Queen's University, Belfast. They live in Hackney Wick where they host a monthly collage night & artist talk under the name of ODRADEK.'