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Seeing the Self-Portrait: Works by frje Echeverría

Brad Covington

Frje Echeverría's self-portraits spanning the last forty years lay forth the same assertions, doubts, and aspirations many of us find dwelling within our own selves. Possibilities of how we see, internalize, and contemplate are brought out in any exhibition that spans a great deal of time, and in his work the thought of self examination challenges our ideas and preconceptions of what a self-portrait really is. The idea or mention of a ‘self-portrait show’ can conjure up various, perhaps even uncomfortable, expectations. Are self-portraits simply records of the person’s uncertain destiny or are they untruths that are based on self-deception? Self-Portrait by its very nature can in some instances evoke feelings of skepticism and mistrust. Brendon Prendeville in his book Realism in the 20th Century discusses Lucian Freud’s self-portrait Interior with a Hand Mirror, 1967, as showing “limitations of vision, specifically respecting the effort of seeing oneself.” He says an integral part of such thematic painting is the “practice of self scrutiny.” One may consider gazing in a mirror as the opposite of unprejudiced observation. One may wonder if the artist is performing, like an actor. If we bother too much with such questions we dramatically limit our capacity for the visual dialogue set forth and we quickly lose direct contact with a wonderful idiom; exploration into the artist’s psyche becomes presupposed and wider implications may be ignored. Conversely, a process of reciprocation, where interaction takes the place of a disconnected one-sidedness, is of utmost importance. If we are to take an artist’s work seriously, as something more than a passing obstruction, we must perhaps rethink the purpose of art making and look at the work as one would if they had unearthed a relic. This may nurture curiosity and push the observer to freely visualize what’s in front of him and perhaps to greet it as something engaging in itself.
One of Echeverría’s earliest works conveys the young artist’s sense of alienation and perhaps an interest in existentialism. *Self-Portrait, Tattooed*, 1965, linoleum cut on kraft paper, figure 1, is a head covered with shapes that mimic exposed muscles that crawl about and cover the artist’s eyes. The hair begins to wrap around the head like the tentacles of a sea creature. There is a feeling of exposure and lack of control. The result is an image in partial relief that is stamped into the paper echoing an embossed piece of animal hide.

In the seventies the use of the mirror or painted reflection and its inclusion in the composition suggest this artist has tried to remove himself somewhat, making his function in the painting no more important than anything else in the immediate environment. Echeverría immerses himself in the use of pastel and at times builds with it and overlaps it as one would use paint. *Self-Portrait with Television while beside Pam in Our Side-by-Side Studio*, 1977, pastel on paper, figure 2, shows the artist’s reflection in a round mirror sitting atop a television. The round mirror blends into the wall, making the artist part of the energized wallpaper, and its shape also functions as kind of a porthole through which the artist can look, as if looking out from within the picture. The blank television feels as though it is on; it hovers while its antenna reaches to the outer edge of the picture. The wallpaper seems made of Asian running script, and cryptic marks in the lower left of the picture seem an unreadable ideogram. The mirror and its tall base can also be read as another antenna thus creating an eerie, disembodied connection between the artist’s reflection and the accumulated glow of what was the changing, image-filled screen.

The use of the mirror as something to be included in the overall image is seen again in *Self-Portrait under the Table with Open Japanese Dictionary*, 1978, pastel on ragboard, figure 3. Here earthy green-blue colors tend toward the opaque and result in a heaviness which traps the painting’s elements and stifles the atmosphere. The artist’s reflection, in a round mirror on the floor this time, works less like a window and more like a weighted object. A wavy line like a rope taunts the top of the artist’s head and an open book lies in the forefront, inviting curiosity. A glass object the shape of an upside down shot glass or a reading loupe, has attached itself to one of the open pages and an indiscernible mound rests on the other. The glass is equal in proportion to
the artist’s head, which reinforces the mirror’s place as being in the background. The artist’s attention is directed towards the distant book he cannot see, creating a mood of longing.

Echeverría says “I avoid masquerading in the work, I try instead for pure observation and direct interaction.” The idea is to have the courage and insight to step outside of one’s expectations and to look and discern as honestly and directly as one is able. “Looking at yourself is like looking at anything else. The profound is always present.”
In 1977 Echeverría made a small group of more objective self-portraits which now some thirty years later resemble his adult son Ben, not yet born in 1977.

No longer do we see a small reflection of a face peering from a mirror, but only the artist himself. *Self-Portrait in Shadow*, 1977, conté on watercolor paper, figure 4, displays a figure whose direct attention is toward us. The light in the picture comes from behind and the artist’s shaded face gives a faint glimpse of his features. The hazy light background on the left of the picture plays with the outer edges of the head and threatens to overtake the image like a passing cloud. We are witnessing someone who is reluctant to come out of the shadows, who is private, but we see just enough to get a sense of the artist’s confidence and inner strength.

In *Self-Portrait in the Blue Bathroom*, 1979, watercolor on paper, figure 5, the artist is set into the middle of the picture by means of a full-length door mirror. The mirror’s reflection creates a passageway in front of and behind him. This composition works as a cage or storefront window since we are looking at a closed bathroom door, which is evident by the black door-knob on the right. The blue doorframes act as four corner posts and the artist, at work painting, is shown as someone in plain view, yet confined. The tripod directly in front of the artist is suggestive of surveyors’
Figure 7. Self-Portrait aboard the Gruziya, 1995. Watercolor, acrylic, and pencil on watercolor, 20" x 15".
equipment, the blue moldings representing his boundaries. The left side of the mirrored door is somewhat wavy, implying it also is a reflection.

In 1986, challenging his method of observation, Echeverría completed pairs of right-hand/left-hand self-portraits. He would simultaneously paint or draw himself using both hands: a simple and effective way to become completely engaged, to overwhelm the senses, to challenge the hands' ability, thereby producing images which verge on arriving from the subconscious. Self-Portrait, Mano Izquierda Eckerd College Studio 4\textit{June}86, 1986, figure 6.

The impulse to work wherever one may be is something Echeverría has always followed. Self-Portrait aboard the Grusija, 1995, watercolor, acrylic, and pencil on watercolor paper, figure 7, is of the artist in his cabin on a ship off the coast of Belize. The trip was to visit Mayan ruins and paint on site. In this painting his features appear rather stoic. Two bottles on the
windowsill seem to be birdlike passengers outside the cabin window. The artist appears fixed and content, but the figures outside seem about to float away. The window or porthole in this image is now behind him, unlike *Self-Portrait with Television while beside Pam in Our Side-by-Side Studio*, figure 2, and he is definitely in the environment rather than the one looking in.

Echeverría taught painting and drawing at the University of Northern Iowa for almost forty years. In the studio classroom he would actively paint and draw in order to welcome the students into a larger creative space and to show the students that he is doing it, participating in order to inspire. *Self-Portrait in the UNI Painting Room 010327, 2001*, pastel on museum board, figure 8, is one of a group that depicts the artist wearing a lab coat in the school’s painting studio. The white outfit transforms him from a teacher to someone who looks like they practice medicine. Echeverría’s conviction that teaching should be about students thinking for themselves and not about telling the students what to think has been his predominant teaching idea. *Self-Portrait 010327* is a picture of the artist comfortable in the practice of helping others. The artist’s fuzzy eyebrows and full beard give the figure an approachable grandfather-like presence and the artist looks as though he is listening and formulating what to say.

*Self-Portrait in the UNI Painting Room 020102, 2002*, acrylic on Masonite, figure 9, is a full-length portrait of the artist standing in front of a tall mirror in the university’s painting studio. The mirror nearly fills the space of the picture and we know it’s a mirror only because of the convex edge of the frame at the bottom of the painting. The artist’s high vantage point suggests he is painting the distortion he sees from his own perspective and the mirror isn’t actually convex or bowed at all. The plaid green jacket becomes a translucent pane window, more intriguing than the actual window at the top, and his torso props up a seated figure who is about to fall, table, books and all, to the left edge of the painting. The artist himself is also propped up or leaning on the left edge of the work’s perimeter, and his distorted lower body looks distant and disheveled in comparison with the statuesque solidity of his facial expression. The figure’s right hand
hangs low and looks like an empty leather glove attached to the cuff of a stuffed shirt sleeve. The work shows the artist’s battle between body and spirit.

"Art is a revelation. Things always happen that are beyond what we intend; we may take a responsibility to them to receive them." This quote may be referring to the relationships he allows between the recognizable and the abstract, perhaps even between "the living and the no longer living and the yet to be born" as in some areas of the paintings that approach a certain abstract grotesqueness. Self-Portrait in the Mirror on the Table in the UNI Painting Room 060214, 2006, acrylic on Masonite, figure 10, depicts a gaunt elderly artist in a mirror one would ordinarily use to apply makeup or shave. The artist’s oval face is tortoise-like and his eyes slowly gaze out from the painting. The mirror lies on a table and is surrounded by various objects that are seemingly something yet not easily definable. The painting surface consists of multiple layers of thin watery acrylic washes. Some areas almost feel silty, and the washes bring about a murky effect. Objects, including perhaps a tin, book, or rumpled package, and a knife sit abandoned on the right side of the table. The water-born atmosphere implies the objects will be tossed about or swept away. As our eye moves to the right, things depicted become less of something and the shapes near the edge recede, drift apart and become hauntingly unfamiliar. Here we feel the artist’s own sense of mortality. The ceiling grids reflected above his head push him out further into the space and emphasize the fact he will inevitably join the rest of the elements of debris.

Self-Portrait, Dotted, 030903, 2003, acrylic on canvas, figure 11, shows the artist in an upside down hand mirror. Here the paint, rather than being layered, is delicately thin. The red palette and the extremely thin paint combine to imply the surface is merely lightly stained, and could be scrubbed away. The body seems bloated and the artist’s puffy beard gives the painting a cartoon quality with a looming air of violence. “The dotted space around the mirror resembles the stubble of an unfinished shave.”

Echeverría works to take the model in, whether it is himself or others or objects, “without attaching a sense of a known string of meanings and without replacing the model with such code.” He says he’d like to “minimize preoccupation with correctness.” He wants to do the work “without giving in to
conventional expectations." He is saying the work should be whole unto itself, formed through its own aesthetic; it shouldn’t rely only on knowledge, social norms or be bound by conventional rules of learned perception. In other words the work’s evolution shouldn’t be something to second-guess. Echeverria says “I think there can be a duty to be true to one’s self and to the wide sense of one’s culture and the human condition, being careful of the not-too-deepness of fashion. A surfer does not make the wave, cannot express it or control it; the task is to understand the wave with mind and body and sensation, to use all of one’s faculties to be alert, with it, on it, and ride it.” This is analogous to his view of the artist at work. “Our making” according to Echeverria, “takes us to unknown places. And our arrival at these places precedes our knowing of them. This is how creative work is revelation.” He is saying painting should tend toward unquestionable Nature, as in the wave, and the act of creating is something much larger than the mere possibilities of our coveted assumptions. “The special gift the work of art gives us does not originate in the mind.”
Figure 12. Self-Portrait in Bryan Van Donselaar’s Class 040504, 2004. Acrylic on Masonite, 68” x 68” 

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The complex composition and spatial juxtaposition in *Self-Portrait in Bryan Van Donslear’s Class 040504*, 2004 acrylic on Masonite, figure 12, makes for one of the artist’s most ambitious works. The painting’s solid and yet forcefully broken space helps to create a dynamic tension between the centralized figure and the angular elements of the perimeter. We see the artist standing in an auditorium at work while students in the background listen to a lecture by Bryan Van Donslear, a colleague at the university. The artist paints himself in front of four horizontal mirrors held together by large spring clips. His body becomes distorted and compartmentalized and his elongated legs are pulled toward the bottom of the picture. In turn the artist’s image becomes progressively smaller from bottom to top emphasizing the feeling of the body shrinking into separate pieces. The artist is shown painting with a very long handled brush; Echeverría did this to expand his vantage point and to enhance a sense of difficulty. The long instrument is reminiscent of a wand; is he performing illusionistic tricks for a distracted audience? The animated red clips that hold the mirrors look as if they are in the act of flying, or repeatedly chewing or biting. This gives the viewer the feeling of an inherent possibility of collapse. In the right corner of the painting is the left corner of the painting he is working on. Echeverría’s wide scope of vision includes what he is already painting, his immediate painting. Thus he seems to be instantly repainting his own picture; the sensation of mortality and regeneration are once again visited. The strong horizontal and vertical lines at the top indicate an order and stability found in Piet Mondrian or Theo van Doesburg, yet the brushstrokes at the bottom give off a sense of chaos and catastrophic gravity. A playful monster-like still life, grotesque and abstract, formed of debris found on a beach and set on a white towel covering a red stool, leans towards the center; and the rest of the painting’s composition wants to twist and fold inward. *Self-Portrait in Bryan Van Donslear’s Class* is undoubtedly one of Echeverría’s most masterful creations of an abstract reality out of pure unadulterated observation.

Echeverría talks of his friend, a monk, who had, decades ago, an out of body experience while briefly passing away during surgery. His friend floated up to the ceiling and seeing himself surrounded by the surgical team, said “Is this all there is?” Echeverría understands this as “distancing one’s self...leaving the body, and siding on the eternal.” Mark Epstein in his book, *Thoughts without a Thinker*, an inquiry into Buddhism and Western psychological knowledge, speaks of consciousness and
“bare attention”\textsuperscript{15} as a state of “choiceless awareness in which the categories of the ‘observer’ and ‘that which is observed’ are no longer operational, bare attention eventually obviates self-consciousness and permits … spontaneity.”\textsuperscript{16} In pursuing self-portraits as part of the artist’s “canon”\textsuperscript{17} and “ritual”\textsuperscript{18} Echeverría is confronting his future and mortality, and his interests lie in the ever-present intermingling of the known and unseen, self and other; the desire to make them one and the same.

Footnotes


2. Idem.


16. Ibid., p 111.

