Portraits and Self-Portraits

Taken from *Light and Lens*, Robert Hirsh, p341

Making Portraits: Who am I and Who are You?

Self-portraits allow artists to show awareness of their own appearance and traits, producing evidence of the intricacies of their lives. Self-portraits may continue gazing back at viewers in another place and time, long after the makers are dead.

Self-portraits can be projections of the self that represent you as you are, or they can present hidden aspects of the self, sometimes revealing a secret self. Traditionally, self-portraits were used to demonstrate social status, taken, wealth, and/or religious beliefs.

More recently, Andy Warhol constantly relied on self-portraitures to reflect on his position and social status as an artist, performing a variety of roles that examine celebrity, disaster, and death. Cindy Sherman has made self-portraits cloaked in historical guises that confront and challenge archetypes and stereotypes, which have been formulated about the roles men and women play in society. Robert Mapplethorpe photographed himself to explore his sexual identity. Chuck Close has made over 100 self-portraits in a variety of media that merge manual and mechanical processes to explore the boundary lines between the abstract and the representational, the methodical and the subjective, the personal and the public self.

Self-Portrait research

Before beginning a self-portrait, it is helpful to delve into the works of other artists who explored the self-portrait and note their research methodology, their lighting and compositional choices, and what ideas their works express. It is the ideas that continue to make their images worth studying.

Portraying oneself before the camera has been a staple of Photography since it's invention.

To begin a self-portrait, develop a concept or idea that will lead you through the process.

A tried-and-true method of reacquainting yourself with yourself is to sit down in front of a mirror, alone, without any outside distractions and, with pencil and paper, make a series of contour drawings. Anyone can do a contour drawing: look into a mirror and draw what you see and feel without looking at the paper until you are finished. Based on what you learn from your drawings, formulate the direction of your self-portrait. Your images should express a sense of self-awareness and reveal something that is important for others to know about you and your attitude about life. While it is true that well-learned techniques help us to clarify our voice, it is our ideas that create powerful images.

Portrait of Another Person

Lasting portraits avoid the obvious and, in doing so, require the viewer's involvement to extract meaning. Now, make a photographic portrait of someone you know that not only shows the appearance of the person, but gives artistic insight into the nature of this person's character.

Including the Environment

Your portrait may show your audience how an individual interacts with the surrounding environment. What does the background environment add to the portrait that a close-up does not? Concentrate on showing only one part of your subject's surroundings so that the importance of the individual is not diminished. In a traditional environmental portrait, the person being portrayed is placed in a setting that shares information about his or her life and/or interests. Typically, an individual may hold an object related to his or her profession or personal interest. Look at the work of Arnold Newman for formal environmental portraits, or the Farm Security Administration photographs of Dorothea Land and Russell Lee for more natural models.

When setting up such a shot, ask yourself, how and what does the setting and inclusion of any object add to what viewers can learn about the subject's life and interests? Also consider creating your own backdrop, which places a sitter in a unique location, perhaps one that the person would like to visit.

Another option is to use only objects in the environment to represent an individual who is absent.