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Artist Ian McKeever on the Raw Power of Helene Schjerfbeck's Self-portraits

Ian McKeever, painter and Royal Academician

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'For I have always found it impossible to resemble myself from one day to the next.'
– Philippe Ricord

'...I never go around mirrors... it tears me up to see a grown man cry,' he sang to himself, as he looked into the mirror. The face staring back at him, presumably to others always the same face, was to him barely known. He never could figure out whose skin he was in; for sure it was not his. But then he would not recognise his own skin were it ever to wrap itself around him. How did others deal with this, he wondered? Did they too feel this discomfort, a rub which never eased? Never spoken about, lived with; or was he one of just a few who had what felt like a body on loan. A body he did not fully trust. Committing to something he did not fully know or trust seemed reckless. So he withheld, as if only ever partially present in the world. A part of himself held back, unsure if he had the resilience to endure, survive total immersion. Most of the time he felt truly lost. Things around him, people even, polluted him. Turning him into mere flotsam and jetsam floating aimlessly, without meaning. Becoming just a part of the vague, directionless flow of life. Any meaning which might crystallize itself into something concrete, graspable, eluded him most of the time. So when in those odd moments it did materialise, he hung on to it as if his life depended on it. He turned away from the mirror, casting one last glance into those eyes.

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It is 1975. I am in Helsinki. Participating in my first group exhibition abroad. It is an exhibition of SPACE artists, the London-based studio collective, at the Taidehalli, the city exhibition space run by the Finnish Artists' Union. The city feels dour, grey, emerging as it was from being politically sandwiched between Sweden and the Soviets. Each of the visiting artists has been allocated a Finnish counterpart as minder-cum-guide. Mine is Timo, a painter photographer, who also writes, perhaps a couple of years younger than myself. We get on well. On one of the free days Timo takes me to the Ateneum Art Museum, which houses part of the Finnish national collection of paintings. It is my first introduction to the history of Finnish art. Difficult; I have no reference points. However, Timo is good, he knows his country's painting tradition, and he helps me to ease my way in. Some works come easier than others; the large snowy landscape of Akseli Gallen-Kallela for instance, I can thread back to a broader context with



Fra Filippo Lippi, *Profile Portrait of a Young Woman*, c. 1445,
 poplar wood, 49.5cm x 32.9cm
Gemäldegalerie der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz
 Photo: Christoph Schmidt



Helene Schjerfbeck, *Self-Portrait*, 1895,
 oil on canvas, 38cm x 31cm
Provincial Museum of Western Uusimaa, Raasepori
 Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen

relative ease. At one point we find ourselves in a gallery of smallish paintings, still-lives, landscapes and portraits. It is the work of Helene Schjerfbeck, Timo enthuses. I am both curious and nonplussed. Unable to make head or tail of what I am looking at – why the fuss?

Over the following years Timo and I become good friends and I am in Finland fairly regularly. On such visits at some point I invariably find myself standing yet again in front of Helene Schjerfbeck's paintings. They have become a Finnish marker for me. One of those things we use when travelling to tell us we have arrived, be it a croissant in Paris or the mounds of fresh mint in Marrakesh. Paintings too can anchor one from museum to museum, country to country. I have only to stand in front of Vilhelm Hammershøi's small *Portrait of a Young Woman* in Funen Art Museum in Odense to know I am slap bang in the middle of Denmark and its culture. For me in Finland this has become Helene Schjerfbeck.

It is the self-portraits that particularly hold me, keep me guessing. They emit a strange discomfort that has to be reciprocated. Discomfort as such is not the problem; after all looking at art is not a comfort blanket. Even if the sensation of looking is pleasurable, satisfying, it should at least have that quality of not being fully available. One should be left with a lingering ache, like unrequited love. But there is something about self-portraits which gets closer to the bone. Makes looking, eye to eye, somehow harder. Puts one in that embarrassing position of being caught out as the only one looking. After all, not even the painter in painting the self-portrait is outside looking on, giving us another set of eyes. He or she is literally in the painting. Depriving us of that usual reassurance of being complicit in looking. We cannot step into the artist's shoes as the artist is in the painting, looking back. We are locked out.

How does a painter begin to grasp any notion of painting the self? What is he or she looking at? What does it look like? I can understand the idea that every artistic statement is somehow a reflection of the artist's psyche. A statement left in the vague twilight zone of glance and glimmer. Yet to paint the self as semblance, as somehow fully appearing in the world, mystifies me. How is it different to painting another person, or even a table or a chair,



Helene Schjerfbeck, *Self-Portrait, sketch (Self-Portrait with Silver Background)*, 1915, pencil, watercolour, charcoal and silver leaf on paper, 47cm x 34.5cm
 Turku Art Museum

Photo: Vesa Adltonen



Alfred Stieglitz, *Georgia O'Keeffe*, 1918, photograph, palladium print on paper, 24.8cm x 20.3cm
 The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

come to that? How does the artist objectify the self? Where does the painter begin, and what is then held in the painting's fixity? Who is it the painter is looking at, eye to eye?

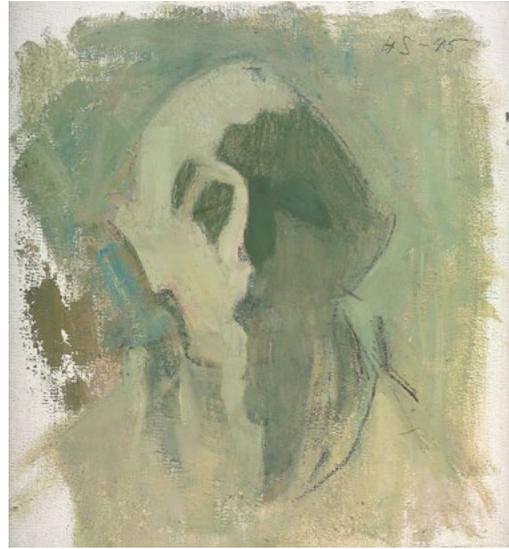
The history of Western portrait painting begins in profile. Eyes do not meet. The head is refined into a beautiful silhouette. Fra Filippo Lippi's *Profile Portrait of a Young Woman* (c.1445) presents the sitter in profile with the inscrutable quality of a delicate flower. Too fragile to get close to. As immaculate as any portrait on the cover of a 21st-century glossy magazine. Beyond approach or reproach. It is only in the 15th century that the Italian portrait, under influence from the North, slowly begins to turn its head to gaze back at the viewer. Meets the world full on. This changes things. Changes not only the nature of the portrait, but also how we look at paintings. The painting ceases being something we behold, becoming something we have a shared interest in. We are now in conversation both with the portrait and the painting, eye to eye. The painting and the portrait have become a reciprocating part of our lives too.

In a modest book titled *Piero della Francesca or The Ineloquent in Art*, from 1954, Bernard Berenson discusses the nature of portraiture. One so easily forgets with what lucidity and eloquence such writers as Berenson wrote. '... I am tempted to conclude that in the long run the most satisfactory creations are those which, like Piero's and Cézanne's, remain ineloquent, mute, with no urgent communication to make, and no thought of rousing us with look or gesture. If they express anything it is character, essence, rather than momentary feeling or purpose.' Character, essence, rather than momentary feeling or purpose, let's ponder this thought by Berenson. Helene Schjerfbeck's early self-portraits, painted when she was in her twenties and thirties, show a young woman self-consciously looking back at the viewer. The works have an innocent earnestness, expressing a desire to be present right now, in the moment.

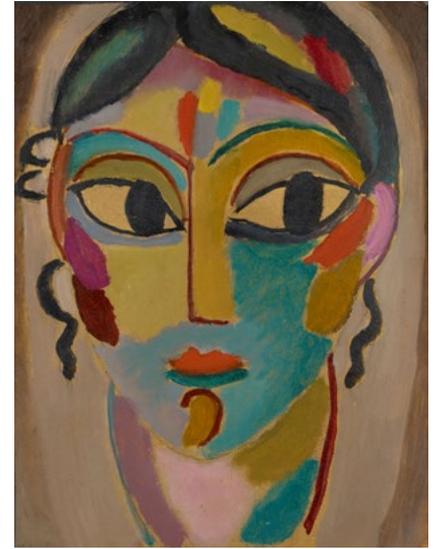
Later self-portraits from the middle of her career reveal much greater reserve and restraint. Both the person painted and the painting are organised into fitting composure.



Helene Schjerfbeck,
Self-Portrait with Black Mouth, 1939,
 oil on canvas,
 0cm x 28.2cm
 Didrichsen Art Museum, Helsinki
 Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
 Hannu Aaltonen



Helene Schjerfbeck,
Self-Portrait, Light and Shadow, 1945,
 oil on canvas,
 36cm x 34cm
 Signe and Ane Gyllenberg Foundation
 Photo: Matias Uusikylä



Alexej von Jawlensky,
Mystical Head of a Girl, 1918,
 oil on cardboard,
 40cm x 30cm
 Kunstmuseum Basel, Switzerland /
 Bridgeman Images

Composure clothes these paintings like a stiff Protestant collar, and we are held at a distance that is not evident in the early portraits. There is something in these paintings that makes me think of the photographic portraits of Georgia O'Keeffe by Alfred Stieglitz from 1918. O'Keeffe's self-conscious stare and presence divest the photographer of his role, throwing the making back onto the sitter as actively creating an image of the self, as do so many contemporary celebrity images. This somehow flips the photograph over into a controlled, by proxy, self-portrait. A quality self-portraits also seem to hold of doubling back on themselves, of being in and out at the same time.

Things change again in the late self-portraits of Helene Schjerfbeck. The paintings are more ragged, edgy, composure goes out the window. What we are seeing is not just the ravages of time, but also a loss of self. Everything is hollowed out. The paintings exist in a state between fatigue and indifference, as if looking through a glass darkly, any notion of a portrait appearing as a distant echo rather than a reflection. During the last two years of her life the artist painted around twenty such portraits. The works have a sense of being more a cipher than a portrait. Here I am thinking of the 'portraits', the *Mystical Heads*, by Alexej von Jawlensky, which as such are not portraits, but rather archetypes similar to the way saints are depicted in Russian Orthodox icons. The artist becomes a dispassionate medium, a transmitter; the ego is absent. He or she is somewhere beyond the painting, unreachable. What is being painted is simply that which needs to be painted. Here we are touching upon Berenson's reference to essence and character, the mute and ineloquent. That unknowable space which we each, as individuals, can inhabit, in which we are present as self, uncontaminated by exchange with the world. This emptying out can manifest itself, in painting, as the paring back of paint and 'image' to its minimum, a quality found in the late paintings of some artists. This is a quality which is equally present in other later works by Helene Schjerfbeck, especially the still-lives. For the still-life and the portrait are never very far away from each other, both are a stilling of life.

A timeline. Sometimes helpful to get a sense of where an artist stands. Schjerfbeck was born in 1862 and died in 1946. She was a contemporary of her fellow country-man



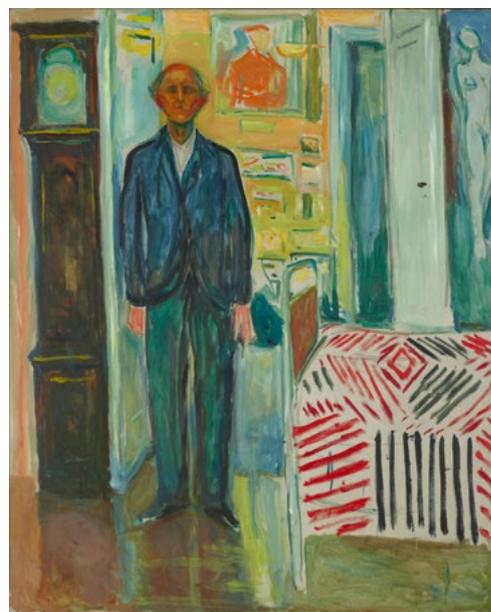
Helene Schjerfbeck,
Self-Portrait, 1912,
 oil on canvas,
 43.5cm x 42cm
 Finnish National Gallery /
 Ateneum Art Museum
 Photo: Finnish National Gallery /
 Yehia Eweis

Akseli Gallen-Kallela and a close contemporary of Vilhelm Hammershøi (born 1864), as well as Edvard Munch and Hilma af Klint, who both died in 1944. Looking further afield, Piet Mondrian and Wassily Kandinsky also died in 1944. Whilst Hilma af Klint, Mondrian and Kandinsky were influenced in their early work by Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical movement and the spiritualist zeitgeist of the time, and whilst Munch engaged with the fashionable investigation of the protoplasmic nature of the spirit, Helene Schjerfbeck appears to have stood outside such esoteric concerns. Equally, she avoided immersing herself in Nordic mythology and folklore, unlike Akseli Gallen-Kallela. Instead she shares a closer affinity with the relatively insulated position of Vilhelm Hammershøi. A looking inwards towards the more domestic, the norms of daily life.

Walking from the hallway to the bedroom, he lost the thought. It was that fleeting. Between the clock and the bed so to speak. This is the title of Edvard Munch's self-portrait of 1940–43, *Self-Portrait, Between the Clock and the Bed*. The painting literally depicts Munch full on, standing between his bed and a grandfather clock. It is a painting which does not so much look out, contrary to Munch's gaze, as one which internalises the passage of time. Turns the gaze inwards. This internalisation separates the Northern Romantic movement from its Southern classical counterpart. The classical world proportions and apportionings. It is a view from the inside looking out, both temperate and idealised. Coherent sense is made of the



Helene Schjerfbeck,
Self-Portrait with Red Spot, 1944,
 oil on canvas,
 45cm x 37cm
 Gösta and Bertha Stenman Donation,
 Finnish National Gallery /
 Ateneum Art Museum
 Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Aaltonen



Edvard Munch,
Self-portrait. Between the Clock and the Bed,
 1940–43,
 oil on canvas,
 149.5cm x 120.5cm
 Munch Museum, Oslo, Norway
 Photo: Munch Museum /
 Ove Kvavik CC BY 4.0

world. The unknown delegated to the world of myths. The Northern Romantic tradition knows no such harmony or boundary. Instead things are left to the individual. Looking inwards, the self must grapple with life's meaning. Make sense of a situation as hostile as it is homely. These two differing worlds feel like separate parts of the brain. Two distinct possibilities as to what it means to be human, to understand. How could it be otherwise? The North goes from long, oppressive, cold winter nights, to summer days that never end. Days relentless in their stifling glow. Days to be shied away from. Whilst further South one is invited out to meet the warm embrace of the morning's light. The night will be welcomed in its own good time. We are made of where we stand in the world.

Where we stand in the world. So close and yet so far away. The raw edges of our being can either shield us against what is out there or lay us bare. 'Polish your eye balls,' he said to me. Most of the time we see things through a haze. Just occasionally do things come into sharp focus, the eye crystal clear in its looking. Then the mind is free. We can see beyond what we already know. The painter looks, incessantly trying, usually in vain, to get to this clarity. To the point where meaning is not a given, but is to be newly seen, felt, as if for the first time. That strange reflection in the mirror is perhaps one point where the painter can begin to do this, to glimpse, to see, to paint and to know again for the first time.

'Helene Schjerfbeck', Royal Academy of Arts, London until 27 October 2019; Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki, 15 November 2019 – 26 January 2020