



All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts.  
—William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

# The Self in Contemporary Self-Portraits

Several established contemporary artists have approached the subject of self-portraiture in different ways, depicting who they are or who they wish to be at various times in their lives. | **by Ephraim Rubenstein**

## **Self-Portrait, Matisse Print**

by Mary Beth McKenzie, 1991, oil, 32 x 26. Collection The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York.

With tremendous pictorial intelligence, McKenzie has related every tone in her painting to those in the Matisse. For instance, the ochres of the shadow side of her face are taken from the drapery and chairs, while the pinkish red under her eye is likewise borrowed from the cloth under the model.

Mary Beth McKenzie stands facing the mirror, open and simply, with an intriguing mixture of both questioning and stating something about herself. She projects a feeling of long-suffering familiarity, mixed with enough doubt for a few questions about herself to intrude. She employs a familiar self-portrait trope—situating herself in front of a reproduction of a work she admires. In this case, it is Matisse's *The Studio, Quai St. Michel, Paris*. The Matisse painting is a sort of self-portrait minus the self, the artist having gotten up and momentarily left the studio. But the model has not moved. She still holds the pose, and Matisse's chair and drawing, like a faithful dog, await his imminent return—but not before McKenzie has slipped in and insinuated herself into Matisse's place in this image of the artist at work in his studio.

McKenzie has done more than become a part of Matisse's painting, however. The French master's painting has become a part of her. Matisse's lyrical image has been internalized, digested, and rearranged by McKenzie, but this time on her own terms. Like thought bubbles in a graphic novel, the elements of Matisse's world seem to come out of McKenzie's head. The diagonal of the window ledge shoots out of her forehead, while the nude model practically spills out of her ear. Also, with tremendous pictorial intelligence, McKenzie has related every tone in her painting



Most typically, artists who are interested in self-portraiture will have a burst of activity when they are young. This often represents a fledgling attempt to figure out who they are, or more important, who they wish themselves to be.

**LEFT**

**Self-Portrait**

by Ephraim Rubenstein, 1970s, oil on linen, 24 x 20. Collection Amelia and Madeleine Rubenstein.

This painting was done when I was very young. I had just seen a Goya exhibition, and I remember being in awe of the authority and power of these Spanish noblemen, and thought I would try the role on for size.

**OPPOSITE PAGE**

**Self Portrait at 30**

by David Jon Kassan, 2007, oil on panel, 35 x 25. Private collection.

With eyes averted and darkened underneath to give a feeling of fatigued distress, Kassan avoids projecting himself actively to the viewer at all. In fact, it seems that if he could back out of the painting completely, he probably would.

to those in the Matisse. The overall grayness—so reminiscent of winter in Paris—is punctuated by the ochres on the shadow side of her face, which McKenzie has taken from the drapery and chairs, while the pinkish red under her eye is likewise borrowed from the cloth under the model.

McKenzie—like Rembrandt and Käthe Kollwitz before her, and like Harvey Dinnerstein and Sigmund Abeles today—has painted herself continuously throughout her career. This body of work constitutes a moving chronicle of her artistic and personal development, recounting her personal transformations and archiving the course of her life from her beginnings as an artist until the present moment.

This continual return to self-portraiture represents an unusual commitment to the endeavor, however. The self-portraits of most artists seem to congregate either around their youth or their old age, or in Shakespeare's words, their entrances and their exits. Most typically, artists who are interested in self-portraiture will have a burst of activity when they

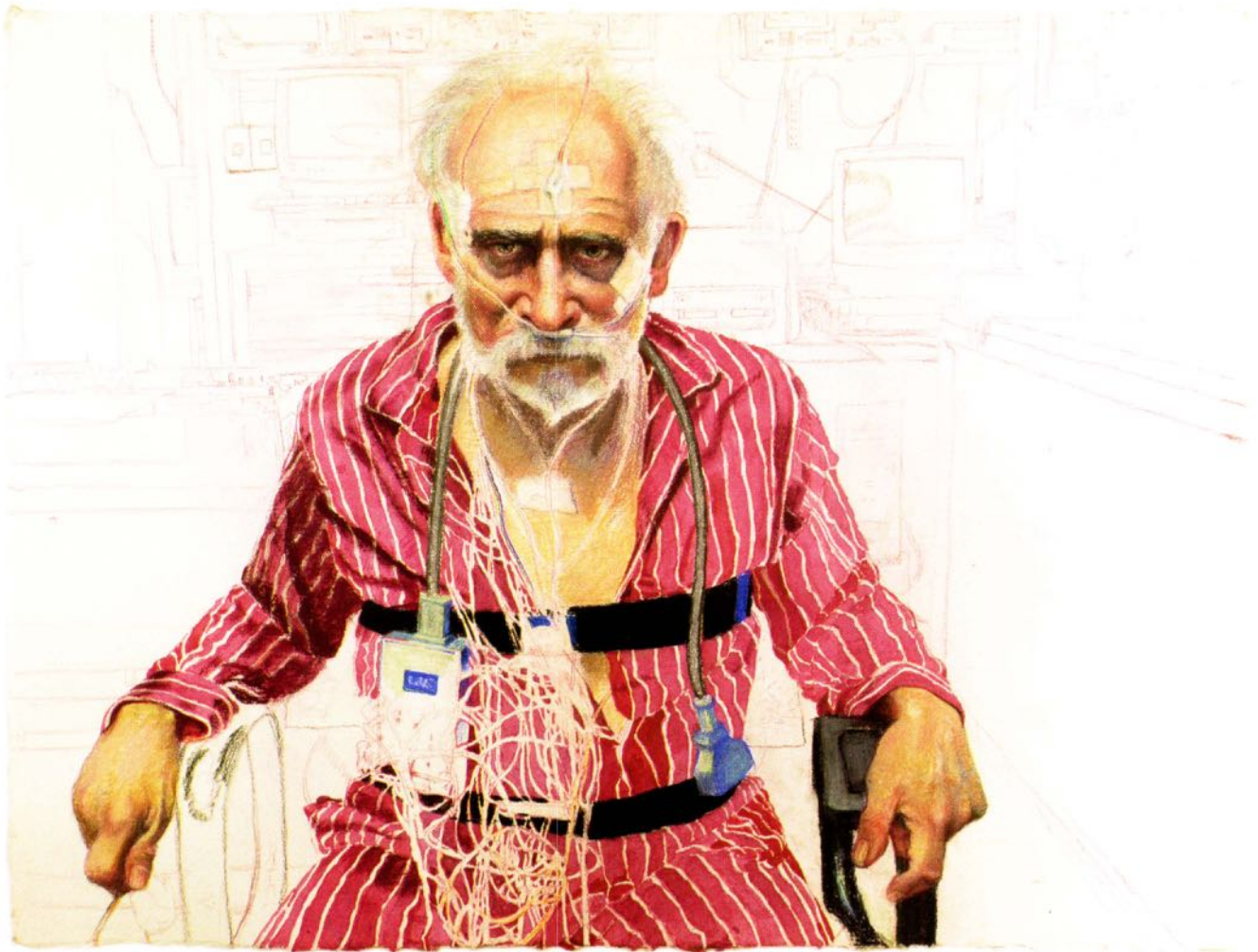
are young. This often represents a fledgling attempt to figure out who they are—or more important, who they wish themselves to be. For entrances, none were more romantic than Courbet's or Fantin-Latour's images that exude the desire to be the rapturous heroes of their dreams. I recall vividly that when I painted my *Self-Portrait*, I had just seen a Goya exhibition, and I remember thinking that being a young Spanish nobleman suited me much better than being a handball-playing kid from Brooklyn. David Kassan, alternatively, takes on an eerily egoless persona in his early self-portrait. Eyes averted, with darkened bags underneath giving a feeling of fatigued distress, he purposely avoids projecting himself actively to the viewer at all. In fact, it seems as if he could back out of the painting completely, he probably would. But however they construe themselves, young people are notorious for the amount of time which they spend in front of mirrors. So self-portraiture, for many artists, is a way of assuming identities, of trying out roles to play, with each man in his time playing many parts.



BELOW

**Portrait of a Parasomniac**

by Sigmund Abeles, 2007, pastel on paper, 31 x 41. Collection the artist.  
Abeles was in the middle of a modern medical nightmare when he painted this. His pajamas read like prisoner's stripes, while the monitors seem like ropes and chains holding him down. The feeling of the artist lunging forward is heightened by the fact that the background is left in the contour stage.



BOTTOM

**Winter 2006**

by Ellen Eagle, 2006, pastel on pumice board, 17 1/2 x 16 1/2. Courtesy Forum Gallery, New York, New York.  
With her Greeklike white dress and rich curls twirling down the side of her face, Eagle reveals herself to be a goddess about to strike. She is Diana at the hunt, her right hand holding her colored arrows.



Some artists will explore the other end of life, however, examining what has become of them, a somewhat stunned account of what life has thrown their way. Sigmund Abeles confronts us hauntingly in his *Portrait of a Parasomniac*, ensnared in the wires and the prisonlike nets of the modern medical world. Abeles must surely wonder if he can be the same man who looked out at us so handsomely and powerfully as in his self portrait *Measuring-Up* [not shown]. Burton Silverman similarly survived a medical nightmare—in his case, a heart attack—and he portrays himself as such in his self portrait, *Survivor*. But unlike Abeles, Silverman is well on the other side of the disaster. With brushes and camera in hand, Silverman is now back to work, but forever changed. His shirt is portentously off, a reminder that surgeons had to cut into his bare chest to keep him alive, and that shirtlessness can never have the same meaning for him.

BELOW

### Self-Portrait—Day's End

by Joe Peller, 2003, oil on linen, 72 x 44. Private collection.

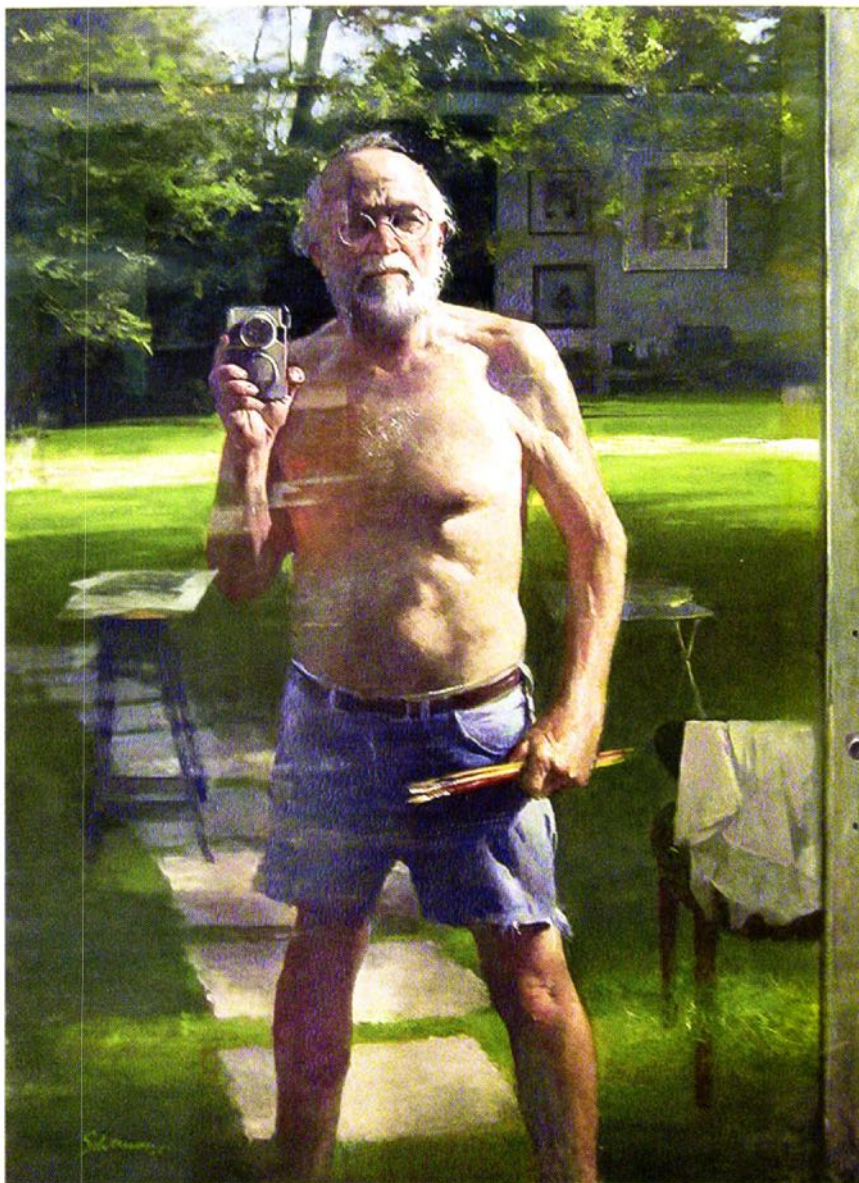
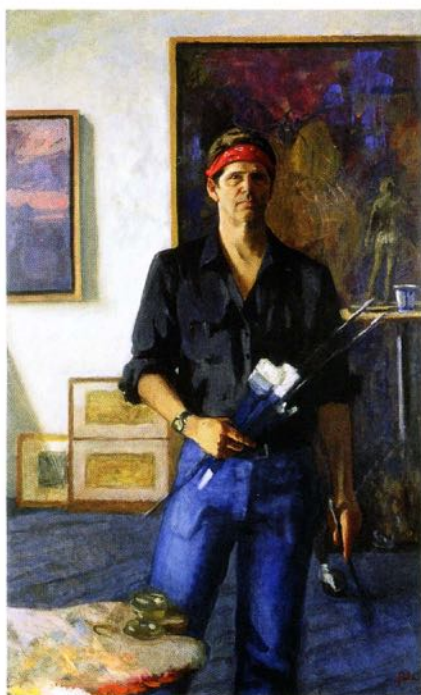
Peller's athlete/warrior's headband speaks of the sweat and labor involved in the many hours spent on his feet. He has planted himself firmly in the midst of his studio, a space filled with gorgeous north light and with other paintings and sculptures, rewards of other fruitful days' work.

RIGHT

### Survivor

by Burton Silverman, 2004, oil, 56 x 40. Collection Columbus Museum, Columbus, Georgia.

Like Abeles, Silverman survived a medical nightmare—in his case, a heart attack. But he is back at work here, holding the two major tools of his profession, the brush and the camera. His shirtlessness is a reminder that surgeons once cut into his bare chest to keep him alive.



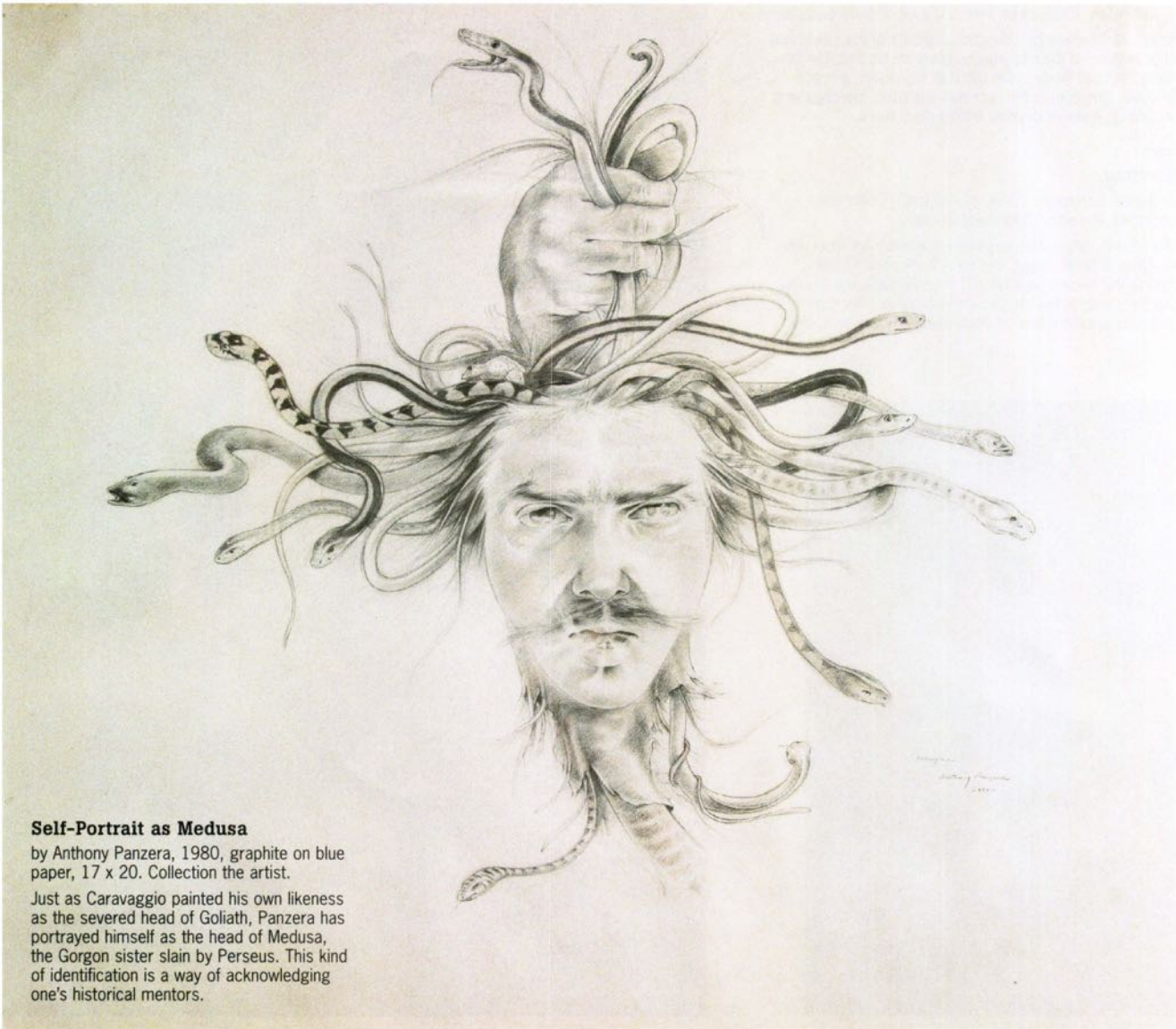
For Silverman, the medical episode is merely the background; what is really important is that he is back at work. And being at work is one of the most important ways in which artists envision themselves. For most artists, our work is at the core of who we feel ourselves to be. As one instructor at the Art Students League of New York put it, "I have two kinds of pants: the kind that has paint on them, and the kind that is *going* to get paint on them." We live to work, and seeing ourselves at work is how we most clearly envision ourselves. What would possibly be more telling, in investigating who we are, than depicting ourselves at the easel?

In *Winter 2006*, Ellen Eagle is at work, red chalk in hand, caught in that split second between looking and recording. She is depicting the moment of graphic response—a crucial moment for the painter. Eagle has captured the instant between when we see what we are looking for and when we make the move to record it. It is that

moment when we hold an observation in our minds for just long enough so that we can turn our impression of light into a passage of colored chalk.

With her Greeklike white dress, so simple in its folds that it reads like an ancient robe, and her dark hair replete with rich curls and ringlets twirling down the side of her face, Eagle reveals herself to be a goddess about to strike. She is Diana at the hunt, her right hand holding her colored arrows. She is in the process of capturing her prey, only this time, it is you, the sitter.

Joseph Peller is at work as well, but he is not so much about to strike as he is surveying what he has done. *Self-Portrait—Day's End* is a telling title. He looks with intense scrutiny but also with obvious pleasure at what he has accomplished. The athlete/warrior's headband speaks of the work, of sweat and labor, of the many hours spent on his feet. And while Eagle uses arrows, Peller wields swords. But Peller's is a highly civi-



**Self-Portrait as Medusa**

by Anthony Panzera, 1980, graphite on blue paper, 17 x 20. Collection the artist.

Just as Caravaggio painted his own likeness as the severed head of Goliath, Panzera has portrayed himself as the head of Medusa, the Gorgon sister slain by Perseus. This kind of identification is a way of acknowledging one's historical mentors.

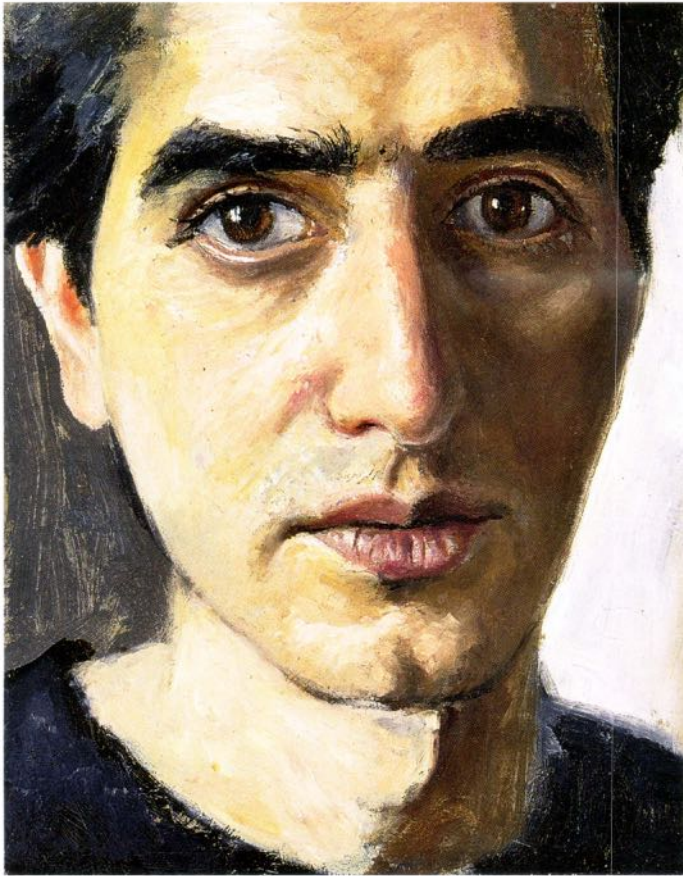
lized battle. He has planted himself firmly in the midst of his studio, a space filled with gorgeous north light and with other paintings and sculptures, rewards of other fruitful days' work.

Having other artists' paintings around us is one way we can refer to our artistic lineage. By including in the background of our paintings the work of artists whom we admire, we not only express our gratitude toward these masters but also stake a claim for our own aspirations and ambitions. Anthony Panzera heightens this notion of art-historical reference by actually inserting himself directly into an earlier pictorial idea. In his *Self-Portrait as Medusa*, Panzera pays homage to Caravaggio by substituting his own face for this most famous of the Gorgon sisters.

If Eagle is a goddess about to strike, then Panzera is the one who has been savagely smote. For the "crime" of having been raped in her sacred temple, Athena rendered the beautiful Medusa hideous. Where luxuriant dark curls once framed her

face, Athena caused writhing venomous snakes to sprout. She made her features horrid, half melting, sore ridden, so much so that no one could look at Medusa without turning to stone. It was only when Perseus cut off Medusa's head and presented it to Athena that the goddess' wrath was assuaged. This is the moment into which Panzera has insinuated his own tragic face. Head dangling from Perseus' mighty grasp, the flesh peels away from his skull while the horrid but elegant snakes continue to wriggle out in fulfillment of their cruel destiny.

Panzera's Gorgon is an extremely dramatic way of referring to one's own artistic lineage. In his 1994 *Self-Portrait*, Costa Vavagiakis makes an equally personal reference to his aesthetic and cultural roots, but in a more subtle manner. Vavagiakis' lifelong interest in portraiture led him early on to the Faiyum mummy portraits—the funerary art of the Greek immigrants living in Rome in the first century. He sensed immediately, as do most viewers, their uncanny paradoxical



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LEFT

**Self-Portrait**

by Costa Vavagiakis, 1994, oil, 10 x 8. Collection New York Historical Society, New York, New York.

Vavagiakis has here made himself the subject of his own Faiyum mummy portrait. He has even captured that uncanny combination of lifelikeness and stylization found in those first-century panel paintings.

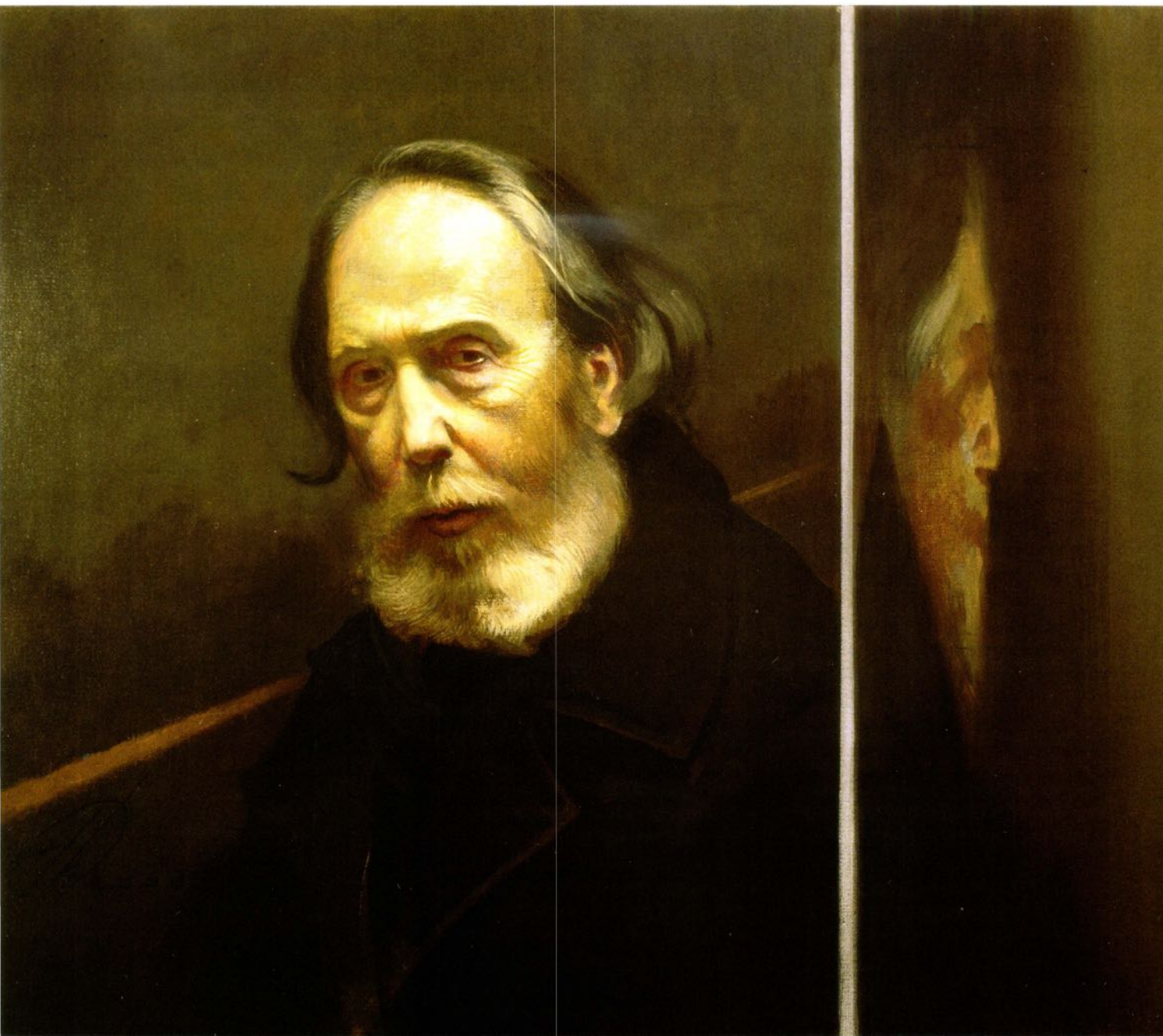
BELOW

**Self-Portrait, Life Masks**

by Mary Beth McKenzie, 1990, oil, 19 x 28. Collection National Academy of Design, New York, New York.

McKenzie paints herself here with two life masks, plaster casts that are often seen around artists' studios. But they also read like alternative selves that the artist can wear if she wants to be someone else. They are literal representations of the three primary psychological selves—me, myself, and I.





ABOVE

**Nocturnal Reflections**

by Harvey Dinnerstein, 2008, oil, 24 x 42. Courtesy Frey Norris Gallery, San Francisco, California.

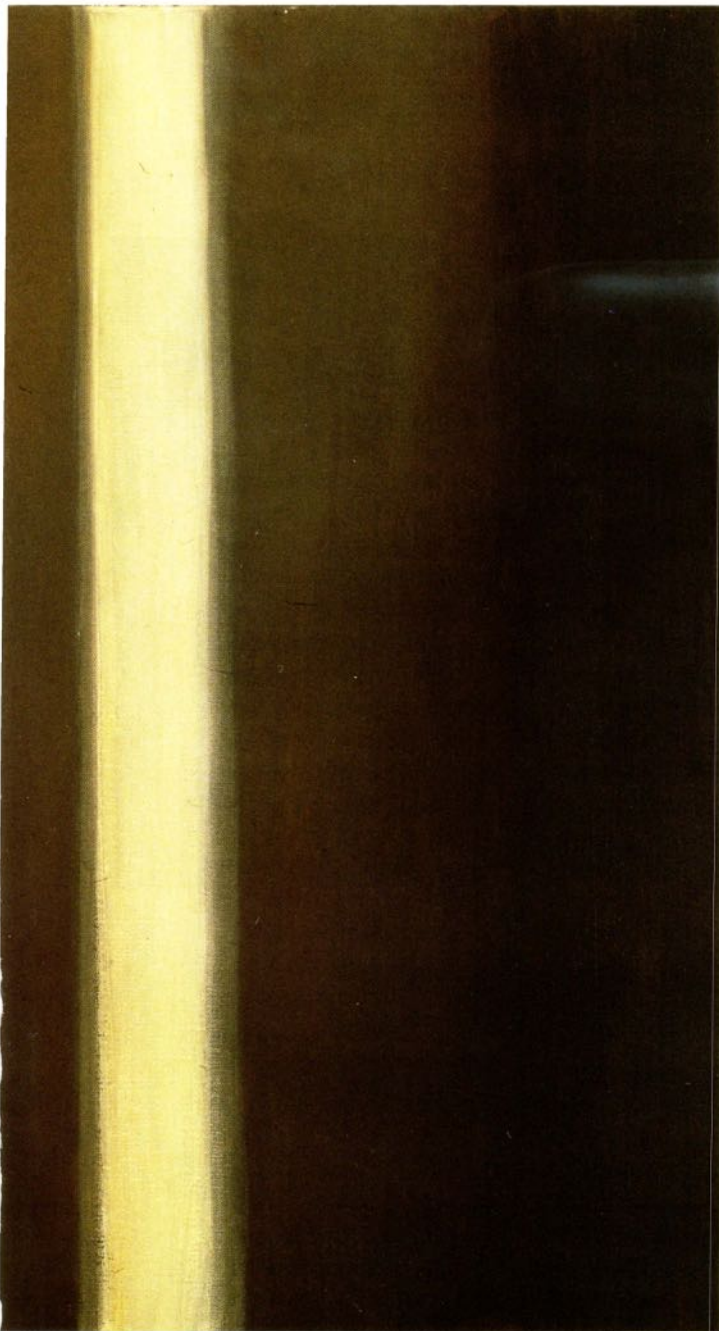
This haunting self-portrait contains both literal and figurative reflections—the artist's own face is compressed into a flash of light on a cylindrical column, and it also serves as a reflection on where the artist finds himself on the journey of life.

OPPOSITE PAGE

**Self-Portrait in My Coat**

by Ephraim Rubenstein, 1998, oil on linen, 38 x 28. Collection the artist.

Life had dealt me a number of blows by the time I did this painting. I remember having been put in a situation that made me feel marginalized and insignificant, and I wanted to remind myself that I could be formidable, a powerful shape dominating the canvas. The coat was a hand-me-down from my father, and I thought of him and his incredible strength when I wore it.



qualities: the combination of sophistication with naïve awkwardness, a formal intensity with an unassuming casualness, and an eerie lifelike quality coupled with pronounced stylization. These ancient faces stop you in your tracks because you saw someone who looked *exactly like that*, even though they have been dead for 2,000 years.

These paradoxical qualities appealed enormously to Vavagiakis, and in an attempt to unite his own personal history with the larger history of art, he made himself the subject of his own mummy portrait. Even though Vavagiakis' portrait is painted in oil, he made the build-up of his brush strokes look like the Faiyum encaustic. With his face pushed forward right up to the picture plane and his features similarly accentuated



in an entreaty to the viewer to stop for a moment and converse, what could be a more poignant meditation on death and the eternal life than the one art bestows upon us?

The contemplation of death becomes increasingly pressing as we get older, as we prepare for our own exits. Harvey Dinnerstein's *Nocturnal Reflections* contains both literal reflections—his own shadowy image compressed in one of those metal cylindrical columns one sees about the city in subway stations and office lobbies—and also a reflection upon the brevity of life, as seen by one of the city's most sensitive travelers. And a traveler he is indeed—outdoors, en route in one of the many anonymous way stations of the city, with yellow traffic markings to indicate his movement. The painting is a meditation on *The Journey*, on the man who is about to become that reflection in the column, that flash of light that is so compressed that it feels as if it is about to get squeezed out of the painting and slip away into the darkness.

Dinnerstein has paused somewhere on his journey to look at us. His eyes are astounding—red, swollen, pink in the sockets, with full bags underneath outlined by heavy creases. His eyes are eyes that have seen a great deal. His very presence seems to ask a question. What is he about to say, this mysterious nocturnal traveler, in his coat, on the road? ■

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