

The Monstrous I

Riisa Gundesen

My work in self-portraiture began with an interest in the relationship between femininity and the politics of the gaze. If the feminine is *seeming* and *being seen*, what is it when no one is looking? In her influential essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey coins the term the “Male Gaze” to deconstruct certain cinematic tropes using feminist psychoanalysis.¹ Mulvey’s central argument is that (classic) film (and by extension, mainstream visual culture) caters specifically to the pleasure of (cis-gendered, heterosexual) men, and is therefore structured to reinforce their position as the cultural centre, the source of “objectivity.” Outside that centre, the film (or image) is experienced differently; a woman watching such a film is forced to watch it through the lens of her own objectification. John Berger addresses this phenomenon in broader terms: “Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at [...] The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object [...] an object of vision: a sight.”² Mulvey’s essay is not only a critique of the objectification of women, but also a dissection of what makes objectification pleasurable for the viewer—and that involves not simply beauty, or beautiful women, but *control*. Mulvey suggests that it is the exquisitely controlled nature of these “sights” that makes them enjoyable.

Consider, for example, our current scorn for “Selfie Culture,” in which much of the vitriol is directed toward teenage girls. The main criticism targets their supposed vanity and narcissism. This accusation clearly reproduces much older sexist rhetorics—accounts of the vanity of women are an ancient and self-fulfilling prophecy. I see a clear parallel to selfie-scorn in the common neo-classical trope of a beautiful woman admiring herself in a mirror as an allegory for vanity. Berger discusses this in his essay “Ways of Seeing”:

The mirror was often used as a symbol of the vanity of women. The moralizing, however, was mostly hypocritical. You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting *Vanity*, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure.³

1 Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2010), 57–65.

2 John Berger, “Ways of Seeing,” *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2010), 50.

3 Berger, 51.

In contemporary contexts, a woman is told that her beauty is her most valuable commodity, then mocked for using available platforms to display her successful gender performance. There is an element of blame attached as well; as Berger implies, the alleged vanity of women becomes a vehicle for deferring a man's culpability. This is borne out in one of my favourite allegorical subjects, the apocryphal story of Susanna and the Elders. It was particularly popular with the baroque painters; along with many others, Rubens, Rembrandt, Tintoretto, and Alessandro Allori all tackled it, sometimes more than once. The parable tells of two wicked village elders who spy on a chaste Jewish wife at her bath, then confront her and try to seduce her. When she refuses, they tell the town that she slept with them, a "crime" that nearly results in her being executed (until a holy man notices inconsistencies in the men's stories and pronounces her innocent). The most popularly depicted scene is, of course, the moment of spying, as Susanna admires her own nude form (sometimes covered in pearls and jewels) in the mirror. Sometimes she is oblivious to the spying, sometimes she seems coyly aware, performative. The mirror (which is not mentioned in the original parable) signifies her complicity in her own objectification and assault, thereby exonerating the viewer. She is looking at herself, therefore establishing herself as a sight that others may have free rein to look at, too. As in Mulvey's analysis of classic films, where the protagonist functions as an audience surrogate, the elders become a proxy for the viewer, heightening the pleasure of looking, and the pleasure of scopophilic control.

Today, takers of selfies are mocked for images which, in the context of an art photo or magazine spread, or a European oil painting, might be acceptable and admirable. The difference between the genres is one of authorship. As self-portraits, perhaps selfies do not afford the viewer the same convenient surrogate; with the taker of the selfie straddling the border between subject and author/viewer, a level of ambiguity is introduced. Though the average selfie may not present any subversion of gender performances, the ambiguity of the selfie — its author is its subject — is apparently enough to provoke the old rhetoric of vanity and narcissism. A limitation has been transgressed, potentially representing a threat to other boundaries.

It is from this place that I begin when considering the possibilities of an anti-performance; this is not a non-performance, or a lack of performativity, but a performance that positions itself in deliberate opposition to the European nude trope, which offers available, beautiful, non-confrontational femininity. In contrast to the curated backgrounds of oil paintings and conventional selfies, the settings of the self-portraits are a more true and intimate representation of the dirty, excessive state of my own living spaces. The figure itself is painted on the verge of losing its integrity of form, dissolving into colourfields and

abstraction, or being distorted, disfigured by strange, textural growths of paint and wax. Features and limbs are twisted and fragmented, subtly recalling (and subverting) the cubists and the action painters, De Koonings and Picassos slicing up the female body into colourful grotesques. The (my) body literally begins to transgress its boundaries. In this way, by approaching and breaching the margins, the portrait invites the abject in.

Abjection is itself a nebulous thing to pin down. To abject is, literally, to cast away, to throw off. The abject is not a thing, exactly—rather it is a non-thing that is repulsed, or repressed, excluded from the world of objects. The abject is closely tied to primal feelings of repulsion and disgust, and therefore food rejection is a helpful place to begin the definition. The sensation of the rising gorge, provoked by the sight, the smell, or the taste of spoiled food is familiar to any person; one might envision, in that moment of nausea, what should happen if the rot would touch your lips, your tongue, and your throat. The retching, the vomiting evacuation that would ensue represents an act of abjection, of casting the polluting, dangerous thing away from yourself. Therefore it exists in the margins, of body, gender, place—I push back the non-object until I encounter the corpse, which cannot be pushed back, for the corpse is contained within the self, death infecting life. I am entangled and confronted with the existential horror of the inevitable, the abject.

The kind of anti-performance introduced here accesses the abject in order to force a kind of confrontation, aiming to deny the comfortable scopophilia that allows for a thoughtless, unstudied objectification as a matter of course. By introducing the repulsive, the abject, the portrait denies the presumptive heterosexual male gaze an idealized reflection of its own desire. Further, the self-portraits display my interior space and life in the context of the European nudes and allegorical paintings, confronting the expectation of titillating intimate fantasy with the threatening, the unsettling, the unthinkable. If femininity is in seeming and in being seen, then the performance of femininity is under threat at its limits, in moments of privacy, of grotesque intimacy. The scenes also reflect physical symptoms of my experiences with anxiety, depression, and mental illness—itching, scratching, and picking at my skin in fits of panic or mania—and this intimacy takes on a sinister role next to images of rotten food, cluttered refuse, and discarded objects. Daily tasks ideologically related to femininity—cooking and tidying, applying makeup, and maintaining appearances—take on a disturbing cast, reflective of the anxieties and obsessive thinking I've come to associate with them. Like an intrusive thought, or the panic attack that you've pushed back all week, the abject lurks in the margins, a source of threat and intrigue. It is as attractive as the white head on a pimple, the mysterious tupperware in the back of the fridge, the scab that must be poked and picked and picked until it scars.

Riisa Gundesen, *Selfie#2*, 2017, oil on canvas, 64 x 46 inches

Photographs by Joshua Wade

Images courtesy of the artist





Riisa Gundesen, *Woman in Blue*, 2018, oil on canvas, 66 x 51 inches

Riisa Gundesen, *Noodle Study*, 2018, watercolour on rag paper, 14 x 11 inches





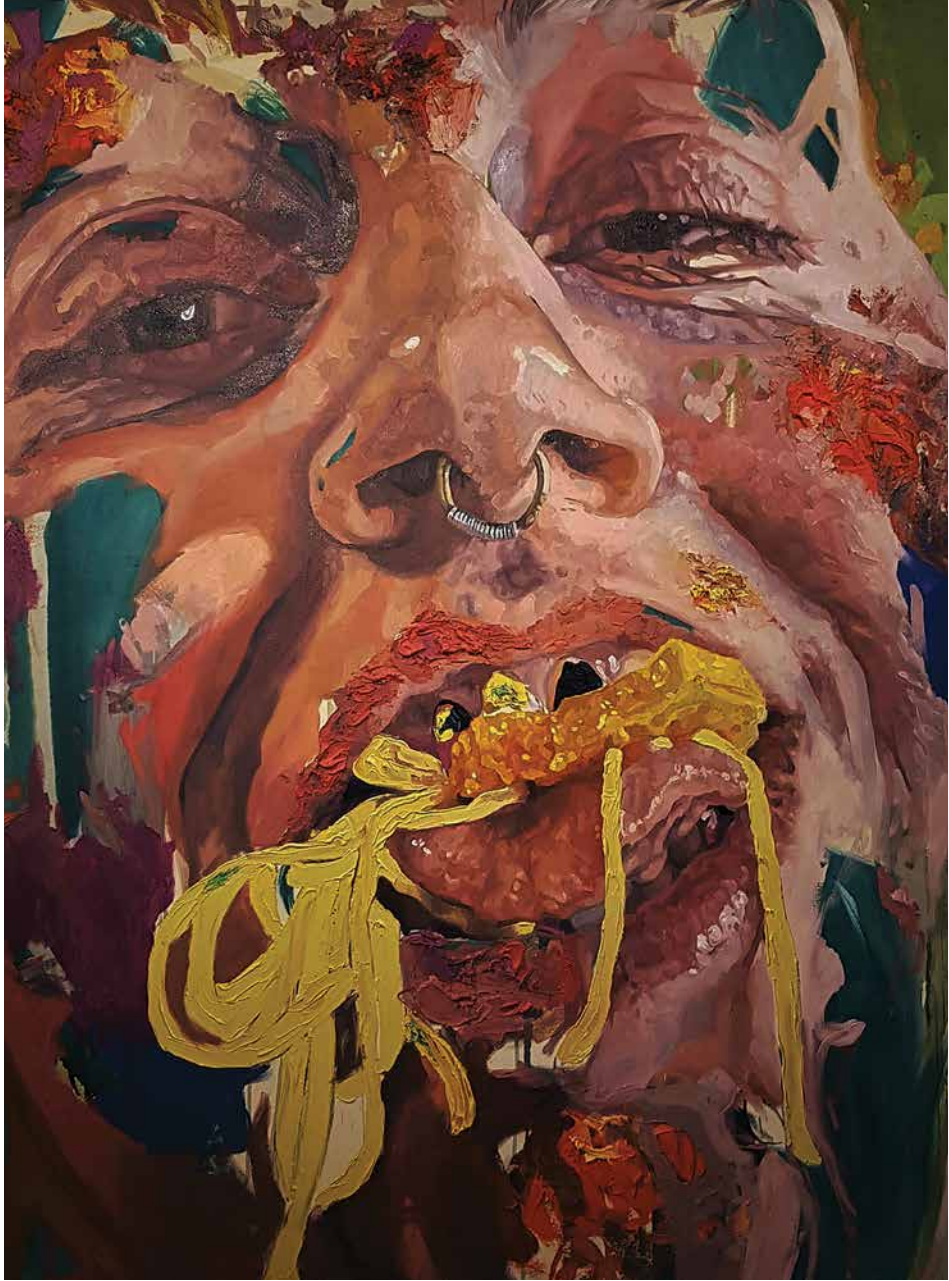


Riisa Gundesen, *Toilette*, 2018, oil on canvas, 41.5 x 53 inches



Riisa Gundesen, *Nature Morte*, 2017, oil on canvas, 51 x 66 inches

Riisa Gundesen, *Bite*, 2017, oil on canvas, 68 x 52 inches



Riisa Gundesen, *Blue Period*, 2018, oil on canvas, 61 x 45.5 inches





Riisa Gundesen, *Inside*, 2017, oil on canvas, 68 x 67 inches



Riisa Gundersen, *Selfie#1*, 2016, oil on canvas, 60 x 60 inches

Riisa Gundersen, *Susanna and the Elders*, 2017, oil on canvas, 66 x 46 inches



Riisa Gundesen, *Study for Danae*, 2017, watercolour on yupo paper, 32 x 24 inches

