

Anne Harris's Phantasmagorical Self-Portraits: March 2013
By Alison Ferris

"The painting, trace of a prolonged attendance at this threshold between time and space, between life and death, does not become an image of emotion, figured as in the Western representational tradition as gesture or expression." Griselda Pollock writing about the art of Bracha Ettinger (1)

Anne Harris unflinchingly depicts herself, now middle-aged, in a series of new self-portraits. Six of the paintings, at first glance, are "traditional" in that she depicts herself in a straightforward portrayal from the waist up. They are also the least forgiving. Her torso can be described in no other way than corpulent: the youthful curve between waist and hips is gone and her belly fat is starting to fold over her hips. Her breasts flatten and sag, having completed their youthful functions. The surface of her pale, thinning skin exposes the fat deposits that lie underneath. We are looking at a Venus of Willendorf no longer endowed with the power of fertility.

Harris has shown us, in a manner that is both brutal and liberating, the physical and emotional consequences of menopause for middle-aged women. Our metabolism slows down, our skin grows more transparent and loses its elasticity, veins are more pronounced, our faces pale or, on occasion, flushed and blotchy. Some of these changes are suggested in the titles Harris gives these portraits including *Pink Face* and *Invisible*. The latter refers not only to the fact that we become physically transparent as we age—thin skin and white hair—but also that we become invisible because we no longer carry the signs of youth, youth being what is sought and seen today. Harris's paintings, however, are not about lamenting these losses. In fact, as is emphasized by the title and content of two other self-portraits tentatively titled *Pale Angel* and *Angel* she seems quite ready to accept the fact that her body, having performed its earthly purpose of conveying life—not only her own but also, for a brief but important nine months, her son's—is transforming, readying itself for a new phase.

From 1996 to 1998, when she was similarly undergoing the physical and emotional transformation of pregnancy and new motherhood, Harris painted three self-portraits depicting herself pregnant. Here is a description of one of the three: *Second Portrait with Max*.

Unclothed and in the last term of her pregnancy, Harris's body in *Second Portrait with Max* (1996–1997) radiates life from her belly and breasts. But her shoulders droop, her arms and hands are listless, and her face, with eyes half-closed and mouth slightly open, is blank, dark, even corpse-like. Taut over her large, swollen abdomen and corpulent thighs and breasts, the skin of Harris's body is translucent. The pellucid skin of her shoulders, arms, hands, and thighs recedes into the background which in turn, is skin-like and joins almost seamlessly with her body. The ambiguous boundaries between the subject and the background suggest that the qualities of Harris's body extend to the whole canvas. Her body is, in a sense, the painting." (2)

The similarities (of which there are many) and the differences (which are few but vital) between Harris's self-portraits with Max and her current self-portraits are worthy of investigation. In addition to what we've come to expect from Harris, marveling in her expert handling of paint and exquisitely laid-down brush strokes, her color palette in the new self-portraits is similar to that of her earlier work. She uses relative color which she describes as "no-name color that only exists in context." (3) For instance, at first glance,

colors of the body's flesh dominate: browns, beiges, pinks, and ivories, but upon closer inspection many other colors such as greens, yellows, reds, and purples are revealed. The subtle layers and juxtapositions of colors vibrate in our field of vision, bringing the no-name colors, and by extension her figures, to life in her paintings.

The colors Harris employs are also reminiscent of those discerned in Old Master drawings: red chalk or conte crayon, black charcoal, white gouache, and brown inks. References to painting from the Renaissance are evident in her Angel paintings. Harris makes use of the foreshortening effects mastered by Renaissance artists such as Michelangelo, whose paintings on the Sistine chapel are the best-known examples of the technique and were copied thereafter for years in images such as the putti found on ceilings of European palaces. However, these references are not pointed or specific in Harris's paintings; rather, they function more as echoes or recollections. They are a reminder that new paintings come with histories.

Life and death together linger in all of Harris's new self-portraits, a phenomenon that exists in the pregnancy paintings but registers slightly differently when they are compared to the new work. Collectively, Harris's three self-portraits with Max do not portray a woman basking in the satisfaction of pregnancy but rather describe her ambivalence about it. As I argued elsewhere, these three paintings touch upon the phenomenon that French philosopher Julia Kristeva has described as "the self-annihilation of self required to give birth." (4) Birth is at the forefront of these paintings while death hangs back in the subjects' corpse-like faces and ghostly limbs. "There is a tension both formally and conceptually between Harris's retreating self and her breasts and stomach which glow in an almost ethereal light and threaten to rupture the surface of the painting itself." (5)

In her new self-portraits, Harris's body signals what might be understood as the beginning of the process of a woman's physical demise, starting with the loss of her ability to create new life. Harris's paintings, however, do not dwell on the fact of death but rather find in it a release, a semblance of freedom, perhaps even a different kind of birth. This can be seen in the fact that, while physically grounded in their body's solidity, the heads and elongated necks of these figures—slightly smaller in proportion to the bodies—appear to hover above their bodies, contributing to a spectral quality in these works. Her expressions in these works register confidence, resolve, and poise, and in *Invisible* resized, we glimpse a slight smile. These figures seem to possess knowledge or a state of consciousness that exists beyond the realm of the ordinary. They also appear not to be connected to a specific time or place—there is nothing of the material world in these paintings that grounds them. Harris famously insists that a painting is only complete when she has believably rendered the air in front of herself. This charge to herself results in the impression that the figures in her paintings emerge from thin air and, despite their physicality, exist in a state and space of suspension. All of these factors contribute to the way that her body can be described as being in what art historian Maria Dibattista describes as "a liminal state": somewhere, "between visibility and nonvisibility in which the outlines, boundaries, even surfaces of a female body. . . tremble on the verge of dissolution." (6)

Harris's figures do indeed exist somewhere in between visibility and non-visibility, but they do not tremble in such a state. In fact, their solidity is quite remarkable, and they seem to have gained strength and confidence at this juncture. This state may be explained by the fact that Harris, as the artist, has found her way to what Griselda Pollock describes as the "threshold between time and space, between life and death." (7) The traces from this metaphorical journey into the time and space of life and death manifest themselves in her figures' spectral qualities. The effect of the self-portraits is that they haunt us: as viewers we feel a strong uncanny presence in these paintings.

While held by this felt presence in Harris's paintings, we might simultaneously wonder why, or what is the purpose of these paintings that haunt us? Who is this artist who haunts us with her own image? And we realize that although these are self-portraits painted in a realistic style, we learn next to nothing about the artist who painted them. And that is precisely the point. The artist obscures herself in these seemingly revealing portraits to stymie the long-held assumption that portraits, particularly self-portraits, reveal something about the artist's interior life, "... a depth with an 'identity'; a depth that can answer us back in our own chosen terms." (8) Harris instead finds her way to spectral worlds where webs of meaning, identities, lineages, and histories mesmerize rather than add up. From there she as an artist can offer us, the viewers, a comparable experience—a place where felt presence takes precedence over profound insight.

Footnotes

1. Griselda Pollock, "Rethinking the Artist in the Woman, the Woman in the Artist, and That Old Chestnut, the Gaze," in *Women Artists at the Millennium*, edited by Carol Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 54.
2. Alison Ferris, *Without Likeness: Paintings by Anne Harris* (Brunswick, ME: Bowdoin College Museum of Art, 2003), 7.
3. "Portrait of an Artist: Anne Harris," in *face to face: A blog from the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution*, February 15, 2013, http://face2face.si.edu/my_weblog/
4. Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," *The Kristeva Reader*, Toril Moi, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 177.
5. Ferris, 11.
6. Maria Dibattista, "Scandalous Matter: Women Artists and the Crisis of Embodiment," in *Women Artists at the Millennium*, edited by Carol Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 429.
7. Pollock, *ibid.*
8. Anne Wagner, "Difference and Disfiguration, or Trockel as Mime," in *Women Artists at the Millennium*, edited by Carol Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 320.

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