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Archives

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Self, Ordovas Gallery, London

In *Self*, the current exhibition on display at **Ordovas Gallery**, London, artistic mastery by four of the most revered artists of the 20th century, Pablo Picasso, Francis Bacon, Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons, is championed. Rarely seen works deliver over a century of captivating self-portrayal, as it develops from the capturing of a moment in time fuelled by an artists' inner most anguishes, to a tool used to help sculpt further thought on the desire for legacy after death.

Immediately upon entering, the viewer is confronted by the pairing of Bacon's *Self-portrait* (1961) and Picasso's *Self-Portrait (Yo Picasso)* (1901). Bacon was never fond of his own image, thus the circular, gestural brush marks obscure the relatable details on Bacon's face, exposing an attempt to disguise an inner turmoil that the artist wrestles with and tries to resolve through painting. Within this act of covering up, Bacon's work instils upon the viewer a sense of abstracted introspection. Everyone, to a degree, can relate to, at the very least, wanting to cover up a part of themselves that they deem unattractive or symbolic of something that they want to remain hidden. It is this desire that Bacon's work reflects and brings rise to within the viewer.

In stark contrast, Picasso's *Self-Portrait (Yo Picasso)*, a never before publicly displayed study executed in charcoal and pastel, depicts Picasso painting by candle light. Where Bacon's mark-making is soft and calculated, Picasso's areas of segregated primary colour, swamped by thick black scratches, is an explosion of unbridled emotion. As a result, a vicious co-dependent dialogue is fostered between the two works as Picasso and Bacon unite over their mutual channelling of their inner conflicts. Yet, we as viewers don't recognise these images purely, as they would have been at the time, as a snapshot of the artist at that very moment working. We use them as a visual enhancement to the purgatorial legacy both artists are now to be confined to through their deaths.

While Picasso and Bacon's pieces aid the image of the tortured geniuses, the later contemporary works presented by Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst are far more calculated. They allow their images to be vehicles for a diverse range of existential thought. This is uniquely captured in Koons' *Self-Portrait* (1991) whereby a marble stature from the *Made In Heaven* series, that is at the far right of the gallery, shows Koons bare chested, with his head flicked back in schoolboy cockiness erupting out of broken shards. The cold white marble suggests a quasi-religious rendering that can be perceived as proselytising, as if Koons is attempting to immortalise himself and curate his legacy before it were to ever happen naturally.

Yet in Hirst's *With Dead Head* (1991) at the opposite side of the gallery, a counteractive approach is presented. A lone black and white photograph on the opposite side of the gallery, a young Hirst, then a student, in a Leeds mortuary, stooping down to next to the severed head of a level grinning inanely. The face of the cadaver is permanently crippled into a boisterous scowl, creating a humorously terrifying juxtaposition between life and death dismisses the need for a self-portrait to govern public image – as Hirst once remarked, "we are here for a good time not a long time". But what is most unique is the cliff-hanger the exhibition ends on, asking the viewer to consider in a century's time how Koons and Hirst's legacy will be impacted by these self-portraits as they are exhibited next to living artists.

Self, until 13 December, **Ordovas Gallery**, 25 Savile Row, London, W1S 2ER.

William Davie

Credits

1. *Self* installation view, Photography by Mike Bruce, Damien Hirst artworks © Damien Hirst and Science Ltd, all rights reserved. DACS 2014.

