

# Review: “Selfie” suggests digital technology puts a new spin on tradition of self-portraiture

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By DINAH MCCLINTOCK

The invention of photography in the early 19th century radically altered the course of modern art and forever changed the way people see the world around them.

Has 21st-century technology — digital photography, social media, smart phones with cameras — had a similar impact on art and vision? This is one of the questions posed by *Selfie: A Contemporary Look at the Self-Portrait* at the [Chastain Arts Center](#) through August 2.

Self-portraits have been a mainstay of Western painting all the way back to cave paintings, of course. [Elizabeth Day noted in the \*Guardian/Observer\*](#) that 4,000-year-old handprints on cave walls can be understood as humans’ desire for self-representation. To explore the relationship between the art historical genre and the ever-present selfie, curator Karen Comer put out an open call to artists for self-portraits that engaged characteristics of the digital version.

James Taylor looks straight at the viewer as if through a camera held in his unseen hand in *Selfie Selfie* (2014). The setting appears to be his studio, a common one in traditional self-portraits, but the position of his body (minus forearms) resembles a selfie.

James Franco argues in his essay *The Meanings of the Selfie* that the digital self-portrait “quickly and easily shows, not tells, how you’re feeling, where you are, what you’re doing.” That immediacy is suggested by the sketchlike quality of Tina Dunkley’s watercolor pencil drawings.



Suellen Parker: Me as Kate Bush, 2014

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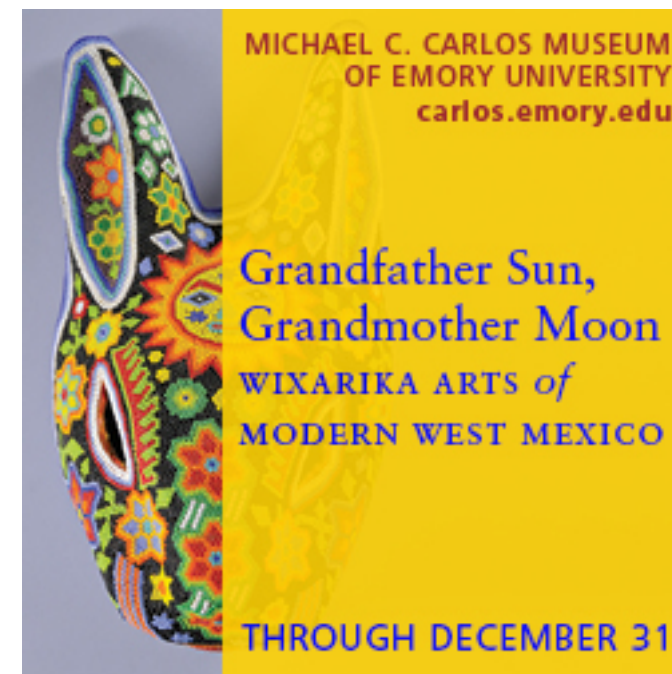
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Cecelia Kane: detail of *How Am I Feeling Today*, 2012–present.

Cecelia Kane captures the serial nature of selfies in *How am I Feeling Today*, an installation of 18 works from an ongoing series begun in 2012. Each day the artist wrote a word describing her state of mind or health on her forehead in lipstick. She then photographed her face and printed a black and white version on a vintage handkerchief from her childhood.

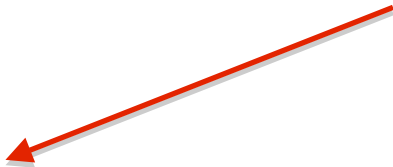
On Day 6, for instance, “Itchy” appears on her forehead, and short embroidered lines haphazardly scatter across the surface of the black hanky. “Healthy” is the word for Day 74; her smiling visage is ringed by a radiating halo of silver thread, and her body is a caricaturelike, embroidered drawing of muscle-man arms with bulging biceps.

The selfie is “about continuously rewriting yourself,” writes Mariann Hardy, a lecturer at Durham University who researches and analyzes digital social media. “It’s an extension of our natural construction of self. It’s about presenting yourself in the best way . . . [similar to] when women put on makeup or men who bodybuild to look a certain way.”

Like teenagers who make glam-shot selfies as if they were pop singers or movie stars, Suellen Parker superimposes her own eyes and mouth onto modeled clay figurines of pop-culture celebrities in a strangely arresting series of archival inkjet prints. Titles such as *Me as Nancy Mckeon as Jo with Blair’s Hair from Facts of Life* (2014) humorously identify the artful manipulation of Photoshop and other digital tools with the artifice of media celebrity itself.



Meg Aubrey: *Damaged*, 2012.





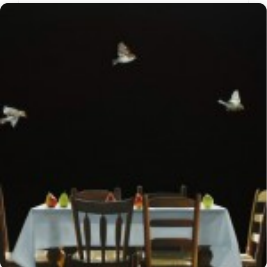
Meg Aubrey’s *Behind the Glass* (2014) depicts the artist as the epitome of stylish affluence. Portrayed from slightly below as if from the viewpoint of a smart phone held in her left hand, an attractive woman in sporty aviator sunglasses and bright red lipstick is seen partially through a sparkling glass of red wine held in her well-manicured right hand.

While selfies frequently show their subjects in their (often contrived) best light, they can also show people in revealing ways. In Aubrey’s *Damaged* (2012), blood-caked stitches cut vertically across the center of her glossy pink lips, imbuing the image of an otherwise put-together woman with uneasiness.

Some work in the exhibition doesn’t seem to address the theme. For example, Matt Haffner’s film-noir-meets-comic-book-style gray silhouette stands out against a video of the gritty, in-town neighborhood near his studio. It does not look as if he is taking his own picture, and the moving image projected across the static silhouette shares nothing with the typical selfie. It’s a stretch to understand Philip Carpenter’s meticulous and penetrating self-portraits or Mario Petirena’s engaging installation of tiny, surreal photomontages as selfie-related.

Even so, the exhibition offers imaginative and intriguing updates on the tradition of self-portraiture, and an awareness that we might be seeing each other and imagining ourselves differently in the digital age.

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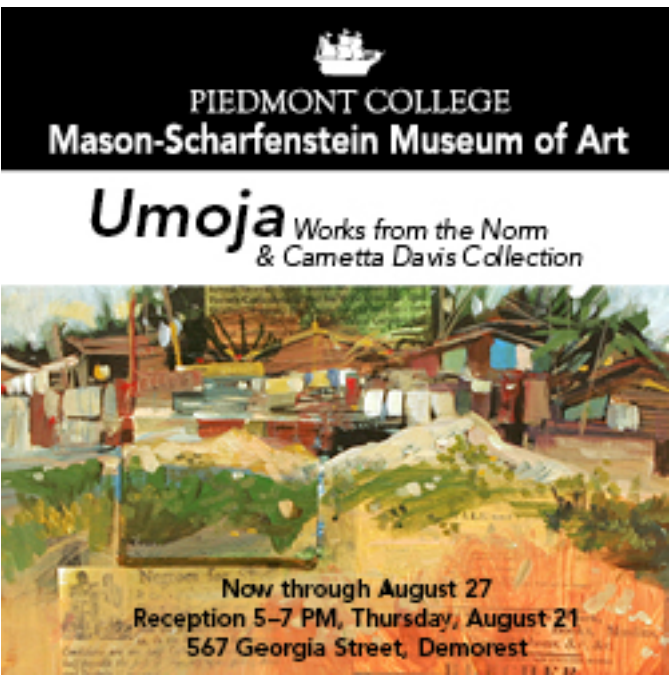
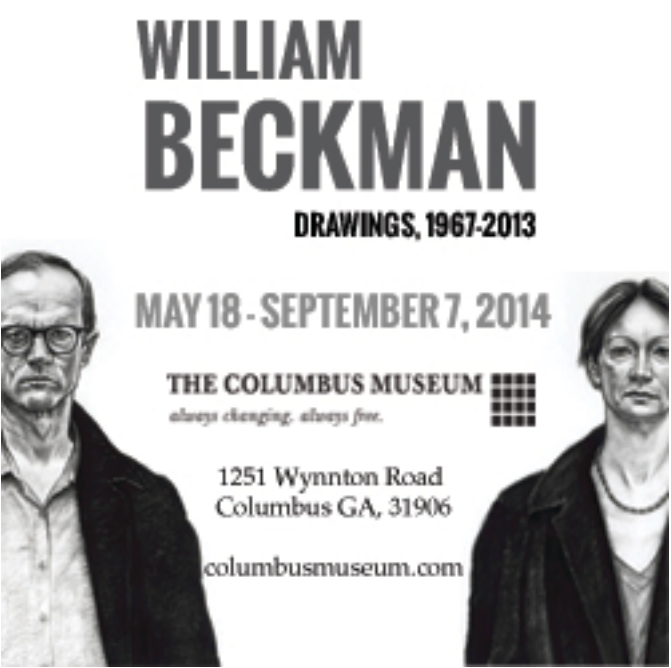
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