The self-portrait is more than just a quick snapshot in the mirror. It’s also a form of self-examination that’s still evolving today.

by Tim Davis
Am a photographer, a calling that almost inevitably summons those who tend to look outward. Most photographers began as kids in car seats (or a cardboard box, according to my mom), pointing out at the world, begging everyone to “look at that, look at this.” We’re seers. Once a seer gets a camera in hand, the ability to wrestle entire works of art from the visual field just by pushing a button becomes intoxicating. I still feel like a kitten stalking a katydid when approaching a subject with a camera. It’s the fine motor control, the physical boldness of being in the world, the effort to summon all my energy into making the entire image feel whole.

It took me 10 years of taking pictures to decide to try a self-portrait. The prospect seemed irresponsible. Why would anyone give up the certainty of decision, the synaptic rigor that allowed, say, Walker Evans to so perfectly frame a roadside row house or Henri Cartier-Bresson to wrangle one of his cycloramic visual puns, just to get in front of the camera? The answer goes back to the very origins of the medium.

Turning the Lens

We think of photography as a European invention, but the first surviving self-portrait photograph is a Daguerreotype by Robert Cornelius, a chemist from Philadelphia. Sometime in late 1839, he polished his silver-coated copper plate, vaporized it with iodine and placed it in a camera in the yard of his family’s chandelry. He then took that radical leap, stood before the lens and watched. The resulting picture depicts a man looking intently at a camera, making sure it’s working. The exposure would’ve been quite long, and Cornelius can be seen concentrating on holding still and on the newfangled apparatus at work. It’s the essential portrait, from the Latin portrahere, to draw forth.

A portrait tries to tell us about the sitter, to draw out something in him or to let the light off his face conjure meaning. Cornelius’ self-portrait is wildly photographic: off-kilter, oddly framed, a little blurry and purely indebted to physical presence. It might be the ideal American image, of a man at work, most at home in himself when plying his trade.

Hippolyte Bayard made his “Self-Portrait as a Drowned Man” just months later. Bayard was one of the inventors of photography but was tricked out of publicizing his invention by François Arago, a
friend of Louis Daguerre’s. In response, Bayard made a series of three staged, didactic self-portraits, shot in his garden surrounded by plaster statuettes and a straw hat. Bayard himself is seen naked from the waist up, much in the manner, as Geoffrey Batchen has eloquently described, of David’s “Death of Marat.” His eyes are as closed as a corpse’s.

The image was accompanied by a note on the back that begins, “The corpse which you see here is that of M. Bayard, inventor of the process that has just been shown to you,” and ends, “Ladies and gentlemen, you’d better pass along for fear of offending your sense of smell, for as you can observe, the face and hands of the gentleman are beginning to decay.” The Bayard is not really a portrait; it is pointed, political and personal. It is a literary exercise used to persuade and cajole. Its author isn’t a person, he’s a character.

These two competing urges—to depict the essence of a sitter’s presence and to describe a narrative scene—run like out-of-phase sine waves through the course of photographic history. Even when out of fashion, they never entirely go away and still define what the self-portrait is in contemporary art. Take two Nadars: one from 1856—where much of the same haunting artlessness of the Cornelius burns through—and another from 1863, showing him in a studio replica of the balloon from which he famously was the first to photograph. Or two Edward Steichens: the “Self-Portrait with Brush and Palette” from 1902, in all of its self-conscious, high art, gum
bichromate staginess, and his 1917 “Self-Portrait with Camera,” a descendent of the Cornelius where the photographer has cast off his artistic airs and meets the camera with measurable pathos and soul. These images show artists experimenting.

And for most of the history of photography, the self-portrait is a lark done between more serious bodies of work. It’s an exercise when there is no one else to sit, no money for travel, no other idea at hand. There are exceptions, in the long-running staged autobiography-in-pictures of the Countess da Castiglione, for example, and in the many dramatized series of F. Holland Day, who was modest enough to cast himself as Jesus.

But it is Lee Friedlander who cracked the door open for artists to work seriously in the self-portrait mode. His long-standing (and ongoing) project to see the self as just another object in the world—a shadow, a reflection, a lump of flesh, a dork just sitting there staring—still feels radical. Friedlander amplifies the awkward mishandling of the casual amateur. He takes the practices the Kodak manual told you to avoid—getting your own shadow in the picture, lining up a head with a tree—and reroutes them to produce fractured, visually complex images of the self. They may not “draw forth” some inner essence from their sitter, but Friedlander’s skittering, loopy, deadpan pictures are true portraits in the Cornelius tradition because they believe in the optical verity of the lensed image.

**ACTING FOR THE CAMERA**

It was into the triumphal trial balloon of Friedlander’s utterly wrong and utterly faithful self-portraits that photographer Cindy Sherman stuck her hatpin. From the first time Sherman put on blackface and pretended to be on public transport (in the very early series “Bus Riders”), she was asking us to look past the “hey, look at this” eye-hunger of the direct self-portrait and go deeper into something unshakably narrative. Every Sherman signals the rise of the Bayardian pointed, illustrative image, as it starts from a fictive idea rather than an optical observation.

Sherman began photographing at a time of grave doubt about the veracity of the photograph, and philosophers and critics seized on Sherman’s work to explain why the camera’s certainty was dubious. But what is most obvious in any Sherman photograph is how good a performer she is. It’s almost impossible to act for 1/60 of a second. You can’t tell that Laurence Olivier is a better actor than Adam Sandler from looking at a film still; acting typically makes meaning over time.

Although Sherman’s work fostered a working model for armies of photographic artists who were interested in artifice, it is also possible to read Sherman’s entire oeuvre as the point where the Cornelian and Bayardian strains of self-portraiture start to come together. For every self-portrait is, in some manner, a staged image. As the photographer emerges from behind the camera, pictorial
space and proscenium stage start to interbreed. As much as the ghost of Bayard speaks through Sherman in how much you are meant to read through the picture to a literary idea, her eternally powerful presence always presses through. And for the armies of contemporary photographers indebted to her, the fictive and the ontological, the real and the staged become more inextricable.

**REVEALING THE PERSONAL**

Laurel Nakadate’s “365 Days: A Catalogue of Tears,” is a temple to the rich mixture involved in making a contemporary self-portrait. Nakadate has always been an artist who portrayed herself. In early works, she used the character of a young, female artist to infiltrate the personal space of men in sad, provocative videos. These videos portrayed the artist as a piquant type, an electric rabbit intended to rouse the greyhounds from passivity toward traditional gender roles. But in “A Catalogue of Tears,” Nakadate grafts that provocateur to a direct, evidential portrait-maker that harkens back to Nan Goldin’s most evocative reflections. Goldin is an artist who lives to drop the hardest emotive moments in her life in bits of glowing amber. Nakadate takes that opportunistic practice and makes it ritualistic, photographing herself crying each day during an entire calendar year. The pictures that result are so hard to register, so strange to gauge emotionally, that they say a lot about the contemporary self-portrait climate.

Nakadate’s pictures are uninflected snapshots of a woman crying in airports, apartments and studios. Yet the overwhelming feeling flowing from the work is of how performative it is. “A Catalogue of Tears” is an elaborate opera about photographing one’s quiet, personal moments. It describes the struggle to understand the self in our fugitive, digital age, when 1.06 billion Facebook users feel perfectly comfortable sitting in private and revealing their deepest inner lives to anyone. The struggle to fix the idea of the self in the shuffle of modern life is the central problem for the contemporary self-portraitist. It’s as if we are all Robert Corneliuses, staring credulously at arrays of the Hippolyte Bayards the world asks us to be. Charles Ray’s “NO,” from 1991, was an early diagnosis of this condition. The picture reads as a straightforward studio portrait of the artist with a genuine, worried expression. Closer inspection reveals that the figure we’ve begun to sympathize with is in fact a mannequin, whose expression has been captured not by the camera, but by sculptors and fabricators, asking dire questions about the power of the camera to “portray.”

**CONSTRUCTING REALITY**

Nikki S. Lee’s self-portraits in various cultural drag, called “Projects,” show the contemporary international artist searching desperately for identity. From 1997 to 2001, Lee worked her way into various communities, from swing dancers to Ohioans,

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lesbians, Hispanics and punks, adopting their manners and dress and having herself photographed in their midst. The images are, again, snapshots, as unaffected and pedestrian as possible, even showing the digital time stamp. But they’re also elaborate constructions, setups that have sometimes taken months to synthesize. Lee is the ultimate photographer-as-exile. In some ways, she is the inheritor of the work of Robert Frank, the Swiss émigré who, in the 1950s, crisscrossed the country showing Americans what they looked like: hopeful, complex, mobile and strong. Lee, a native of Korea, has shown us what we look like today: in flux. Her self-portraits do more than align the documentary and staged urges in photography—they breed them, rendering them indistinguishable and asking us to assume that all identities are fluid.

This notion comes flooding home in Gillian Wearing’s series called “Album” where she re-created her own family photographs, clad in elaborately wrought costumes and makeup. Wearing is an artist whose every move smears the contours between artifice and authenticity. These pictures define the self as the family, then revel in and struggle against the gravity the family’s history still exerts. She photographed herself as her father, brother, mother and herself at various ages, in both studio and casual settings, and always in these pure, almost translucent masks. The pictures teem with the giddy jouissance of the pure portrait. They feel like looking, and they look with feeling. But they are also obscure objects of desire. The masks feel like film emulsion, potent and absorbent of our attention, yet somehow holding something back, as if deeper meanings were latent in them.

Wearing’s “Self-Portrait in a Mask” perfectly defines the ways in which the Bayardian staged image and the Cornelian evidentiary portrait have collapsed in modern practice. Here is an unaffected a portrait as any photographer has ever made: It looks like a passport picture or a well-done employee-of-the-month shot. Here’s the artist, staring right at the camera with genuine pathos. Yet it’s all a construction, a flypaper trap for our ideas about the self. If a portrait draws forth an inner essence, Wearing’s picture wraps that essence in a shroud, along with the certainties of its viewers.

We’re living in times not that dissimilar to the heady days of early photography when Cornelius and Bayard were figuring out what a photographic self-portrait might be. Just as then, technology is jump-starting how we see the world, but contemporary artists are now following the general public in learning how to respond. Every status update is a self-portrait, with a caption no less, and millions of people are carrying credit-card sized objects in their pockets that allow them to see themselves taking their own pictures (an utter revolution). The privilege that I feel as a photographer, to look outward and avoid the inward assessment, is no longer a possibility. “Hey, look at that!” has become “hey, look at me.”

Tim Davis is an active photographer, the author of five books of photography, a contributing editor to “Blind Spot” magazine and an associate professor of photography at Bard College. His work is included in collections at several museums, such as the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and The Museum of Modern Art. www.davistim.com