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Abstract

In a recent exhibition catalog of painter Mark Greenwold at New York's DC Moore Gallery, the artist, in lieu of a conventional statement about his work, conducted a self-interview. To his question, "Why?" Greenwold responded:

"I thought that I could possibly get at things that another person might find too daunting or too polite to ask—very obvious questions by the way, that I'd probably be too thin-skinned or reactive to give an honest response to if another person asked the question." [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Mark Greenwold, DC Moore Gallery, Self-portraiture, Vincent van Gogh

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In a recent exhibition catalog of painter Mark Greenwold at New York's DC Moore Gallery, the artist, in lieu of a conventional statement about his work, conducted a self-interview. To his question, "Why?" Greenwold responded

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Here, Greenwold adopts a separate persona to achieve an honest representation of his self. Greenwold's self-examination, a simultaneous distancing and collapsing of identity, finds a pictorial equivalent in his odd and ambiguously autobiographical self-portraits. His paintings are complex figure studies in which Greenwold himself is often depicted. Stylistically fantastical and paradoxically "real," Greenwold's work examines what strange and dreamlike scenarios reveal about human nature in general and Greenwold in particular. His subject and style are marked by a series of oppositions; the works are at once representational and abstract, photographic and painterly, comic and menacing, familiar and uncanny. These incongruities result in a new take on self-portraiture, one that acknowledges how identity develops in relation to complicated interactions with others, as well as a perceived disconnect between one's mind and body, and the resultant anxieties, desires, and fears lurking in the gap between the conscious and subconscious selves.

Given Greenwold's awareness of a multifarious sense of self and of the broader connections between painting and personal psychologies, his work resonates with the pointillist, expressionist self-portraits of Vincent van Gogh. Greenwold seems attuned to assumptions about an artist's troubled temperament and depictions of personal madness that frequently color the readings of Van Gogh's paintings. Greenwold's works, however, do not merely render the artist's own mental state or illness, but more broadly examine how complexities and contradictions define one's psyche.

Setting psychological themes aside, the most striking similarity to Van Gogh

can be seen in Greenwold's method of applying paint. Like his forebear, Greenwold employs unmodulated strokes of almost arbitrarily colored paint on faces, in hair, and adjacent to freckles and moles. In *Need to Understand* (2002–03), for example, short, thick strokes of blue, white, orange, red, and yellow on the figures invite the viewer to perform a kind of optical blending, to at once see the paint as paint and as descriptive of light and shadow, flesh and cloth, texture and depth. Seen from afar, the paintings are almost photographic in their naturalism, but Greenwold does not conceal the painterliness of his brushstrokes and the materiality of his medium.

While Greenwold's self-portraits pay particular homage to Van Gogh, his pastiche of strange figures in strained relationships and situated in uncannily small rooms also corresponds to surrealism. In the work of early twentieth-century artists Max Ernst and Giorgio de Chirico, for instance, fantastical imagery evokes the irrationality of dreams and the more disquieting facets of the subconscious. Like his surrealist predecessors, who were influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis, Greenwold conveys a deep interest in unraveling the constraints and mores of conventional society in an attempt to depict unconscious thoughts and compulsions. In examining the relationships between the psychological / physical and the ordinary / absurd, Greenwold depicts bodies that are disjointed, with heads out of proportion not only with their own torsos, but with their surroundings and figural counterparts. He achieves this aesthetic incongruity by culling the images in his paintings from different photographic sources. The backgrounds are taken from commercial interior design magazines, and he selects personal snapshots for the subjects. In cutting, reassembling, and shifting the picture out of scale, Greenwold introduces into his work the implicit violence of this montage technique. Drawing on the resultant unease of the process, the artist creates a surrealist tableau that is, paradoxically, photographic and painterly. Through the contradictory reference to the imaginary world of painting and the assumed objectivity of photography, the works dislocate the viewer from a familiar, "real" world in order to picture the surreal.

Whereas Greenwold's paintings examine the psychology of the self, the artist's representations of the physical body impress themselves on the viewer's mind. In *Passionate Friends* (2008), Greenwold's arms are outstretched as if he is holding a camera to capture his own image. His arm touches the woman next to him, and her freckled, mottled, aging skin mimics his own, making material his claim to be "too thin-skinned." The coupling of these two figures is not an easy, traditional pairing. Greenwold sits in the nude, as does the woman in profile at right, who

turns toward the older woman in the center. The youth and nudity of the figure at right suggests a kind of intimacy or oblique sexuality, but the result is not one of romance or sensuality. Rather, one senses a physical, psychic vulnerability and profound discomfort among them. Their poses and expressions seem perplexingly private as well as public. The painting evokes the anxiety felt about one's own nudity and the awkwardness of encounters with the bodies of others, and perhaps the work is prompted by the almost universal dream of being naked in public. The paintings consider the societal boundaries and concerns of sexual and physical decorum and, as such, pictorially catalog certain Freudian anxieties, corporeal urges, and dreamlike situations.

By exposing the bodies of his subjects, as in the complete nudity of the woman at right in *Never the Same Love Twice* (2006–07), as well as depicting his own nudity in other paintings, Greenwold connects himself to the surrounding figures. Despite the intense and private presentation of these bodies, the stories of the other subjects are curiously vague. These figures do not seem to function as autonomous main characters, nor do they relate a clear narrative for the viewer. Given this kind of psychic distancing, one senses that these figures are posing not for a viewer, but for Greenwold himself. Although Greenwold frequently depicts himself on the edges of his compositions, the paintings seem primarily to reflect his personal relationship with the sitter and, more importantly, the psychology of the artist. This process is not necessarily narcissistic, but rather realistic in its narrative and psychological purpose. The paintings do not claim to speak for the subjects, nor do they openly portray each character's psychology or temperament. Rather, the figures appear to inhabit a world that exists only in the artist's head. Greenwold's paintings examine how one's identity is not revealed through superficial or physical traits, but through relationships with, proximity to, and apprehension about "real" people.

The inconsistency in scale between the figure and ground in the paintings, as well as between heads and their bodies, privileges the psyche over the physique. Consequently, one repeatedly asks, but never seems to know definitively, what occupies the mind of this painter. In *Lucy* (2004) a large, disembodied head floats in the upper right of a domestic scene. The female seated at the left sits on the couch with a filled mug by her side and stares out toward the viewer with a familiar and friendly smile, though it is Greenwold's own large, hovering visage that hypnotizes. The lit lamp placed over Greenwold's mouth suggests that his mode of communication is beyond ordinary modes of speaking. His glowing, incorporeal presence appears, almost comically, as transcendental or metaphys-

ical. He appears to question the formation of self-consciousness and the illusory nature of reality.

The depiction of an almost godlike, illuminated apparition suggests bizarre pomposity, but Greenwold diffidently depicts this same disembodied head floating in a small, steaming pot held by a woman in *Good Intentions* (2006). His presence parallels the hot cup of coffee in her right hand. Despite the seeming self-effacement in this scene, Greenwold does not make clear what the “intentions” of the other characters are, or if, as the title suggests, they are “good.” The peculiarity of Greenwold’s self-portraits drives the overall meaning of each painting. His presence as a haunting specter overpowers conventional readings of the physiognomy, posture, and expression of the other characters in these paintings.

In *Lucy*, Greenwold’s ethereal countenance is juxtaposed with another depiction of a bizarre head lacking a complete human form. This creature, comprising a man’s face and lizard’s body, sits uncomfortably in the middle ground of the painting. This fantastical composite finds its mongrel counterparts in *Why Not Say What Happened* (2003–04) and *A Moment of True Feeling* (2004–05), in which large bugs with human heads lurk on the floors. At approximately half the size of his models, with menacing grins and anxious expressions, these hybrid varmints—insects, rodents, reptiles—are reminiscent of the psychic anxieties, traumas, and familial complications of Gregor Samsa in Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* (1915). Kafka’s story, like Greenwold’s paintings, depicts physical, psychological, and familial struggles; the author and artist both juxtapose real woes and relatable concerns with a fantastical, absurd chimera. To read Greenwold’s paintings, one must cobble together the fragments, distortions, and (mis)representations of what is real, while questioning how the body informs the mind, and how the mind affects the body.

Perhaps Greenwold’s answers to these metaphysical questions reside not in representation, but abstraction. All the abstruse thoughts and elusive, implied narratives are manifest in the colorful shapes and geometric patterns that hang above heads and hover on the surfaces of his paintings. In *The Excited Self* (2005–06), for example, the bouquet of abstract animals, disembodied eyes, curvy squiggles, and rectilinear geometric forms in varying bold colors evokes the surrealist technique of automatic drawing, an involuntary process of picture making thought to depict one’s unconscious. These stylized and symbolic forms contrast with the orderly cadence of the wallpaper in the background to suggest the wild, freely associative tendencies of thought. The variants of the abstract forms that float above the heads in *A Moment of True Feeling*, *Good Intentions*,

and others, appear like thought bubbles that further distance the figures from the ordinary and the conventional. Through this simultaneous distortion and exactitude, allusions to fantastical dreams and actual emotion, Greenwold's montages carefully examine the nature of the "real" self. In titling one of his self-portraits *Need to Understand*, Greenwold acknowledges the desire to comprehend, to make sense of one's identity and mind. The ambiguities presented in the paintings, however, leave the viewer only with this sense of needing. Lacking any lucid or coherent answers, one may never fully understand.