

ALEX MILLS

The Daunting Task: A Review of Barbara Walker's Self Portrait

Painting a self-portrait is one of the most arduous processes an artist can undertake. It doesn't seem like it should be because, after all, you know your face better than anyone else. But culture today is inundated with mirrors and reflections so we can study ourselves, critique ourselves, and often remake ourselves. As we critique ourselves and study our features in the context of our current visual culture, we address ourselves habitually not as we are, but as we wish we could be. We miss our own reflections, looking instead at the gap between what we have and what we want. For an artist attempting to paint an accurate self-portrait, this provides a great many complications.



Barbara Walker's *Self-Portrait* is a beautiful visual demonstration of vulnerability and strength at the same time. Her face is beautifully painted. Ignoring context and content, just looking at her technique and skill, it is easy to see that Walker truly has an uncanny ability to depict people. She varies her brushstrokes throughout the entire painting but they work together in complete harmony. The intense detail around the lips and the eyes does not seem out of place against the thicker, more patchy brushstrokes of her chest and shirt. The detail with which she captures her hair as well is tactful and intricate.

Her method speaks to the greater beauty of the painting as well. The areas she uses the greatest detail are all her identifying features- her hair, eyes, and lips. They mark her as herself. But they also have been the marks attacked by racist systems and beauty standards. I think of the hair products and chemicals black women have used to have straight hair or the caricatures drawn with the over-emphasized red lips. Yet, despite our cultures history with these features, Walker boldly claims them as her own.

I had an art teacher in high school who made the class do four self-portraits using a mirror. We were not allowed to use our phone cameras or work from a still photo. Neither were we allowed to smile. I remember sitting down at my desk with my small circular mirror, feeling like I was about to go to war with the paper and my face. It is so incredibly humbling to study your own face in such depth. I often describe drawing or painting as feeling the object with my eyes, tracing the smallest details and finest lines, leaving nothing untouched or unnoticed. When it's myself, not only do I have to address all the minute details I would rather ignore, I have to make the conscious decision whether or not to include them in my artwork. I remember the discomfort of confronting my acne and my frizzy hair in the mirror and knowing I wouldn't include it in my drawing. I had to address why I chose to leave each feature out or why I chose to add it in. I was at war with not only the mirror but my self-perception and self-esteem as well, and it was a truly bloody battle.

To note, I detail my own experience as a white artist, where my features are widely accepted by popular culture. My looks do not jeopardize me in any situation and my interaction with my appearance is greatly influenced by that, though I often do not realize it. For a black artist, the process I mentioned above must be a thousand times more intense. In a society that still sells skin lightening creams to people of color and still isn't sure how to handle natural hair, I cannot imagine the confrontation in the mirror for any person of color. I acknowledge that Walker's and I's experiences with self-portraits

are very different, but I believe my experience allows me to appreciate her work on a deeper level.

It takes vulnerability to confront your features and even more strength to claim them as your own in a painting. Barbara Walker navigated the bloody battle and came out victorious. She owns her identity and proclaims to the viewer "This is how I want you to see me!" She truly mastered the daunting task of seeing yourself and then portraying yourself to others.

October 23, 2020