

FACE TO FACE

As the Summer Season at Sotheby's London celebrates portraiture from its earliest origins, Jennifer Higgin explores three artists' approaches to the modern self-portrait

Right: Louise Bourgeois,
Self Portrait, 1990

In 1548 in Antwerp, a 20-year-old artist painted a self-portrait. Despite its modesty and scale, Catharina van Hemessen's painting of herself at the easel is significant: it's the first known self-portrait of an artist at work. It also highlights the fact that, at a time when women had no political agency and were barred from academies, apprenticeships and the life room, they persisted in their artistic endeavours and turned to themselves as subjects. The Italian renaissance artist Sofonisba Anguissola is another case in point: famous in her lifetime, she was the most prolific self-portraitist between Albrecht Dürer and Rembrandt.

Leap forward to the 20th century and the genre bloomed. In 1906, Paula Modersohn-Becker painted one of the first naked self-portraits by a woman; decades later, Frida Kahlo explored her pain and resilience, using her own body as a conduit. In post-war Poland, Alina Szapocznikow cast parts of her body to exorcise her traumatic experiences as a Jew in the Second World War; and in the 1970s, Cindy Sherman began staging the shape-shifting photographic self-portraits that she is still creating. These are just a few of many possible examples. This year, three major artists across three generations – Louise Bourgeois, Carrie Mae Weems and Avery Singer – have museum exhibitions devoted to their work. Each of them has, in various media and to myriad ends, used self-portraiture to explore a complex range of issues and ideas.

LOUISE BOURGEOIS

Louise Bourgeois' major preoccupation was herself. From 1951, depressed by the death of her father, the French-American artist began what was to become a four-day-a-week, 30-year commitment to psychoanalysis. She believed in the therapeutic aspects of creativity, explaining in a conversation with Christiane Meyer-Thoss: "To make art is to wake up in a state of craving. It's not a linear progression; it goes like a clock; when you reach a certain spot on the clock, it recurs. It's a certain rhythm occurring each day. And the making of art has a curative effect."

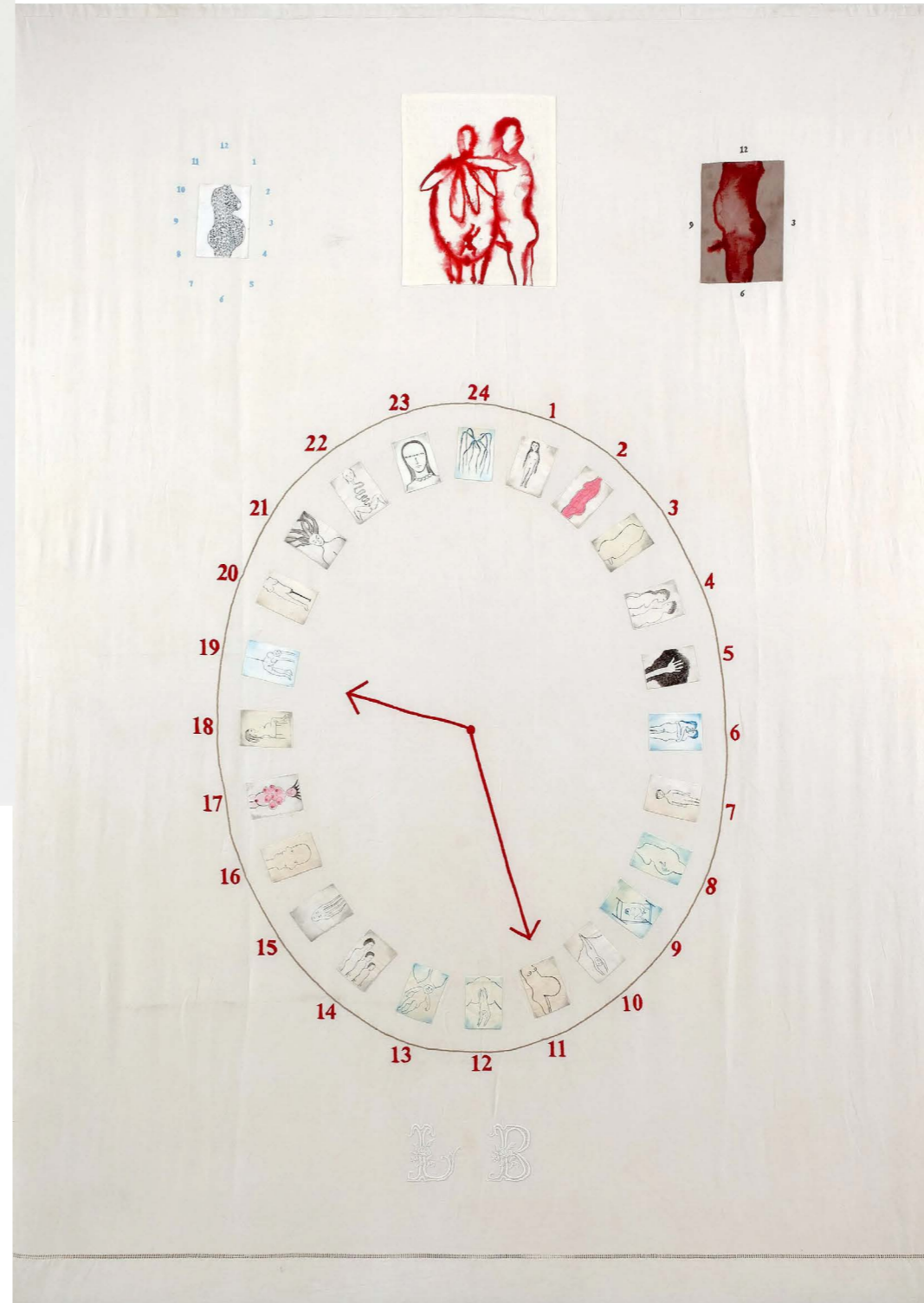
Although Bourgeois' work was fired by autobiography, only a few of her works are titled as self-portraits. She used the genre to explore not how she looked, but how she felt, what she dreamed, what she had experienced. A great believer in free association, she variously visualised herself as a five-legged beast; a tiny red figure dangling from a balloon-like breast; a head that contains two other heads and a naked baby; a woman with five eyes and a large necklace. In 1963–64, the artist created *Torso, Self-Portrait*: it began life as a wall-hanging plaster-and-burlap sculpture before evolving into a free-standing work in bronze, which she recast in marble in the 1980s.

In *Torso*, Bourgeois presents herself as a fragmented, abstracted body that is both tough and vulnerable, supported by a robust, surreal, ladder-like spine. The self here is unrecognisable as an individual: rather, it has become bulbous, vulval, enigmatic: both armour and invitation, an evocation of breasts, belly and bone, the idiosyncratic and the universal. Bourgeois said of it: "This is the way I experience my torso [...] somehow with a certain dissatisfaction and regret that one's own body is not as beautiful as one would like it to be. It doesn't seem to measure up to any standard of beauty."

In her 98th year, Bourgeois created *Self Portrait* (2009) out of an old bedspread embroidered with the initials "LB", using drypoint, dyes and ink. A meditation on mortality and memory, it includes a 24-hour clock with its hands positioned at the hours of 19 and 11 – numbers that form the artist's birth year. It's surrounded by 24 small panels filled with tiny images that represent various stages in Bourgeois' physical and psychological development: her youth, marriage, motherhood and old age. These include a blue drypoint print of *Maman*, a monumental spider symbolic of both Bourgeois' mother – who, like a spider, was a weaver – and Bourgeois' own artistic practice: she believed she created sculpture not only from her mind but from her body. Self-portrait or not: everything Bourgeois made sprang from both her inner and her physical life.



“ SHE USED SELF-
PORTRAITURE TO
EXPLORE HOW SHE
FELT AND WHAT
SHE DREAMED ”



From far left: Louise Bourgeois, *Self Portrait, 2007*; *Self Portrait, 2009*; *Torso, Self-Portrait, conceived in 1963–64, cast in 2000*

CARRIE MAE WEEMS

Over the past 40 years or so, US artist Carrie Mae Weems has employed photography, video, performance, installation and activism to document the world and her place within it. In an interview with her friend and fellow artist Dawoud Bey she explained: “From the very beginning, I’ve been interested in the idea of power and the consequences of power; relationships are made and articulated through power.” However, she added that even though she has constantly mined her autobiography, her exploration has been tempered by “narrative, the social levels of humour, the deconstruction of documentary, the construction of history, the use of text, storytelling, performance, and the role of memory have all been more central to my thinking than autobiography”.

In the late 1970s, when she was in her 20s, Weems worked with documentary photography. In 1984, her first exhibition, *Family Pictures and Stories*, comprised intimate, casual photographs of herself and her family and friends, embracing, dressing up, gathering in parks and homes. In 1990, she created the work that was to make her famous: *The Kitchen Table Series*, a suite of 20 gelatin silver prints and 14 texts on silkscreen panels that tells the story of a fictional Black couple with their children. The table was the artist’s: a stage around which the family eats, smokes, drinks, puts on makeup, talks, embraces, argues. The room is lit by a single overhead light: an allusion, perhaps, to scenes of interrogation so familiar from cinema. Props include playing cards, a birdcage and books, while pictures on the wall shift from a Malcolm X poster to a still-life painting of flowers to a patterned fabric – in some images, the wall is blank. Weems, who was 36 at the time, played the mother; when she’s not with her family, she seems wrapped up in her thoughts, reading and writing. “I attempt to create in the work the simultaneous feeling of being in it and of it,” she said. “I try to use the tension created between these different positions – I am both subject and object; performer and director.” The text accompanying the photographs describe her character as having a “bodacious manner, hard laughter, multiple opinions”; she is “socially involved, loved to run her mouth, to talk things through”. The series is something of an expanded self-portrait: a milestone in its exploration of both female and Black subjectivity.

In the three decades since *The Kitchen Table Series*, Weems has continued to explore the intersections of the personal and the political. *Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, 1995–96, is the artist’s response to a selection of 19th-century photographs of African American subjects. For *The Jefferson Suite*, 2001, Weems cast herself as Sally Hemings – the enslaved woman “owned” by Thomas Jefferson. And in *Roaming*, 2006, she photographed herself from behind, in a black dress, looking at historic sites in Rome. In *Museums* (2006–ongoing) she pictures herself in front of famous museums across Europe. Weems continues to raise questions – around power, exclusion, notions of beauty, race and gender – that, she makes clear, are both endemic and personal.



Above: Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled (Woman & Daughter with Make Up)*, 1990, from the *Kitchen Table Series*

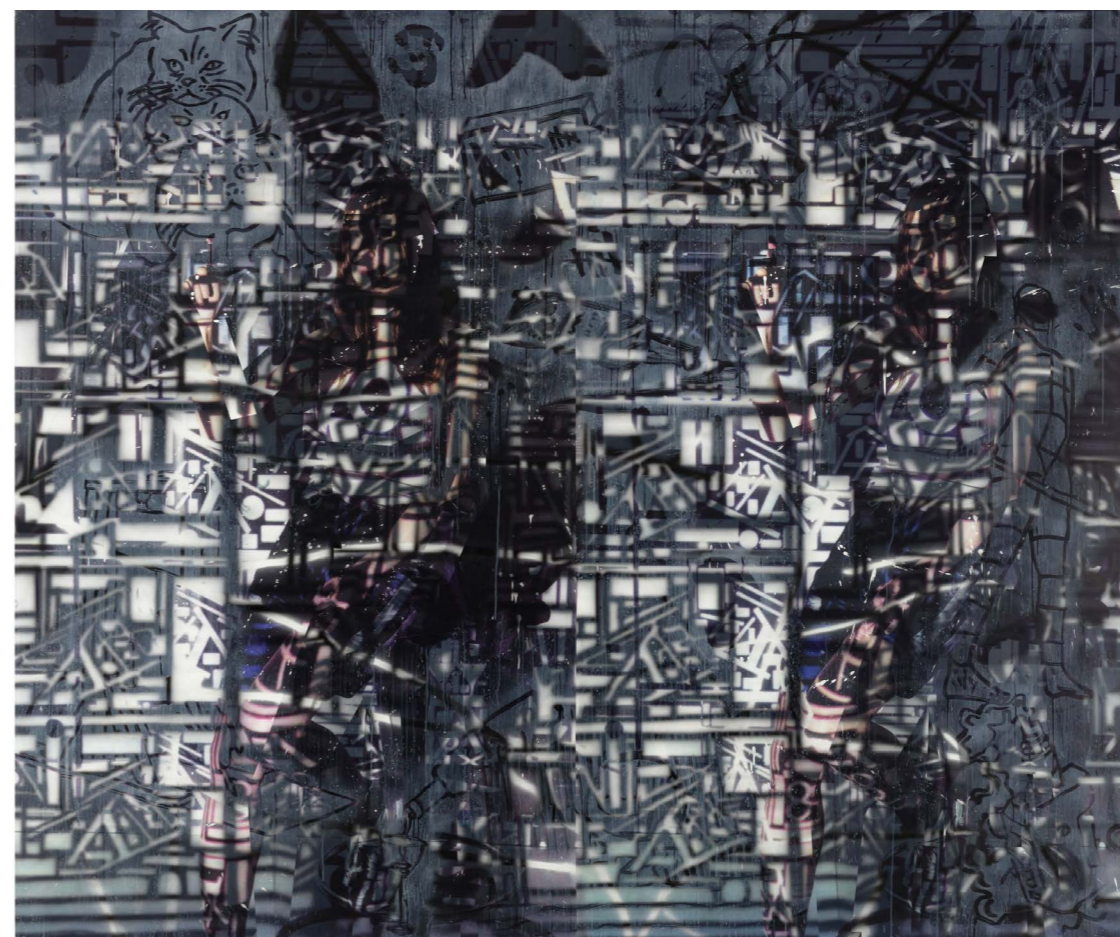
Right: Carrie Mae Weems, *The Edge of Time—Ancient Rome*, 2006, from the *Roaming* series





Avery Singer, *Self-Portrait (summer 2018)*, 2018

Above left: Avery Singer, *Technique*, 2021



AVERY SINGER

In 2018, the then-31-year-old American artist Avery Singer painted *Self-portrait (summer 2018)*. She depicts herself in a white dress with bare legs, gazing at the viewer with a stern, unsmiling expression. Her right arm is raised: she's pointing at us looking at her – or, perhaps, we're seeing her through glass and she's painting loose scarlet lines across the surface with her finger. She's surrounded by crude, graffiti-like drawings of bottles – one with eyes – and glasses, a moustachioed man and the vague intimation of a Pierrot-like figure. Her blank stare and the atmosphere of unreality evokes a mood akin to a horror film. The painting's layers – of meaning and medium – embody the artist's restless testing of the boundaries of her visual language: a single image might be created using software, projections, gesso, airbrush, acrylic and liquid rubber. Paradoxically, Singer employs the language of computer programs to engage with the history of painting and modernism, especially in her references to Futurism and Cubism. Her frequent use of grisaille – a technique in which an image is rendered in shades of grey – nods to both art-historical precedence and the monochrome of the production line while creating the illusion of sculptural depth.

Singer's first major exhibition, which was staged in 2013 at Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler in Berlin,

was titled *The Artists*. Using free software SketchUp, the artist drew blocky, genderless figures, which she projected onto canvas, masked areas with tape, then airbrushed. The result was a group of black-and-white paintings that appear to be handmade and mechanical. Unearthing her experiences as a young artist, Singer created scenes that both mock and pay homage to the various clichés of bohemian life: drinking, studio visits, still lives on crowded tables, crowds in small spaces.

In recent years, Singer's relationship to history – both of the world and her own – has been slippery. While not explicitly titled as self-portraits, her references reflect her eclectic interests: the French revolutionary politician Maximilien Robespierre, pop culture, graffiti, Old Master painting, alcoholism, birds, brands, bongs, pills, pods, whippets, sneakers and the internet meme Wojak, or Feels Guy – a melancholy, bald-headed man rendered in a few swift lines. In a recent interview, Singer described what motivates her approach: "If you're making art as a contemporary artist, you should just be trying to make something that hasn't been thought of before, that has a real stake in authorship, in originality, and offers a unique conception of the world. That's what I try to do. I don't try to filter my ideas. I just follow them, see what happens with them." ◦

Jennifer Higgie is a writer and author based in London, and the former editor of Frieze. Her books include The Mirror and the Palette: Rebellion, Revolution and Resilience, 500 Years of Women's Self-Portraits

» Louise Bourgeois. *Imaginary Conversations* is at The National Museum, Oslo, until 6 August; *Louise Bourgeois* is at Lower Belvedere, Vienna, from 22 September 2023–28 January 2024. Carrie Mae Weems is at Barbican Art Gallery, London, from 21 June–3 September, supported by Sotheby's; Dawoud Bey and Carrie Mae Weems: *In Dialogue* is at the Getty Center, Los Angeles until 9 July. Avery Singer: *Unity Bachelor* is at ICA Miami until 15 October

SINGER CREATES SCENES THAT BOTH MOCK AND PAY HOMAGE TO THE CLICHÉS OF BOHEMIAN LIFE

Photos: The Easton Foundation/VAGA at ARS, NY and DACS, London 2023; © Carrie Mae Weems, courtesy of Carrie Mae Weems and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York; Galerie Barbara Thumm, Berlin; courtesy of Avery Singer and Hauser & Wirth © Avery Singer, photo: Lance Brewer