

Sarah Lucas' Self Portraits 1990-1998

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From 1990 to 1998, Sarah Lucas developed a series of self-portraits that show her in a variety of confrontational poses and situations, each addressing contemporary notions of gender, sexuality, and artist-hood. *Portrait of the Artist As...* features five of twelve prints that Lucas made from this series. In [*Eating a Banana*](#) (1990) she poses with the piece of fruit in her mouth, eyeing the camera suggestively. In [*Summer*](#) (1998) a frothy beer can explodes in front of her grimacing face. In these prints, she appears with short hair and androgynous clothing. She adopts a mixture of traditionally masculine and feminine physical markers, challenging contemporary understandings and signifiers of gender identity.

Lucas confronts the gendered nature of representation in contemporary culture by drawing attention to her own body. This artistic strategy aligns her with a number of explicitly feminist artists, particularly Cindy Sherman. In Cindy Sherman's [*Film Stills*](#), the artist staged elaborate sets in and out of the studio in which she appeared in the guises of archetypal female characters from film and television – the femme fatale, the housewife, the damsel in distress, and more.

Sherman began to create these images in 1977, during the formative period of feminist film studies. In 1975, film scholar Laura Mulvey published an essay entitled 'Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema', in which she argued that mainstream film was presented from a male perspective and relied on strict differentiation between the sexes. The women who appeared in film functioned as passive objects of what she called the 'male gaze'.¹ As a female 'director', staging these photographs herself, Sherman challenged the dichotomy of the male subject and female object.

Lucas performs similar operations in several of her works, though her focus is on media other than narrative cinema. In *Summer* she makes a strong reference to pornography, but her androgynous appearance separates her from the women who typically participate in adult films and photography.² Lucas has commented on the relationship between *Eating a Banana* and advertisement culture:

I had this double-page spread from the Sport, which was about the hot weather that had just broken out. It said 'SHINE ON' in great big letters, and it had this woman in a T-shirt with an ice cream. It was such a great picture. I loved it, but it was obvious to me, doing the banana thing, that even though there's the same issue of titillation, my stance is different.³

Again, Lucas uses her androgynous appearance to complicate the objectification of women in popular media. Lucas' position with regard to advertising is ambivalent. In some ways, it seems that she adopts an unapologetically celebratory attitude toward it, as indicated when she claims that she 'loved' the magazine spread of the woman with the ice cream cone. Lucas' self-portraits themselves have been compared to advertisements for the artist, clearly representing the key themes relevant to her practice.⁴ However, she also uses these images to confront the exaggerated differences between the sexes and the commodification of female sexuality present in contemporary advertising.

Lucas' work plays an important role in *Portrait of the Artist As....* Not only is she the sole female artist exhibited, but she also contributes an overtly feminist view of art history and self-representation. Lucas' work addresses issues of gender and sexuality in relation to the history of art as well as in relation to popular and advertising culture. She adopts art historical themes and visual symbols and inscribes them with new meanings. In [Self Portrait with Skull](#) (1997) we see Lucas sitting on the floor with a skull between her spread legs. Here the skull is linked to female sexuality, complicating a symbol that has previously been constructed and used predominantly by male artists to represent *vanitas* or mortality.

Lucas further explores recognisable art historical visual cues and symbols in [Human Toilet Revisited](#) (1998), showing herself seated on a toilet in a t-shirt and bare legs, with a cigarette between her fingertips. The voyeuristic feeling implicit in viewing a woman alone in a bathroom, on a toilet no less, is made stronger by her downward gaze – this is especially striking considering Lucas typically connects directly with the camera. The feelings of vulnerability and voyeurism that Lucas conjures in this image are intricately connected to her interest in appropriating the techniques and symbols of male-dominated art history. Her imagery is not so unlike the *toilette* scenes painted by many impressionist

painters such as Pierre Bonnard, Edgar Degas, or Pierre Auguste Renoir, in which women are depicted performing intimate, private actions such as bathing or grooming their hair.

Lucas breaks the tradition of male artists depicting female subjects in this particular way, yet the defiant nature of her pose on the toilet is complicated by her submissive gaze.

The toilet itself is reminiscent of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, 1917, one of the most infamous and recognisable 'readymades', consisting of a urinal laid flat signed with the date and the name of the artist's alter-ego, 'R. Mutt'. Duchamp's readymades are everyday objects that the artist transformed into artworks simply by putting them on display, breaking ties with their original function. Duchamp later created the alter-ego Rose Sélavy, who is identified as female. Duchamp's interest in gender binaries and the adoption of feminine characteristics and dress is reminiscent of Sarah Lucas' exploration with androgyny and established notions of femininity. The toilet is also a well-known feature in paintings by Francis Bacon, who depicted the toilet as a site of pain and suffering, and as a place to expose the vulnerability and physicality of the human body.

Whether engaging with popular media or artistic tradition, Lucas places familiar conventions and subjects into new and often controversial contexts, simultaneously aligning and setting herself apart from the cultures to which she belongs.

¹ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, 833-44 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

² Elizabeth Manchester, 'Sarah Lucas Summer 1998,' 'Summer', Sarah Lucas, December 2001, Summary, accessed 04 June 2012, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/lucas-summer-p78452/text-summary>.

³ Matthew Collings and Sarah Lucas, *SL: Sarah Lucas* (London: Tate Pub., 2002), 73.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 60 and 72.