

## **On Pantea Rahmani's Self-Portraits**

**by Salar Abdoh**

The six black and white self-portraits by Pantea Rahmani are monumental but restrained. Rather than tell a narrative, they capture states of being; they are the embodiment of expression, its distillation.

In the first painting of the series, the artist sits at a slant, one of her legs flopped over an arm of the chair, while her angular face is turned back to the viewer and holds our gaze as if some incipient reckoning were in the air, perhaps a confrontation, a sort of dread contract between the viewer and the viewed. But this reckoning appears just as quickly postponed in the second canvas, the only nude of the series and one, interestingly enough, where the subject's gaze does not stare back at us. Fetus-like, emaciated, wounded, she lies there as if at any moment she could topple out of the frame and shatter the grave interiority that the picture intimates. The direct gaze, however, returns in the next canvas. Not accusatory this time; rather, it is stilled – not calm but intent on getting there. Therefore, perhaps, the presence of the cat, held in the subject's embrace as a talisman of sorts, a shielding of oneself, protection. This sense of shielding is particularly evident in the remarkable consistency of the position of the hands from one picture to the next. In the fourth canvas, for instance, the subject is lying on the floor again, but the hands that had previously wrapped themselves around the cat are now protectively, even tenderly, rounding the torso. The legs, unlike canvas 2, are reposed in their tranquil thrust out of the frame. The gaze is not quite resigned but – much like the fifth canvas where the entire bearing of the subject is one of contained coiling – it is a gaze that is thoughtful and circumspect. And finally there is the sixth and last canvas where the artist looks back at us

through a mirror. Here, too, the hands do not break the pattern of defensive positioning, but there is fire in the accumulation of the black on black of her hair, and the very creases in the close-fitting top that she wears are an extension of the infinitely precise play of shadow and light apparent in the feet, hands and face.

There is muscularity in these outsized canvases. And graceful tension.

And yet, the scale of the series and the amount of work put into each canvas only becomes truly apparent when one realizes how the meticulous small-brush work can seduce even the most highly trained eyes into imagining it is pencil or conté work they are looking at rather than paint. What the artist in fact does is to start out with an unprimed canvas; then using charcoal for the initial sketching she gradually works in gesso and ink, applying dashes of white paint when light needs emphasis. The technique, needless to say, is astonishingly painstaking and precise, and gives the appearance that the various elements of the canvas had in fact been woven together. Furthermore, the transparent layering upon layering also lends the works an animate quality, as if the thin hachure lines were breathing through the very pores of these colossal pictures, the biggest of which measures at 210 cm x 350 cm.

But who is this woman whose trenchant stare into and out of the mirror of the final canvas is like a simple, yet rock-hard declaration of *I am*. She has, after all, crafted a map of herself, and in this map, or maps, it is as if the story of self-portraiture – from Albrecht Dürer and Rembrandt to contemporaries and near contemporaries like Kahlo, Lucian Freud and Jenny Saville – had been inherited, then transcended through the agency of that mirror. Why transcendence? Because through the representation of herself in the mirror, the artist presents a final image of an “I” that derives its coherence and bearing not from tradition or the external

gaze but from self-reflection, from its own inner sources. “All her life the woman is to find the magic of her mirror a tremendous help in her effort to project herself and then attain self-identification,” writes Simone de Beauvoir (1946) as she theorizes on women’s struggle for a stable, autonomous self-image. Yet the mirror, as an emblem of renewal or selfhood, is a tricky thing. In the “Mirror Stage,” for example, Jacques Lacan stresses that the mirror is in fact only a prop that brings about a semblance of a sense of a coherent self, that the authentic “I” remains forever elusive and unattainable.

Nevertheless, Pantea Rahmani’s manifestation of selfhood in these canvases is not just personal; rather, as an Iranian and an artist from the Middle East, her ground-breaking work is a stomp through the dry land of current conventions with their tired motifs of the ‘covered woman’, monotonous calligraphic gestures and corner-shop symbolism of the *oriental* kind. To stand in front of these self-portraits, then, is to be reminded of Kenneth Clark’s insight when he wrote, “To be naked is to be deprived of our clothes, and the word implies some of the embarrassment most of us feel in that condition. The word ‘nude’, on the other hand, carries . . . no uncomfortable overtones. The vague image it projects into the mind is not of a huddled and defenseless body, but of a balanced, prosperous, and confident body: the body re-formed.”

In Pantea Rahmani’s self-portraits what we arrive at is an entire geography that is slowly, achingly, and brushstroke by brushstroke re-formed and reinvigorated. It is the *east*, if you will, rejuvenated.

