

InTheArts

Montgomery College faculty administrator (self-)exams

Western artists used to be anonymous. After the fall of the Roman empire and its multitude of sculpted heads, the Byzantine icons that held sway never divulged the names of their authors. Attributes were used to identify saints and portraits of ordinary mortals were taboo. Images of the living eventually reemerged at the behest of patrons (see the Cloister's portrait of a couple kneeling in a doorway to watch The Annunciation in the 1425 Merode Altarpiece). As the cult of the self grew during the Renaissance, artists increasingly slipped their own visages into their works. Students of Art History 102 will remember the tiny distorted portrait of Jan van Eyck

OnView

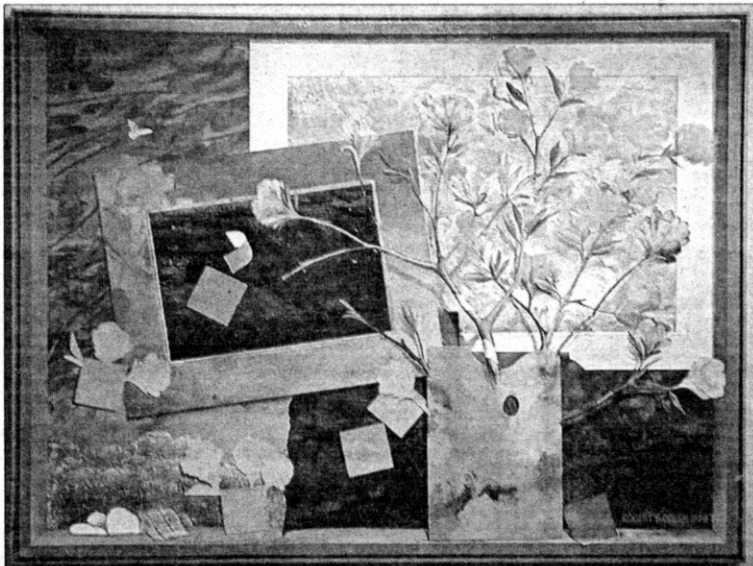
by Nancy Ungar

in the convex mirror behind Giovanni Arnolfini and his bride.

Private patronage brought the Baroque era closer to our own. Portraiture not only recorded the faces of the wealthy, but signaled status and occupation through clothing and accouterments. Velazquez portrayed himself painting the royal family in "Las Meninas" and Rembrandt, often depicted holding a brush and palette, recorded every wrinkle that ever appeared on his brow.

While in ensuing centuries portraiture became the artist's bread and butter, the ground-rules changed after 1839. The invention of photography co-opted most of the business, both allowing and forcing artists to find different ways of expression. In Montgomery College-Rockville's current exhibition, "Mirror Images: Self-Portraits in Many Media" artists make reference to art history and often echo the conventions of photography in their own portrayals.

As per tradition, Kay McCrohan, who has been studying icons at the same time that she has been teaching color theory, paints an icon of herself as a saint holding a palette and a book; a color wheel is her halo. In her exacting pencil drawing, Jane Goodwin holds her artists' tools like weapons as she boldly looks you in the eye. Printmaker Caroline Thorington portrays herself working, silhouetted against a window in a large sun-drenched lithographic studio. A stone etched with the image of the print itself is closest to the eye. The act of printmaking with all of its complex machinery almost su-



Robert Cohen's trompe-l'oeil painting within a painting depicts the activities that define his persona.

persedes the printer herself.

In his 1915 portraits of a friend, American artist Marsden Hartley demonstrated that an artist can use attributes alone to convey a sense of a person's mind and life. Robert S. Cohen compiles a series of images that represent him not via his physical appearance, but through the activities that define his persona. In his trompe-l'oeil (fool-the-eye) painting within a painting within a painting, Cohen depicts a flowering branch and a stormy landscape along with images of paintings of them and an image of the palette used. The trompe-l'oeil work is, in parts, so successful that I, who should be immune to this, had to touch the painting to determine if a bent piece of paper were real.

The influence of photography is evident in Michael Farrell's triple image. Here a central black-inked portrait, defined in the light and dark of an overexposed photograph, is partially overlaid to the left and right by identical portraits in gray that mimic a triple exposure on film. The multi-

ple layers imply a complexity that is far from iconic.

Surrealism, the sense of the weird, informs much of the work here. Joan Rosenstein's "Gemini Returns" is an eerie photograph of two nude women casually perched among spindly white tree trunks. While we see their bare backs, the masks they wear, the two faces of Gemini, face forward, effectively disguising and hiding them from our searching eyes.

In the same vein is Joan Danziger's striking self-portrait sculpture kneeling near the entrance to the gallery. This almost life-sized nude woman confronts the viewer not with an open face but with the massive head and beak of a large bird. She has neither eyes nor ears, her beak is closed tightly and she sits primly and subserviently on the ground. But there is no disguising her power — watch out!

The show also includes some drawing tours de force such as Annette Polan's floor-length pencil drawing of a herself in a flowing Japanese robe. Sarah Stecher's



Joan Rosenstein's "Gemini Returns" is an eerie, surreal photograph.

sepia ink cross-hatched drawing of a bald self against a Romanesque window is in the tradition of northern European Renaissance portraits; it is, like McCrohan's, a tongue in cheek quoting of art history. A child of her self-probing times, Stecher has neatly cut off the top of her skull to expose the crenellations of her brain.

P.C. Mu's self-portrait is a four-foot high steel armature that suggests a large animal. The head, which appears to be that of a large dog or cow (Mu), is a wrapping of white gauze edged with blood red at the neckline. Komelia Okim's head is a Brancusi ovoid atop a sinuous, silver exclamation point of a body perched in a geometric base of glass. She rises like a majestic water spirit, tossing her wind-blown curly wired hair high above her self-contained head.

This is a department-store selection of self-portraits, visually interesting, referential and often irreverent, allowing for a fairly wide definition of the form. "Mirror Images: Self-Portraits in Many Media" will continue at Montgomery College-Rockville, Art Building, 51 Mannakee St., through Feb. 9. For information call 301-279-5115.