

In-Appropriation — Nigel Cooke

At first glance, the worrisome and persecuted face that looks out from Paul Housley's *Self Portrait as Picasso's Last Self Portrait* has little in it to suggest that the work was painted in 2011. First shown earlier this year as part of his solo exhibition at London's Poppy Sebire, the painted figure gamely sports the Spaniard's regulation school-of-Paris stripy shirt, above which an oversize head disassembles nervously in a mesh of marks that feel generically 'Picassoesque'. Yet the febrile impact of these touches suggests something more troubled than the diligent garret practice of late modernity. Instead, somehow, an up-to-date brand of creative anxiety comes across, in a portrait of the artist not in the throes of genius, but strung out with envy and artistic paralysis: strikingly, the face appears fatigued by what could be intuited as a surfeit of painting knowledge. Picasso's image of himself at ninety years of age in 1972 has been swallowed whole, in an act of appropriation that is in a small part a straightforward homage, but more largely an acutely complex admixture of historical and personal doubts, and even grievances.

Given the feel of this painting and its insistent appropriation of Picasso, it's ironic to recall that the dominant accounts of appropriation (largely consolidated in the 1980s) first saw the process as the antithesis of the garret, the solipsistic studio being the place where modernist isolation from sociopolitical practice was believed to be at its most conservative and uncritical. For Benjamin Buchloh, appropriation strategies posed as the symbolic liberation from such idealistic concepts as the modernist fantasy of aesthetic autonomy, describing art's fascination with popular, mass-cultural or folk forms of aesthetic production in 20th century modernity— from African art to cinema — as a public denunciation of art's elitism and 'the obsolescence of its inherited production procedures'. The opposite was true, however; as has become well known, the process of acculturation inverted the intention of politicising the work, instead simply incorporating the chosen form into the value systems of the elite art context. It may now appear that Housley's borrowing is merely the form of appropriation that goes in another direction— the reactionary side of the process, where a retreat into historical styles is devised to gain a spurious prestige in the here-and-now. Yet the face of Housley's figure tells us otherwise; Picasso's time-worn visage seems wearied not so much by life's trials as by 'inherited production procedures' and the torpor of 'the garret'.

Perhaps this is because the painterly updating casts the sitter/paint synecdoche (the simultaneous understanding that the paint itself is both a material stand in for both sitters - Picasso/Housley - and the pictorial description of them) in a sort of zombie role, where a long-dead man and an old-school painting style are now lingering around a living artist's reflection. If so, the painting's layering of expressions from two points in time achieves a strange kind of symbolic eclipse, where appropriation does not bring something other into proximity with art, as it often did in the painting of the 1980s, but instead imports an icon of official art history that poses a risk to the new painting's assumed intentions as a straight self-portrait - conventionally suggesting the desire to confirm one's own gravitas, not someone else's. Here the artist - the earnest and humourless 'muse' of the common or garden academic self-portraitist — is wilfully supplanted by another, altogether more historically confirmed artist. Only the trick here is that it isn't simply another person's appearance moving into position in a self-portrait 'as Picasso'. Rather, it is the heart of Picasso's painting sensibility itself that obscures

Housley: Picasso's famous scopophilic gaze, and all its attendant baggage of meaning, blots out Housley's attempts to give credence to his own appearance in paint. In a tragicomic take on self-portraiture, Housley's attachment to the Picasso painting actually ranks higher in the artist's estimate of valid content than the value of his own face. In a move of high pathos, Housley deploys appropriation as an antidote to the burdens of painterly knowingness – the poisoned chalice of skill, fluency and habit – daring his work into a kind of staged identity crisis, the centre of which sees the artist himself subsumed to the greater urgency of a mind full of paintings not his own.

In an artworld brimming with prolix paintings overstuffed with historical hyperawareness, the appropriation here constructs a refreshing picture of self-doubt within knowledge. It infiltrates vision with a kind of hallucination in which the image looking back from the mirror is freighted with invasive thoughts and a welter of leering, intimidating historical achievements, tiresomely overruling any attempts to match them. That this body of awareness about painting dominates one as a painter is a realisation only possible in a practice that has long grown out of the facile returns of historical quotations, where 'references' in paint are no longer a rigorous option. In the end, the painter is forced to accept that other paintings by artists from the past are not something he simply knows about – they have finally become who he is.

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