



# EYE TO

SELF-PORTRAITS  
FROM THE  
NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY

HIRMER

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NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY,  
SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION, WASHINGTON, D.C.

**HIRMER**



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## DIRECTOR'S FOREWORD

“The artist embodies in himself the attitude of the perceiver while he works.”

– John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 1934.

It is a strange thing to look at someone looking at themselves. For example, when you see another person brushing their teeth, shaving, or putting on their makeup in front of a mirror, it feels at once intimate and voyeuristic. What goes through their mind as they scrutinize eye to “I”? Are they pleased with what they see? If they catch you looking, twinned faces staring back at each other in the glass, do they react with pleasure, awkwardness, or irritation? Suddenly, two separate entities are no longer alone but are sharing an experience. Then there is a *moment* when someone returns a look, a gesture, starts a conversation, makes a *connection*—or disengages, and turns away.

How even stranger then, when the self-looking is not happenstance but deliberately made for an audience—even an audience of one. Pygmalion-like choices are made, giving the artist the ultimate power to make and remake their identity. As Andy Warhol remarked: “When I did my self-portrait, I left all the pimples out because you always should.”

Because we are all on a journey of self-discovery, there is something compelling about looking at someone imaging themselves. The common phrases “I was just thinking” or “If it were me” are used to test out who we are linguistically—how fascinating, then, to be able to do so pictorially. When an artist looks in a mirror, s/he is caught by a trapped face that will arrange itself, regardless the circumstances, but the adjustments they make are their own. In the end, it’s all a performance.

The “performative self” has further developed with the selfie. As the artist Molly Soda notes, it is “the idea that we’re all walking around with these complicated and discrete emotions that are basically triggered by our devices.”

s the National Portrait Gallery reflects upon its first fifty years since opening to the public, it seems wholly appropriate to turn our attention to artists looking at themselves. This publication illustrates 143 of the over 540 self-portraits in the collection, providing rich materials for future discussions about performing identity and visual biography.

Thanks go to Chief Curator, Brandon Brame Fortune, for penning the wonderful lead essay, curating the accompanying exhibitions in Washington, D.C., and on tour, and providing the intellectual framework for this project. This scholarship would not have been possible without the visionary support of Cathy and Michael Podell. Deepest appreciation also goes to all those artists, collectors, and donors who have helped the National Portrait Gallery assemble such a wonderful collection of artistic introspection that meets us *Eye to I*.

We would also like to thank all of the contributors to the catalogue for their careful research and wish to extend a special thanks to Pie Friendly for her research assistance.

Kim Sajet, Director  
National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C.



**PATRICIA CRONIN** (born 1963)  
**DEBORAH KASS** (born 1952)

In 2002, the cross-disciplinary artist Patricia Cronin carved a Carrara marble self-portrait with her then-partner, now wife, the pioneering feminist artist Deborah Kass. Conceived in the tradition of nineteenth-century funerary sculptures, *Memorial to a Marriage* presents two influential feminist artists and life partners in an eternal embrace. As a powerful commentary on gender, sexuality, and marriage, it tells both a transcendent story and one that is historically and culturally significant. The work was made a decade before Cronin and Kass were granted the right to marry in their home state of New York. After creating the original marble sculpture for New York City's historic Woodlawn Cemetery, Cronin made three bronze casts of the work, one of which is shown here.

DM

*Memorial to a Marriage*, 2002  
(cast 2013) by Patricia Cronin  
Bronze  
68.6 × 213.4 × 137.2 cm (27 × 84 × 54 in.)  
Gift of Chuck Close (C/NPG.2016.119)





