



Julie Heffernan

Mending a Reflection



Self-Portrait as Hothead, oil on canvas, 78 x 64 inches, 2018-19

Introduction

Rowan University Art Gallery has consistently presented the work of women artists through our exhibitions program, which is supported by our permanent art collection primarily of women artists from the 1970-80's. Our intention is to demonstrate the power of the female voice in its creative expression on a range of issues including: social injustice, gender equality, and environmental concerns.

Working with Julie Heffernan has provided the opportunity to curate an exhibition that embodies these themes conveyed through the power of self-portraiture and the female form. Heffernan posits a central female figure as a commanding force embraced by pictorial narratives of her design that are monuments to impacted and impactful women in art, history, and literature.

We are honored to be the first venue in the State of New Jersey to produce a one person exhibition of Julie Heffernan's work.

—Mary Salvante

Curator, Gallery and Exhibitions Program Director
Rowan University Art Gallery

Julie Heffernan: Mending a Reflection

Presented by Rowan University Art Gallery
September 3 – October 26, 2019

Julie Heffernan

Through the Looking-Glass

Julie Heffernan's Self-Portraits

What is a self-portrait?

A portrait, to begin with, is assumed not only to be a likeness of its subject, but also to embody a degree of insight into their character. Portraiture is thus regarded as a special, almost ineffable artistic skill. And a self-portrait is imagined to be something even more remarkable, for not only is the artist able to capture their own likeness, but to comprehend and communicate aspects of their own psychology that are beyond the grasp of ordinary folk.

The solitary women who occupy the convoluted space of many of Julie Heffernan's paintings (almost every one of which is dubbed a *Self-Portrait*) do rather resemble the painter herself. But her first *Self-Portraits* were actually still life paintings, with no identifiable faces or personages in them at all, and since then she has used the term in the titles of paintings of twins, groups of children, young men, rooms filled with flames and fluttering birds, dogs, landscapes, and on one splendid occasion a tent on a raft about to go over a waterfall. Clearly Heffernan's concept of self-portraiture involves considerably more than merely conjuring resemblance; and even more than permitting insight into her personality via that resemblance.

As Heffernan has often noted, hers are paintings that lead their own lives. Their appearance and content reveal themselves to her as she paints them.

Apparently they don't always know when they are finished: *Self-Portrait as Two Headed Princess* for example was once a 2006 painting called *Self-Portrait as Dead Meat II* when the naked foreground figures and even the two headed princess herself were absent. Moreover the paintings and their components do not stay within the physical or conceptual limits that we might usually expect of them.

Consider *Self-Portrait with Spill*, one of the six "scroll paintings" included in this exhibition. Naked but for a looping braid of what might be her own hair knotted around her hips, a woman stands near the corner of a high room. She holds a section of a long, illustrated scroll that snakes across the floor and rolls itself into a huge ball beside her. Around her hang framed paintings of various sizes. The blood red wall visible between their gilded frames suggests a gallery in an old-fashioned museum, or perhaps even a grand country house, and as its color changes gradually to a lime green in the upper left corner it invites us to imagine that it is lit by electric lights mounted close to the ceiling. So far, so straightforward. On the other hand, the state of the floor suggests that this might not be a gallery at all, but rather the studio in which this near-naked woman has actually made the paintings that hang here. Though it is polished to a reflective sheen in the immediate right



Self-Portrait as Two-Headed Princess, oil on canvas, 68 x 57 inches, 2006-2019



foreground, elsewhere there is what Heffernan calls “the mess of her painting”. There are smears and thick encrustations of paint, and three tin cans sit on the floor. One is full of soaking paintbrushes. Another contains some kind of liquid. The third has been tipped over and, apparently giving the painting its title, its clear liquid contents spill on to the shiny floor and pool out like a Rorschach blot.

Or perhaps that is not really the source of the spilling liquid. The huge painting immediately behind the semi-naked artist is a reworking of Poussin’s *Jupiter and Antiope*, though Heffernan has entirely changed its color and shape. The nymph Antiope (who is represented in the Poussin in fleshy creams, pale brown, and pinks) is rendered in translucent blues and turquoise

in Heffernan’s reworking. She might thus be the source of a similarly colored shallow stream that flows into the foreground in a lower half of the painting that simply does not exist in the Poussin. Perhaps it is this stream that spills out on to the floor, and in fact that is not a tin can at all – significantly enough it is partly hidden by the looping scroll – but rather something like the sort of sewer pipeline that appears in other Heffernan paintings like *Self-Portrait as Gulf Clean-Up Plan* (2013).

The mischievous spatial interplay between the not-quite-naked artist and the no-longer-a-Poussin is yet more complex. First, the painted landscape provides the artist’s upper body with an entirely separate background space to the picture-filled room in which



Self-Portrait as Gulf Clean-Up Plan, oil on canvas, 66 x 68 inches, 2013 (Above, not included in the exhibition)
Self-Portrait with Spill, oil on canvas, 96 x 68 inches, 2018 (Left)



her feet are firmly planted. Then, as Heffernan herself has pointed out, the painted Jupiter seems able to overcome the gulf between these two spatial settings and to reach into the artist's head, so that what is depicted 'behind' her might be understood to exist primarily in her imagination. "This is an emanation from her head as much as it is a historical painting," is how Heffernan puts it. Then look at this: the topknots of the artist's elaborate hairstyle act as convenient pictorial fig leaves, obscuring the sex organs of both Jupiter and Antiope.

These sorts of complex and convoluted spatial settings recur over and over again in Heffernan's paintings. What makes them compelling rather than merely entertaining is that they play host to equally complex content.

At first sight, the other principal way in which Heffernan juggles space seems more familiar, in that she implies a continuum between her depicted space and the space that we her spectators occupy. The paint smeared floor she depicts reads unproblematically as the extension of the floor



Self-Portrait with Shipwreck, oil on canvas, 72 x 60 inches, 2019 (Above)
Self-Portrait After Galilee, oil on canvas, 68 x 60 inches, 2019 (Left)



Self-Portrait with Anna, Katherine, Liz and Barbara, oil on canvas, 30 x 26 inches, 2018-19 (Above)
Self-Portrait with Mary's, Josephine and Antonia, oil on canvas, 30 x 24 inches, 2018-19 (Right)





that we are standing on. More troubling is the psychological space that we share with these depicted women. Heffernan has painted women (and other central figures) that stare directly back at us since the mid-1990s. In that time their faces have suggested many different moods, but in a number of these scroll paintings (including the four large scale examples included in this exhibition) something new emerges: their expressions range through disappointment, impatience, exasperation, disdain, perhaps even suppressed anger. Certainly it is disconcerting to find ourselves in the same room as these women.

What have we done to prompt these responses? The answer is palpable in the paintings themselves. We are participants in a world in which women's qualities are belittled or ignored, in which their achievements are overlooked, in which their bodies are seen as entertainment or rewards for men. We have permitted millennia of patriarchy to endure, in other words. Ours is a world in which depictions of rape are regarded as appropriate to the realm of High Art (it is the subject of *Jupiter and Antiope*, which was painted not only by Poussin but by Rembrandt, Titian, Correggio and many other male artists for their male patrons) and also, let us not forget, in which the President of the United States is accused of violent sexual assault while the nation shrugs.

Ours is a world in which the female spirit has been under perennial threat, something called 'feminism' had to be invented, and remarkable women have had to turn their efforts to challenge and overturn structures invented and imposed by men. These are the women that Heffernan honors in *Self-Portrait with Spill*: all of the identifiable paintings it includes apart from *Jupiter and Antiope* and one other (a reworking of Böcklin's *Isle of the Dead*) are portraits of women, including playwrights, poets, and writers Caryl Churchill, Isak Dinesen,

Adrienne Rich, Doris Lessing, Claudia Rankine, Octavia Butler, and Marguerite Yourcenar, and also the celebrated anthropologist Margaret Mead and the civil rights activist Ella Baker.

Ours is a world in which the late Carolee Schneemann – an artist who for some years was represented by the same New York gallery as Heffernan – was moved to concoct the remarkable performance *Interior Scroll* in 1975. In the course of this iconic piece the naked Schneemann gradually pulled a long paper scroll from her vagina. From it she read aloud an account of her film work being dismissed for what were considered its feminine characteristics. This scroll is of course a precursor to the scrolls that Heffernan's women present for our examination.

Although there is a spatial continuum between Heffernan's depicted world and the one that her spectators occupy, in terms of meaning there is a *Through the Looking-Glass* duality between them. For this is a feminine space. At its heart Heffernan's content in these scroll paintings concerns what she calls "providing alternatives to how women are perceived, and to stereotypical imagery of women. I want to turn that on its head and show women from the inside out, to show my female sensibility from the inside out." Thus Julie Heffernan's *Self-Portraits* are not dependent upon the appearance of that central woman – even when one is present – but upon the whole range of her own knowledge, experience, and sensibilities. And upon what each painting reveals to her. This is what she calls "the accumulated features of an interior self". It is in this sense that she is *Mending a Reflection*: she calls it "a different sort of self-portrait, one more akin to a truer self," and, crucially, "conceived without the distortion of a mirror."

–Robert Ayers

Self-Portrait with Daughters, oil on canvas, 79 x 56 inches, 2019 (Left)

Artist Statement

My work has dealt with the phases of a woman's life, derived from my own experience over the years: early paintings describe the ripeness of youthful experience with burgeoning fruit and fecund landscapes; while later paintings suggest maturation, with imagery of accumulation and loss. Reared Catholic, I'm inclined to excess, both as a mechanism to describe the richness (and spectacle) of interior experience and as a response to the ethos of minimalism that permeated the male-dominated art world when I began painting in the late 70s.

As an appreciator (and consumer) of some of that powerful imagery from my childhood, I'm interested in how the culture I was born into has developed a shared collective unconscious through all the subliminal imagery we encounter as children and that has been accumulating in our mental landscapes over a lifetime. That vast trove of imagery, from Old Master paintings to film stills to porn imagery, has worked on us our whole lives – telling us stories, scaring us, titillating us, even modifying our behavior – to define and shape who we are at this particular moment in history.

Presently, I am working with the concept of memory as it is captured in that kind of powerful, shared imagery that undergirds our experience of culture and its relationship to history. A central female figure bears (and bares)

scrolls, the imagery on the scrolls revealing fragmented moments from history and mass media. On the one side we see moments from Old Master paintings; and, on the other, journalistic and filmic accounts of human and animal rights abuses. The festoonery of the scrolls curling down onto the floor and around her feet suggest the twisting and twisted nature of how we experience that onslaught of imagery that makes up our culture. These fragments and the tendrilling of the scrolls also suggest slippage, the disconnect that occurs when canonical imagery that purports to tell a tale of "truth" butts up against accounts of so-called reality as understood through the media. These two-sided scrolls tell a double-sided story about history as not only "one damn thing after another," but also the sugar coating of tales of abuse (as in images of Manifest Destiny, or when Old Master paintings conflate rapes with abductions), and the flipside of that experience as evinced by imagery that glorifies abuse, like pornography, trophy photographs of hunters with their kill and the variety of titillating violent imagery that permeates mass media.

Female figures as bearers of culture have permeated human history, from the caryatids of ancient Greece holding up temples, to Roman depictions of Themis as *Justitia*, to 19th century Beaux Artes statues of Woman as *Virtue*. The nude central figure in my paintings gives a nod to the trope of Woman as keeper of tradition, but here she is not idealized: her gaze is outer directed, confronting the viewer and inviting engagement in the events she presides over. Behind her is a portrait gallery of great women who took on power structures and, by their activism, either sowed the seeds of or wrought great changes in the world, women like Rachel Carson, Anita Hill, Jane Goodall, Julia Butterfly Hill, Tarana Burke and many more. And it is possible the central figure in the paintings is the actual painter of those portraits, since paint buckets and brushes lie on the floor next to her.

Finally, I invoke the ur-scroll of Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Monologue* performance piece from 1975 in these paintings, as well as the #MeToo movement for giving voices to women who have been silenced for too many years by the dominant culture. In these paintings I honor women.

–Julie Heffernan



Self-Portrait Standing My Ground, oil on canvas, 68 x 66 inches, 2016 (Above)
Self-Portrait as Wrangler, oil on canvas, 68 x 66 inches, 2015-19 (Left)



Julie Heffernan

About the Artist

Heffernan has been exhibiting her paintings nationally and internationally since 1988 and represented by **Catharine Clark Gallery** (San Francisco). She has had numerous solo exhibitions throughout the United States and Europe, including at PPOW in NYC entitled *Hunter Gatherer* (2019); the **Crocker Art Museum**, **Palmer Art Museum** and **Michael Haas Gallery** in Berlin; and a museum show entitled *When The Water Rises* originating at the **LSU Museum of Art** in Baton Rouge and travelling to museums in California, Pennsylvania, Florida and Texas through 2019. She has participated in numerous group shows at major galleries and museums including the **Museum für Moderne Kunst**, in Bremen, Germany; **Me Museum**, **Olbricht Collection** in Berlin; the **Palazzo Reale** in Milan, Italy; and in *Environmental Impact* exhibition travelling to 12 museums throughout the United States.

Heffernan's has published reviews and articles in a number of books and magazines, including *The Figure - Drawing, Painting, And Sculpture - Contemporary Perspectives* (Rizzoli), **Art Pulse**; and publishes essays by painters all over the country in her blog **Painters on Paintings**. Since 2011 her work was featured on the covers of numerous poetry books or journals including **Tin House** and **Columbia Poetry Review**.

Heffernan is a board member of the **National Academy Museum** in New York. She is a 2017 Fellow of the **BAU Institute** at the **Camargo Foundation** in Cassis, France; was awarded the **Meridian Scholar (Studio-F) Artist-In-Residence Fellowship** from the University of Tampa in Florida and the featured artist for the **2017 MacDowell Colony**. Heffernan was awarded a **Milton And Sally Avery Fellowship** at MacDowell in 2013 and invited to be the **Lee Ellen Fleming Artist-In-Residence** at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville in 2012, the Commencement Speaker for the **Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts** in 2010 and was the featured artist at **BAM (Brooklyn Academy of Music)** in 2009. She is the recipient of such prestigious grants as the NEA, NYFA and **Fulbright**, as well as a **PS1 Artist-in-Residence**, and her work has been reviewed by all the major newspapers and magazines including *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker*. Her work is in numerous museums throughout the country including the **Brooklyn Museum of Art** in New York and the **Virginia Museum of Fine Art** in Richmond, VA. She is a Professor of Fine Arts at **Montclair State University** in New Jersey.

About the Author

Robert Ayers is a British-born, Brooklyn-based artist and writer.

He began writing for publication in 1981. Since then he has written hundreds of articles, interviews, reviews, catalogue essays, and other pieces. He has been a Contributing Editor to ARTSCRIBE [London], a Senior Editor at ARTINFO.com [New York], New York Correspondent to Total Theatre [London], and U.S. Correspondent to EIKON [Vienna]. He has recently contributed introductory essays to monographs on Gloria Garfinkel and Alden Mason. He is currently writing a book on Julie Heffernan.

Robert Ayers worked as a widely respected performance artist between 1975 and 2010. Nowadays his art activity takes the form of political street action.

Exhibition List

Self-Portrait with Daughters

Oil on canvas, 79 x 56 inches, 2019 (Cover image, page 12)

Self-Portrait as Hothead

Oil on canvas, 78 x 64 inches, 2018-19 (Page 2)

Self-Portrait as Two-Headed Princess

Oil on canvas, 68 x 57 inches, 2006-2019 (Page 5)

Self-Portrait with Spill

Oil on canvas, 96 x 68 inches, 2018 (Page 6)

Self-Portrait After Galilee

Oil on canvas, 68 x 60 inches, 2019 (Page 8)

Self-Portrait with Shipwreck

Oil on canvas, 72 x 60 inches, 2019 (Page 9)

Self-Portrait with Anna, Katherine, Liz and Barbara

Oil on canvas, 30 x 26 inches, 2018-19 (Page 10)

Self-Portrait with Mary's, Josephine and Antonia

Oil on canvas, 30 x 24 inches, 2018-19 (Page 11)

Self-Portrait as Wrangler

Oil on canvas, 68 x 66 inches, 2015-19 (Page 14)

Self-Portrait Standing My Ground

Oil on canvas, 68 x 66 inches, 2016 (Page 15)

Self-Portrait with Shelter

Oil on canvas, 68 x 60 inches, 2015 (Page 18)



Self-Portrait with Shelter, oil on canvas, 68 x 60 inches, 2015

Rowan University Art Gallery

Where the University Meets the Community

Rowan University Art Gallery serves as a premier cultural destination for South Jersey, the Rowan community, and the surrounding region. We provide a platform for discourse on best practices in contemporary art by professional artists, curators, and scholars through the presentation of interdisciplinary art exhibitions, panel discussions, guest curatorial projects, and other public programming. We are committed to cultivating an inclusive environment that encourages a dialogue between exhibiting artists, students, faculty, the general public, and other cultural institutions. Our goal is to offer visitors an enriching cultural experience and function as a resource for contemporary art throughout the region.

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