Being Francesco Clemente

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Just as we all have sovereign individual selves, or so the Renaissance taught us, so also are our faces possessed of a sovereign individuality. We all carry within our selves self portraits that are, for the most part, portraits of our faces, though there must be, there are cases in which we, some of us, see our selves in other parts of our bodies; a muscleman's self-image may be a picture of a bicep, a dancer may see her self as existing most fully in her feet, a gigolo in his genitalia, or a pianist in his hands. But mostly it is in our faces that we face ourselves, and in this regard the invention of the looking glass is an event of some importance, making possible as never before the prolonged daily study of the self, the self-as-face, the self as reflected self from which that further reflection, the self portrait, can be born. We should not, however, overstate the importance of this moment, because before the looking glass there were earlier, proto-mirrors; the Incas had mirrors of a sort, could not dowithout them, even though they never learned the secret of the wheel. And in Greece and Rome there were polished shields, such as those in which it was safe to behold the Gorgon, and glassy pools, such as the one by which Narcissus, perhaps the first self portraitist, lay in eternal contemplation of his beauty.

Nor is the availability of a reflection essential. We know ourselves whether we see our mirror images or not. "man cannot understand without images," Thomas Aquinas said, and our minds are programmed to construct those images, even without the help of our eyes. The consequence of the gift of self-consciousness, the gift that makes us human, is the invention of the self-image. Blind men have painted self portraits and sculptors who never saw their faces nevertheless carved them in stone. Almost three and a half thousand years ago Bak, the chief sculptor of the pharaoh Akhenaton, made stone carvings of himself and his wife, Taheri. At that time portraiture was a commissioned art, yet Bak felt the need, without hope of financial reward, to portray himself and his beloved. Phidias, it's said, was jailed for the blasphemy of carving the image of his own face on Athena's shield in the Parthenon. He must have known of the taboo he was breaking, yet he broke it, yielding to the ancient, potent urge to be seen by others as one sees oneself.

To take a walk along the famous Vasari Corridor in Florence, the covered walkway built by Giorgio Vasari in 1565 to allow Cosimo de' Medici to walk unobserved between the Uffizi and Pitti palaces, which now houses perhaps the world's greatest collection of self-portraits, is to witness many comparable acts of

self-revelatory bravery. Here the minatory patriarchal hauteur of Lucas Cranach the Elder seems to terrify the haunted, youthfully uncertain Filipino Lippi; the swagger of Velázquez's stance and the suspicion in his eyes are answered by Rembrandt's serene undefended acceptance of the passage of the years. Chagall reveals himself as a blue wizard, with one of his airborne ladies at his brow, while the Swedish painter Carl Larsson is a clown, in a clownish hat, holding a clown doll. To make a work of art one must use a form of double vision, looking simultaneously outwards andinwards, making naked what is clothed and telling what is secret, and revealing how the interior world of sensibility, memory, and fear is linked to what is shouted aloud and paraded before our eyes in the world all around, which is so brightly illuminedbut which remains, nevertheless, opaque, until the artist's nakedness provides the key that unlocks its mystery. This is what we mean when we say that art is an act of courage, and why the success of a great self portrait feels almost heroic, because this is the form that is, perhaps, the locus classicus of the meeting between the interior and the exterior worlds, while failures of self portraiture, the preening reluctances one encounters all too often, are evidence of a type of cowardice.

The self portraitis the interrogation of what the artist knows best, but it is also the most polymorphous of forms, emphasizing continuity or change, surface or depth, mask or skull. And sometimes the artist is merely the model, though perhaps the artist when serving as his own model is never "mere"; Caravaggio, painting himself as the decapitated head of Goliath, was himself a falling giant nearing the end of his life; Artemisia Gentileschi lending her big, strong features to her ferocious heroines also intended somethingpersonal, as, no doubt, did James Montgomery Flagg when he used his own features to create the ultra-patriotic image of "Uncle Sam."

If Rembrandt's long study of himself over time stands at one end of the spectrum of self portraiture, then Warhol's representation of the artist as product stands at the other, and in between are the morbid, perhaps overrevelatory introspections of Kahlo and the enigmatic, opaque gestures of Gilbert and George; the performances of Cindy Sherman, the artist as role player, and the documentary quality of Nan Goldin; and then there is the case of Sam Francis, who painted self portraits that didn't look like him at all, pictures in which his face might become female or even Japanese, and whose subject, he said, was metamorphosis. He needed otherness in order to find his way back to himself. The more one looks at self portraits the more one begins to feel that metamorphosis, the art of the protean, may lie closer to the truth about the form than representation, and this, finally, is why Francesco Clemente's new pictures of himself are so interesting. Clemente is a metamorph par excellence—actor, clown, mask, avatar—and, as slippery as the legendary Old

Man of the Sea, he wriggles hard when you try to pin him down. You have to hold ontightly, and for a long time, while he mutates ceaselessly to elude your grasp, and only at the very end, when you are both exhausted, does he give up his secrets and tell you what you need to know.

"All things flow, nothing abides," wrote Heraclitus, andthe idea of change as the only constant later became one of the dominant concepts of the Roman Empire. Ovid, in his *Metamorphoses*, offered a brilliant gloss on this theme. Yes, change was everywhere—it could be playful, extraordinary, or grotesque—but it was not random. Endangered women and assaulted emperors alike metamorphosed not according to their fancy but in response to the crises of their lives, and their metamorphoses were not games or disguises but revelations. Ovid's characters changed, one mightsay, into themselves. The chameleon, after all, does not change colour whimsically but to protect himself, to survive. His changes, too, reveal his slow and guarded nature. Clemente and the chameleon are two of a kind. Here they are, united in a single mysterious, even mystical image, the green creature curling over the artist's head like a second self, and refusing, no doubt for aesthetic reasons, to adopt the colouration of the field against which it poses. Which is the self portrait in this self portrait, one might well ask, the image of the reptile or the man?

In Indian mythology, and philosophy, too, the idea of the changeable self, of gods as well as men, lies close to the heart of things. I myself have always been strongly attracted to metamorphs, and I suspect that this Indian interest in all that is mutable accounts for Clemente's long, passionate response to India, of which there is so much evidence in these new pictures, in the bright bleeding-Madras pink of the *Self Portrait with Smoke*, set against the human figure's somber tones; in the *Tantric Self Portait*, and again in the transfigured *Self Portarit as a Bengali Woman*, reminiscent of those Sam Francis self-alterations. But beneath these obvious Indian signs there is something more deeply subcontintental in Clemente by now, something more than simple referentiality—an elective affinity, to use Goethe's term, an acquired or developed or discovered feeling for an Indian rhythm of life. Set these portraits beside the work of a major contemporary Indian artist such as the late Bhupen Khakhar and the echoes are there for all to see. Khakhar, seeking an Indian "voice" that was imitative neither of the West nor of traditional Indian miniature-style painting, found inspiration in the contemporary, in the visual furniture of the Indian street, in the colour palette of storefronts and billboards, and constructed from these materials his own increasingly passionate, increasingly explicit, increasingly erotic world. Clemente, no slouch at the erotic himself, likewise takes inspiration from—seeks the eternal in the contemporary; his fish-eating cat, his spiraling smoke-self, the bountiful patterings and colours of

his beautifully lurid caged bird, his Tantric meditation, and his yin yang mandala are similar to what one might find on India's ubiquitous calendars of the gods and equally ubiquitous and deificatory political posters, as well as its bright yellow ghee canisters, its cobalt-blue cheese tins, its purple and vermillion saris drying on the dark dhobi ghat rocks.

What is it about Italians and Indians? Because if the best kind of comedy is the comedy of recognition, the laughter that comes when we think, yes, it is like that, things are so and we are thus, then in India there is often a recognition-comedy ofthis sort between Indians and Italians, because sometimes Indians, when looking upon Italian visitors, feel that we are looking into a sort of mirror, as if we were seeing ourselves in translation; we recognize something, perhaps, in the gesticulations, or the volubility, or the love of mothers, or the poetry, or the gusto of the eating, or the high pitch of the speech, or the caste system, or the vehemence, or the quickness of the temper, and we think, some Indians think, that perhaps, if only we drank wine, we would be those people, perhaps Italians are just Indians who drink wine. Consequently, in India it is sometimes said to Italians that they, the Italians, are the Indians of Europe. Usually of course it is said to make these visitors feel at home and so it is a form of Indian politeness—and there are so many forms of Indian politeness, including ones that are really insults—but this one contains enough truth to merit repetition. And if the Italians are the Indians of Europe then the Indians are the Italians of Asia, and not only because we are both southerners, Indians and Italians, not only because we each hang off the bottom of our continent of origin, Italy like a giant leg, India like a giant, dripping nose. And standing upon the Italian-Indian border, that fantastic frontier, straddling, or, better, leaping back and forth across this imaginary borderline, smiling his wicked commedia dell'arte smile, at once satyr-like and iconic—*satyriconic*—is Francesco Clemente, mingler of the two worlds, artist of spiritual cynicism and erotic chastity, or perhaps of cynical spiritualism and chaste eroticism, his face hanging hugely above his dreamscapes like the moon.

There is a story by Italo Calvino about a time when the moon was closer to the earth than it istoday, when lovers could leap off the earth to walk upon its satellite and look up at their home planet hanging upside down above their heads. Separation, inversion, the fascination of the leap: these are the characteristics of Clemente's paintings. His is a traveller's art. "In each place where I was," he says, "the continuity of memories, the tradition of the place, has been broken, somewhere, sometime; I don't know why. Really, you can't look at any place in the world from the place itself. You have to look from somewhere else to see what is there." These ideas, of the fragmentation of cultures, and of the creative benefits of displacement, are close, also, to my heart. "The only ones who see the whole

picture," one of my half-remembered characters says somewhere, in some half-forgotten book, "are the ones who step out of the frame." Fragments are what we have left, and the artist must assemble them into meaningful form, so that they can reveal some, at least, of their broken mysteries, the way the shards of Heraclitus's lost book still, after two thousand years, retain the power of significant speech. Clemente's *Self Portrait with Smoke* reassembles a fragmentary self in just this way, uniting the artist's dissociated and replicated physical elements with the most transient and evanescent of bonds.

These paintings are more playful, less somber than the great grisaille series of a few years ago, offering, in place of the grave, unflinching self-examination of those earlier pictures, a quasi-mystical vision of the artist as present in all things, just as all things are present in the artist. Clemente is the cat with the fish in its mouth (but he might as well be the fish); he is the pig with the Clemente mask as well as the artist with the pig mask. He is in a wisp of smoke, and a god-like being riding a priapic phallus, and the dreamer, perhaps the conjurer, of an aerial apocalypse. Cinematic parallels present themselves: of the menacing Agent Smith in *The Matrix*, taking over and transforming into his own image whatever body he chooses to occupy; or of the sequence in *Being John Malkovich* in which, in the actor's interior universe, all of reality has been Malkoviched, all faces are Malkovich's face, and the only word in the only known language is "Malkovich." There is of course a delicious narcissism at work in Clemente, but it is redeemed by what one may call his Hindu insistence on the underlying principle of unity in the universe, *Tat Tvam Asi*, "Thou Art That," as the wise father, Uddalaka, explains to his son Svetaketu in the *Chandogya Upanishad*.

The "transformational grammar" of these paintings (to borrow Noam Chomsky's term) seeks to connect the deep structure of the images embedded, as Aquinas understood, in our essential, unconscious natures to the surface structure of our visual perceptions. And at the collection's heart, less antic than the other pictures, darker and more melancholy, is the extraordinary *Self Portrait After a Family Photograph*, a picture that hides the family's eyes from us, but even so, even though we cannot look into the soul's windows, manages to convey love, intimacy, pain. Loss, and other emotions for which there are no names, a painting in which the hidden world behind the eyes is perfectly revealed through what is seen of faces, gestures, and touch: a masterpiece.

This essay was originally published as Salman Rushdie, "Being Francesco Clemente," in *Francesco Clemente: Self Portraits,* exh. cat. (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2006), pp. 5–10.
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