

Hood Exhibition Highlights the Contemporary Self-Portrait



Hanover, NH—January 19, 2015—Organized in collaboration with nine Dartmouth students, *About Face: Self-Portraiture in Contemporary Art* explores the extraordinary range and global diversity of self-portraiture in contemporary art. Building on the success of recent student-driven Hood exhibitions, such as *The Expanding Grid* and *Word and Image*, this project offered these undergraduates a unique opportunity to learn more about museums and curatorial practice by participating in the planning and execution of a major exhibition project. They studied original works of art in the museum’s Bernstein Study-Storage Center, honing their close observational skills and informing their selections for the exhibition, which includes paintings, photography, prints, and video by eighteen noted contemporary artists—Chuck Close, Susanna Coffey, Félix de la Concha, Rineke Dijkstra, Marit Følstad, Martín Gutierrez, Nikki S. Lee, Sarah McEneaney, Bruce Nauman, Wendy Red Star, Enrico Riley, Cindy Sherman, Kiki Smith, Renée Stout, Christian Thompson, Jeff Wall, Ai Weiwei, and Francesca Woodman—all of whom are known for their probing investigations of the genre.

About Face is on view from January 31 through July 19, 2015. On May 7, three of the artists in the exhibition will come to campus to participate in a panel discussion on the theme of “Self-Portraiture and the Construction of Identity.” Martín Gutierrez, Wendy Red Star, and Renée Stout have all engaged in work that interrogates the construction of contemporary identity and the nature of representation.

“*About Face* engaged its student curators in great depth,” said Michael Taylor, Director of the Hood Museum of Art. “Once the exhibition checklist was finalized, each student chose an artist’s self-portrait to research and write an object label for. In doing so, they learned more about the myriad ways in which contemporary artists have engaged with self-portraiture, while also bringing their own perspectives as Dartmouth students. This unique vantage point allowed these students to produce a fresh take upon each artist’s approach to self-representation, and I believe that the labels that they wrote for the exhibition are truly remarkable.”

“The label-writing process was a unique experience,” explained Laura Dorn, Class of 2015. “It gave me the opportunity to view pieces in the *About Face* exhibition in storage and engage with the content, scale, and materiality of the works. In an age where ‘selfies’ are everywhere, it was an illuminating process to respond to the way contemporary artists are approaching themselves as a subject.” The experience of seeing original works of art in the Bernstein Study-Storage Center also made a deep impression on Malika Khurana, Class of 2015, who wrote her label on Kiki Smith’s *My Blue Lake*: “When you see artwork in person, and it’s there in the storage of the Hood for your eyes only, you can find so much more than you would in a crowded museum. All pretensions are off, and you can connect with the art on such an intimate level, taking the time to imagine the artist’s process and what they were trying to do as they worked on this piece in their studio. It was amazing to me to realize how many fantastic pieces (by artists as well-known as Kiki Smith!) are in the Hood’s collection.”

“Writing a label for the exhibition was initially intimidating and a great challenge,” said Singer Horse Capture, Class of 2017, “especially after looking at Christian Thompson’s photograph in person and beginning to realize how beautiful and brilliant it is. However, after taking the time to think about the essence of what the work meant to me and how others could access it, creating a label I am proud of was a surprisingly exciting and rewarding experience.” Taylor Payer, Class of 2015, also found the experience of writing a label to be “incredibly rewarding”—she “enjoyed the opportunity to study the works of art up close and think deeply about their social implications.”

Bay Lauris ByrneSim, Class of 2015, recalled that her first reaction to seeing Francesca Woodman’s self-portrait was “surprise”: “In person, the Woodman photograph was so small and delicate. I had to lean in to see what was happening. Initially, I had assumed that she wasn’t visible at all, but upon looking closer, Francesca’s figure appeared. I felt my label rather than wrote it. When I reflected on my relationship to the image—a discovery of size and almost forgetting the author—Emily Dickinson immediately came to mind. Francesca composes an image that feels like a secret, just like a Dickinson poem, in a way that almost seems to be a personal revelation to the reader-viewer.” Adria Brown, Class of 2015, also made a deep personal connection to a work of art in the exhibition: “As a Chickasaw woman interested in working within museums, I found my experience writing for the *About Face* exhibition particularly moving since I had the chance to not only contribute to an exhibition, but write on a Native American photographer. Since the Hood Museum of Art encourages students to personally interact with art through the Bernstein Study-Storage Center, I was able to spend a considerable amount of time examining, analyzing, and seeing Wendy Red Star’s *Four Seasons*.

Viewing this piece firsthand and then incorporating my thoughts and ideas into an exhibition label was incredibly fulfilling for me. I got to not only expand myself professionally and academically but in addition interact with art that is personally and emotionally striking.”

Alexandra Johnson, Class of 2015, was both “excited and nervous” when she was approached to write a label for the exhibition: “While I have much experience working in museums, my projects have never been in the curatorial department; writing a label for a piece on display was completely new to me. Skimming through the list of portraits to be featured in the exhibition, several peaked my interest, but it was Marit Følstad’s chilling video *Pretty Girls Can Kill* that intrigued me most. What I love about art is that each piece is an invitation for personal reflection and contemplation: no two people will look at a work in the same way. While I originally envisioned my label for *About Face* to embody my own specific interpretation toward the video, my label actually ended up being more about the process through which I observed the video, struggled to determine a clear meaning, and eventually coming to realize that, at least for me, the greater value lies in the immersive experience of watching the video than with deducing one ‘takeaway’ conclusion. Indeed, it was impossible for me to not lose myself in the arresting gaze of the woman in the video. While my questions only increased with each additional viewing, participating in the all-consuming experience of viewing *Pretty Girls Can Kill* embodies what is, for me, what museums are all about: losing yourself in works of art.”

“Seeing Susanna Coffey’s painting (and other work in the *About Face* exhibition) before writing the label reminded me of the power of the in-person experience with works of art that museums provide,” said Elissa Watters, Class of 2015. “Smaller than I had expected and with a visual play and dynamism less apparent in digital reproduction, Coffey’s painting *Intake* took on a whole new form in the Bernstein Study-Storage Center and inspired the label I wrote in direct response to the painting’s material reality.”

As these Dartmouth students discovered during their research and writing for the exhibition, many of the eighteen artists whose work is on display in the exhibition focus on the manipulation of identity through disguise and assumed personae, while others use direct observation to capture specific moments in their lives or turn to historical precedents to inform their contemporary practice. Considered collectively, the works of art included in *About Face* overturn conventional expectations regarding self-portraiture and will allow visitors to the Hood Museum of Art to reflect critically and philosophically on the complex processes of identity construction and the different ways in which the self is valued, fashioned, and presented today.

About the Hood Museum of Art

The mission of the Hood Museum of Art, as a teaching museum, is to create an ideal learning environment that fosters transformative encounters with works of art. This dynamic educational and cultural facility houses one of the oldest and largest college collections in the country, with more than 70,000 objects acquired since 1772. Among its most important works are six Assyrian stone reliefs that date from around 900 BCE. The collection also presents art from other ancient cultures, the Americas, Europe, Africa, Papua New Guinea, and many more regions of the world. The Hood seeks to inspire and educate through direct engagement with original works of art and offers access to the rich diversity of its collections through ongoing highlights displays, special exhibitions, an online collections database, and a wide array of programs and events.

About Dartmouth

Founded in 1769, Dartmouth is a member of the Ivy League and consistently ranks among the world's greatest colleges and universities. Dartmouth has forged a singular identity for combining its deep commitment to outstanding undergraduate liberal arts and graduate and professional education with distinguished research and scholarship in the arts and sciences and its three leading professional schools—the Geisel School of Medicine, Thayer School of Engineering, and the Tuck School of Business.

Media Contacts

Hood Museum of Art

Nils Nadeau: (603) 646-2095 • nils.a.nadeau@dartmouth.edu

Dartmouth College Office of Public Affairs

(603) 646-3661 • office.of.public.affairs@dartmouth.edu

Image caption: Chuck Close, *Self-Portrait Screenprint 2012*, 2012, silkscreen in 246 colors. Edition of 80. Published by Pace Editions, Inc. Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College: Purchased through the Mrs. Harvey P. Hood W'18 Fund; 2014.12. © Chuck Close, courtesy Pace Gallery. Photograph courtesy Pace Prints.

#####