

Seeing Vivian Maier - Anthony Luvera

How should we look at a self-portrait? What can a self-portrait tell us? Why do artists make self-portraits? How is the artist's identity revealed through their self-portrait?

Vivian Maier's self-portraiture is a significant thread running throughout her greater body of work. The mystery surrounding her life story and the unusual way her photography was discovered and brought to public attention makes the images Maier made of herself all the more beguiling. A self-portrait is often thought to offer a kind of explanation, revelation or confession, providing the artist a way to see themselves and be seen by others. But given that Maier's self-portraits, and indeed her entire output as a photographer, much of which remained undeveloped in her lifetime, were apparently never made to be seen by anyone, how are we supposed to see the photographs Maier made of herself?

Questions about self-portraiture drive my practice as a socially engaged artist. The self-portrait is not only a way in which I depict myself, it is also a method I employ to enable the people I work with to represent themselves. When working with people who have experienced homelessness, and with individuals and communities who are otherwise marginalised or excluded, I use self-portraiture to challenge the ways these people are usually seen by society. For me, the self-portrait is a useful tool to explore issues relating to agency, power, class, identity and representation.

So, it is through the lens of my own practice of making and facilitating self-portraiture, I stand in front of Maier's self-portraits and wonder about her intentions. There are no titles, statements or interviews to guide how we should look at the photographs she made. She was not involved in the selection of images displayed in the numerous exhibitions and publications that have taken place since her death. Without any contextual information provided by Maier, about why she made these photographs or what she hoped audiences would see in them, we will never really know why she made self-portraits or how she meant for these images to be read. All we can do is piece together information gleaned from interviews with people who knew her and those involved in unearthing her work, and project our own readings onto the details seen in the photographs she created.

The Rolleiflex camera Maier used, with its twin-lens and waist level viewfinder, is perfectly suited to the self-scrutiny involved in making a self-portrait. This type of equipment slows down the process of looking and commands careful consideration of what is included and excluded when composing an image. All of Maier's photographs, especially her self-portraits, sing out with a striking compositional clarity. Using mirrors, windowpanes, metallic surfaces, shadows and still life arrangements of clothing, Maier captured her likeness in carefully arranged depictions. Her self-image often appears juxtaposed with or superimposed onto the other people she encountered on the street. The fragmentation and sense of movement conveyed in Maier's self-portraits reminds me of the writings of the American sociologist, George Herbert Mead, who asserted that the self is formed through social interaction with the external world. Always in transition, identity is a negotiation between the self and others.

A collapse of subject and creator within one image, the self-portrait is an enduring theme in the history of art which appears to both reveal and disguise at the same time. Historically, the self-portrait has its origins in an artist's self-promotion, a public display of the skill and expertise handling of their chosen medium. Spending most of her life working in service to the households of wealthy families in New York and Chicago, perhaps Maier's use of photography to create self-portraits – as masterfully created as they are – enabled her to achieve something altogether different. Perhaps these self-portraits enabled Maier a way of privately expressing herself in order to circumvent the restricted agency and limited power afforded to a woman of her social position. Perhaps for Vivian Maier, these self-portraits shouldn't be seen by us at all.

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