

ART • WEEKEND

Susanna Coffey Studies the Nature of Portraiture

For years, Coffey has produced modestly scaled self-portraits with not a brushstroke of flattery.

John Yau 6 days ago



Susanna Coffey, "Void of Course" (2018) (all images courtesy of Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects)

I want to take the long way to travel a short distance because I am reviewing Susanna Coffey's work for the first time after looking at it for at least 20 years. It is not that I know how I feel about her work, but that I realized I needed to sort through the swirl of feelings it stirs up. As one snarky reviewer said of Coffey, "[She] is a truly gifted artist and a repellant painter." The same could be said of Lucien Freud and Francis Bacon, but no one seems to have thought of it.

Coffey, who is the F. H. Sellers Professor in Painting at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, is about to retire after teaching for 37 years. When a former student, John Mitchell, asked her about the small-scale self-portraits she has been exhibiting since the early 1990s, the artist [stated](#):

[...] in 1982, as a young faculty, not having much money for models, I began to paint self-portraits from observation in order to be a better teacher. To learn about, not a subject, but rather a process of making, I got a mirror and looked into it and tried to paint what I saw.

She goes on to say:

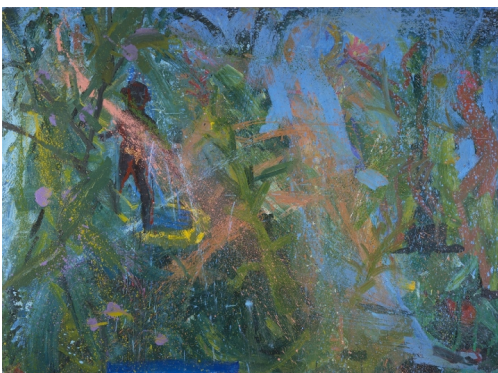
I imagined a whole group of paintings to be made in front of a mirror and so I made a deal with myself to just go with it. It seemed stupid at the time but I just wanted to see what else that mirror could reveal.

Shortly after reading Coffey's statement, the unlikely pairing of Euan Uglow and Jasper Johns came to mind. The pairing seemed, to quote Coffey, stupid at the time, but I never successfully dispensed with it, either. One reason these names came to mind had to do with Johns's statement, published in *Time* magazine in 1959, about why he painted the American flag:

It all began with my painting a picture of an American flag. Using this design took care of a great deal for me because I didn't have to design it. So I went on to similar things like the targets things the mind already knows. That gave me room to work on other levels.

Uglow, who worked from life and was also a teacher, became known for his paintings of nudes set in a stripped down, artificial space. Everybody who has written about him points out that he was an extremely meticulous artist, who did a great deal of measuring in his work.

In her continued return to self-portrait, Coffey shares something with these dissimilar artists. The difference, however, is telling, and she is surely conscious of it. She is a woman painting her self-portrait for over 30 years.



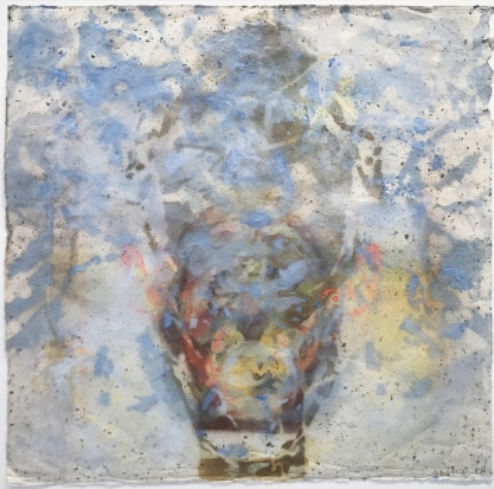
Susanna Coffey, "Rharian Plain" (1988)

According to the scornful critic I cited earlier, Coffey has no subject but her own narcissism. That is not what's going on at all, but it's evident why that argument has been made. For years the artist has produced modestly scaled self-portraits with not a brushstroke of flattery. Often, she covers her hair so that, from a distance, she might appear bald. I have seen portraits of her wearing a ski cap, a baseball cap in reverse, and a shower cap. Essentially, she has simplified her head to an oval form. Often, the view is

slightly angled, as if the head is being seen from below. She often uses the same palette

for the head and the ground, turning the painting into an exploration of the mutable relationship of figure and ground, which can be translated into figuration and abstraction.

These different thoughts came to the foreground when I recently saw [*Susanna Coffey: Crimes of the Gods at Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects*](#). The exhibition was a revelation for many reasons. It included a large painting, “Rharian Plain” (1988), and a selection of woodcuts on rice paper from her artist’s book, *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (1988), translated by Apostolos Athanassakis, as well as selection of recent self-portraits.



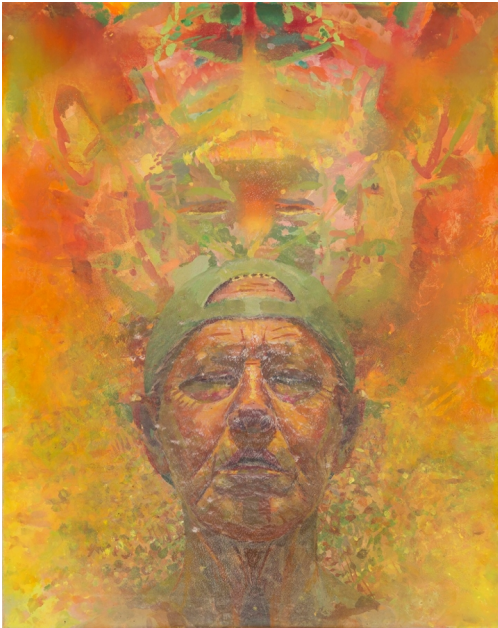
Susanna Coffey, *Ethereic* (2018)

According to the artist, the 1988 book captures the “criminal behavior of patriarchs.” The anonymously written poem tells the story of Demeter’s search for her daughter, Persephone, who was kidnapped and imprisoned in the underworld by Hades. Demeter’s desperate search causes the crops and wildlife to fall into neglect. Eventually, an agreement is reached and Persephone spends half a year on earth, bringing with her light and renewal.

Dominated by black pigment and flurries of cut (white) lines and angular contour lines, the woodcuts reveal another side of Coffey’s art, inspired by her interest in myth. Shown along with “Rharian Plain” it is clear that she has had a longstanding concern with the space within which a brushstroke is both itself (a smear or splatter of paint) and a signifier (the forest). Her technique runs the spectrum from daubs of frosting-like paint, to swirling, tender brushstrokes, rendered with a loaded brush, to delicate investigations of light. Despite her strong interest in myth, she rejects the classical ideals of beauty. In this she shares something with Charles Garabedian and Mary Frank, two other artists who recognized that myths could be a way to reflect upon contemporary civilization.

I wonder if her rejection of classical ideals of beauty and her need to reinterpret myth led her to reexamine the nature of portraiture — which is what I think she is up to in her works in this vein. The figure in her self-portraits is aloof, an object in a welter of paint, a form slowly changing into the ground pressing against her. In “Ringers” (2016), composed largely of pale greens, yellows, and light browns, the faceted form becomes a kind of helmet, with the semi-circular opening in the back becoming a third eye. Her

face seems to be a mask partly covering another face, with openings in this skin so we can partially see the eyes beneath it. Is the looming form we see a demon, a projection, a thought, or a dream?



Susanna Coffey, "Ringers" (2016)

These are not self-portraits in any conventional sense. They seem, rather, like inspired inquiries into the nature of portraiture. This is why a critic found them repellent. They don't flatter the face. The hat and the head's position de-gender the person we know is the artist. Coffey seems intent on refusing to use the markers commonly associated with portraits of women. She prefers to reflect upon the nature of portraiture and self-representation. And running through all these paintings is a deftness of touch and style put at the service of a larger question, which is, how does one want to present the self to the world? These are tough, uncompromising paintings that should be looked at and reflected upon. What the mirror she holds up to us reveals is not something pretty.

[Susanna Coffey: Crimes of the Gods](#) *continues at Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects (208 Forsyth Street, Manhattan) through June 30.*

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