

# All yours

Here's looking at you, kid

• By BARRY DAVIS

There's nothing new about artists creating self-portraits. It has been an attractive and highly revealing tool of artistic expression for centuries.

Rembrandt, for example, delivered a fetching likeness of himself, complete with beret, over three-and-half centuries ago; Albrecht Durer's alluring rendition of his visage, complete with flowing tresses, was produced over 400 years ago; while Louise Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun's late 18th-century *Self-Portrait in a Straw Hat* looks a little like the equivalent of a PR-motivated portfolio image.

In fact, you might even go so far as to suggest that the latter is akin to a Louis XVI-era selfie, and that brings us neatly on to the central theme of *Looking at You / Talking to Myself*, the new exhibition of works by 53-year-old internationally acclaimed artist Eran Shakine, which opened last Thursday at the Zemack Contemporary Art gallery in Tel Aviv.

The show comprises a large number of paintings and a handful of some oversized sculptures, and the thematic message comes through loud and clear throughout.

There is a sort of center-of-the-universe, narcissistic thread to the show. Most of the large canvases feature figures – predominantly female – in various degrees of attire, and most are de-



Acclaimed artist Eran Shakine against the backdrop of a work from 'Looking at You / Talking to Myself.' (Yaron Haramati)

void of facial features.

One canvas has the words "Ego," "Super Ego" and "Me" neatly slotted into the bottom left-hand corner beside yet another seemingly anonymous character. I venture that the text implies different degrees of self-interest, but Shakine says that isn't exactly what he is trying

to convey "We all have each of these three factors fully," he states. "We are all 100 percent of this and this and this."

So apparently selfies are nothing new, nor is the desire to present ourselves to the world in a self-tailored manner. What has changed is the means for achieving the egocentric result. Until





A sort of center-of-the-universe, narcissistic thread runs through the show. (Photos: Ran Erde)

not too long ago, the only people who could have their image captured in the long term were the well-heeled, which, notes Shakine, generally involved an ulterior motive. “When an aristocrat commissioned someone to paint him, it was designed to make a statement about power. And when he did that, he placed the document in the annals of history, to preserve his image for generations to come. He could also control how he was presented to those who lived after him, and how they envisaged him.”

Now, almost anyone can capture and streamline their own image and get it out there to all and sundry via social networks.

“Today this whole area has accelerated manifold,” says Shakine. “In the digital era anyone can control their own image.”

Then again, the user-friendliness of promulgation involves some pitfalls, too, and you can just as easily lose control over how your image is received or, indeed, whether it is accepted at all. It can also be manipulated to serve others’ interests. “You know, with Facebook, if someone doesn’t like what you put up, they can just chuck you out. Yesterday someone told me that people can listen to your phone calls and tap into the stuff you exchange on social media, and then they’ll send you, for example, information about some product they want to push, which is connected to the conversation you just had. That’s crazy! We’ve created the Big Brother ourselves.”

That, presumably, can also apply to selfie postings. So is Shakine using *Looking at You / Talking to Myself* to try to send out a clarion call?

“I don’t issue warnings,” he says.

“That’s not my role. I am a sort of mirror. My art is a mirror. I believe that art should reflect society.” Does that mean that art should be an accurate resonator of life? Or should works of art act as a prism, through which reality is refracted and deconstructed to an extent? “Any mirror distorts. Is there any report in the media that doesn’t offer its own angle on the facts?”

Social commentary is a basic component of Shakine’s creative ethos. His work generally follows a defined thematic strand. “I create projects for myself,” he explains. “But I am not in the business of pontificating or trying to tell people what to think or how to act. I am interested in what people are thinking.”

There is an interactive element to the current Zemack Contemporary Art gallery show. Then again, any work of art should invite discourse, criticism and complementary responses from the viewers. *Looking at You / Talking to Myself* clearly does that. For starters, there are the featureless visages which naturally get us to imagine what the subject really looks like, what expression they might have had when they were in the process of being captured, and – possibly – how they felt about being put onto a canvas.

There is an intriguing textural quality to many of the paintings, too. Most have black backgrounds, but some of the figures are surrounded by flat, colored backdrops which, says Shakine, were produced using a very elemental tool. “I used a common decorator’s painting roller,” he says. “It was great using that.”

He clearly became very adept at the technique and at producing deft twists and turns and some layering with it – although not quite without cost. “I developed tennis elbow,” he chuckles ruefully.

Unwieldy implement notwithstanding, Shakine has produced some surprising aesthetic effects. There are some subtle linear nuances, while in other works he has managed to elicit some grainy qualities out of his roller action. “It almost looks like a photograph blown up really big,” notes the artist while we view one of the canvases. “I like that.”

Body language and self-image projection, naturally, come into it. Shakine also challenges the consensus regarding what is considered to be a desirable female figure. “That’s Kim Kardashian,” he exclaims, referencing the reality TV personality who has proudly displayed her somewhat outsized rear curves to the public, while we observe a painting of a similarly proportioned female character.

What is, perhaps, most impressive about Shakine and his work is that he identifies with his base source of inspiration.

“Look at this one,” he says, pointing to a painting of a young woman with lips pronouncedly pouted. “That’s sexy. I am part of this culture.”

Shakine is also perfectly happy with the idea that his idea of beauty may very well be the product of the advertising brainwashing that most people undergo. “I don’t look at these things from afar. I am totally inside all of this. I am not judgmental.”

*Looking at You / Talking to Myself* closes on August 14. For more information: (03) 691-