

Alberto Martini, *Self Portrait* 1929

I walk through the Contemporary Art room at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, past the Neo-Expressionism, the Minimalism and the Pop-Art, and enter a quiet, grey room occupied by the Surrealists. Surprisingly, I have not been into this room before, throughout my many visits to the MMFA, and I am intrigued by the diverse aesthetic array before me. I walk a loop around the sculpture works in the centre of the room, noticing a few Dali pieces, and consider perhaps writing about one of these. When I look through the sculpture's limbs however, my eyes make contact with a striking, dark set across the room from me. I immediately head over the far right wall to a medium-sized oil painting, 65cm x 54cm, and sit down on the bench before it.

10am - Vaginal imagery.

There are silhouettes whirling in this mind-space. The profile of a woman's breast and the frontal, fragmented curve of a woman's hip surround the figure's head on it's either side. They create the sides of the frame, the borders, allowing for the figure to occupy the center of the piece, like the clitoris.

The eyes strike you. Their whites which surround the dark black and green pupils, they look *too* white with the redness in the rings around them – as if they're actually quite bloodshot but someone has used Visine on them. Although I'm not sure that Visine was around in the late 1920s, perhaps this is just surrealism at work.

The skin which encompasses the eye sockets is the most human aspect of this figure. The lack of a nose feels alien, the black lips dead and fish-like. But the eyes are decidedly human.

Is he in the womb? Is he longing to crawl back into it?

His blackened interior glows with white around its limits in an outline that continues beyond the apex of his head through the center of the two women's bodies. Innocence of a newborn baby?

His soul has been blackened by the world outside the womb and longs to return to this safe place of maternal protection.

The ears are large, red, and demanding of attention. Are they listening, or are we supposed to be? Their redness appears irritated, suggesting a harsh experience with the world they have come up against. Loudness? Vulgarity? Is the light moving through them – in one and out of the other? Are they absorbing it from either side, to have it unite flame in the middle?

The lips are there, but appear as if they were an afterthought – as though they were etched on at the last second, important, but not integral. They are not functional, they are decorative. Perhaps they have only been added to make us feel comfortable? Would we feel more disoriented if they haven't been added?

He listens, but he does not respond. He absorbs the world around him – through his ears and eyes – but is not an active participant in it, therefore does not need functional lips. But a face without lips is not human. Martini has ensured then, that this figure is in some way human.

The female anatomical shapes on either side of the central figure seem to mirror classical imagery of the angel and the devil on one's two shoulders; the devil (dark figure) on the left, the angel (white figure) on the right – and yet the light is hitting the figure from the left.

Feminine eyelashes decorate the figure's left eye as it is touched by the light from above.

The black woman is shown in profile, where an erect nipple informs of her body most blatantly. The white woman is frontal, which we read from the crease depicted where her thigh meets her pelvis. Shades of blue contour her body, accentuating her soft curves.

It seems as though the white light is burning the blackness off of the body, like a vampire. The part of his head struck by the direct light is exposing the same brown, human-like skin which surrounds the eye-sockets. It evokes the way that snow melts from a grassy lawn, slowly inward from the edges, revealing the frozen earth underneath a little at a time. The blackened body here, is the snow, and the brown skin the thawing, hidden earth. The white light the sun in Spring.

He is defrosting.

Where the central figure's hand touches the right side of its body over where the heart would be, the contact creates a white glow. This hand is encircled by red, which mimics the irritated feeling of the ears. Is the light being absorbed into the soul? Or does the double negative (blackness on blackness) turn to white? Is he searching for his inner light/goodness to bring out into the world? Has it been lost inside him? The entire right side of his body appears to melt at this contact of the hand with the heart – there is a redness festering up from under the black exterior on the right side, beginning at the shoulder and working its way down toward the elbow and ribcage. Perhaps the heart needed a reawakening.

By eyes following the trickle of redness down the right side of the body, I begin to notice the wooden frame chosen for display of Martini's piece. The black wood highlighted by silver detailing mirrors the harsh black abyss of the soul in the painting - trapping all of the light/innocence/virtue it can get a hold of within its confines (the thickest, black section of the frame is accompanied by a thinner, silver inner rectangle which sits against the painting itself) as it works its way physically inward toward the central figure in the painting it showcases. The frame appears to be moving forward toward the viewer, causing the central figure to appear as though doing the same – however he is blocked from coming any closer to us both by the black,

glowing, TV-like box depicted in front of him in the bottom left corner of the painting, and also by the confines of his frame like an animal in a zoo, restricted by its cage.

This black box in the bottom left corner, glowing white light from the opposing side from where the viewer stands, could it be reflecting the same light coming from above the figure? It would not have been a television in 1929 – though if it were a contemporary piece this would be assumed to be a television. Could it be a mirror?

The light which shines down over the figure from above is reflected back onto him by this object, and where the light is reflected back onto the body (toward the right), the body melts from the heat, turning from black to dark red as though blood is being drawn toward its surface.

The figure looks as if in pain, though accepting of it. He understands his obligation to undergo pain if he is to attain the light. He has accepted his pain, or a punishment, and will endure it without resistance. He surrenders, without a fight.

There is a warmth to the piece – a chemical reaction.

He does not exist in the physical world here, he has manifested outside of his physical body. Or are we getting an X-ray of the soul inside the body-vessel which exists in the physical world?

If this is a self-portrait, are we witnessing an X-ray of the painter's soul? Are we watching as he fantasizes about multi-racial women, bodies of which he has not yet attained?

Is the light merely the bright flash of the X-ray machine, needed in order to expose the inner-workings of this dark inner soul?

If this is Martini's soul, the non-functional lips have been added to make us recognize the human aspect of this soul. Realistically, the figure does not need a functional mouth due to the soul's lack of verbal speech when removed from the physical body. The human soul is an energy – a spirit – a being, but it is not a physically active player in the material world and therefore does not require a functional mouth for interacting with it. The soul further does not need to be fed. Martini then has added these decorative lips for nothing other than our comfort.

Is one woman the Id, the other the Ego? The figure then being the Super Ego, navigating between the two but trapped somehow, lost between them?

Is this what he sees when he looks in the mirror?

We are not offered any contextual, material setting; nothing concrete. The figure floats in a dream – or nightmarish – black abyss similar to its own exterior. Unspecified, and like the lips, black. Cold.

*I am-* Is the hand protecting the heart from radiation?

Are the heart and the mind connected, or are they separate?

Does he just not want to bare his heart to us? Is the entirety of the piece a reflection of a heart blackened and controlled by repressed sexual desire? Is sexual desire a darkness? A sin?

Is the piece Freudian still?

The eyebrows are suggestive. The left is raised in an arch, the right remains straight over the right eye. On the left, the arch creates space for the feminine eyelashes between the brow and the

eye. There is intention here. Responding to a challenge? Temptation? The right remains softer, unaccentuated. Together, they are focal; more defined and expressive than the dead, impractical lips. The eyebrows are human, and unlike the lips, the eyebrows are functional. They indicate a plan, a distinct object of desire.

The eyes and their brows are where the emotion lays. The combination of the two features create a Jack-O-Lantern; glowing from within, expression resting in the illuminated eye sockets.

Human-resembling, but not human itself.

The figure is not kind, or gentle – he is burning with desire.

Does the mirror represent the outside world, reflecting naivety (the white light) onto a dark soul?

Are we seeing the inner demons of what the world sees as an innocent man? Is the innocence coming from the women above him? Purity?

He desires the women. Does he desire simply to penetrate them? To penetrate their innocence, that which was stolen from him by the outside world? Was he ever innocent, or has he felt poisoned since he left the womb?

Why then, do I pity him?

His desire has not been satisfied in the material world. He must retreat into himself in order to be his true self, finding satisfaction within. He absorbs the world around him, then turns internally.

Does he see himself in these women – fragmented, nameless. These are not women, I should stop referring to them as such. They are female bodies: fragmented body parts that indicate a woman, but they are not women.

Does he want to be inside of them, or does he want to *be* them?

There is a visual pleasure at work here: an active male gaze, a passive female body.<sup>1</sup> They are not inviting, but there is a softness to their presence - a passivity – they are not difficult either. Available, but not open-armed. Not warm, but temperate. They are thoughts rather than full-formed human people. Their different races could either refer to a fetishization of women of colour, or a curiosity about the unknown, or this could suggest that he does not care what the woman's body looks like – he does not have an ideal – he simply longs to be a woman in general; to have women's features, their softness, their presence, regardless of race. Typically, when a male portrays a female body, they have either a specific image in mind that is accentuated– a certain feature or ethnicity – or the entire body is depicted to indicate sexual availability. These different, fragmented depictions simply present themselves as such: female bodies, nothing more, nothing less. Femininity is not singular for him. These female figures could be anyone.

Perhaps Martini doesn't know for sure what he wants, other than his desire in some shape or form, for female bodies. Or does he even desire female bodies? Perhaps this is what he's been told to desire, so he has tried to depict them, but he can't even bring himself to represent a complete woman's body because he struggles to find the sexual attraction to them that he has been told to have. He struggles to artistically portray that which does not excite him, and so he includes them as passing thoughts rather than defined objects of desire, which speaks volumes about him as a self-portrait artist. He is honest.

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<sup>1</sup> Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Feminisms*, 1975, 432-42. doi:10.1007/978-1-349-22098-4\_25.

Is this perhaps why he appears alien to his viewer? Is he alienated by society due to his unaccepted sexuality?

My eyes return to the long, curled eyelashes which frame the left eye – the eye which is being struck directly by the light shining down from the top of the painting. It seems now that another side of him, an alter-ego, is being revealed.

Perhaps the darkness inside of him has been his struggle with the desire for his soul to inhabit a woman's body, not through penetration, but through physical manifestation. Perhaps he wishes to exist and live inside a woman's body, which is why the female figures are portrayed both respectfully and gently, but also fragmented. He has not fully come to terms with this yet, therefore this alter-ego is not yet able to manifest itself in the material world. Like the women's bodies, it has not been fully formed.

Does the lack of functional lips further allude to his lack of ability to express himself in the material world? This soul exists, but it is not supposed to exist, so it exists only in secret, to be realized only under harsh inspection – a harsh white light, or X-ray – of the material body/vessel where one may find subtle clues leading into a deeper being. The mirror for him then acts as a doorway into this truth which resides behind his skin. The mirror is a personal X-ray machine.

He looks lost.

He is familiar.