

A question of likeness

As Archibald season finds its stride, Emma McLean investigates self-portraits in the collection that duck, weave and obscure traditional representation.



Julia Gutman *Everyone you are looking at is also you 2024*, found textile and embroidery, 250 x 350 cm, Art Gallery of New South Wales, purchased with funds provided by the Contemporary Collection Benefactors 2024 © Julia Gutman

As you wander this year’s Archibald Prize you might ask yourself, what really makes a portrait? According to the Archie’s rules, artists are obliged to conduct at least one live sitting with their subject, to employ paint (in some way), and to depict ‘preferentially ... some man or woman distinguished in art, letters, science or politics’. Interpretations have varied on the latter over the years to highly controversial effect.

But what of the self-portrait? There have been many memorable examples throughout the prize’s history, from Wendy Sharpe’s bold *Self-portrait as Diana of Erskineville* 1996, riffing on the mythological, to Brett Whiteley’s *Art, life and the other thing* 1978, disclosing his struggle with heroin addiction.

Search ‘portrait’ in the Art Gallery’s online collection database and you will be met with a flurry of entries spanning centuries. In my research I spotted a miniature portrait of Mary Queen of Scots carved in ivory, a 1948 self-portrait by Margaret Olley peeking into a mirror over a setup for a still life, and a diptych portrait of a husband and wife rendered on silk, from China, dating from the 17th–18th centuries.

We humans are relentlessly in pursuit of our own image. Perhaps this harks back to a time when we would have been lucky to catch our own reflection in a still body of water, or in the pupil of another person’s eye. Portraiture is said to date back to ancient Egypt to the depiction of royalty and nobility on mummy cases, and to the funerary masks of ancient Rome. It was a matter of practicality but perhaps, also, a grappling with permanency.

In around 1500, crystal glass mirrors were invented, allowing people to truly see themselves for the first time. Prior to this, mirrors were made with materials such as obsidian, bronze sheets or polished stone, but they just didn’t do the trick.

The emergence of the glass mirror was adopted with great aplomb by artists and their patrons, perhaps none more so than Rembrandt van Rijn to whom nearly 100 self-portraits are attributed. Of course, this progress accelerated dizzyingly once Joseph Nicéphore Niépce created the first recorded photographic image in 1826.

Today, the cult of the portrait and the self-portrait continues to snowball, but what of the artists who prefer obfuscation? Tracey Emin’s *My bed* 1998 offers a famous example of the non-portrait portrait. Having stayed in bed for many days after a nasty break-up, Emin accumulated vodka bottles, tissues, cigarettes, a pregnancy test and other items around the bedframe. Presented in a gallery context, it is a raw and personal portrayal.

Like Emin, some artists are disinclined towards the physical ‘self’ part of the self-portrait. In Dana

Schutz’s *Breastfeeding* 2015 in the Art Gallery’s collection, the emphasis is less on the subjects depicted (Schutz and her baby), and more on a physical experience. Here, limbs tangle in a flurry of pink and red upon a rocking chair. A hand appears to wrench at hair, a single eye peers upward, engorged purplish toes face the viewer and angular shapes confuse the background.

Each angry hue and dynamic brushstroke speaks of a frenzied experience. Schutz is an artist who enjoys tipping the scales between love and repulsion, beauty and the visceral. In this work, she paints a confessional self-portrait that swings between feelings of nurture and closeness to disorientation and chaos. In other words, the multiplicities of life.

In a newly-acquired self-portrait, 2023 Archibald Prize winner Julia Gutman also draws upon the facets of human experience. Gutman’s *Everyone you are looking at is also you 2024* depicts herself in seven different iterations. In this artwork she refers to a quote by African-American writer and activist James Baldwin who stated, ‘Walk down the street of any city ... and look around you. What you’ve got to remember is what you’re looking at is also you ... You could be that person. You could be that monster, you could be that cop. And you have to decide, in yourself, not to be’.



Dana Schutz *Breastfeeding* 2015, oil on canvas, 213.4 x 203.2 x 4 cm, Art Gallery of New South Wales, purchased 2016 with funds provided by the 2015 USA Foundation Tour and the Mollie and Jim Gowing Bequest Fund © Dana Schutz

Morimura Yasumasa *Mother (Judith II)* 1991, type C photograph with acrylic gel medium, 238.76 x 158.75 cm, Art Gallery of New South Wales, gift of Peter Norton 2021 © Morimura Yasumasa



Baldwin, who suffered racial discrimination and beatings in the United States, called for empathy and humanity. Gutman answers this call through her artwork and draws upon an additional source to do so: John Pettie's 1866 painting *Arrest for Witchcraft*. Gutman mirrors several of the protagonists in Pettie's artwork – an elderly woman with bound hands (the alleged witch), weapon-toting men, the angry mob and the curious onlookers. Gutman depicts herself as both aggressor and victim across the fabric of her embroidered scene, casting doubt upon the constancy of personality.

Japanese artist Morimura Yasumasa also works through personas. He takes an appropriative approach, mimicking popular images from Western art history. Since the mid-1980s, Yasumasa has disguised, transformed and inserted himself into the work of the 'masters' through photography, describing his practice as 'wearable painting'. Yasumasa often obscures his appearance and, in doing so, questions where he belongs within a popularised, white art-historical canon.

Yasumasa's identity is almost always replaced with the appearance of a muse, such as Vincent Van Gogh's *Self-portrait* 1889, and Johannes Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* c1665. In the Art Gallery's work by Yasumasa, *Mother (Judith II)* 1991, he conflates the vegetable paintings of Giuseppe Arcimboldo and Lucas Cranach the Elder's *Judith with the head of Holofernes* c1530 to create a comical yet layered scene.

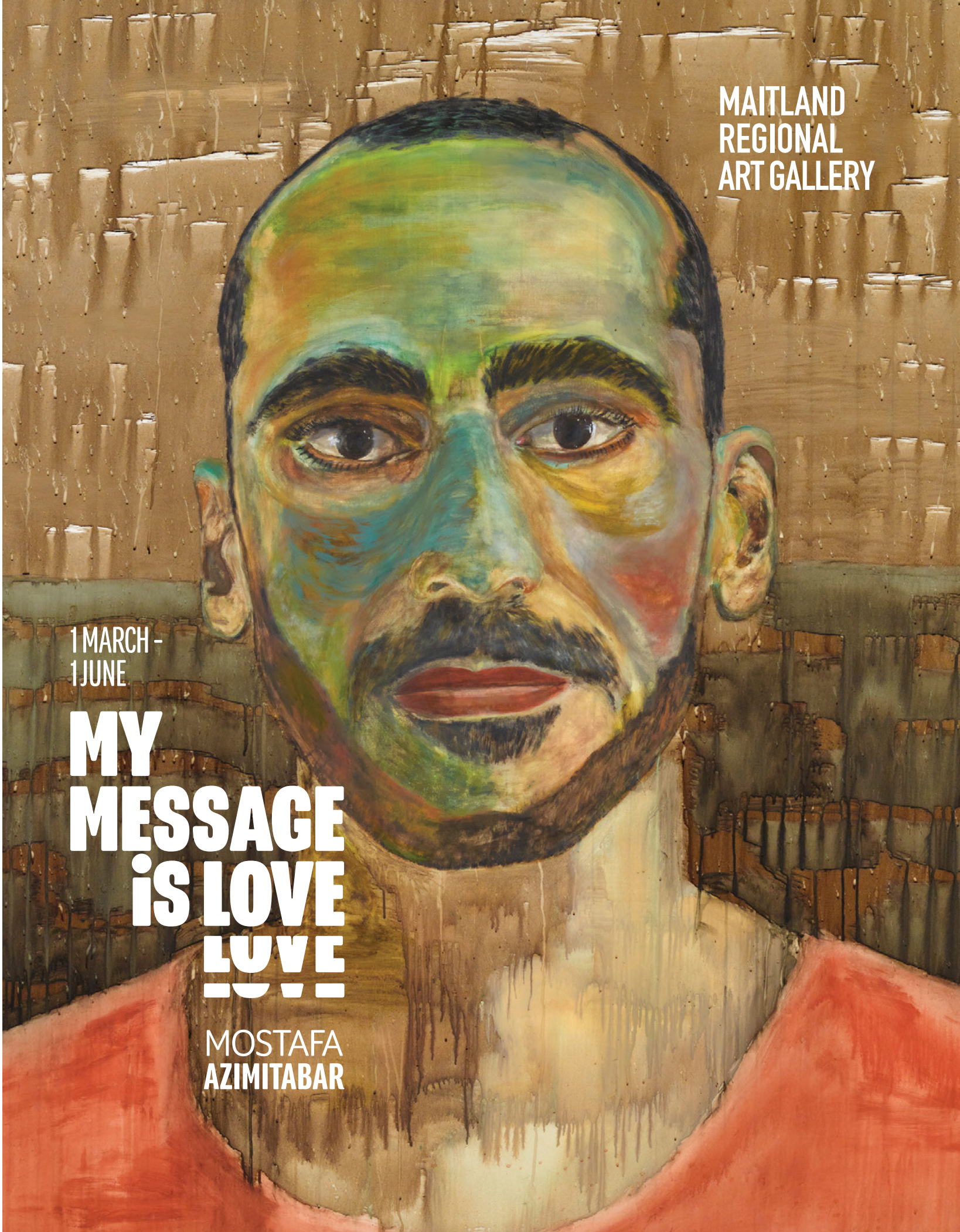
He is the sword-wielding Judith, sporting a necklace of brussels sprouts and cocktail sausages. He is also the beheaded Holofernes, with glassy eyes and the waxen skin of a potato. Yasumasa shields himself behind these characters yet reveals much of his personality in the process. The combination of art-historical references speaks to a broader issue of homogeneity and hybridisation. As the world begins to collapse references, images and cultural trends into consumable products Yasumasa holds up a mirror and asks, where does individuality belong in all this?

When considering portraiture, we often consider likeness – how well an artist has captured their subject's features. However, look closely and you'll see that through an artwork's style, colour, marks and interventions, the artist equally reveals themselves. Sometimes the artist is wearing a mask, playing a part, or employing abstraction to convey emotion. You'll find that these artworks speak the language of likeness too.

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Emma McLean, *Look* deputy editor

The Archibald, Wynne and Sulman Prizes 2025, Naala Nura, our south building, lower level 2, 10 May – 17 August, charges apply



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