

Painting Across Generations

Simone Bingemer's first and only self-portrait creates a web of gazes that crosses generations and tells a deeply personal story.

By Ani Kodjabasheva

Simone Bingemer's *Self Portrait* (opposite), winner of the Richeson Pastel Silver Award, is the first self portrait she ever made. The artist has been practicing as a portraitist in Cologne, Germany, for decades. She won the Grand Prize for a portrait in the Pastel 100 competition in 2015, but she had never acted as her own subject—until now.

Bingemer's motivation to create a self-portrait was mundane—she wanted an image for her website that would represent her better than a photograph could. Thus began a project of self-discovery that brought together family relationships across four generations.

A TRUE LIKENESS

Bingemer expresses a concern about the endless stream of images we're surrounded by today. Fleeting self-representations do not, she fears, point to any greater understanding about ourselves. She believes her task as an artist is to show that deeper truth about a person.

Before she begins a portrait, Bingemer first meets with her subjects face-to-face in their home. She takes many candid photos, attempting to capture the person's presence. "By the end of the session, they're relaxed and not thinking about how they look," she says. "They become easy and comfortable. This is the moment I get my best photos. It's a 'certain view' I'm waiting for."

In the case of her self-portrait, Bingemer followed the same process, with her daughter acting as photographer.

The artist doesn't like to be photographed. "I hate it," she says. But her daughter gave her the space to be herself, capturing moments that fit Bingemer's vision for the painting. In doing so, the next generation became a part of a self-portrait that condenses a chain of familial relationships.

FAMILY TIES

In the painting, Bingemer gazes calmly at us, as if lost in thought or listening intently, engrossed in a conversation. Behind her is an image of an artwork that was originally painted by her grandfather, Georg Meistermann (1911–1990), a renowned German artist of his era. The expressionist image he painted of a woman and child shows Bingemer as a baby with her mother. With its bright, fantastic colors, flat surfaces and sharp geometric lines, it contrasts with the softly and precisely modeled depiction of Bingemer in the present.

The artist positioned her own eyes in line with the baby's eyes, her hands side by side with her mother's hands embracing her. The shape of the mouth and the pale green irises of both images of Bingemer—as a baby and in the present—show an unmistakable kinship.

The painting expands to include the artist's mother, as well as her grandfather. The contrast between the modernist and realist styles of representation shows the span of time separating the generations, while the composition maintains the connection between

Self-Portrait (25x19)





“In the end, a portrait always shows the viewer a secret that keeps renewing itself.”
—Simone Bingemer



CLOCKWISE FROM
UPPER LEFT
Carlotta: Ginger Girl
(26x8)

Anna (18x23)

Madeline (20x15)

them. While working on the painting, Bingemer experienced this directly: “I met myself when I was a baby. I had never thought about that, but in this moment, I thought, ‘Wow, what a long lifetime in between and so many experiences.’”

As with all her paintings, in creating this artwork, Bingemer found out more about the subject—in this case, herself. She was always fond of her grandfather’s painting: “It creates a wonderfully cheerful atmosphere, like a bright spring day,” she writes on her website, but she now discovered new meanings to it. “I didn’t have a very good relationship with my mother. It was always difficult between her and me,” Bingemer says. “This was a chance to see—yes, I was a child nevertheless, and it was okay.” Through the process, she experienced more appreciation for the relationship, and she found acceptance of a multilayered past.



Sabine
(40x21)

A WEB OF GAZES

Bingemer says her choice of clothing in the self-portrait, like the creation of the painting itself, was selected for purely practical reasons. She chose black because it would stand out from the background. “Imagine if I had chosen another color. I would’ve been like a chameleon—you couldn’t find me,” she says.

Stäs und Boo
(43x30)



Still, when speaking about her general practice as a portraitist, the artist insists she is very mindful of details. “Everything has a meaning. Every little thing,” she says. “Whatever [my subjects] show, how they wear their hair, which clothes they wear, which colors—even their earrings—everything tells something about them. It supports their personality. Otherwise, they wouldn’t wear it.” This raises the question of whether there isn’t more to the way she chose to represent herself.

Bingemer didn’t want to use the clichéd pose of the artist at work, smeared with paint, palette in hand because she’s “more matter-of-fact,” as she puts it. And yet, the pleated collar and sleeves extending beyond her dark sweater evoke classic Renaissance portraits in which ruffles frame the face. Bingemer’s figure, seated in the corner below her grandfather’s painting, calls to mind Diego Velázquez standing off to the side in *Las Meninas*. Inconspicuous in his dark clothing, Velázquez looks knowingly at the viewer as the dizzying replication of a painting-within-a-painting he has created unfolds around him.

A similar case of *mise en abyme* happens in Bingemer’s self-portrait as she looks at the viewer, at herself, and at her past. Generations look at each other across the picture plane. “The self-portrait is both serious and whimsical,” as Figure & Portrait juror Carol Peebles observed. It confronts the viewer with a puzzle. Where is the painter of the mother’s portrait located, for example? Is Bingemer, like her mother, looking at him? “In the end, Bingemer notes, “A portrait always shows the viewer a secret that keeps renewing itself.” The artist’s image in her self-portrait seems to be contemplating this secret.

IT’S ALL IN THE EYES

Bingemer has a particular way of constructing her portraits. First, she decides on the subject’s position on the page. She makes a sketch of the



Anastasia
(30x20)



Simone Bingemer

(simonebingemer.de) is the third generation in a family of renowned artists. At the age of 16, she became the youngest pupil ever to enroll at the Art Academy of Cologne, in Germany. After graduating in 1975, she worked as an illustrator across Europe. In 1995 Bingemer refocused her profession entirely on portrait painting. Her ability to create “not just portraits but also pictures” has won her much recognition both in Europe and abroad. Among numerous nominations and prizes, she was awarded first prize in the portrait category of an international pastels competition in 2001. Bingemer lives with her three children in Cologne, where she also has her studio.

composition, then uses a grid to enlarge it to a bigger sketch that’s the same size as the finished painting. When she begins the actual artwork, Bingemer paints the eyes first—“so I’m constantly in contact with the person all of the time I’m working,” she says. “The face takes shape around the eyes. Bingemer models it like a sculpture. To create line, she breaks up pastel sticks into small pieces and uses their sharp points. It’s a process of endless adjustments in order to get the details right—the wrinkles around the mouth, the facial expression. She examines and corrects the work by looking at it in a mirror or by turning it upside-down. “I try to be as exact as possible and to come closer to the person,” Bingemer says.

The background comes after the figure,” says the artist, “and introducing it is the hardest part of the process.” All elements of the painting need to fit together to recreate the subject’s presence, and the background has to reveal something about that person’s inner world. The painstaking process of completing a portrait “starts with the eyes and ends with the eyes” as the artist makes it come to life.

Asked if she keeps her self-portrait on display in her home, Bingemer laughs heartily. “Oh, no,” she says. “It’s stored away in a cupboard.” She still prefers focusing on her work as a portraitist and not on herself. It may remain for future generations to continue unraveling the painting’s secrets. **PJ**

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