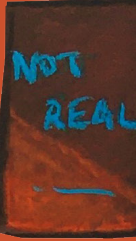


RA



Self-portraiture

Royal
Academy
of Arts

attRAct resources
Produced by RA Learning

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Self-portraiture

Introduction

Portraiture, including **self-portraiture**, stretches far back into the past. Throughout history, artists have made likenesses of rulers, friends, strangers, lovers, and themselves. Portraits were often drawn, painted, sketched or sculpted because until the early 19th century, when photography was invented, there was no other way to depict someone's appearance. From the earliest **Daguerreotypes** through to Polaroids, disposable and digital cameras, and later smartphones, portraiture became easier to disseminate and less expensive to make. More than just a record, artists have used flattery and symbols to convey their sitters' beauty, wealth, or standing. They have used **abstraction** and imagination to depict themselves, their disappointments, or their dreams.

Amongst the Royal Academy's prints and drawings collections are unique sketchbooks, artist books, drawings, technical manuals and prints that span many countries and several centuries. One such print is a small-scale hand drawn etching by the great Spanish painter and printmaker Francisco Goya. The artwork is called: 'El sueño de la razón produce monstruos' which translates into English as 'The dream[or sleep] of reason produces monsters'. We want you to use this as a starting point to create your own imagined self-portrait that doesn't rely on direct observation.



Self-portraiture

Produced in 1799, this popular and well-known print is a rare example of a self-portrait by Goya. He's depicted not as you might have seen him or as he might have seen himself in a mirror, but as his imagined self. In the image he is shown slumped at his drawing desk as if he has fallen asleep whilst working. His drawing materials and etching tools lie in front of him, discarded mid-production. He looks exhausted in his isolated, sleeping state.

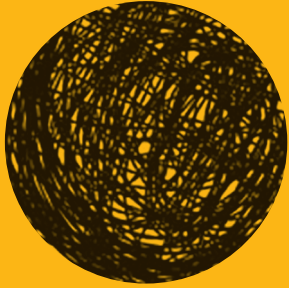
Goya is surrounded by symbolic visions of his dream and nightmare imagery. The creatures of his imagination haunt his sleep and we are introduced to a menagerie of monstrous owls, giant bats and demonic, prowling cats that occupy his slumber. The animals are a **symbolic code** that articulates the artist's fears for his society and the hypocrisy, callousness and anxieties he witnessed in 18th-century Spanish culture.

For Goya the owls represent folly and foolishness, the bats are representations of ignorance, and the cats are emblems of evil and darkness.

We are less familiar with symbols now, but by using them in this way Goya could more easily comment upon political issues and his societal concerns without risking persecution or punishment from the powers of the Spanish Royal Family or Catholic Church. The image introduces a symbolic allegory of tortured creativity in which an artist's anxieties, worries and hopes are presented as dreams.



Activity



Using any medium — like drawing, collage, or sculpture — make a self-portrait that depicts you making art, explores the thought processes behind your work, or that shows you sleeping and dreaming.

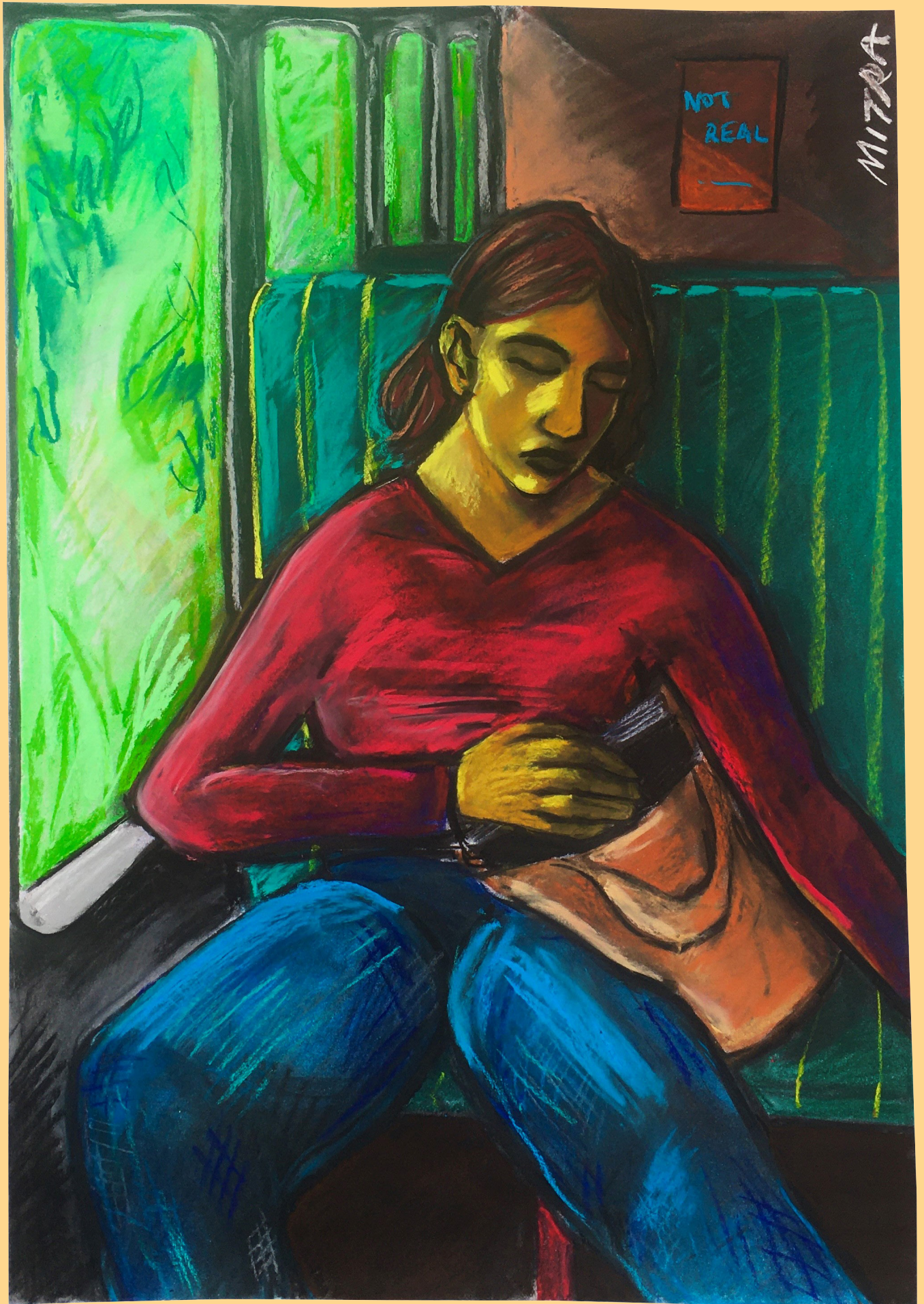


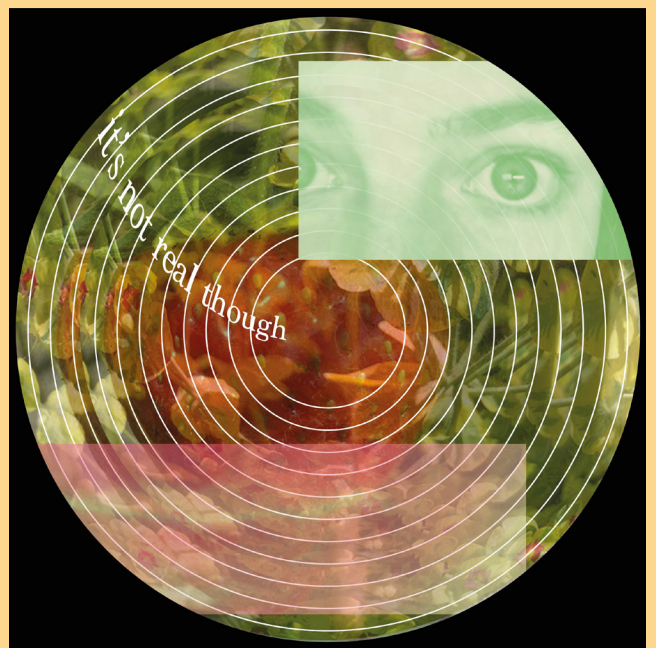
Not sure how or where to start?

Trying to create a self-portrait without looking at yourself in the mirror can be hard. If you're stuck, try answering these questions first:

- What do you think about when you are making art?
- What do you think about when you are alone in your own space?
- What do you think you look like when you are making art in your space?
- How will you represent yourself, literally and symbolically?
- What do your dreams look like? What images populate them? What do you think they mean?
- What fears, hopes, concerns and issues do you have for the world and how can you symbolically draw these? You don't have to use the same symbolic language as Goya!

Accompanying artworks and cover image created by **Aparna Mitra, Eleanor Getting, Finn Jaques** and **Lily Tyler** during an online workshop in 2020 led by **Mark Hampson**, Head of Fine Art Processes for the RA Schools as part of the attRAct programme, a free year-long programme for young people aged 15–19.





Glossary

Abstraction Abstract art is not representational or naturalistic. Rather, it uses geometry, colour, forms, shapes, collage, and a range of other techniques to explore or convey emotions and concepts about the material and conceptual world. Artists like Wassily Kandinsky, Sonia Delaunay, and Hilma Af Klint as well as Royal Academicians like Eileen Agar, Frank Bowling, and Mali Morris are well known for their use of abstraction.

Daguerreotypes was one of the first commercially successful photographic processes. It works by coating a copper plate with a chemical compound called silver iodide, exposing it to the light in a camera. The plate is then fumed with mercury vapour and the image is fixed by a solution of salt. The results are highly accurate and sharp and the resulting work is known as a Daguerreotype. A few photographers discovered this method around the same time, but it is named after only one of them: Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre.

Dreams Visual artists have sought to imagine the unseen land of dreams. Ary de Vois' divine visions, Hieronymous Bosch's elaborate and unsettling fantasies, Henry Fuseli's nightmares, and Dali's dream interpretations, are just a few examples of works that explore sleep and dreaming in different ways.

Polaroids are a type of instant camera that uses self-developing film to create a print shortly after clicking the shutter. It was popularised by the manufacturer Polaroid, but there were other kinds of instant photography too.

Portraiture A portrait is a representation of someone other than the artist. Historically portraits were often of rulers, nobles, and aristocracy but as painting to order became rarer, artists depicted whomever they liked, from complete strangers to family members.

Self-portraiture A self-portrait is a portrait of the artist made by the artist. They can be representational or abstract.

Symbols In art, a symbol is usually an animal, a plant, an object, that can stand for something that is hard to depict through figurative art. Floriography and iconography are two common ways artists have incorporated symbols into their work. In the former, particular flowers have particular meanings for instance a thorny red rose might stand for the crucifixion of Jesus or for intense love. In the latter, particular objects can stand for different aspects of life, for instance a skull usually symbolises the inevitability of death.