

*Comparing My Drawings and Paintings  
with My  
Self-Portrait Photographs*

The context in which I wrote the following essay was the 2015 offer of and subsequent planning for a large exhibition of my self-portrait paintings, drawings, and photographs. The essay was to have been included in the exhibition's catalog. Regrettably, the exhibition never took place.

Three works that were to be exhibited (one from each genre) are reproduced following the essay.

There are many differences one can observe in comparing the self-portrait photographs with my paintings and drawings. One is that out in the world with a camera I am responding to the immediate perception of a usually unpredictable, sometimes stable, sometimes fleeting composition that includes my reflection and/or cast shadow. This spontaneity stands in contrast to the days or weeks of deliberation, preparation, and execution required for my studio works. And, in contrast to the unexpected, often irregular, and usually uncontrollable reflecting surfaces and light conditions I see on the street, at my easel I use a small (7x11 inches), clean mirror mounted on a support of my own design and making that holds the mirror in any location or orientation. I work in a basement studio with equipment that allows me to choose and vary the backgrounds

and lighting with great precision. The self-portrait and hand paintings and drawings all have as their starting point a reflection I see in my mirror of my face or left hand as I have posed it/them. I have never drawn or painted from a photograph; indeed, as I work at my easel, the core of my engagement is trying to figure out how to render what I see in the mirror (often with slight hourly or daily alterations of the pose, or of the expression on my face) while remaining aware of how the thinking and posing shift from one day to another.

Despite the differences I address in the previous paragraph, an important similarity in my approaches to oil, graphite, and photography suggests their continuity. Although the photograph is captured in that one moment in the world, there remains work to be done on the digital file with the necessary software to develop the digital negative, often many hours over days or weeks of gestation and execution, before it is ready to be printed. When I work on the image with the software, I often feel I am engaged with precisely the same variables of craft that I apply to my studio work, thinking about and working on composition, tonal relationships, and edge qualities, to name just three. Seeing, knowing, and contrivance underlie all my thoughts as I make my works. When I paint or draw I respond with certain tools to my eye's reality as I look in my mirror; when I develop my digital negatives I alter with other tools the lens's reality as it is captured by the sensor.

A second difference between the paintings/drawings and the self-portrait photographs is the relationship between figure and ground. Most of my paintings and drawings have featureless backgrounds, but these backgrounds are not at all “plain”.

Deciding on a painting’s background paint tones, getting the proper edge qualities where they meet my head or hand, and figuring out the effective tones for the intermixed paints in the transitions between subject and ground are often as difficult for me as any of the challenges a painting poses. In the drawings, the transitions from head or hand into the “background” (usually the featureless plain paper) require decisions about lines, scumbles, smudgings, and erasures in ways that parallel using brushed paint.

I am intrigued by the difference between, on the one hand, the necessity (or perhaps I should say my proclivity) to think about every last fraction of an inch of a painted or drawn contour for at least a little while and sometimes for much longer; and on the other hand, the impossibility of doing that in the street when I take a picture. The featureless backgrounds of the drawings and paintings stand in contrast to the complex visual fields in which I am embedded in the street photographs. I use the expression “visual field” rather than “background” because the space rendered in the photograph does not always present a clear foreground and background. Sometimes my reflection appears to have been laminated with the surrounding environment into a single two-dimensional layer; sometimes the surface in which I am reflected (or some support of that surface, for example a

shop window's metal frame) is in the foreground and I am the background or even a well-defined middle-ground.

Another area of difference and similarity places painting on one side and drawing and photography on the other: it is the time needed to prepare to work and clean up afterwards. Painting as I do it requires budgeting at least an hour for setting up and cleaning up. The major determinants are the complexity of my palette and the number of brushes I use on a given day -- sometimes I need only a few dabs of paint when I start, sometimes a few dozen, and similarly with brushes, which require careful cleaning each day. Drawing in graphite and working at my computer require no setting up or cleaning up and therefore make it possible to work when only a limited amount of time is available.

Jeffrey Saldinger  
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