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The Many Faces of Julia Couzens

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by [David M. Roth](#)

Let the dog out. Feed the chickens. Eat breakfast. Look in the mirror. Create a self-portrait. That is how Julia Couzens begins each day in a ritual she's performed for decades. "The impetus," she told me, "is to make contact with my core, to get a drawing that's its own living truth."

Such efforts, spanning the years 1996 to 2022, form an revelatory exhibition titled *one hundred fifty-two self-portraits (give or take)*, which contains just 99 images, divided between charcoal drawings and multi-media collages, some identified by date, some not. Together, they show an artist grappling with demons: her own and those imposed on us by the pandemic and Donald Trump.

Where Couzens has for years produced paintings, drawings, sculptures, collages and installations that obliquely allude to internal struggles, this exhibition shows her engaged in rigorous self-examination on a grand scale, openly and with a rawness previously unseen. Stripped of the abundant

virtuosity that in the past cloaked self-doubt, the charcoal drawings show the artist mercilessly dissecting her reflected image. In these, she allows psychomotor impulses to override the urge to self-edit for an imagined audience. The results, which read as an unexpurgated visual diary, are quite often unsettling.

Frenzied gestures

reminiscent of those seen in German Expressionism, form images that sometimes read as half-animal, half-human. Several, with blackened eye sockets, resemble zombies. In others, Couzens depicts herself plainly and more benignly: alert, distracted, bored, pained, nonplussed, groggy, angry, fierce, dreamy, dour, inquiring, pensive and so on.



Self-portrait, 8:45 am, Feb 12th , 2022, charcoal, pencil, collage, 12 x 9"



L to R: self-portrait, 2022, collage with hair; Saturday Feb 20th 2022, 6: 28 am, 12 x 9 inches each

The collages, composed of photos, yarn, thread, magazine pages, text snippets, cardboard, fabric swatches, watercolor stains and charcoal-drawn elements, exhibit a different character. They're lighter, playful and, at times, almost festive. Part of that levity comes from a reoccurring visual prop: oversized glasses like of those sported by Martin Scorsese and Lina Wertmuller. Some years back, Couzens adopted a similar kind of eyewear, and the repetition of it (in the form of cardboard cutouts) laid across many differently conceived collages lends them a caricature-like quality. In these, the artist doesn't savage her likeness so much as alter it with whatever materials she finds at hand.

No two are remotely alike. Some of the best involve selfies. One, for example, appears to show a glyph projected onto the artist's forehead; another, employing a photo shot from the side and bedecked with shoulder-length black hair, I took for Michael Jackson. Ever alert to what she can wring from found materials, Couzens, in another notable piece, places a face-

shaped snippet of a magazine page onto a water-warped sheet of paper. Its gentle ripples cast strong shadows, affecting the look of an upturned death mask being swept across a sand dune.



Other collages align more closely with the angst expressed in the charcoal pieces. One shows the artist's face as a balloon drawn in black yarn bearing a gardenia fashioned from a potholder; it's appended to a paint-stained dishrag with the words "Help Me" spelled out across the bottom in yarn,

while another shows Couzens' face as an African mask with a scrawled inscription: "Making it look easy takes a lifetime of letting go. 'Masterful' fucks me up."

Reading that, I was reminded of the myriad ways Couzens tries to temper her innate skills. The first inklings of these abilities — the ones she tries not to repeat — arrived in the 1980s in the form of exquisite charcoal drawings that depicted the human body as glowing hunks of limbless, genderless flesh with orifices in anatomically impossible places. Then came investigations of subcutaneous systems (cells, organs, blood, membrane, tissue) rendered as agglomerations of gluey orbs. These she followed with room-sized installations where her penchant for representing nature as a gothic drama burst into full bloom — in vast, intricate networks of yarn and twisty ties that mirrored the dense underbrush of Merritt Island, her home in the Sacramento River delta. Bundles of lashed-together fabric and detritus – heaped onto pallets, wall-hung and suspended from ceilings — came next along with [collages of a very different sort](#) than those seen here.

Connecting threads? If there are any, it's the artist's faith in her subconscious and the nervous energy running through her fingertips. As she once explained: "There's no way to make art; there's only the process." While the contents of this exhibition do not, in her estimation, equate to the kind of art she would typically present to the public, they do afford viewers an extended glimpse into the art-making process: one that, for Couzens, begins by looking in the mirror.

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Julia Couzens: "one hundred fifty-two self-portraits (give or take)" @ [b. sakata garo](#) through October 29, 2022.

About the author: David M. Roth is the editor and publisher of Squarecylinder.

