

BEST SELF

Curated by Polly Morgan

23 May - 28 June 2025

Public opening Thursday 22 May, 6-8 pm

Featuring Juno Calypso, Mat Collishaw, Polly Morgan, Christopher Page, Boo Saville, Julia Thompson & Bengt Tibet.

‘Choose your self-presentations carefully, for what starts out as a mask may become your face.’

Erving Goffman in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.

How many selves do we have and would friendship blossom if they met? Perhaps Best Self would admire the bravery of Make-up-free Self and praise her ‘courage’? Lurking Self might compliment Public Self for ‘putting it out there’ as Masochist Self basks in the heat of Hot Self’s disdain.

Fiction thinks estrangement is a more likely outcome. Young Self Dorian Gray stabs the portrait of Aged Self and takes his own life in the process. Best Self Sue in *The Substance* is repulsed by Worst Self Elisabeth’s binge-eating and keeps her locked in a cupboard.

The more abundantly we possess wealth, youth and beauty the more we seek to elude death. The pursuit of eternal life, or Transhumanism, is funded by billionaires with too much to relinquish to consider an end. The wellness and beauty industry are the new granters of indulgences. Using terms like ‘longevity protocol’ and ‘anti-aging’ they promise an escape from the hell of senescence if we only grease their baby-soft palms.

Julia Thompson’s glowing coloured bottles have all the allure of these products sold to us as elixirs of youth, yet in reality they are tainted distillations of femininity. Formed from make-up, soap, sugar, perfume and vodka, the scent of candy and florals is overpowered by ethanol. Having emerged from their moulds like perfect little dolls, their shifts in translucence and colour reveal the incompatibility of the materials within and in time outside influences take their toll and they grow wonky, leaky and stooped.

Society expects women to resist and repair changes to their appearance as they age, with scant regard to the personal cost. Boo Saville’s painting *Emerge (Quarantine)* captures a female face, presumably just freed from the pandemic duty to wear a surgical mask, concealed this time behind a cleansing peel. Is this ‘self care’ or pressure to rejuvenate her skin for the eyes of others? Queen Elizabeth I suffered dermatological damage from the lead present in her pale foundation. Presumably this will have compelled her to apply further layers, thus worsening the scarring she sought to disguise.

We can’t know what Queen Elizabeth I would have felt on seeing Mat Collishaw’s *Mask of Youth*, a Robotic silicone mask modelled with special effects to approximate her true, pock marked and pomp-free appearance, but seeing how she chose to be memorialised in the *Armada Portrait* we can assume this is a self she wouldn’t have wanted to outlive her.

Bengt Tibbert’s magisterial women, clad in neon lycra, are created using AI and thus free of the limitations of mortality. Dazzling in dramatic natural settings, they might be the heroic survivors of natural disasters or pastiches of gymwear-clad women indulging in a ‘Selfiesta’ of posterior displays and conspicuous styling, like *Birds of Paradise* dancing whilst the world burns.

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Five cement tablets cast from the inside of the latest iPhone box group and overlap like a pocket sized cemetery, in *Here Lies Our World* by Polly Morgan. Buried at the back in a sunny orange, a coloured cast snake is nestled in the camera lens cavity. Successive iterations of the same snake adjust their tone a shade in fresh attempts to thrive, as might a maladaptive breed or a selfie that fails to muster sufficient likes. Accumulating like notifications they nudge closer to the viewer as though soliciting selection, before they are bested by a better self.

With the invention of the front facing camera, smartphones added the mirror to their arsenal of applications. As if from a fairytale, this looking glass offers us what we want to see, rather than what is there. Christopher Page's *That Which Is Missing* is a painting on canvas of an analogue mirror. The curve of a frame and the way light appears to reflect on bevelled glass fool us into believing that one thing is another. Like a smartphone, it's a compelling illusion; when we draw close to peer into it, we disappear.

Juno Calypso's *Silent Retreat* depicts a young woman in a pool fragmented by five mirrors. Despite the multiple perspectives offered, nothing of her is revealed. The mask she wears for some uncertain beauty treatment has a shiny white surface and black holes for eyes, giving her the blank appearance of a hollow china doll; an allegory perhaps for photo-sharing platforms, where the most prolific give the least away.

Social media's increasingly sophisticated editing tools have democratised the opportunity to control our image, even as we slacken in the attic. From Queen to Kween we may now fashion our immortal face, as what will remain when our mirrors hang vacant.