

## Even in the digital age, self-portraits in paint enthrall us, says Cristín Leach Hughes at the national collection

Profile pictures, avatars, those images we use to represent ourselves when interacting online — for the first time in the history of the human race, anyone who wants to participate fully in the modern world must choose an image to represent themselves. This slow-creeping shift in how we live is so mundane that we have embraced it largely without comment, yet we are living in unprecedented times. What was once the preserve of artists has become part of everyday life: the requirement to produce a self-portrait.

In the past, capturing an image of yourself required some specialist talent or skill, you had to be able to draw, paint or sculpt. Then photography came along. Now we have a range of digital technologies that anyone can master to produce a satisfactory self-image. Even if we use a photograph taken by someone else, the action of selecting, modifying, cropping and uploading it shifts images such as these into the realm of self-portrait. It is in this context that the National Self-Portrait Collection of Ireland, housed at the University of Limerick, has unveiled 20 new additions to a collection that now numbers 465 works by 438 artists.

And it is in this context that the two most striking images in the exhibition are at opposite ends of the technological scale. A searingly honest oil painting by the German-born, Dublin-based artist Vera Klute steals the show, but it is closely followed by Les Levine's *Starry Night* over 16 Duffern Ave, Dublin, a three-part chromagenic print on metallic paper. These two are also at opposite ends of the scale in terms of age and career stage; Klute is an emerging artist, Levine a veteran. Klute was born in 1981. She was chosen by the Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA) to take part in its annual Futures exhibition in 2011. She makes film works and kinetic



Steady gaze: Vera Klute and self-portrait; below, Michael O'Dea

## Up close and personal

sculptures, but she also answers those tiresome questions about whether contemporary multimedia artists can actually draw and paint by demonstrating her skill right here.

With no makeup, cracked lip and ruddy cheeks, she includes a blurred light-switch in the background to remind us of the ordinariness of it all. Her self-portrait shows off not how well she can look, but how well she can paint. It's an exquisite piece of art. There is an unavoidable truth in her uncompromised stare, an honesty that keeps you coming back to look again. Unlike the "kinetic paintings" she showed at the RHA, in which the eyes of her subjects blink via a hidden mechanical element, the eyes of this painting are still, yet they follow you around the room.

Levine's photographic triptych is also flawlessly made and driven by a fiercely intelligent engagement with the art-historical context not just of his own works but in which all contemporary art must sit. A cascading constellation of Stars of David and Christian crosses fills the space between two snapshots of himself, one silver, one gold. He is wearing a hat on which five candles are perched, the blur of his moving hand presumably due to the fact that he has just lit

them. Levine was one of the first artists to work with video and television. He was born in Dublin in 1935, but moved to New York in the 1960s where he became a leading figure in the conceptual-art movement. A contemporary of Andy Warhol, in the 1970s he coined the terms media art, disposable art, software art and camera art. He is one of the few internationally significant Irish-born figures in the story of modern art.

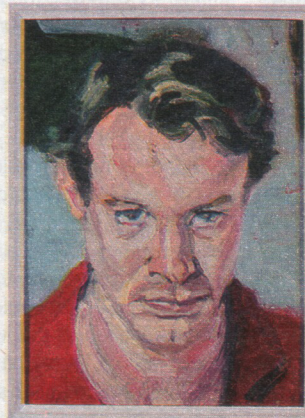
Both works are dated 2012 and they stand out not least because not all of the self-portraits in the wider collection are up to the same standard. Throughout the NSPCI, an extraordinary array of famous names and historical figures hangs cheek by jowl with artists whose stars never really rose

and those who have almost entirely disappeared from public awareness, some deservedly so.

One floor up from the New Additions show, in the Foundation Building, 250 more works are hanging. There's a blue-faced Louis le Brocquy from 1982 and a black-haired Robert Ballagh from 1984. There's a furtive-looking Patrick Hennessy with no date; Jane O'Malley looking like a Celtic sorceress from 1988; a rough-looking Tony O'Malley from 1979; and a determined-looking Michael O'Dea from 1983. The names go on and on in delightfully random order: George Potter, Andrew Folan, Paul Nietzsche, Michael Kane, Dairine Vanston, Patrick Leonard, Brian Ballard, Peter Collis, John Shinnors, Maeve McCarthy, Dorothy

Cross, Liam Belton, Una Sealy, Michael Farrell, Charles Harper. There's a long-haired Basil Blackshaw from 1982; a great, grey, abstract self-portrait by Mary FitzGerald from 1987; and a youthful Martin Gale, leaning against a tree, painted in 1983.

There are sculptures by Rowan Gillespie and James McKenna, a bird-like ceramic form by Deirdre McLoughlin from 1991, Eilis O'Connell's bronze life mask from 1985-6 and a wonderful Self Portrait in Bronze by Imogen Stuart from 1983. There is also quite a lot of much more amateur-looking stuff. But despite its uneven nature, the collection does offer a certain potted history of Irish art since the mid-1900s, including the influence of artists who moved here from other countries on 20th-century Irish modernism. The White Stag artist Basil Rakoczi is here. So, too, is the sculptor Alexandra Wejchert, who is represented by a dynamic black and yellow print from 1985. The collection is on free, permanent display. There are another 40 works in Plassey House, including the original nucleus of the collection: 15 Irish self-portraits purchased by the university from the collection of John Kneafsey in 1977. There are more than 100 self-portraits in the Main Building,



It's a treasure trove of images. A good self-portrait always gives something unexpected away

among them the painter Donald Teskey's remarkable, haunting image of himself. Plans are afoot to rearrange the display so that the entire collection can be displayed in one place. New works are added through a combination of invitations to artists, gifts by donors and friends of the collection, and the occasional purchase of works by deceased artists. Among this year's additions are a wonderfully free dash of a painting by the late Phil Kelly; Thomas Brezing's darkly humorous Self Portrait on Wheels; and Michael Canning's charred-looking sculpture, Self Portrait: Three Skulls.

Artists traditionally featured the tools of their trade in their self-portraits. The late Hilda Van Stockum's 1984 painting of her white-haired self in an oval mirror includes brushes and an exhibition catalogue. Yet Oliver Comerford's silhouette on a sunset horizon in the wood does as much to situate his self-image within the canon of his own work as a painter. The cartoonist Martyn Turner has drawn himself with politicians' heads mounted like trophies on the wall behind him: five former taoisigh. A cartoonishly large pencil and brush are tucked under his arm and the title, *Well, I Recognise Most of Them*, is designed, appropriately, to make you laugh. The other new additions are by Stephen Brandes, Keith Wilson, Paul Mosse, Simon English, Caoimhghin Ó Fraithile, Walter Verling, Dieter Blodau, Ruth McHugh, Andrew Vickery, Paki Smith, Ann Quinn and Andrew Manson. They vary in technique, quality and, in all likelihood, relevant longevity as much as the rest of this vast collection.

Still, it is nonetheless valuable for its undeniable mix of the good, the bad and the uninspiring. It's a treasure trove of remarkable images. A good self-portrait always gives something unexpected away. The best reveal a personal truth about the sitter, something no one else could capture. As Frida Kahlo once said, "I paint self portraits ... because I am the person I know best." ■

*Additions 2012: New Works is in the National Self-Portrait Collection of Ireland, University of Limerick, Bourn Vincent Gallery until Nov 8*