

Now You See Me: Self-representation in the work of Charlotte Hodes

Hannah Westley



Walking amongst Vessels, Charlotte Hodes, 2016, papercut, 44cm x 60cm

Enmeshed in lace, effigies in filigree, totems of textile design, the female figures that inhabit Charlotte Hodes' world float in spaces of simultaneity and equilibrium. Contoured in white, black or pink; emerging from or blending into backgrounds of intricate pattern and vibrant colour; reclining, stretching or walking away, the female nude asserts her presence across painting, print, papercut, collage, glass and ceramic. A hybrid practice that combines traditional tools such as pencil or scalpel drawing with laser cutouts and digital transfers, the artist creates her images from a personal archive of visual elements.

Hodes' art states its contemporaneity through a constant engagement and negotiation with the past. Sometimes the historical references are oblique (patterns inspired by Sevres porcelain); other times overt (copies of Old Master paintings juxtaposed with floating nudes). The female figures that haunt her work are studies from postcards, magazine clippings, photographs, paintings, wrapping paper and textiles. But in amongst these bodies wrenched from history is the body of the Hodes herself.



Sèvres Silhouette VI, Charlotte Hodes, 2005-06, papercut, 126 x 61cm
Photo: Peter Abrahams



Drawing Skirts: Promenade, Charlotte Hodes, 2007, papercut, 109 x 112cm
Photo: Peter Abrahams

Discreet, easily mistakable, rarely acknowledged, the artist's self-representation is a recurring motif that has no less or greater significance in the work than the sketch of a painting of Elizabeth I, the figure of Eve or the copy of a photograph of a fashion model. Yet Hodes' self-portrait inserts the body of the artist into her work where it becomes a locus of identity. Depicting her own body, the artist is negotiating the divide between subject and object roles: her identity is the representation that connects internal (the artist's subjectivity) with the external (the gaze of the spectator).

As Lynda Nead observed, 'More than any other subject, the female nude connotes "Art"'¹ and Hodes' nudes knowingly nod at this hierarchical history before playfully turning away. Allegory or symbol signifying sexuality, purity or artistic vocation, the female nude over the last fifty years has been an arena for ideological battles, a theatre where theory takes the stage. Hodes' nudes are clearly a part of this cultural history; they link the artist's body of work back to the tradition of fine arts. But this particular female body is also disruptive of tradition: a rebellious presence whose form and processes of production call into question not only generic hierarchies but also notions of artistic and gendered identity.

If self-portraiture is traditionally a genre where the artist explores different aspects of their identity, the public manifestation of a private persona, Hodes' nudes question the premise and the possibility of that identity. Hovering outlines, cutouts, emptied forms or interlaced with surrounding motifs, Hodes' female figures are ever-present but rarely fully materialized.



Vase in Pinks, Charlotte Hodes, 2006, slip & handcut transfer on earthenware, 41 x 35cm
Photo: Peter Abrahams

Reduced to a series of contours and planes, these figures assume their identity only in the context into which they are placed. Emptied of the artist's subjectivity, they become malleable and polysemic, their meaning created through the company they keep. In work from her ongoing series of papercuts, *Walking Amongst Vessels*, the female figures are alternately veiled in patterns or partly assimilated into the background in shades of dark and light. When she uses herself as model, Hodes first draws the pose, then enacts it and then captures it in a photograph. She describes this process as understanding the pose inside out.



Surfing History; stripes, pale green, Charlotte Hodes, 1999, oil on canvas, 183 x 153cm, Private Collection

In such a way, modeling becomes the first step of the artistic process: a lived experience that is then translated into line and drawing. Hodes owns the body and its identity through the unique and inimitable gesture of placing pencil to paper. But for Hodes this self-portrait is only a component in her visual inventory. This Derain-esque drawing is then subject to further stages of development through copying or redrawing or tracing or scanning into Photoshop or Illustrator. As the drawing moves through this process, it is refined, abstracted or simplified. Ultimately Hodes reduces the self-portrait to a stencil or a cipher: an image detached from its unique origin through processes of reproduction that can subsequently be applied to a multitude of scenes. Kenneth Clark stated, 'The nude remains the most complete example of the transformation of matter into form'² but Hodes' self-portrait enters her

collage compendium: a sign amongst others, she transforms form back into matter. Detaching the self-portrait from its origin, Hodes undermines the traditional purpose of self-portraiture: the unique reflection of a singular artistic subjectivity. To recall Walter Benjamin, the portrait becomes detached from its aura.

While it is not necessary to know about the complex processes that create the sumptuous and intricate surfaces of Hodes' decorative art, the production process nonetheless reveals, in modernist fashion, that the meaning of a work of art is bound up in the history of its making.



Constellations, Charlotte Hodes, 1992, oil on canvas, 152 x 176cm, New Hall Art Collection

In becoming detached from its origin, the artist's body loses its status as indexical sign. Through a series of production techniques, Hodes calls into question the essentialist nature of the creative act and the creative identity. Working from archives, her own and others (the Wallace Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum, the paper pattern template library archive at London College of Fashion), Hodes reveals that creation is the re-presentation of the already seen. The artist-as-archivist appropriates different moments from history and builds a visual repertoire that is both reminiscent of a palimpsest (layers that obscure and reveal changes over time) and postmodern fragmentation (the way in which no one historical period is given

priority but all co-exist on the same plane). Hal Foster has identified this ‘archival impulse’ amongst contemporary artists as being symptomatic of a desire to challenge public archives, a way of establishing a counter-memory.³ Hodes’ archive gives rise to a body of work where new pieces might echo earlier pieces or recall an image from years before. Therefore the artist establishes an identity for her work that is bound up in its own remembering as well as its interventions into cultural memory.

This archival sampling further problematises the concept of an original creative identity. In the painting series: *Surfing History*, copies of historical portraits of women are juxtaposed with a contemporary female nude, who leans on or drifts over them like a phantom from the future. Recalling the hovering transparent figures from paintings by Nancy Spero and David Salle, Hodes superimposes her nude/herself on history. In *Walking Amongst Vessels*, the nude co-exists with drapery, fashion plates, and pots. Hodes refers to her transparent nudes as membranes; they offer a selective barrier: a filter for vision. Negotiating the relationships between subjects and their depictions, Hodes’ images are adrift in and on history. Being able to see through her figures, either because of their transparency or because they have blended with their background, gives the viewer a space to pass through, an alternative perspective. All self-representation takes place within existing conventions and discourses. But there are ways in which self-representation may draw attention to the limits of discourse, to a lack of fit between the self and its representation: in other words, how the self-representation might make visible its own historical construction and thus disrupt or make transparent the artificiality of such constructs, as for example, in Helen Chadwick’s ([Vanitas II](#)).

If the contours of the female nude have conventionally served to contain excess, sexuality and its correlating danger, then the contours of Hodes’ nudes reveal the permeability of the body’s boundaries: its penetrability and porosity. Transparent, hovering or camouflaged, the female form in Hodes’ work is both defined by and constitutive of its surrounding environment. Paula Rego observed about Hodes’ painting, “Pattern is like an incantation. You fill in whole areas compulsively like a magic doodle. It is the opposite of modeling a form. When you model a form you have to use light and it becomes sculptural, and it implies that inside that form there are guts and intestines, ovaries and what-not if it is a woman; if you use a pattern it is one way of filling in the outline. But in Charlotte’s pictures the pattern does not stay within the outline. It overlaps and takes on an existence of its own. So you get a lack of adjustment of the object – a lack of focus – everything is pulling away from everything else.”⁴

Unlike the feminist art of certain of her forebears, Hodes’ work does not construct a female figure that is based on the essential universal category of ‘woman’. In the recurrence of her female figure in different situations, she acknowledges the possibility of multiple subject positions. The recurring presence of the artist in her work does not amount to an autobiographical narrative, nor does it offer a singular model of subjectivity and its representation. Rather Hodes’ repetitive use of her own image offers instances of the self, local uses which arise from a specific situation. As she emerges or disappears from the field of vision, Hodes’ nude negotiates the margins between visible and invisible, knowable and unknowable.



Filigree in floral pinks, Charlotte Hodes, 2009, slip & handcut transfer on earthenware, 88 x 40cm Photo: Matthew Hollow

If, as Judith Butler argued, the 'self' is an effect of a performance constituted in and through language, discourse and culture, Hodes's depicted self is performed reiteratively as a process over a period of time and thus reveals the fiction of a fixed, inner, essential selfhood.⁵

But if identity is a socially gendered construct then so is genre. The age-old aesthetic hierarchy that privileges certain forms of art over others has historically devalued 'women's work' because it was associated with the domestic and the 'feminine.'⁶ The detail of Hodes'



Filigree; lace, Charlotte Hodes, 2009, papercut, 112 x193cm, Private Collection,
Photo: Matthew Hollow

labour intensive collage and papercut is often reminiscent of embroidery or needlework, while the drapery, fashion plates and ornaments she includes in her images reference the domestic space as much as their role in the decorative arts. The heavily worked surfaces of her collage cutouts make visible women's traditionally invisible labour and are a tactile challenge to the hierarchical distinction between the fine arts and the decorative arts that depends on the dominance of vision. In an ocular-centric Cartesian logic, the fine arts exist to be contemplated; the decorative arts adorn functional objects. By exploring the female body and the way its curves and contours might adorn, enhance and echo the shapes of ceramic vessels, Hodes undermines the dominance of the sense of vision and recalls the sensuality of the female body through an invitation to touch. The curves of her highly glazed pots invite caressing hands. Exaggerated breasts and hips visibly recall the shapes of Greek vases; the female figure touching her breast invites the spectator to do likewise. Tactility undermines critical distance; through tactile perception art appreciation becomes an embodied experience and recalls the viewer to his or her own sense of self.

Hodes' work is about boundaries: the contours of the female nude, generic hierarchies between craft and art, the decorative and the fine arts, the domestic and professional, the body as a singular identity and the multiplicity of selves afforded by technological reproduction. If Hodes' women begin life as the singular and unique reflection of the artist's indivisible self, her methods of production reveal the female identity to be multiple, similar, pluralistic: devoid of a single subjectivity, they perform identity as a process of becoming. From collage to ceramic, cutout to print, Hodes' nudes reveal how an engagement with the historical narratives of representation, genre and identity can create spaces where new associative interpretations and connections can be made.



Portrait, Charlotte Hodes, 2016, hand cut transfer on china, unique, 16.5cm/22cm & 28 x 35cm
Photo: Peter Abrahams



Dressed Silhouette #6, Charlotte Hodes, 2016, acrylic, oil & ceramic plate on wood, 61 x 97cm
Photo: Peter Abrahams

Biography

Hannah Westley is a lecturer at the American University of Paris. She completed her PhD at Cambridge University, followed by an Entente Cordiale Scholarship for post-doctoral research. Her research interests include self-representation, word/image relations and new media. Previous publications include *The Body as Medium and Metaphor* (Rodopi), a volume that explores the intertextuality of self-representation in portraiture and autobiography, and a monograph of the British abstract painter Sheila Girling (Lund Humphries).

1. Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, Oxon: Routledge, 1992, p.1 [↵](#)
2. Clark, Kenneth, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*, Princeton: Princeton University Press. Clark, 1957, p. 23 [↵](#)
3. Hal Foster asks, “Might archival art emerge out of a similar sense of a failure in cultural memory, of a default in productive traditions? For why else connect so feverishly if things did not appear so frightfully disconnected in the first place?” (Foster, *October*, Fall 2004, Issue 110, p. 22). [↵](#)
4. Paula Rego in conversation with Francesca Rossi, <http://charlottehodes.com/text/paintings-1991-1992-eagle-gallery/> [Accessed 25 April 2016] [↵](#)
5. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”*, Oxon, Routledge, 1993 [↵](#)
6. As Lucy Lippard explained in her 1973 essay, ‘Household Images in Art,’ previously women artists had avoided “‘Female techniques’ like sewing, weaving, knitting, ceramics, even the use of pastel colors (pink!) and delicate lines—all natural elements of art making,” for fear of being labeled “feminine artists.” The Women’s Movement changed that, she argued, and gave women the confidence to begin “shedding their shackles, proudly untying the apron strings—and, in some cases, keeping the apron on, flaunting it, turning it into art.” [↵](#)