

Dorp

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Self-Portraits (2009 - 2024)

Joshua Abelow

Act I: 7th - 18th July

Act II: 19th - 30th July

Joshua Abelow has been preoccupied with the artist as the subject for as long as I've known him, which at this point amounts to more than two decades. When I was an undergraduate art student, he introduced me to Paul McCarthy's *PAINTER* (1995). This served as a pivotal point for me as an artist, a student, and a friend of Josh. As a young artist, I had undoubtedly fallen under the spell of magical paintings made by such luminaries as Hilma af Klint, Forrest Bess, Pierre Bonnard, Giorgio Morandi, Alice Neel, Francis Picabia, and Édouard Vuillard. However, I also grew up as a skinny, snarky skeptic, who religiously watched skate videos and everything from *Jeopardy!* to *Jackass*. Therefore, it was helpful for me to have McCarthy's hour-long piece take some of the air out of the pompous and prickly painters that dominated the post-war era that was surely so pervasive during Josh's formative years and who collectively remain a prevailing force, both in the market and in museums today. In a way, it also gave me permission to give in to some of my own anti-authoritarian impulses in my still-burgeoning art practice. And in a way, it additionally helped shed some light on perhaps where my dear friend and pseudo-mentor had been coming from and perhaps where he might have been and might still be going.

Back when Josh was a graduate student at the Cranbrook Academy of Art, I distinctly remember him making self-portraits with his absolutely adorable late dog, Georgia, propped up on his head. They were simultaneously so sincere, while also being profoundly preposterous. Sincerity is not commonplace in Josh's artwork, but it's abundant in his practice as a whole. For nearly three decades, Josh has maintained a rigorous and ritualistic daily studio routine, in which he rotates between the menial and mundane, such as stretching and applying gesso to canvases, and the exhilarating or extensive, such as working through quick and raw graphite drawings and developing new series after new series of paintings while also returning to and incorporating previous recurring motifs. The drawings are often absurdist fever dreams, featuring the artist himself in various forms, as myriad characters with other characters, and often in screwball situations or scenarios. The paintings range from extremely regimented neo-neo-geo color explorations to more sardonic texts like "HARDER FASTER," "HANG ME," and "I MISS YOU BITCH." In one series, he simply painted his phone number over and over again.

But the one theme Josh always seems to return to in his work, the one constant, is self-portraiture, and more specifically, the semi-performative idea of the inflation and conflation of the artist as the subject. And although it might seem a bit strange to be sincere about this fascination, he genuinely is sincere about it. And despite this concept being present throughout his drawing practice, it is prevalent throughout the paintings, as well. While in graduate school, Josh grew out a huge beard that made him look like something of a sitcom shut-in, and it eventually made its way into funky abstract self-portraits, resembling piles of curly fries. Upon receiving his MFA, Josh left the United States for Berlin and began reading copious amounts of Henry Miller, which was fitting, as Miller is well-known and well-regarded for his semi-autobiographical, stream-of-conscious, surrealist stories. A series of self-portraits composed of black drippy circles for eyes, a triangle for a nose, and a bent cylinder for a mouth painted over assorted colourful abstractions were titled the Black Spring paintings after Miller's collection of ten short stories, published in 1936, between his momentous novels, *Tropic of Cancer* and *Tropic of Capricorn*.

In the decade-plus since then, Josh's practice and his career have taken many turns. He made a series of witch paintings, he made a series of worm paintings, he made a series of E.T. paintings. He made a series of Beavis and Butt-Head drawings, he made a series of Pepe, Doomer, and "brainlet" drawings. At a certain point, one has to wonder: How much does Josh relate to witches, worms, aliens, degenerates, and memes? Is everything self-portraiture? If the artist is the subject, isn't the subject also the artist?

For this exhibition, Josh is presenting a selection of self-portraits spanning 15 years with Dorp in two "acts", staged like a visual play – perhaps a play on art, or the art exhibition, itself? The concept of "15 minutes of fame" is universally attributed to Andy Warhol, the only famous visual artist from my hometown of Pittsburgh, but the general concept of short-lived fame, often as a result of phenomenological wonder, allegedly dates back all the way to the Elizabethan era. Josh has long been toying with the idea of fame and success in his work, often mocking it, even titling a 2012 exhibition in Brussels *FAMOUS ARTIST* and scrawling the phrase on several paintings over the years.

Unlike Warhol, Josh has no real concern with the frivolous nature of fame; rather, his attraction to it comes more from a more playful, self-deprecating place, more aligned with that of the sensibilities of John Waters, who famously (or infamously) hails from Baltimore, a mere hour from Frederick, Maryland, where Josh was born and raised. Like the campy, sleazy, beloved director, Josh balances his sharp and savvy intellect with a dry wit and a crooked smirk. They both realise that art is an essential reflection of self and society, but if the individual or the collective can't take a joke, then the question ought to be asked: Is life really worth living? And I suppose the problem with fame is...it's like money – once you have too much of it, you lose your sense of self (and your sense of humour).

Keith J. Varadi, June 2025

62 Great Pulteney Street, Bath BA2 4DN

The exhibition is on view by appointment only. To make an appointment, or for more information and images, please contact info@dorpprojects.com or [@dorpprojects](https://www.instagram.com/dorpprojects) on Instagram.