

THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, AUGUST 14, 2009

Art in Review

Self-Portraits

*Skarstedt Gallery
20 East 79th Street, Manhattan
Through Sept. 4*

Who do these people think they are? That is what you might wonder about the nine well-known artists who coyly toy with self-portraiture in this interesting show.

In a 1984 photograph John Coplans has his aged, hairy back turned to the camera and his head hidden from view. In photographs from 1979, 1981 and 1985, Cindy Sherman appears to play characters in different cinematic melodramas. Andy Warhol looks typically enigmatic in five paintings from the mid-'60s. A lacy pattern of thick black paint almost completely conceals Rudolf Stingel's face in a small painting from 2007.

For a large, tricky photograph from 1990, Yasumasa Morimura transformed himself into the little princess in Velázquez's painting "Las Meninas," and Robert Mapplethorpe depicted himself as a devil with horns in a 1985 photograph. In a teasingly obscure piece from 1990, "Ahh . . . Youth," Mike Kelley has a photograph of himself in his younger days flanked by framed pictures of grungy stuffed animals.

A 1996 drawing on hotel stationery by Martin Kippenberger is an exception. With his shirtless, sagging body and pensive expression, he seems genuinely vulnerable. In a large 1988 painting, on the other hand, Kippenberger is wearing king-size Picasso-style briefs, and a floating blue balloon renders his face invisible — a blank to be filled in by the viewer's imagination.

Albert Oehlen, who is more commonly known for his hyperactive abstractions, painted a seemingly traditional self-portrait in 2001. Given his penchant for artistic gamesmanship, however, it is hard not to suspect a hidden agenda animating his otherwise surprisingly conventional picture.

KEN JOHNSON