

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Reflecting on the Mirror Paintings

The series of paintings with mirrors is an extension of my *Spectator* series of works that explore various aspects of the gaze and our roles as viewers and participants in art. Initially these paintings included figures that look directly out at the viewer, some sporting sunglasses or peering through binoculars to create the effect of both obscuring and magnifying the eyes. I then subsequently considered more voyeuristic imagery and created pieces using multiple panels that juxtapose replicas of nude women from art history with that of the voyeur, the "Peeping Tom". It occurred to me that since we are also gazing upon these images of nude women we are, likewise, voyeurs and Peeping Toms. That is when I first decided to incorporate a mirror within a piece, to reflect our image as we look at the painting and prompt us to consider our role.

As it turns out, mirrors have long held a presence within the history of art. They have appeared in ancient art and in works by numerous painters, including Titian (*Venus with a Mirror*), Jan van Eyck (*The Arnolfini Portrait*), Diego Velázquez (*Las Meninas*), René Magritte (*Not to be Reproduced*), and Michelangelo Pistoletto (*Mirror Paintings*). Mirrors are used as a central device that allows the artist to take liberty with the painted reflection. It is not unusual for the imagery painted in the mirror to be inconsistent with what should be reflected given its angle and to include additional figures, especially self-portraits. Throughout time, mirrors have also carried a number of associations and meanings, from the divine to the demonic and truth to trickery. A fixture in our everyday lives, mirrors can symbolize both physical and spiritual reflection, "Know Thyself". They may also serve as a symbol of beauty, vanity, and the negative values suggested in the Greek myth of Narcissus. It is this myth of Narcissus that I reference in the series of paintings titled *The Narcissist is You*. In these paintings the mirror is a stand-in for the reflecting pool, the viewer assumes the vantage point of Narcissus, and flowers grow where he once pined away.

Because mirrors are so commonplace, it is easy to overlook the fact that the images they reflect are not reality but a representation of reality, just as a painted image is. They are both translations of the three dimensional world onto a flat surface. This is what I was thinking about when I created *This is Not Really You*, a small piece that is simply a mirror bearing that inscription along the borders of the frame. Ultimately, as we contemplate the layers of meaning in these works, we may look into the mirrors within them to check our appearance and perhaps recognize, or not, their inevitable duality as functional object.



Catherine Christiano, *The Narcissist is You*, oil on panel with mirror, 48 x 30 in, 2006. Collection of the artist. Photo credit: Rick Scanlan.



Catherine Christiano, *This is Not Really You*, metal leaf on acrylic with mirror, 13.5 x 12.5 in, 2005. Collection of the artist.



Seated woman holding a mirror. Attic red-figure lekythos by the Sabouroff Painter, ca. 470-460 BC. Velanideza. National Archaeological Museum, Athens.



Jan van Eyck, *The Arnolfini Portrait*, oil on panel, 32.3 x 23.4 in, 1434. National Gallery, London.



Titian, *Venus with a Mirror*, oil on canvas, 49 x 41.5 in, ca. 1555. National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.



Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas*, oil on canvas, 125.2 x 108.7 in, 1656 – 1657. The Prado, Madrid.



René Magritte, *Not to Be Reproduced*, oil on canvas, 32 x 26 in, 1937. Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam.



Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Person Leaning*, painted tissue paper on polished stainless steel, 1963-64. Promised gift to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Copyrighted by the artist.