

# Self-Portrait

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Cours sur l'auto-portrait donné au Centre pour la culture féministe de Montréal.



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In childhood, we are taught how a picture should look. At the same time, we are being taught how we, ourselves, should look. Both the development of our perception of art and of ourselves are related to appearances. As children, we quickly learn the approved symbols for a cloud, a house, a tree, a person. Individuality is not important here; what is important is that everything is neat, pleasing and instantly recognizable according to the code of appearances. We, as children, wanted to draw what we knew and what we knew was there; but we turned to the learned symbols of how someone else thought objects should

appear. We began to produce images for approval and gradually the independence of self-expression atrophied.

By adulthood, most of us have stopped drawing and we say we can't draw. If as adults a desire to draw resurfaces, there are hundreds of How-to-draw books on the market. These books show how to draw a face on the basis of an oval, measuring it off with spaced lines to show where to put the eyes, nose, mouth, etc. This method again deals with appearances — how to draw a face, but not an individual or unique face with all the structural or



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expressive differences that make it unique.

For women, there are interesting parallels here. As little girls we are taught the importance of appearance, staying neat and clean, well groomed and well behaved. Almost simultaneously, at school age, we learn the accepted symbols for objects and how to present them in our drawings. In later years, though we may no longer be actively drawing, there is still often a desire to return to what was once a natural activity. We then make short, unsatisfying attempts to draw with the How-to-Draw books. We are surrounded with images of how we should look as women. How many of us have gazed at drawings of squares, circles, triangles and heart shapes trying to decide which was closest to the shape of our own faces, so that we could change it with make-up, into that elusive ideal oval? We looked closest at our faces when we wanted to change what was there — accent the ideal or mask the ‘faults’. We put ourselves under close scrutiny to change how we look rather than see, understand and accept what is there.

Studio work in a self-portrait course is an attempt

to cut through this conditioning, both in the production of an image and how we should appear when that image is of ourselves. Through a series of exercises in drawing and painting we work at learning to see and at developing the coordination between the hand and the eye, to put down what we see, not what we are conditioned to see.

As a group, we each bind a book to be used as a notebook, sketchbook, scrapbook, etc., a record of self-exploration. This journal is shared with the group at times or kept private, as one chooses. Through seeing slides of self-portraits and through discussions centred around these and women’s writings, we examine how women have seen themselves traditionally through their work, and how that may be changing in the work of women today.

The purpose of the self-portrait course at the Centre for Feminist Culture is, using various approaches: to go beyond the external image, to examine identity, personality, individuality; and to produce through talking, writing, drawing and painting a portrait of, and by, oneself. ○