

THESIS

MAKING MY IMAGE

Submitted by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Spring 2010

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COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

April 1, 2010

WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY FARRELL ELISABETH TOMPKINS ENTITLED MAKING MY IMAGE BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS.

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

MAKING MY IMAGE

The impulse to craft my own likeness is an intuitive choice driven by questions about my identity as a woman and an artist. I define these themes as *passive* and *active*, and explore them visually through the medium of reductive woodcut printmaking. Using the genre of self-portraiture, I force the viewer into the same space I occupied as I observed myself in the mirror. Original drawings are analyzed as a series of shapes and broken down into layers of value. The resulting prints express my suspicion that the viewer can never fully understand my point of view.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my advisors, Jim Dormer and Steve Simons, for their expertise, advice and unwavering support. I would also like to thank my family for their unconditional love and encouragement.

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Self-portraiture is a theme I have explored from many angles beginning in high school. It started as an intuitive choice, but upon reflection makes sense given my curiosity and the context of my experience. I was always a watcher, intensely aware of the social sphere that surrounded me and my place in it. I had the ability to stand outside myself, and look in from the outside. As a child, I baffled my pre-school teachers who wondered if I was deaf because I was so quiet. As an adult, I am curious about my identity as a woman and as an artist within this culture. These two identities have emerged in my thinking as opposites. I believe that women still occupy a certain role in popular culture – to be looked at. As a woman artist, I exercise an agency which is at odds with this role. Visually, I have defined these opposites as appearing and disappearing, active and passive. They show up in my artwork through a cycle of construction and deconstruction. Crafting my own image within the medium of printmaking by breaking down and rebuilding is now the center of my creative project. I underscore women's role by using my face and body as my subject, but assert ownership and agency through the simple act of reinterpreting and crafting my own image.

These concepts started to crystallize visually during my first printmaking class as an undergraduate at UW-Madison. For most of my college career up to that point, I enjoyed experimentation with painting and drawing, but never concentrated on any particular imagery or medium. Printmaking made it possible to play with images in a way that came very naturally to me. I could experiment with one image very quickly and easily by collaging elements together. My first prints were figures floating in landscapes – passive and sleeping (Fig. 1). These early pieces were created completely out of my imagination. During critiques, it was pointed out that they looked like me, which sparked

a conscious curiosity about the self-portrait. In response, I began to photograph myself and use the images to produce drawings of my face over distant landscapes (Fig. 2). Gradually my focus shifted away from landscape combined with body, to just my face. I took many photos and altered them in Photoshop®. This process allowed me to simplify by breaking the value/color structure down into six or seven layers. It stripped away skin tones and detailed topography of features, and pushed the pictures from individual portraits toward cleaned-up images where gritty details of individual features are erased. I brought them into reductive woodcut in an effort to emphasize the simplified, layered structure. Instead of a perfectly flat, machine produced photo, the images were crafted with materials such as wood and ink, by an artist's hand.

With these pieces I thought about the depictions of women in popular culture and art history books. The femme fatal images of the Pre-Raphaelite painters both attracted and repelled me (Fig. 3, 4). I saw connections between current representation of women in fashion magazines, and the images created by these painters. Jan Marsh describes the women depicted by the painters as “silent, enigmatic, passive figures, not individuals engaged in activity but objects to be gazed upon by painter and spectator.”¹ I played with this observation by using bright jewel-tone colors to create beautiful images, combined with a direct gaze (Figs. 5, 6). I will expand on this theme in the following paragraphs.

During the course of my research in graduate school, I struggled to explore these ideas in greater depth. In hindsight, I was trying to find an elegant way of expressing the passive and the active together. In a new series inspired by the lack of inhibition in children's art, I began to work quickly and instinctively (Fig. 7). Acrylic painting and sugar-lift etching forced me to work loosely and absolutely subjectively. I let the pieces

¹ Jan Marsh, *The Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 1.

take on meaning after they were finished. Some of these works were better than others. The strongest pieces were extremely intuitive, fresh and honest. Simultaneously, I was still curious about the direct use of photographs as source material by artists.

Marlene Dumas influenced me through her paintings. Her work helped me understand the importance of printmaking to my project. She seemed a true image maker to me – a personal goal I had not articulated up to that point. Though she looked at photos as she painted, her images were something new and subjective, filtered through her hands and her brain. Consider her self-portrait (Fig. 8). Dumas' paintings have been compared to a veneer, sheet or screen, which calls to mind the flatness of a photograph. The essence of her work depends on the photograph and the way we read images in our culture. As I began to make sense of this, photographs dropped out of my process. Printmaking is already flat, layered, and collaged. As a medium, it is an easy reference to a variety of visual media. The goal to craft an image from scratch became more intentional. I wanted to shut out the baggage that photographs bring, and work within my own subjective world. I drew from my face in a mirror. By allowing drawings to emerge rather than choose images, it became possible to let process and materials lead my decisions.

This choice was pivotal in shaping the meaning of my art because it allowed me to take complete ownership of the image and process. My work's intended relationship with the viewer is expressed in an article by T.J. Clark. He describes the interaction between self-portrait and the viewer: "...in order to get on any kind of terms with a self-portrait, we have to accept that our eyes are roughly where the painter's once were, and

not only eyes but mind.”² Especially when combined with an intense, penetrating gaze, the effect is coercive. Self-portraiture asserts that the self knows the subject in a way no one else can. Although the viewer is forced into my viewpoint, she/he can never really access my inner life, only observe my body. The process of building, breaking down, and building again, echoes the self-portrait and viewer interaction.

Another function of this experience is to highlight the fact that the artist’s mind is separate from her body. According to Clark, the mind/body duality is another claim of self-portraiture.³ In fact during the course of my experimentation in graduate school, showing more of the body (shoulders as well as face/head) became increasingly important to me. I realized that the concepts of passive woman versus active individual were better communicated in the pieces which include shoulders as well as face. Early work such as *Layered Self* (Fig. 5) and *Red Self* (Fig. 6) rely on the gaze to accomplish this. The posture of my body in recent self-portraits (Figs. 9, 12) more effectively expresses emotions which point toward the inner workings of my mind.

Building and taking away are a meditation on my experience as a female and creator/artist within this culture. According to John Berger in *Ways of Seeing*, “...the social presence of a woman is different in kind from that of a man...*men act and women appear.*”⁴ This is an aspect of my culture that I have internalized and worked to understand. About the social presence of the genders Berger states:

A man’s presence is dependent upon the promise of power which he embodies. [It] suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you...By contrast, a woman’s presence expresses her attitude to herself, and defines what can and cannot be done to her...But this has been at the cost of a woman’s self being split

² T.J. Clark, *Self-Portrait: Renaissance to Contemporary*, ed. Anthony Bond and Joanna Woodall (London: National Portrait Gallery Publications, 2005), 59.

³ Ibid, 62.

⁴ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Penguin Books, 1972), 47.

into two. A woman must watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself.⁵

I am not interested in what this says about the relation between men and women as much as what it says about a woman's relationship with herself.

The *surveyor* of woman in herself is male: the *surveyed* female. Thus she turns herself into an object – most particularly an object of vision: a sight.⁶

These seemingly opposing identities of “male surveyor” and “female surveyed” are fascinating to me. I explore them along with other above-mentioned concepts, through the technical process of printmaking. To illustrate how this works, I will describe the making of *Self-Portrait Grid* (Fig. 9), and related pieces.

During the summer before my thesis year, I made many drawings of myself by looking in the mirror. Drawings were built with large brushstrokes of value (india ink). My body was treated very simply with one or two layers, face more detailed, and eyes large and precise. *Self-Portrait Drawing* (Fig. 10) was chosen from among others because the silhouette communicated an introverted quality and the gaze was intense. Once I had the image, I broke it into shapes by tracing. It was difficult to find edges through semi-transparent tracing paper, and the ink drawing blurred together in many areas, making the act of tracing a whole new process of interpretation. This process became so long and methodical that it felt meditative. It is comparable to mapping a landscape. I was able to analyze layers of value formally, simplify, and reinterpret. Details were stripped away just like the Photoshop® experiments. The resulting network of shapes constitutes a second interpretation of my body broken into parts. Instead of a machine aided reinterpretation, this one is processed through my mind. The decisions are

⁵ Ibid, 46.

⁶ Ibid, 47.

based on formal elements, but they are influenced by my self-conception and how I wish others to view me (body and artistic prowess.) I map a landscape that refers to my body and face, but it is completely of my own creation. The resulting drawings captured my imagination and have recently led to a separate branch of exploration. *Self-Portrait Map* (Fig. 11) is one example. The next step was to trace the shape-drawing onto a piece of wood, carve, and print a reductive woodcut. This part of the process simplifies the image even further. Some prints are left with only two or three layers of ink, which strips away so much detail that I am nearly unrecognizable (Fig. 12). The silhouette and gestural position of my body are the only information given. Here, the act of printing multiples and layering express my thinking.

Reductive woodcut is a relief printmaking process which allows me to make multiples and build layers of value from lightest to darkest. Reductive prints are also called suicide prints because all colors are carved from one block. Once a color is carved away, it can never be printed again. For *Self-Portrait Grid* I used two reduction blocks to achieve overlapping shapes. The first block was background texture and some shapes inside the figure. I chose poplar for the surface pattern, using a drill with wire brush attachment to take away the softest wood and create a raised grain. I polished and printed the wood twice, slightly offset to achieve “chatter” in the printed texture. For the second block I used a Japanese wood called shina (a member of the linden family). In combination with very sharp u-gouges, this type of wood allowed me to obtain crisp, clean edges within the figure. I printed on a press rather than by hand to preserve this crispness and keep layers of ink thin and even. To this end, careful formulation of ink was important. Ideally, I mix ink with modifiers to a consistency similar to mayonnaise.

In this case, I sacrificed perfect consistency for translucent colors. Since transparent base is extremely sticky, I had to add gelled medium, plate oil, and magnesium to achieve thin, even layers. For *Self-Portrait Grid* I began printing the background and first layers of the figure as if I were editioning. However, I allowed myself the freedom to try slightly different ink formulations and colors as I reacted to the prints. This way, I was able to create multiples with slight variations and play with the idea of manufactured sameness, a metaphor for the way we read photographs. I was also able to preserve prints at earlier stages of printing in order to consider them in relation to more defined, finished prints with more layers of ink.

When the prints are viewed together (*Self-Portrait Grid*) dualities of meaning emerge. The impulse to present myself as a cleaned-up, simplified character is expressed through the extremely simplified prints. I am a faded silhouette, passive and inaccessible. As more layers of ink are dropped, eyes, nose and mouth emerge, revealing an intense, almost confrontational gaze. Considered in relation to each other, they oscillate in and out, focusing and fading. The decision to refer to a body and an individual, but not give the details, expresses my suspicion that the viewer can never really understand my experience. The methodical building of separate prints all from the same block challenges the way we read images in our culture – quick and without a second glance. Multiple images from the same matrix, but more or less detailed, refer to various conflicting truths.

This body of work is the culmination of my impulse to express the truth of my personal experience. While these themes will always be a part of my imagination, I feel like this chapter of my artwork is complete. Through the art, I identified the questions

that were driving my exploration. Although I am still working from my image, I am thinking more about how my truth is similar to others' truths. I expect that this line of inquiry will lead naturally to more general questions about people and their motivations and interaction. A new path of interest is beginning with line studies such as *Self-Portrait Map*. For the immediate future, this new direction is firmly rooted in the process of drawing. I am studying artists involved with the idea of mapping. *Self-Portrait Map* is constructed using only line, a vocabulary that allows me to simplify form without obscuring it. This direction might provide with a new way to talk about object and subject; external and internal realities. Eventually I expect printmaking to resurface as my medium-of-choice as it is at the heart of how I read and interpret the visual information that surrounds me.

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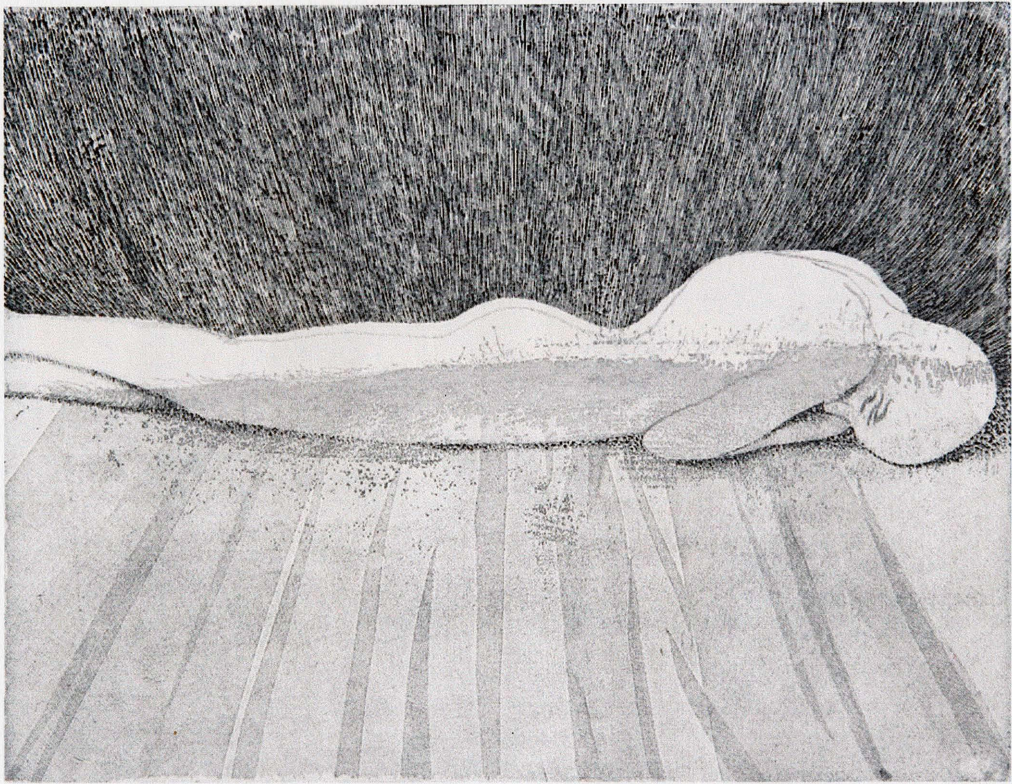


Fig. 1, Farrell Tompkins, *Under Water*, 2002, etching, 7" x 9"



Fig. 2, Farrell Tompkins, *Cornfield*, 2002, drypoint etching, 6" x 8"

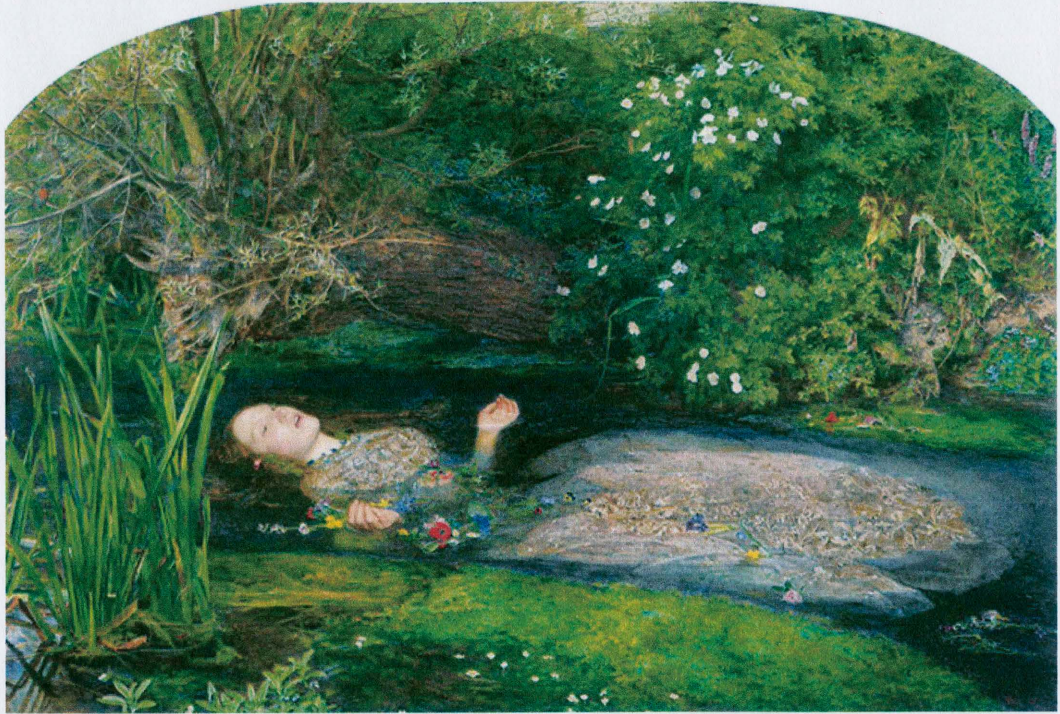


Fig. 3, Sir John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*, 1851-2, oil on canvas, 30'' x 44'', Tate Britain, London

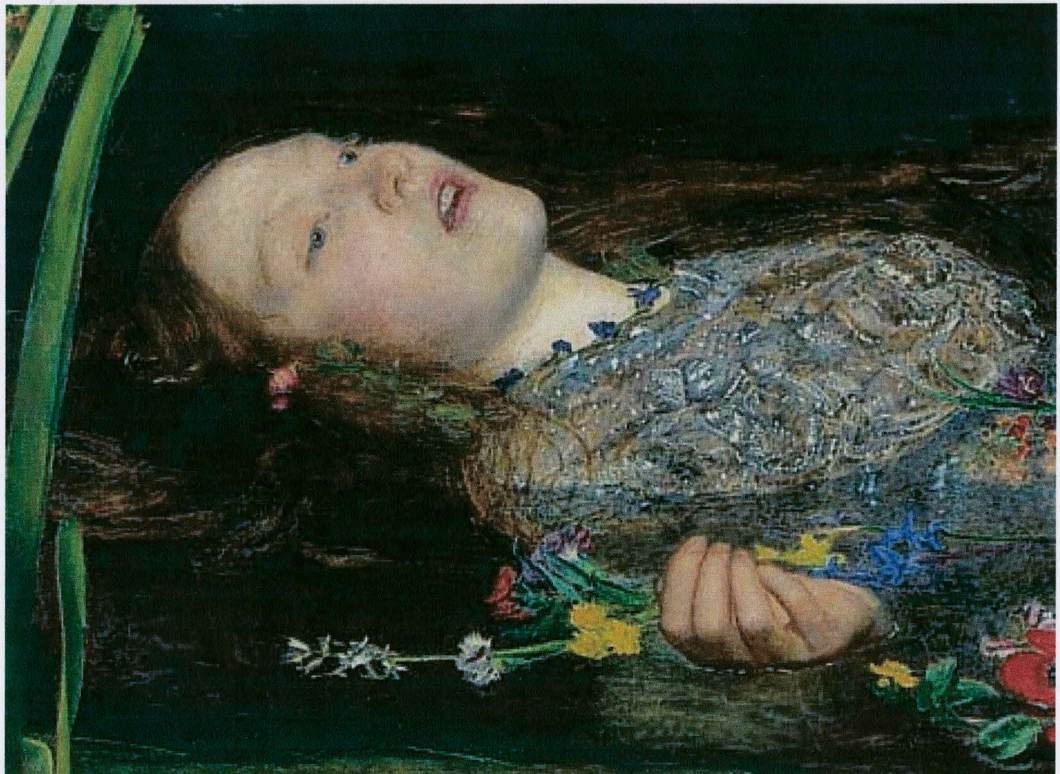


Fig. 4, Sir John Everett Millais, *Ophelia* (detail), 1851-2, oil on canvas, 30'' x 44'', Tate Britain, London

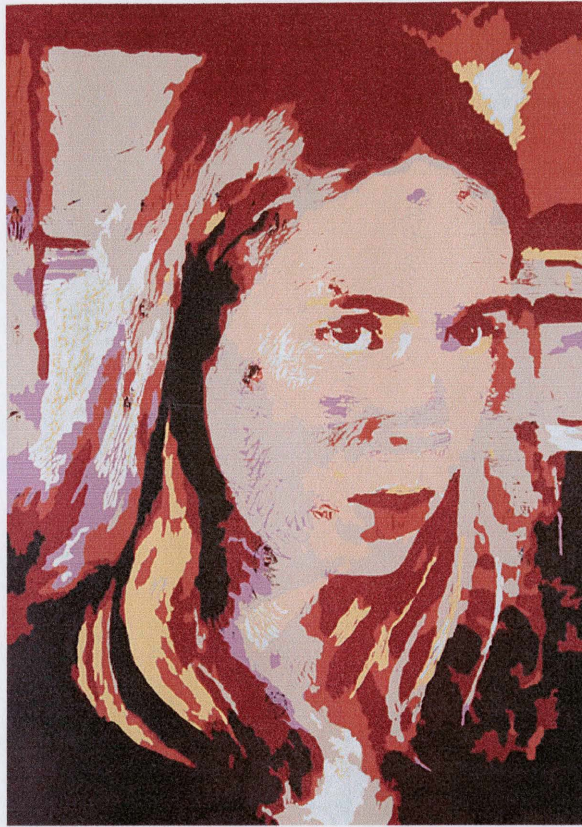


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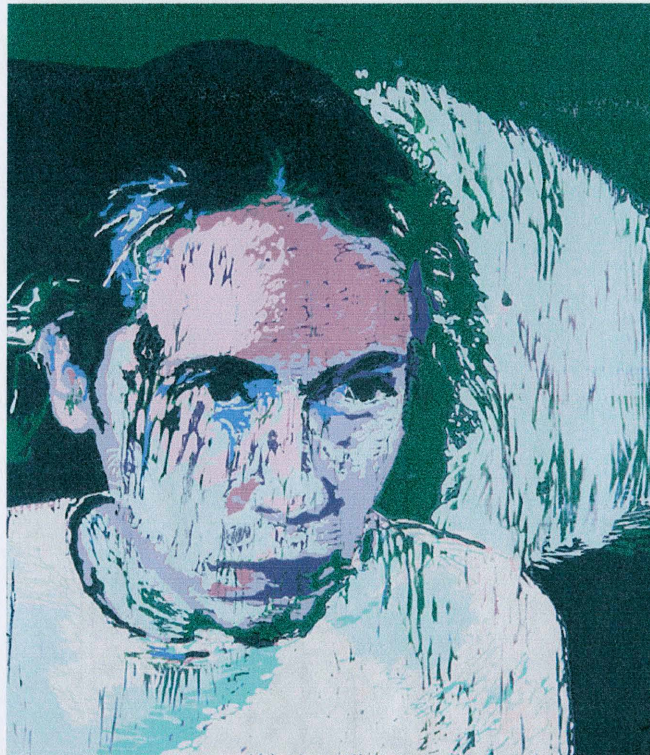


Fig. 6, Farrell Tompkins, *Layered Self*, 2006, color reduction woodcut, 17" x 15"

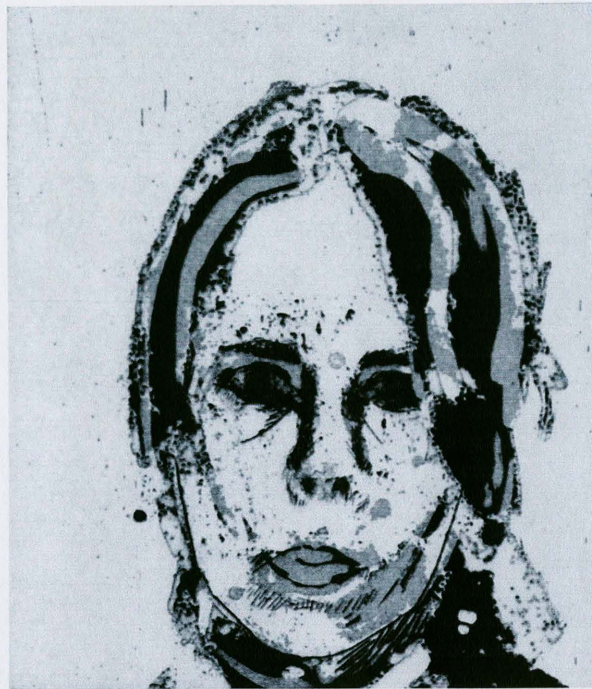


Fig. 7, Farrell Tompkins, untitled, 2008, etching, 4 1/2" x 4"

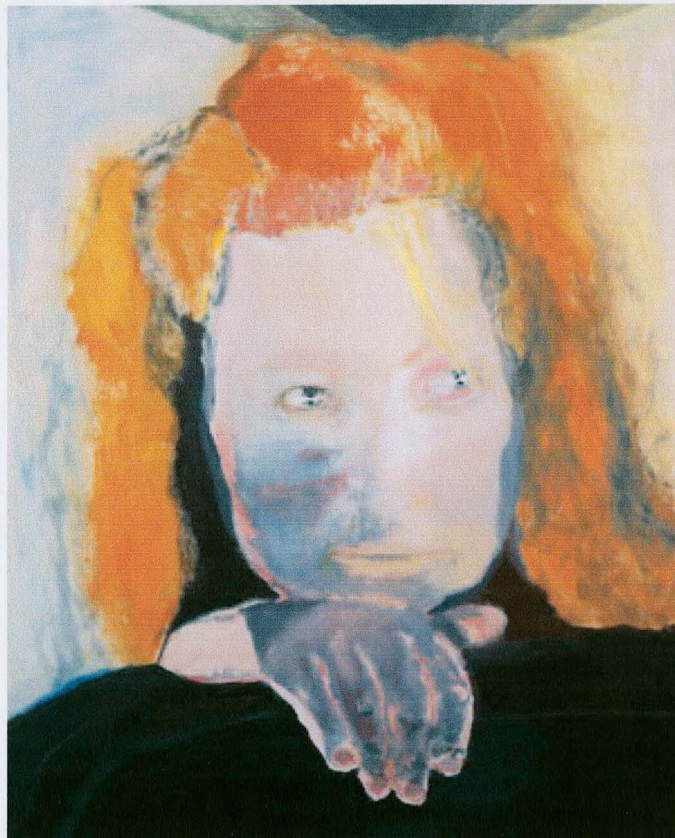


Fig. 8, Marlene Dumas, *Het Kwaad is Banal (Evil is Banal)*, 1984, oil on canvas, 49 3/16" x 41 5/16", Van Abbemuseum Collection, Eindhoven

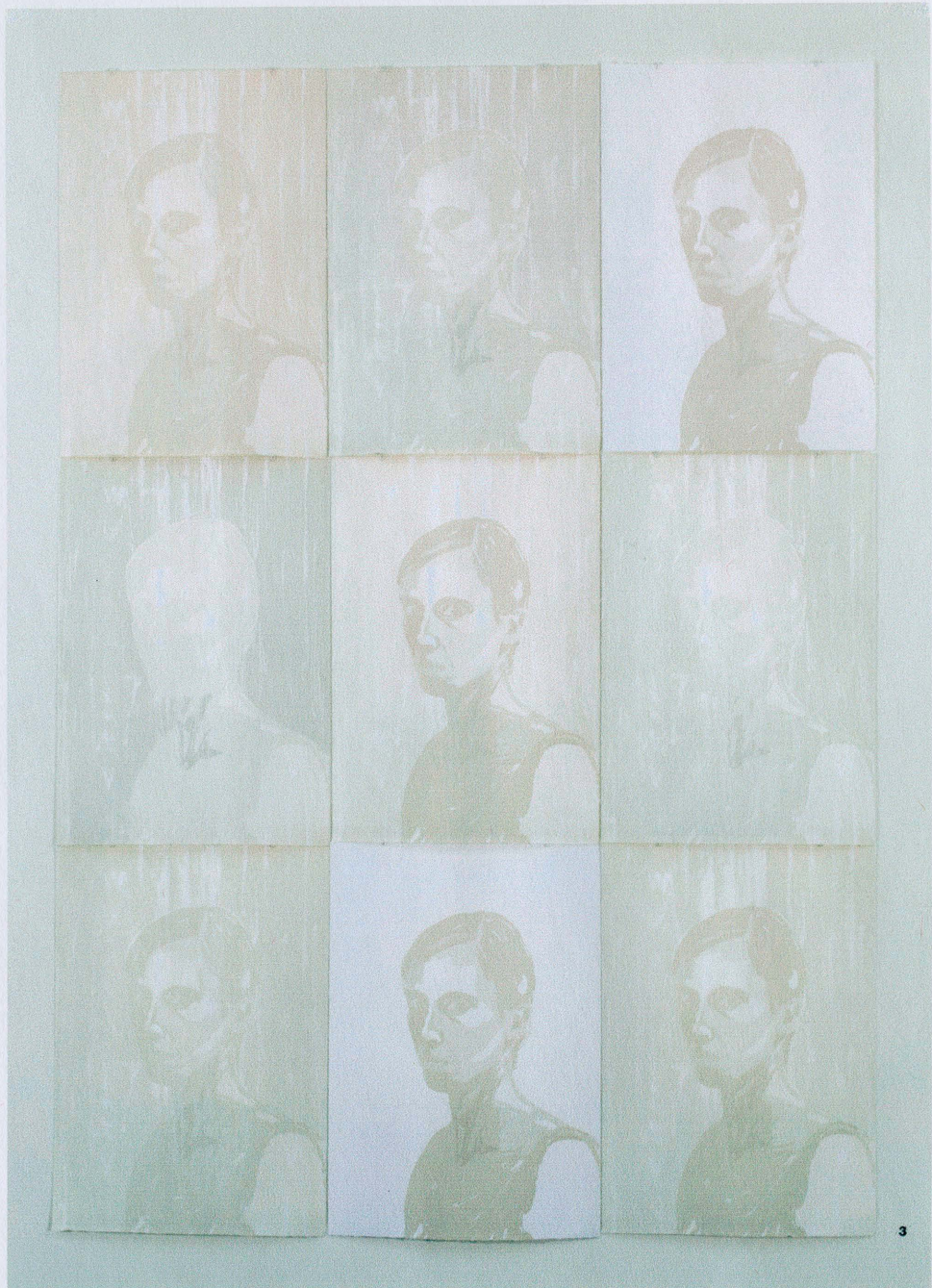


Fig. 9, Farrell Tompkins, *Self-Portrait Grid*, 2009, color reduction woodcuts, 69" x 48"



Fig. 10, Farrell Tompkins, *Self-Portrait Drawing*, 2009, ink, colored pencil, and gouache on paper 23" x 16"

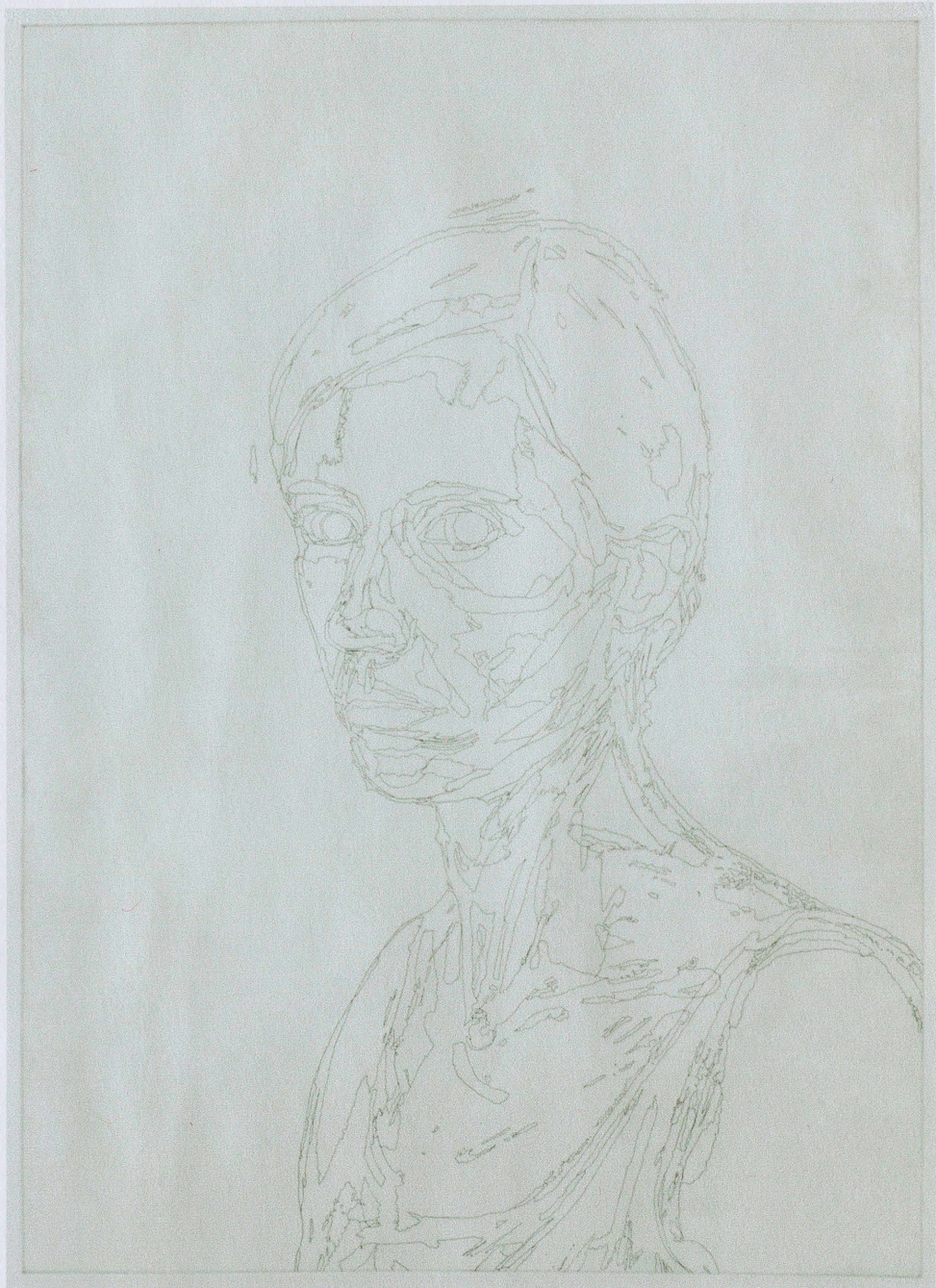


Fig. 11, Farrell Tompkins, *Self-Portrait Map*, 2010, etching, 33" x 24"



Fig. 12, Farrell Tompkins, *Self-Portrait*, 2010, color reduction woodcut, 29 ¼" x 22 ¼"