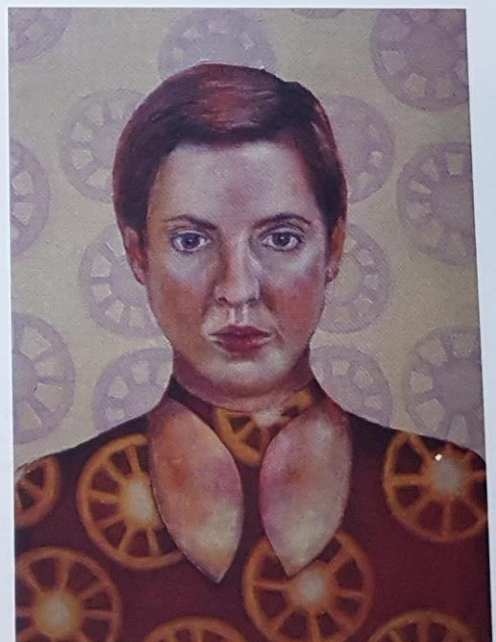


## **2005 Under Scrutiny**

John Mateer, Arts+Medicine, issue 1

arts+medicine:self\_analysis



Self portraits from *About Face*:  
above, Lindy Lee; right, Gabrielle Bates

## Under Scrutiny

When a self-portrait artist holds a mirror to their face, they are looking for traits beyond the physical. The fundamental question raised and interpreted is, 'Who am I?' and it parallels the investigation a patient diagnosed with cancer undertakes. This unique synergy is the premise for *About Face*, an exhibition in Melbourne that raises money for cancer.

By John Mateer

One in three Australians is diagnosed with cancer at some point in their lives, making it a condition that affects everyone. Not all cancers are equally serious but the anxiety the disease represents is like the mirror into which each of us will look one day. The response to a diagnosis of the disease is similar to the process of reflection an artist undertakes when creating a self-portrait. It is this idea of contemplation in the face of adversity that painter Gabrielle Bates hoped would be understood and responded to by the artists she invited to create a self-portrait for *About Face*, an auction in January that raised money for the Australian Cancer Research Foundation.

Among the 21 artists exhibited were the high-profile painters Su Baker, Lindy Lee and Victor Rubin, as well as the respected though lesser-known artists Marika Varady, Miles Allen and Megan Thomson.

"[Accepting a diagnosis is] an emotional journey through the moods of confrontation, conflict, acceptance, completion and abandonment," says Bates, whose family has been affected by cancer. "It's a journey encapsulating the entire experience of living and self."

According to Bates, "'Who am I? What, or who, makes me, me? What does it mean to be alive?'" are questions that an artist raises in the process of a self-portrait, but can also apply to the person facing a life-threatening cancer. Both, too, have the seeds of a possible transcendence. "Undertaking the challenge of painting a self-portrait means looking beyond myself, to go beyond limits, to transcend what I think I know about the world.

"It's very scary, but necessary [to soul search] in order to live a full life. I have to look and listen to everyone around me, find their beauty, find their grace, their strength – all of their potential. When I find that in them, I can find that in myself.

"The image [featured in *About Face*] is not just about me. It's

about everyone. It's about life rather than death, and it's been extraordinarily healing."

Su Baker, head of the School of Art at the Victorian College of the Arts and a highly regarded painter, has known many people who have had cancer. "Art enables us to experience the world with positive curiosity and empowers us to feel more in charge of our lives." Creativity is liberating, she adds, in that it allows the individual to situate their self in relation to the world. The

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self-portrait is a particularly acute instance of positive curiosity, and "almost forensic" in its investigative precision.

Baker has painted self-portraits before, but has exhibited them less frequently than her other work. In painting herself, she says, "You must heavily scrutinise yourself as an image ... it's definitely not an exercise in flattery."



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According to the Melbourne artist, there is another unique aspect to the self-portrait. During the process of painting, the artist is producing herself as an image, as in a mirror. Yet when the work is completed, the artist's image stares back at the viewer's face. A self-portrait describes the process of the artist looking into herself, but also acts as the statement "This is me!" to the world.

Her father, who was also an artist, kept portraits of his wife and his children in the way others keep photographs, something like the icons of the Orthodox Church. It is in this way that, for Baker, the self-portrait can give the comfort of a benevolent presence, "looking over" one, like a bedside vigil.

Lindy Lee, who has had cancer, is one of the internationally renowned artists in *About Face*. Though she has worked with portraits, this is her first self-portrait. Like many of her images, she has started with a photograph – in this case, one taken of her as a child.

It is a typical example of Lee's work in that she gravitates to snapshots that capture the first signs of a personality forming on the face; the first awareness of the self's "outwardness" is visible. Her portrait depicts herself at a school-going age, when, as a Chinese-Australian growing up in Queensland, she first began to notice she was different from those around her.

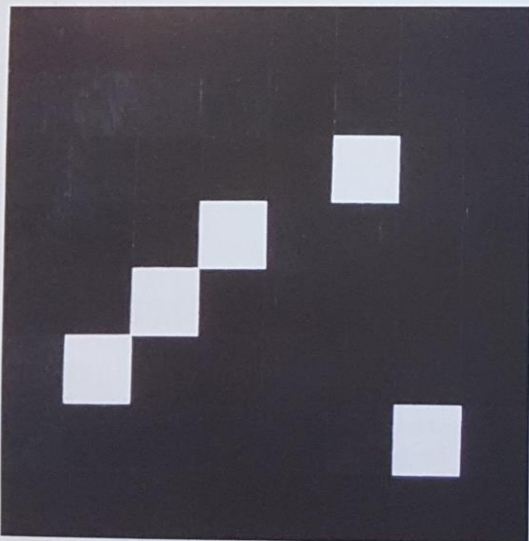
This revelation strikes Lee as the origin of her practice as an artist. "It's this sense of strangeness, my memories of the beginning of a sense of alienation, that I see in my own young face." It is also her sense of separation, she says, that led her later to adopt Zen Buddhism. Even as a child she wondered: "what it is that exists in this body?"

Her interest in reworking photographs of friends and family arose from a work she dedicated to her late nephew. Lee wanted to make a work that could situate her nephew in relation to his Chinese ancestors. She produced 100 Chinese-style concertina books of family photographs and other images and exhibited them as an installation. Though a memorial to her nephew, Lee regards all of her work as an opportunity for identification between the artist and the viewer, for "a meeting and measuring of our own existence".



left: Su Baker  
below: Miles Allen's  
abstract self-portrait

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Most recently she has been working on a portrait of a friend's child who died of cancer. The child's parents chose six photographs and from these Lee developed an image, gathering different qualities of the child's face, which she then amalgamated to form her picture.

Her earlier work of the 1980s was an investigation of the Western notion of portraiture, which drew on the works of the Old Masters and foregrounding the materials, but after Lee started practicing Zen a decade later, her work became brighter, using intense block colours, screen-printed images and splashes of hot wax, giving her work a sense of spontaneity.

It is the combination of Lee's belief that "all material is metaphor" and the Buddhist notion that everything is impermanent that these works manifest because they are about both the amazing instant of spiritual presence and the instant's inevitable transience.

Meanwhile, artists Miles Allen and Marika Varady interpreted the *About Face* brief more laterally, using form and colour to evoke a sense of self.