

NONFICTION

The Trauma and Talent of Some of History's Greatest Women Artists

By Celia Paul

Oct. 5, 2021

THE MIRROR AND THE PALETTE

Rebellion, Revolution, and Resilience

Five Hundred Years of Women's Self Portraits

By Jennifer Higgie

"I've written quite a lot about art and artists and have cultivated a pretty deep envy of them," the novelist Rachel Cusk recently told an interviewer for *The Paris Review*. "To operate outside of language — it seems the more lasting contribution. Yet painting is, has been, so masculine. The story of women in art is brutal." "The Mirror and the Palette," a new history of women artists' self-portraits, proves her right about the brutality.

In this candid book by Jennifer Higgie, an Australian art critic, each painter endures some life-changing trauma. The stark message is that women need to suffer in order to make great paintings, and that trauma is the alchemical ingredient necessary for transforming talent into genius.

Higgie has structured her book in thematic, rather than strictly chronological, chapters. The first is "Easel" and the last "Naked." She starts with Catharina van Hemessen, a Flemish artist who in 1548 painted her tiny self-portrait — widely believed to be the earliest surviving one by an artist of any gender seated at an easel — and ends with Alice Neel, the American painter, who died in 1984. Neel provides the book's final quote: "You inherit the world. Somehow, you find a place for yourself."



Self-portrait from 1912 by Helene Schjerfbeck. Alamy

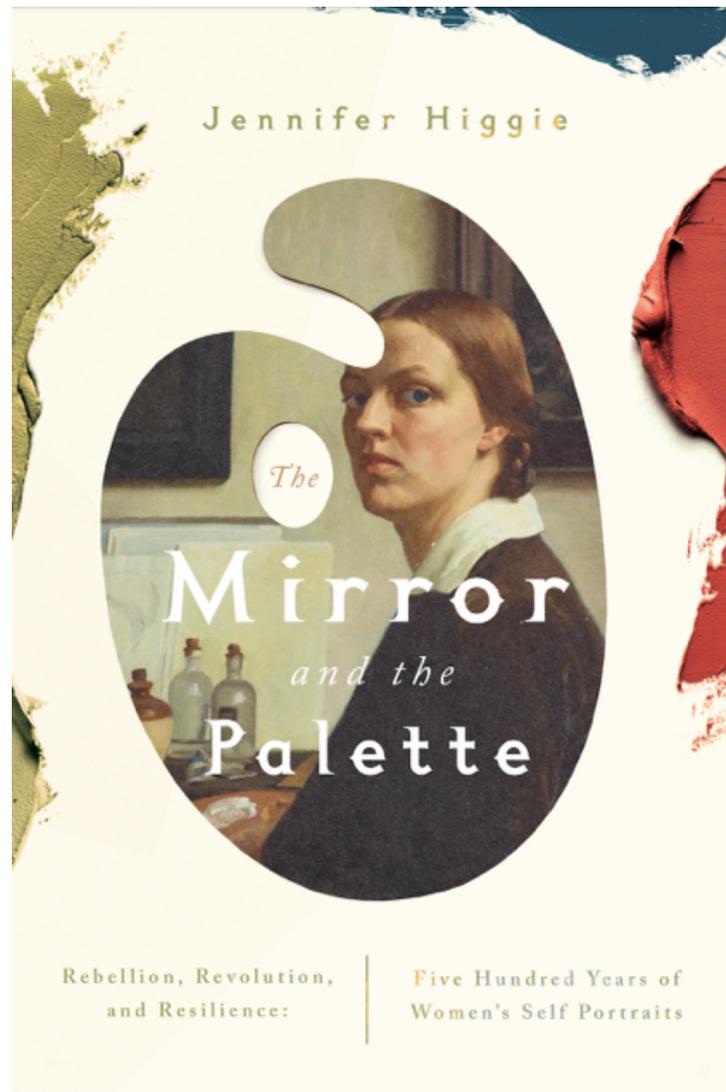
Is there a “female voice” in painting? Is there a painterly equivalent of Charlotte Brontë, Jean Rhys or Annie Ernaux? This book suggests there is and that it is defined by woundedness.

The worthy women artists who diligently persevered with their craft, from 1548 onward, sometimes gained reputations for themselves by brilliantly evoking the styles of the famous male artists of their time; the 17th-century Dutch painter Judith Leyster mimicked the style of her countryman Frans Hals perfectly, for example. In the sequence of the women artists presented here, the first to blaze out with an original female style was Frida Kahlo: Her paintings expressed an undeniable authenticity, a newly experienced awareness of the world, unlike anything else.

Kahlo was born in Mexico City in 1907. Higginson writes: “At the age of 6, Frida contracted polio” and at 18, “she was involved in a cataclysmic accident: A tram crashed into the bus she was traveling on. A handrail pierced her body. Her pelvis, her collarbone, her spine and her ribs were broken; her leg, withered from her childhood disease, was fractured in 11 places; her shoulder was dislocated and one of her feet was crushed. ... She underwent 32 operations. ... One of her legs turned gangrenous and was amputated.” Her husband, the painter Diego Rivera, also caused her emotional pain. According to Higginson, “Their relationship was tempestuous, adoring, furious; both had affairs.”

Yet nothing stopped Kahlo from painting. When she was bedridden, she hung a mirror above her bed so that she could paint herself. She said, “I paint myself because I am alone. I am the subject I know best.” There is an energy, an almost supernatural force, about her work that is very difficult to

describe in words; it has to do with the urgency of the paint marks: the need that drove her to transcribe her disability and psychological instability into beauty and permanence.



In Higgle's fifth chapter, "Solitude," she talks about the life and work of two artists who mean a lot to me: Helene Schjerfbeck, born in Helsinki in 1862, and Gwen John, born in Haverfordwest, Wales, in 1876. Both found their signature styles by withdrawing from the world. Unlike Kahlo's, their woundedness appears to have been self-imposed. But the pain of their longing was the fuel that drove them on.

I saw the first solo exhibition of Schjerfbeck's work in Britain at the Royal Academy of Arts in 2019. I had never heard of her before. The important room in the exhibition was devoted to her self-portraits. The late ones are among the most extraordinary self-explorations ever made, by a woman or a man. The early paintings are charming, but conventional. Then something happens.

Higgie explains that Schjerfbeck, after studying in Paris — where she was happy and successful — and traveling abroad, went back to Finland, eventually retiring to a small town in the countryside to look after her mother. She supported them both through sales of her art and gradually gained recognition in the Finnish art world. Then she fell in love with “the forester, painter, writer and art collector Einar Reuter.” When she heard that he was engaged to someone else, the news “was such a shock” that “she spent three months recovering in a hospital.”

By the time she came home, her art was transformed. Higgie describes one of these new self-portraits: “Thin lines scar the painting’s surface, most violently around her eyes. Her body, as dark as a hole ... as if there’s no delineation between her own skin and that of her painting. In pain, she harms the image she has created of herself.” After her mother died, Schjerfbeck again became ill. Even though she was now famous, she could manage her grief only by painting in solitude. When she died, in 1946, Higgie writes, “her easel, like family, was at her bedside.”



Self-portrait by Helene Schjerfbeck, 1944. Alamy

I have always felt closely connected to Gwen John, and her work is intimately familiar to me. Throughout her life, John had to contend with her brother, Augustus John, who became a much more successful painter than she was. They both attended the Slade School of Art in London and

lived together as students. Gwen found Augustus overbearing. Her search for self-knowledge was precipitated by her need to escape his influence. Two self-portraits capture her transformation.

In the first, from around 1900, she portrays herself with a hand on her hip, her fingers nearly touching the masculine buckle of her belt. She is gazing directly and challengingly at the viewer. She was painting like a man, like her brother. The energy of the brush marks flows outward, not inward. She has not yet found the quiet intensity that would define her later work.

About two years later, she painted another self-portrait. Her expression is as remote as that of a figurehead on a ship: She's saying that she is prepared to face anything the world throws at her, but she will not be part of any family circle or art club. Her brother had recently married her close friend and the couple had had a baby. John understood that to become a mother one has to compromise, and she wasn't prepared to do that. She was going to choose solitude and deprivation instead. In doing so, she became one of the greatest spiritual painters of all time.

When we arrive at Alice Neel, born in 1900 in Philadelphia, it's as if she effortlessly opens a door that had previously seemed locked, bringing with her the possibility of freedom and humor. Goodness knows, she had her share of tragedy: Her first daughter died of diphtheria before she turned 1; her second daughter was abducted by her husband; she had a breakdown as a result and was hospitalized. Various relationships with disturbed and abusive partners followed her recovery, as well as two sons, whom she brought up almost single-handedly in poverty.

Yet her invincible spirit shines through and her life ended in triumph. When she was 70, she was commissioned to paint the feminist critic Kate Millett, the author of "Sexual Politics," for the cover of Time magazine. It made her famous. At 74 she had a retrospective at the Whitney Museum in New York. She said that the experience convinced her that she "had the right to paint." She painted her first solo self-portrait at 80. She painted herself naked, and said: "Frightful, isn't it? ... I love it. At least it shows a certain revolt against everything decent." Somehow, Neel managed to make woundedness look like joy.