

Selfie as art at the Saatchi: from Rembrandt to a grinning macaque

Exhibition explores the history of the selfie and our changing relationship with this most everyday of art forms

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It is a show that includes painstakingly executed self-portraits by Rembrandt, Van Gogh, and Frida Kahlo, as well as rather more spontaneous selfie portraits by Kim Kardashian, Tom Cruise and [a macaque monkey from the Indonesian island of Sulawesi](#).

The images are being displayed together in London's [Saatchi gallery](#), and while the curators are not assigning them any aesthetic equivalence, they do argue that there is a direct line from one to the other. The gallery is staging what it believes is the first exhibition exploring the history of the selfie, from the 16th century to the present day.

“In the 16th century, it was only the artists who had the skills, materials and tools to create self-portraits,” said gallery chief executive Nigel Hurst, who had the idea for the show. “Now we all have that wherewithal through our smartphones.”

Hurst originally envisaged a small show, but the more he explored the subject, the bigger it became, with the exhibition occupying two floors and 10 rooms of the gallery.

It opens with images of some of the finest self-portraits ever made, by artists

including Rembrandt, Picasso, Munch, Courbet, Schiele and Kahlo. They take the form of a slide show – similar to the way you might see images on a phone – on dozens of screens. Visitors will be able to vote for the ones they like best.

All that might be seen as a gimmick, but it is one Hurst is unapologetic about. “These are artists who I guess when we’re at school we’re not asked whether we like them or not – they are held up as people of genius. It’s not to be taken too seriously, but it is nice to give people the opportunity to decide, for example, ‘Rembrandt is not my cup of tea, but Picasso is.’”

In other rooms are more contemporary self-portraits by artists including Francis Bacon, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Tracey Emin. Some are more challenging than others, such as a [Nan Goldin photograph called Nan One Month After Being Battered](#), which depicts her with a vivid black eye. She took it to prevent herself forgetting the damage caused by a boyfriend’s violence.

Other works on display include 50 passport photographs by the Colombian artist Juan Pablo Echeverri, a tiny sample of the thousands that must exist since he [began in 2000 going to photo booths and taking shots of himself in different guises](#).

In the same room are works from [The Honeymoon Suite, by young British artist Juno Calypso](#), which depict her one-woman road trip to a honeymoon hotel in Pennsylvania, a place she has called a “1960s pink gothic nightmare”.

Calypso said her longstanding interest in depicting herself was a pragmatic one. “It is out of necessity to be honest – working with other people stresses me out. It was: ‘How can I work by myself? How can I have a job when I don’t have to speak to anyone?’”

She is very much part of the selfie generation – “stupid millennials and their selfies!” – and naturally comfortable with it. “In 10 years it will be like TV or the telephone. We’re going to be embarrassed that we gave it this much attention and made it seem so novel and had this moral panic when it is just a thing that is going to be normal very soon. It is just a camera that faces your face – that’s all it is.”

The exhibition argues that what we think of as a selfie – taking our own picture with our own camera – is not entirely new. Photographs in the show include Stanley Kubrick looking intently into a mirror as he takes a photograph of himself, and George Harrison taking a picture of himself in front of the Taj Mahal in 1966.

The very first selfie is named as one [from December 1920 of five moustachioed men in hats and suits on a New York rooftop](#) cheerfully holding aloft a briefcase-sized camera at arm’s length. Little could they imagine a world when more than a million selfies are taken every day, often in alarming circumstances – diving with sharks, being chased by bulls, or [during an illegal climb up an outrageously tall building](#).

Examples of all those are on display at the Saatchi, as well as celebrity photobombs and memorable selfies such as the one taken by [Barack Obama with David Cameron and the Danish prime minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt](#).

Also in the show are works by young British photographers – all given a smartphone by the show’s sponsor Huawei to take new works – and the shortlisted contenders for a competition in which 14,000 selfies were entered.

Hurst hopes the show will be seen as fun as well as exploring more serious themes. “Art galleries can still be pretty intimidating places, and our role is

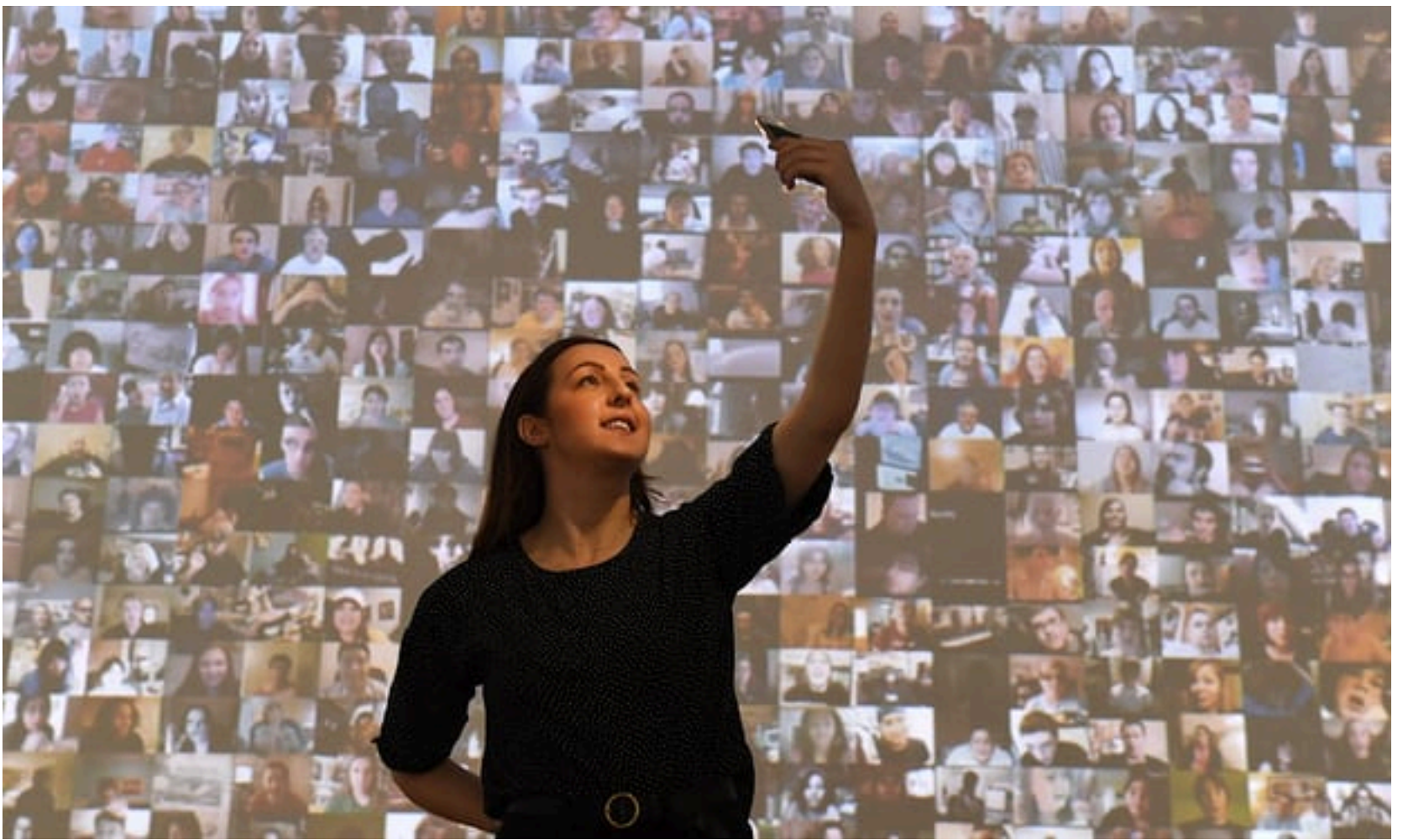
really simple – it is to bring contemporary art and how visual imagery is now being made to as wide an audience as possible. Something like a selfie is a very good entry point.”

He admitted that some people hate selfies, seeing them as inane, but argues that they should embrace them. “I’m going to make a confession. Until the day before yesterday, I’d never taken a selfie. It is a generational thing. My kids give me a hard time about it ... but you run with something, then it runs with you.

“The selfie is by far the most expansionist form of visual self-expression, whether you like it or not ... The art world cannot really afford to ignore it.”

- From Selfie to Self-Expression, Saatchi Gallery, London SW3, from 31 March-23 July, free.

[See some images from the exhibit the next page.](#)



A Saatchi gallery employee poses in front of thousands of images of people using social media during a preview of Selfie to Self-Expression. Photograph: Andy Rain/EPA



A detail from an 1889 self-portrait by Vincent van Gogh that features in From Selfie To Self-Expression at the Saatchi gallery in London. Photograph: The Courtauld Gallery/PA



A visitor takes a selfie in front of a collection of daily passport photos by Juan Pablo Echeverri at the exhibition. Photograph: Victoria Jones/PA



A guest at a preview. Photograph: Stuart C. Wilson/Getty Images



Journalists and guests attend the press view. Photograph: Stuart C. Wilson/Getty Images