

Sarah Lucas (b.1962), *Self-Portraits*, 1990–98



Digital images courtesy of The Artist, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London

Key Facts:

- Medium: Iris print
- Size: 12 prints, dimensions variable (height: 78–98 cm; width: 72–90 cm)
- Collection: British Council Collection

1. ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Visual analysis: The series comprises a mixture of black-and-white, colour and collaged photographs. The artist is the subject of each image, though her appearance varies greatly. In the majority, we see Lucas' face looking out at us from behind a dark curtain of hair. Provocative or arresting, she challenges us to return her gaze. In other photographs, she is engaged in an activity, smoking and/or on top of, or sandwiched between parts of, a toilet. Neither type presents her in a light we might expect from a female artist; rather, her unflinching gaze and androgynous appearance suggest that gender is something fluid and up for question. One photograph stands apart from others in the series: entitled *Summer* (1998), it depicts liquid being thrown at Lucas' face. The fluid distorts Lucas' features and causes her to look away from the lens. In many of the photographs, additional objects add humour and interest: a skull, fried eggs, knickers, a large fish, a mug of tea, a banana. Together with Lucas' candid postures, sexual puns are made more apparent and the objects themselves become symbolic. Lucas' legs spread wide and ending in heavy-duty boots are often photographed from below, with this view enhancing our impression of them as strong and dominant. The photographs are both a retort to the laddish culture of 1990s Britain and a reflection of the growth of the 'ladette'.

Subject matter: The self-portrait series clearly places the spotlight upon Lucas herself. Seen within the wider context of the YBAs (Young British Artists), alongside such practitioners as Gillian Wearing, Sam Taylor-Johnson (née Wood) and Tracey Emin, the theme of the artist as a celebrity lacking in inhibitions and ready to confront their audience directly is a clear current running through the work.

'I had this double-page spread from the Sport, which was about the hot weather that had just broken out. It said 'SHINE ON' in great big letters, and it had this woman in a T-shirt with an ice cream. It was such a great picture. I loved it, but it was obvious to me, doing the banana thing, that even though there's the same issue of titillation, my stance is different' (Lucas, in Collings and Lucas, 2002).

As with much YBA work, there is a deliberate attempt to draw material from the tabloids and insert it into the realm of high art. By borrowing forms from the mass media, a strategy seen previously in Pop Art under Richard Hamilton and Andy Warhol, Lucas' photographs emphasise the subtle sexualisation or fetishisation of the female form, but through the guise of championing the very medium she sets out to question. Julian Stallabrass has said of Lucas that her work has the effect of *'placing the viewer in a situation where voyeurism and the pleasures of looking collide with conventional liberal attitudes'* (1999).

Though Lucas is fully clothed in almost all of these photographs, references to her 'sex' and the objectification of women are made through stand-in phalluses. In *Got a Salmon On #3* (1997), she stands outside a men's public toilet with a salmon slung over her blazered shoulder. In *Self Portrait with Fried Eggs* (1996) she sits in an armchair, the camera lens aligned to her groin, with two freshly fried eggs over the top of her T-shirted breasts. In *Smoking and Human Toilet Revisited* (both 1998), we get a glimpse of a more meditative Lucas, a private moment glanced from above that suggests a grander narrative on the scale of Emin's concurrent, and equally confessional, *My Bed* (1998).

2. CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

It is known that Lucas was interested in the work of feminist theorist Andrea Dworkin while at Goldsmiths (now University of London). She has cited Dworkin as an inspiration, particularly the controversial books *Pornography* (1979) and *Intercourse* (1987). The subtitle of Dworkin's seminal text *Pornography* was 'Men Possessing Women', referring to the role pornography plays in the perpetration of violence against women by men. Dworkin was criticised by some for disallowing women their own sexual desire by focusing on men; however, in this series by Lucas we see a recurrence of strong female personas. This reclaiming of the female draws comparison with the photographic work of Cindy Sherman, an artist to whom Lucas appears to make clear reference.

Though Margaret Thatcher's premiership ended in 1990, the impact of her policies – particularly her axiom '*there's no such thing as society*' – is seen to have had a profound effect on the YBA group of artists that flourished in the 1990s.

'There's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look after themselves first.'
(Margaret Thatcher)

By 1990, the UK economy was in recession. In order for artists to ensure that their careers had legs, they needed to rely on private patronage and entrepreneurship. Lucas attended Goldsmiths in London from 1984 to 1987 under the tutorship of Michael Craig-Martin, whose Conceptual work *An Oak Tree* (1973) had reconditioned the use of the readymade as introduced by Marcel Duchamp in 1914. The legacy of this can be seen in such early works by Lucas as *Two Fried Eggs and Kebab* (1992), a table with two eggs and a kebab that foreshadows the self-portrait of a similar subject seen here, as well as *Au Naturel* (1994). Lucas was a contemporary of Damien Hirst at Goldsmiths and showed her work in 'Freeze', a 1998 exhibition curated by Hirst and housed in a warehouse. In 1993, Lucas set up 'The Shop' with Tracey Emin. This enterprise was a temporary retail outlet selling art

multiples operating in a similar way to the pop-up shops and restaurants that later become ubiquitous in London and other major cities.

For Lucas, the nod to Duchamp is present in the toilet that appears in two of her photographs, both of which have titles that reference the 'human toilet'. Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) was an upturned porcelain urinal signed 'R Mutt' that challenged the use of low-grade objects as art. *Fountain* also brought into the high art sphere the subject of base human processes, such as urination and excretion, which were the preserve of private experience rather than polite society – particularly the kind that frequented art galleries. It is exactly these issues of class and taste that Lucas' work draws upon. She shocks her audience with her unabashed crudeness, clutching the cistern itself in *Human Toilet II* (1996) as though she is part of its very plumbing. In this work, she also relies on the cold, hard, black enamel for her modesty, as it covers her seemingly naked body beneath. Her nakedness seems to draw attention to the human form as a processing unit, caught up in the consumption and excretion of products, in much the same way as the female form can be seen to have been objectified. Duchamp was also interested in the portrayal and nuances of gender: in Man Ray's 1921 photograph of Duchamp as his alter ego, Rose Selavy, we observe an inversion of the female/male positioning, likewise seen in Lucas' work.

3. DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

The photographs are all Iris prints, made using a method of photographic printing introduced in 1985 by Iris Graphics, originally of Stoneham, Massachusetts. The photographic medium, not recognised as a fine art medium until more recently, provided female artists such as Cindy Sherman, Martha Rosler and Nan Goldin with a means of making work that was a distinct move away from painting and sculpture, which were viewed as patriarchal forms of art-making. During the second half of the twentieth century, photography had become popular as a way to capture temporal artworks, such as performance or land/earth art, or as a method to explore semiotics through Conceptual art. The aforementioned female artists, however, used the photograph as a stage either to present carefully choreographed shots (Sherman/Rosler) or as a much more intimate and confessional tool (Goldin). Both of these methods seem to be evident in Lucas' handling of the camera. She also appears to draw upon David Hockney's use of Polaroid collage in *Self Portrait with Mug of Tea* (1993).

The series is part of an edition of one hundred and fifty, suggesting the reproducible nature of working in photography and perhaps referencing Duchamp's *Boîte-en-Valise* (1935–41), where the artist's work can be commodified on repeat.

4. WAYS IT HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED BY PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES

Lucas is smoking in many of the photographs. In 1998, she spoke of *'possessing time in a palpable way, stopping to pause and contemplate. It's really important to have areas of your life – whether it's walking into a pub or smoking – where you suddenly feel you've found your own time zone'* (Lucas, quoted in Kent, 1998). The use of the photographic medium to capture these seemingly banal moments befits her focus on the temporal. This idea is thrown into greater focus in *Self Portrait with Skull* (1997), where the skull could be viewed as a contemporary 'memento mori' were it not for its suggestive positioning between Lucas' thighs.

Elizabeth Fullerton has noted that: *'Lucas languished in the shadow of her boyfriend Gary Hume and other men in the group (those YBAs who participated in Freeze, 1988), who were being feted with shows in Europe and America. Disillusioned, she gave up art and, paradoxically, found her own voice. Fuelled by anger and feminist literature, she made a portrait of herself, Eating a Banana (1990). With no make-up, short hair and a leather jacket, she glowers confrontationally at the viewer in an "are you looking at me?" way. Yet the pose is ambiguous, the very act of eating the phallic fruit potentially implying "come hither" at the same time'* (2016).

In these early stages Gary Hume was behind the lens and both he and Lucas have made reference to the clear 'male gaze' implicit in the shot. Lucas said of the image, *'I suddenly could see the strength of the masculinity about it - the usefulness of it to the subject struck me at that point, and since then I've used that'* (Barber, 2000).

Gregor Muir's observation of Lucas is perhaps helpful here: *'Slightly androgynous in appearance, Lucas didn't care much for regular women's clothing, opting instead for jeans, T-shirts and a bit of leather. She smoked like a trooper and had a working-class accent so she came across as a bit of a toughie'* (2009).

Elizabeth Manchester, writing for Tate, describes how she feels that *'Lucas is fascinated by the paradoxically co-existing drives towards both sex and death described by Sigmund Freud in his essay Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920). She refers to this in Self Portrait with Skull 1997, a photograph in which she sits on the floor with her legs apart and a skull positioned between her feet. Equating her sex with death, this image encapsulates the fear of obliteration, through a projected fantasy of engulfing and swallowing, evoked traditionally by the female body. For Lucas, as the female subject, this threat is posed by her own urges towards pleasure and self-destruction'* (2001).

Related works:



Left Sarah Lucas, *Two Fried Eggs and a Kebab*, 1992.

Digital image courtesy of The Artist, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London



Sarah Lucas, *Au Naturel*, 1994. Digital image courtesy of The Artist / Saatchi Gallery

Further reading:

- Barber, Lynn (2000). 'Drag Queen', *Observer Magazine*, 30 January 2000, pp.10–16.
- Collings, Matthew, and Lucas, Sarah (2002). *SL: Sarah Lucas*. London: Tate Publishing.
- Fullerton, Elizabeth (2016). *ARTRAGE: The Story of the BritArt Revolution*. London: Thames & Hudson.
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- Manchester, Elizabeth (2001). 'Sarah Lucas', Tate Website.
- Muir, Gregor (2009). *Lucky Kunst: The Rise and Fall of Young British Art*. London: Aurum Press.
- Stallabrass, Julian (1999). *High Art Lite: British Art in the 1990s*, London: Verso.