



MICHAEL ISKOWITZ SELF-PORTRAITS 1989–2009



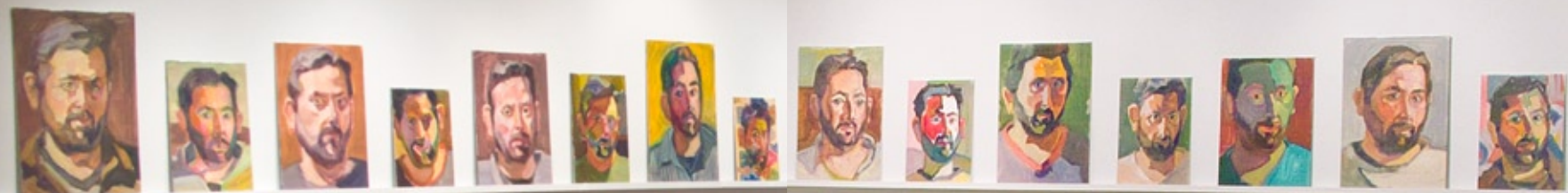
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**Michael Iskowitz:
Self-Portraits 1989–2009**

**Esopus Space
64 West Third Street, #210
New York, New York 10012**

Front Cover: Michael Iskowitz, Untitled self-portrait, 2008, Oil on canvas board, 12 x 18 inches [detail]

Back Cover: Michael Iskowitz, Untitled self-portrait, 2009, Oil on canvas, 18 x 24 inches



Interview with Michael Iskowitz

Tod Lippy: This show includes two series of self-portraits: the smaller ones you've been painting in the last couple of years and some larger ones from 1989 and 1990. How did the earlier series come about?

Michael Iskowitz: Those big ones were done when I was a student at Cooper Union. Some of them were even exhibited in a show in the hallway there. They got a favorable reaction, so that's good.

Why did you start doing them in school? Were they a class assignment?

Well, my first semester in the second year I started having emotional problems, and then I had to go into therapy, so I guess for some reason, at some point, I decided to do these portraits of myself. I felt like I just had to do them. Each one is kind of a metaphor about how I felt about certain things at the time. The biggest one [*Fig. 1*] with the intense red background is about this girl. I was 19 years old, and had all of this sexual energy. You know, you get emotionally attached to somebody and you don't want to, but you have no choice. It's pretty steamy. You can see the passion in the painting and also one eye is blinded. Just like, you know, he's trying to pull away. I really wanted the

face to feel like tissue paper, to have that really soft energetic quality. The others relate to different feelings—like the one that’s blue, with the crystalline structure to the face—that’s like, “Michael is cold,” almost like I’m frozen.

You didn’t paint any of these for almost 20 years. Why did you start working on them again recently?

I started doing this second round of portraits in 2008 because I had been doing watercolors of toy bears, and nobody really cared about them. My teacher said they looked “cute” but that they didn’t have any psychological edge or drama to them. You know, painting should have some drama. So I thought to myself, “What am I going to do?” And then it occurred to me: If I started doing self-portraits again, it might be like plugging my unconscious into a socket. That’s the metaphor I was thinking of—that there would be this electric charge.

Some of the portraits are very naturalistic, while others almost dip into abstraction.

I guess I go back and forth. It swings around like a pendulum. Some are just direct observation, and others reflect how I feel about something personally. If I get too repre-

sentational in one, then I want more color, or to experiment in some different way, with the next one. They go round and round. And I try to make every one of them look like me, but obviously they all look different. This one [Fig. 2] looks like Eddie Murphy—I was watching him on TV, and then I did this portrait. I almost put fangs in there, actually—I took them out. This one [Fig. 3], it looks like the guy in that movie with Jim Carrey, where he was playing the comedian from *Taxi*....

Andy Kaufman?

Yeah—the eyes are so close together. I painted one that reminds me of a guy I saw in a Subway store. And another one that looks like my neighbor. I tried to make them look like me, but sometimes they end up looking like someone else.

Somebody like Rembrandt—his self-portraits all look like him. But even so, he would dress differently, or portray himself as an actor playing different roles, or someone with different careers. Somebody told me a couple of years ago that they saw a show of these paintings of George Washington by six different artists. And when you put them all together, they all looked like different people. And then you had to ask yourself which one really represented



Fig. 1. *Untitled self-portrait*, 1990
Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 inches



Fig. 2. *Untitled self-portrait*, 2008
Oil on canvas board, 11 x 14 inches



Fig. 3. *Untitled self-portrait*, 2008
Oil on canvas board, 12 x 16 inches



Fig. 4. *Untitled self-portrait*, 2008
Oil on canvas board, 9 x 12 inches

George Washington. So, I guess, which one of these is the real Michael Iskowitz?

Do you use a mirror, or do you work from photos?

I use a mirror, and I've painted most of them in the garage. A lot of them I did over the winter, and there's no heat out there, so at times it was like 22 degrees. My parents told me to use the space heater but I said, "No, I don't need it, I'm fine." That feeling, sitting in a cold room, painting—I kind of enjoyed that. It pretty much takes me an hour to do each one, and for a while I was doing one every day.

Do you start each portrait with a particular approach in mind?

Sometimes. I take ideas—images in my head—and I put them together in big clumps, and then I do a portrait and see what comes out of it. Each one is different. Like I'll think: What it would be like to do one of these if I was blind? What kind of color would it be? Or what if I did one of "Michael as an alien"? Some of them are really scary-looking.

In one of the self-portraits [*Fig. 4*], there's the figure of a bird hidden in the face—see, here's the beak. My teacher

told me that the Abstract Expressionists had a rule—that there should be nothing representational in the painting. I hope I'm describing this in the right way, but what they would do is paint for a while, then they would take a break, and when they came back, refreshed, if they saw anything in the painting that resembled an object, they would paint it out. *[laughs]* So I don't know, maybe it's kind of a human tendency to do that kind of thing.

How do you think these relate to the rest of your work?

I'm not sure they really do relate to the rest of my work. Maybe the "Doll House Society" drawings and paintings are similar in a certain way. I've heard that therapists often have children play with dolls as a kind of therapy, and those works with the dolls, I think, have that kind of unconscious energy in them. You know, I take the experiences of my life and put them into the situations I'm depicting with the dolls. And it's kind of the same thing with the portraits, except they push it further, because with those I'm connecting to myself directly.

When I'm working on these I imagine this explosion of spiraling energy—like chakras in yoga—coming out of them; it's very intense. I remember, during my third year at Cooper, a fellow student came up to me after he saw my

paintings and asked me, "Mike, are you on drugs?" And I said, "No, I'm not on drugs. Why?" And he said, "Well, your paintings show what I see when I'm on drugs." And then he kind of shrugged and said, "Wow, I guess you're a natural." *[laughs]*

They are incredibly powerful.

Like I said, it's kind of like plugging into my unconscious with the electric cord. Which reminds me of something: When my therapist visited Spain he went to the Picasso museum there. You know how psychological Picasso can be—how deep inside himself he could go. And my therapist told me that after the second floor he had to leave; he couldn't take all of that emotion and unconscious brought to the surface. Maybe in some way I hope I can reach that deep into myself with these.

Exhibition Checklist

SOUTH WALL

1. *Untitled self-portrait*, 1990 (on floor)
Oil on canvas; 30 x 40 inches
2. *Untitled self-portrait*, 2008
Oil on canvas board; 12 x 16 inches
3. *Untitled self-portrait*, 2008
Oil on canvas board; 9 x 12 inches
4. *Untitled self-portrait*, 2008
Oil on canvas board; 11 x 14 inches
5. *Untitled self-portrait*, 2008
Oil on canvas board; 8 x 10 inches
6. *Untitled self-portrait*, 2008
Oil on canvas board; 11 x 14 inches
7. *Untitled self-portrait*, 2008
Oil on canvas board; 9 x 12 inches
8. *Untitled self-portrait*, 2008
Oil on canvas board; 12 x 16 inches
9. *Untitled self-portrait*, 2008
Oil on canvas board; 8 x 10 inches
10. *Untitled self-portrait*, 2008
Oil on canvas board; 11 x 14 inches

WEST WALL

11. *Untitled self-portrait*, 1990
Oil on canvas; 24 x 30 inches
12. *Untitled self-portrait*, 1990
Oil on canvas; 24 x 30 inches
13. *Untitled self-portrait*, 1990
Oil on canvas; 24 x 30 inches
14. *Untitled self-portrait*, 1990
Oil on canvas; 24 x 30 inches
15. *Untitled self-portrait*, 2009
Oil on canvas board; 18 x 24 inches
16. *Untitled self-portrait*, 2009
Oil on canvas; 18 x 24 inches
17. *Untitled self-portrait*, 2009
Oil on canvas board; 18 x 24 inches

NORTH WALL

18. *Untitled self-portrait*, 1990 (on floor)
Oil on canvas; 24 x 30 inches
19. *Untitled self-portrait*, 2008
Oil on canvas board; 12 x 16 inches
20. *Untitled self-portrait*, 2008
Oil on canvas board; 9 x 12 inches
21. *Untitled self-portrait*, 2008
Oil on canvas board; 12 x 16 inches
22. *Untitled self-portrait*, 2008
Oil on canvas board; 9 x 12 inches
23. *Untitled self-portrait*, 2008
Oil on canvas board; 11 x 14 inches
24. *Untitled self-portrait*, 2008
Oil on canvas board; 12 x 16 inches
25. *Untitled self-portrait*, 2008
Oil on canvas board; 9 x 12 inches
26. *Untitled self-portrait*, 2008
Oil on canvas board; 11 x 14 inches
27. *Untitled self-portrait*, 2008
Oil on canvas board; 12 x 16 inches
28. *Untitled self-portrait*, 2008
Oil on canvas board; 9 x 12 inches

EAST WALL

29. *Untitled self-portrait*, 2008
Oil on canvas board; 11 x 14 inches
30. *Untitled self-portrait*, 2008
Oil on canvas board; 12 x 16 inches
31. *Untitled self-portrait*, 2008
Oil on canvas board; 9 x 12 inches
32. *Untitled self-portrait*, 2008
Oil on canvas board; 12 x 16 inches
33. *Untitled self-portrait*, 2008
Oil on canvas board; 11 x 14 inches
34. *Untitled self-portrait*, 2008
Oil on canvas board; 12 x 16 inches
35. *Untitled self-portrait*, 2008
Oil on canvas board; 8 x 10 inches
36. *Untitled self-portrait*, 2008
Oil on canvas board; 11 x 14 inches
37. *Untitled self-portrait*, 1989
Oil on canvas board; 18 x 24 inches

