



# carla

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## Gertrud Parker at Parker Gallery

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In Gertrud Parker's painting *Belvedere* (2017), the fanged head of a tiger floats disembodied against a deep blue background, looming over a brushed-in bespectacled blond (a stand-in for the artist herself). This perplexing self-portrait, which hangs alongside seven others, sets the tone for a group of works that toy with the notion of self-portraiture and the mercurial nature of

subjectivity. Parker, who is the grandmother of gallery owner Sam Parker, grew up in Vienna before fleeing Nazi occupation in the 1930s. She now lives in the Bay Area where, since the 1980s, she has made sculptures out of gut skin, or mammalian organ tissue. That textural materiality translates to her recent paintings, each of which are rendered in a thick encaustic, a new medium for Parker, formed by adding pigment to heated wax.

There is a funny tension at play in the works—they are stylistically in dialogue with early European modernism while simultaneously invoking the convention of self-portraiture in feminist art as well as more recent notions of selfie feminism. For example, *Looking in the Mirror* (2018) is, most simply, a mirror selfie. Unlike the other works in the show, which only utilize paint, the center of this work is a collaged photograph of the artist holding up an iPhone to take a picture of herself. This image is embedded in a wobbling painted bathroom scene replete with sink, tiles, and a potted plant that reminds equally of your Instagram feed, David Hockney's *Man in Shower in Beverly Hills*, George W. Bush's shower self-portrait, and Maria Lassnig's mirror drawings from the mid-'70s. Parker's playful framing of her own bathroom selfie merges her own gaze with the viewer's, an early feminist strategy of making oneself both object and subject.

In the other self-portraits, Parker's image is much more allusive, nearly anti-photographic. In *Shingles* (2017), Parker paints

herself standing against a shingled backdrop, in which the gridded shapes behind are painted in sloppy encaustic detail. Parker's own face is barely articulated. Thin, blurred dabs and strokes of color stand in for eyes, nose, and mouth. In almost all the works, her face is painted flatly, directly on the panel—giving it a barely-there quality in contrast to the thick encaustic that forms in dimensional masses around the figure. Moreover, in *Shingles*, the artist's entire body is painted with a shimmering paint that further emphasizes her phantasmal quality. Parker's self-portraiture flirts with self-erasure, or more precisely, with illegibility, the impossibility of imaging oneself. To this point, in another painting titled *Veil* (2017), the edges of Parker's body are barely delineated from the abstract forms of the background so that she seeps into the painting and vice versa.

In another work, *With the Artist's Sculpture* (2018), Parker's face hovers large behind an abstracted form in the foreground that, the title indicates, is a sculpture. Just as Parker's self-portraits are unstable or illegible images of the self, we can extrapolate from this particular painting that the artwork itself is an unstable representation of the artist. Parker is calling into question an artwork (which many have theorized is itself always a self-portrait) as a stable reflection of its maker.

*Belvedere*, then, takes on a new valence in relation to these other paintings. If this is a continuation of her exploration of reflections of

the self, might we infer that the big cat is a fractured part of herself? Parker suggests that both the artwork and the self are rife with capacious and uncontrollable meanings. The more we try to make stable images of ourselves, the more they get away from us. Importantly, in Parker's hands, the unstable self doesn't feel like a crisis. The work's playfulness is a necessary component of the kind of exploration that doesn't seek absolute answers or stable meanings. In placing a disembodied tiger, a mirror selfie, and her own sculpture side by side as self-portraits, Parker probes the myriad ways we try to fix and monumentalize our own subjectivities. Taken together, Parker's self-portraits are fragments, never allowing the subject to resolve into a mythologized whole.



Gertrud Parker, *Looking in the Mirror* (2018).  
Encaustic with gutskin and collage on panel,  
18 x 10 1/4 x 1 inches. Image courtesy  
of the artist and Parker Gallery, Los Angeles.