

Barry Schwabsky, "Nicola Tyson: Petzel Gallery," *Artforum*, December 2020, pp. 173 – 174.

Nicola Tyson

PETZEL GALLERY

Three of the eight paintings in Nicola Tyson's exhibition "Sense of Self" were designated as self-portraits, but they didn't tell you much about how she looks. First of all, they didn't have faces, usually a *sine qua non* of the genre. I can also assure you that, contrary to *Self-Portrait: Wings* (all works 2020), the artist lacks the feathery appendages common to birds, the ones covered in tiny iridescent scales boasted by butterflies, or the presumably more immaterial ones worn by angels. Likewise, if more prosaically, she did not (last time I saw her) have the massive body of the seated figure in *Big Yellow Self-Portrait*. Only *Self-Portrait: Stripes* might be a more plausible rendering, if only because the subject has been reduced to a generic verticality in the form of the stripes (mentioned in the subtitle) of the robe or whatever it is she is wearing. Maybe it's the painting's intense-blue background, but I was reminded of the pin-striped outfit in Henri Matisse's rendering of himself on the left-hand side of his great painting *The Conversation*, 1908–12. And for that matter, the other two Tyson self-portraits also seemed to recall, ever so discreetly, familiar works of art: *Wings* evoked Paul Klee's monoprint *Angelus Novus*, 1920, while *Big Yellow* reached further back into history to suggest, in a more general way, a late-Renaissance or Mannerist portrait—the arm depicted in Tyson's canvas, a massive blue oblong floating diagonally across the center seemed, as it were, to raise a defensive barrier between viewer and sitter. The image recalled those of the impressively clothed sitters in paintings such as Correggio's *Portrait of a Gentlewoman*, ca. 1517–19, or Bronzino's *Portrait of a Lady in Red*, ca. 1533.

In fact, all that signaled any of these as a self-portrait (beyond the titles) was the head of red hair each figure shares with the artist. Despite this sop to recognizability, it was clear from the exhibition's title that what was at stake was not the image Tyson sees in the mirror but something more like proprioception—an inner representation. And for someone who has devoted decades to painting, it's only natural that a sense of self be articulated via the dense history of the art on and through which she's so often reflected. Tyson's references to modernist or earlier painting, calculated or casual as they may be, are more than knowing nods to the cognoscenti: They

Nicola Tyson, *Big Yellow Self-Portrait*, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 80 × 62 ¼".



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are part of a continuing effort to lay earnestly playful claim to the entire terrain of her art. And more than in most of the artist's past work, in these images the psychological freight carried by the figure seems less important than the chromatic and formal gusto with which she renders it. Klee's angel may be transfixed by the scene of history, but Tyson's has lift-off. Not all the pieces in the show were quite so ebullient: *The Disconnect*, more subdued, pictures two nearly abstract figures who can't quite click, while the unusually congested and disquieting composition *Don't Look Back* appeared to be a flayed close-up centered on a staring eye. But three still lifes of bouquets seemed to offer up portraits of the life force itself, in colors reverberating in all directions.

—Barry Schwabsky