Both Observer and Observed

By HELEN A. HARRISON

"SELF-PORTRAITS: The Message, The Material," the current exhibition at Hofstra University's Emily Lowe Gallery in Hempstead, is the latest in a series of recent shows that have explored the artist's function as both observer and observed. The duality of this role is especially timely in that contemporary trends have brought the artist more and more, so to speak, out from behind the shadow of the easel and into the limelight of public scrutiny.

This exhibition, initially organized by the painter Carolee Thea for the Schick Art Gallery of Skidmore College but substantially modified for the Hofstra venue, features 31 artists working in various media, including video. Its purpose is to explore the nature of what Ms. Thea describes as a combination of self-reporting, self-revelation and transformation, following the participants on "journeys through private landscapes, emotions and personae in search of the central self."

The idea of the artist as an explorer of the inner recesses of the human condition is a relatively recent one, dating back only to the Renaissance,

Dual role explored in exhibition of self-portraits at Hofstra gallery.

when humanism surfaced as a legitimate area of esthetic investigation. From the 16th century onward, the self-portrait has played an increasingly important role in that process, to the point that, for some artists — Gilbert and George, for example — they themselves actually become the work of art they create.

Of course, this is not the only method by which artists use self-imagery to communicate their intentions. Both the means and the results are as complex and varied as the individuals who resort to the mirror for subject matter, a fact that the current exhibition brings out.

What the show fails to do, however, is assemble a uniformly admirable group of examples with which to illustrate its thesis. One could hardly expect a thorough treatment in a selection as small as the gallery allows, but given the limitations of space, one might wish that fewer incidental works had been featured, and that more artists for whom the self-portrait is a primary vehicle had been included.

Lucas Samaras, who has consistently and even obsessively presented a distorted, agonized self in his photo-transformations, was unaccountably dropped from the revised show, and other likely candidates, such as Marisol, Claes Oldenburg and Larry Rivers, who have consistently inserted themselves as interlocutors between their art and the public, are not represented. Perhaps they would not be missed if there were a uniformly high standard in the show as a whole.

A few of the foremost self-portraitists at work today are indeed included, along with several artists whose names are less familiar but who are equaly worthy of notice. Among the former group is Robert Arneson, whose particular brand of combined self-advertisement, caricature and social commentary has earned him a unique stature among ceramic sculptors. His color woodcut, "California Artist," shows off the typical Arneson persona, confrontational but protected from deep scrutiny by a pair of sunglasses, wearing the knowing smirk of the consummate bluffer.

Chuck Close, who has reprocessed his own image into progressively more schematic forms for nearly 20 years, is represented by one of his manipulated paper multiples. The photographic brutality of his earlier style is here broken down into a grid of tonal elements, forcing the viewer to extend perception to the limits of recognizability. Unlike Mr. Arneson, whose personality is a primary factor in the image he creates, Mr. Close becomes a cypher who exists solely as a vehicle for formal experimentation.

Cindy Sherman's photographs of herself in costume can hardly be considered self-portraits at all, since they cast the artist in surrogate roles that in fact deny or negate her selfhood. In the example on view, she assumes the guise of an Arabian character, robed and turbaned like a mysterious nomad. As usual, her role is generic rather than specific, inviting speculation and the invention of a narrative context with dramatic implications.

The theatricality of performance art is represented by Eleanor Antin's video piece, "The Ballerina and the Bum," in which the artist casts herself as an aspiring dancer from some unspecified Middle American small town who envisions stardom in New York City. As in Ms. Sherman's work, she assumes an emblematic role, merging her own identity with that of her character and blurring the distinctions between autobiography and parable.

Role-playing and transformation are major subthemes in self-portraiture, involving the simultaneous veiling and revelation of the artist's character. The mask is an essential feature of many of these works, such as Rhoda Sherbell's "La Sept Tete," its title a pun on the group of images that, together with the artist's head, forms a single, seven-part unit. The miniature faces inhabiting the sculpture reflect the multiple natures of the individual, none of which by itself expresses the complete person.

Personalized role-playing can be self-deprecating, as in Luis Cruz Azaceta's "Mechanical Doggie," in which the artist becomes a garish toy about to be lured by a bone on a string. The work seems to symbolize the manipulation to which many people, artists and others, often feel subjected, and against which they are as foolishly helpless as the toy. It can also become self-congratulatory, as in Charles Parness's "Self-Portrait With Wolf Mask," with the artist revealing a benign countenance beneath his leering disguise — the sheep in wolf's clothing, the nice guy beneath the gruff exterior.

The artist as hero, boldly undertaking the creative act, is symbolized by Anita Janosova's self-portrait before her easel, sternly contemplating her own figure. Her solitary, athletic pose drips with determination, but the effect is rather too stereotyped to be convincing.

The seemingly straightforward depiction of the artist in the studio is often less objective than it seems, revealing attitudes toward work, subject matter and the artist's role as both observer and interpreter. Joan Semmel portrays herself in a relaxed moment, holding a photograph and facing a model, whom we see reflected in a mirror that further reflects the one the artist is using to record her own image. This complex and revealing work, outwardly calm yet filled with lively, intriguing references to creative and private life, provides the kind of insights that several of the more minor works in this genre fail to offer.

The exhibition is on view through next Sunday. The gallery is open Tuesday from 10 A.M. to 9 P.M., Wednesday through Friday from 10 A.M. to 4:45 P.M. and Saturday and Sunday from 1 to 5 P.M. Admission is free. ■