

## Suzanne Rose: “Moments of Being”

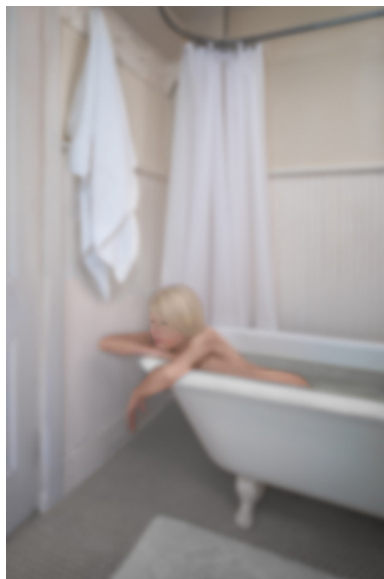
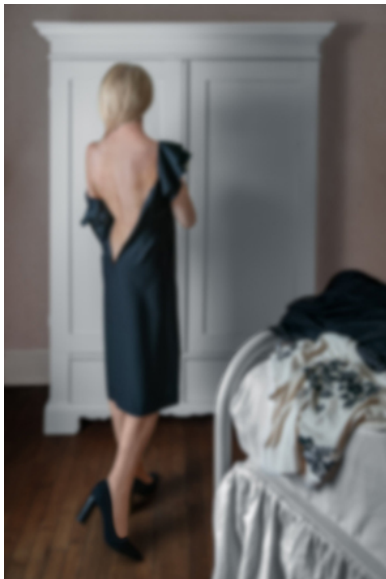
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Review by Tom Mullaney

Self-portraiture is currently a ubiquitous genre but one that dates back to antiquity. The introduction of oil paint around 1500 helped artists, such as Durer, Holbein and Rembrandt, to adopt the new opportunity to portray themselves on canvas. Today, photography has replaced the canvas and become the defining visual trope of the twentieth century. And, during the last fifty years, self-portraiture, with the advent of the internet, has become a commodity.

However, the self-portrait remains a serious endeavor for exploring and depicting a subject’s character, mood, and identity. And rather than focusing on the face, lips, and eyes, as in olden days, the emphasis now is on the whole body.

That is the technique photographer Suzanne Rose uses in her show, “Moments of Being”, now at the Zolla Lieberman Gallery. Her five large (five-foot high) and one smaller print are arresting at first gaze but then give way to a serious examination of the works. Giving the prints a deeper viewing, I admired Rose’s assured sense of composition and control of the camera. Rose, as both artist and model, adopts the self-portrait mode but then flips the standard frontal pose and turns her back to the camera, shifting the series’ focus onto the story her works tell of love, loss and grief.

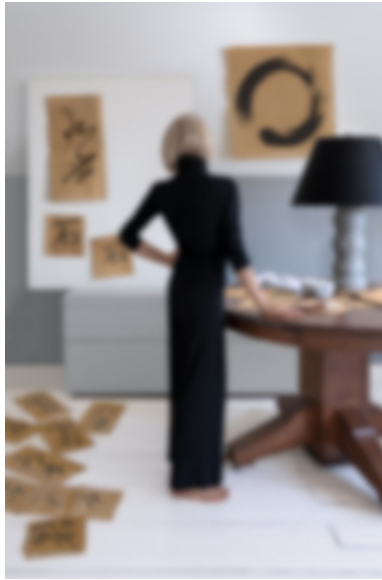


Suzanne Rose (Left), *Undressing*, 2022. Pigment ink jet print on museum weight paper, 56 x 42.5 inches. (Right) *Bath*, 2022. Pigment ink jet print on museum weight paper, 56 x 42.5 inches. Photos: Zolla Lieberman Gallery.

The image that first caught my eye, *Undressing*, depicts the artist in her bedroom, back turned, frozen in thought, with the left side of her dress hanging off her shoulder and reaching down to her waist. Her mood appears to be one of reflection and some inner turmoil. That pose drew me in to view the entire show and deduce the story behind the prints.

There are three more backward-facing self-portraits and two in profile. A second one, *Bath*, shows Rose in profile with her head on the bath rim, hands overhanging the tub, looking forlorn. The portrait is a masterful depiction of someone at a pivotal moment of solitary loss.

With *Anniversary*, the previous photos serve as preview of the show's dramatic intent. Rose is sitting in a side chair with her left arm on her forehead, alone in her thoughts, looking at a hanging black dress, recollecting on the day's happy occasion gone wrong. Rose, in her artist statement, reveals that these reenactments of distressing turning points in her life, relive the painful letting go of her beloved home and her long-standing marriage.



Suzanne Rose (Left) *Anniversary*, 2022. Pigment ink jet print on museum weight paper, 56 x 42.5 inches. (Right) *Brushwork*, 2022. Pigment ink jet print on museum weight paper, 56 x 42.5 inches. Photos: Zolla Lieberman Gallery.

Her suite of self-portraits, chronicling a private and overwhelming period in her life, struck me as brave and skillfully staged. The work avoided both the pitfalls of narcissism and limp cliché.

Rose has said she turned to poetry to help pick up the pieces and chart a new course. She confessed that she was particularly consoled by Elizabeth

Bishop's poem, *One Art* which reads, "The art of losing isn't hard to master; | so many things seem filled with the intent | to be lost that their loss is no disaster."

Rose seems to have taken those lines to heart and, in the exhibit's final shot, *Brush Work*, she turns to her art for centeredness and meaning. Yet, that is no happy ending. The circle on the wall (a Zen meditation Ensō) shows a broken circle, a sign that the artist has more self-work to do to make it whole. This provocative exhibit is recommended for your viewing and reflection. The show continues until July 30.

Besides portraiture, Rose has photographed a variety of subjects. One is a suite of formal, black-and-white studies of the natural world, part of a series documenting the destructive consequences of the Anthropocene. That term signifies the current geological epoch we are in, marking human's dominating and damaging impact on the natural environment, resulting in climate change, pollution, and a grave loss of biodiversity.

The suite, "Blind Spot", viewed online, consists of 34 images, mainly of bare or disfigured trees. Some are beautifully lit by sky or the moon. One striking image is of three tall mounds of excavated earth resembling sand dunes, Rose skillfully captures these "subjects," nature's evidence of the harmful environmental impact caused by man.



Suzanne Rose (Left) *Clear Cutting*. (Right) *Hunting Blind in an Open Field*.  
Photos: <https://suzannerose.com>.

While a number failed to make much of an impression, either due to blandness or sheer repetitions of the subject, there were close to ten prints that I lingered over. They exerted a stronger pull, vividly documenting

evidence of the Anthropocene. Two prints that showed Rose's mastery are *Clear Cutting* and *Hunting Blind in an Open Field*. The first shows two groves of trees ripped in half to make way for a miles-long thruway of electrical poles. The second, picturing a blind spot, is a stunning, chiaroscuro image of a cabin in a field. The blind spot is a structure in which a hunter can hide and wait for his prey, birds or a defenseless deer, to come into shooting range. The odds of a kill strongly favor the shooter.

Rose makes clear that she is no disinterested photographer. She clearly is upset by all the spoilage she sees. The Anthropocene poses the existential question of whether, given its record of misguided destruction, the human race will survive. Rose plans to continue the series theme, documenting more examples of human domination. Judging by the relative success of this suite, Rose may be a Rachel Carson with a camera.

Tom Mullaney, former Managing Editor of the *New Art Examiner*, now serves the magazine in a consulting capacity. He authored an arts blog, "Arts and About" for nearly a decade and has been published in *The New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Chicago Magazine*.

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