



## Melissa Shook: Early Self-Portraits 1972-1973 @Miyako Yoshinaga

By [Loring Knoblauch](#) / In [Galleries](#) / October 5, 2022

In our current smartphone era, the artistic idea of taking a single self portrait every day seems altogether obvious, almost ridiculously so. People Snapchat themselves every day as a matter of routine, or simply take selfies as they pass along through their lives, as part of an ongoing definition and documentation of identity.

To introduce directed intention to this process transforms the casual into the more formal – some artists have made such pictures in the same place or time every day (for a decently long period of time), adding a level of dedication and consistency that more improvisational forms of everyday photography lack, while others have gone further to consider alternate poses, props, or clothing (or lack thereof), introducing even more layers of potential conceptual thinking. But to claim today that the daily self portrait project is something new or groundbreaking would clearly stretch credibility; such projects have been done so much over the years (and so well, in some cases) that we’ve become somewhat numbed to any aesthetic innovation or real personal exploration that might actually be taking place.

But back in the early 1970s, the idea that a woman would take a photograph of herself every day, in most cases in various states of partial undress or complete nudity, was quite a bit more radical than it is today, and this is what Melissa Shook set out to do. Shook began her daily self-portraits in December of 1972, and continued them for the next eight months, capturing herself in the setting of her downtown New York loft, often against a simple blank wall.

For many, the “rediscovery” of Shook’s work from this period will trigger a quick flurry of possible influences and antecedents – the late 1960s and early 1970s were a busy time in feminist and conceptual photography, and a number of powerhouse female photographers were just getting started at that time, so we might be tempted to look at Shook’s project and inadvertently misunderstand the actual timeline. Cindy Sherman didn’t get to Hallwalls in Buffalo until 1975, and Francesca Woodman started at RISD that same year. And Hannah Wilke made some nude images of herself in 1974, as part of documenting a performance at the Kitchen, and went on to make more self-portraits in 1975 and 1976 (including a grid of gestures near her face). To actually get definitively earlier than Shook, we have to go back to VALIE EXPORT’s performances in the late 1960s, and then to the works of Rita Myers in 1971, and Eleanor Antin

and Ana Mendieta in 1972, and all of these weren't really exploring durational self-portraiture per se, but boldly using their nude bodies as a subject.

Given this historical context, Shook's overlooked daily project starts to feel altogether more ground-breaking and unexpected. This show is organized in clumps and clusters of images, with Shook exploring one motif or another for a few weeks at a time underneath the broader daily self-portrait umbrella. At the end of December, she was aiming her camera back at the windows of her loft, taking in more of the modest living space, including a coffee table, a Christmas tree, and a cat, with the light streaming in creating shadows and contrasts. By early January of the next year, she had moved the camera away from that vantage point and instead pointed it a blank wall, its flat expanse interrupted only by a single potted avocado plant; as the days clicked by, she moved from fully clothed to fully nude, with intermediate stops punctuated by her hair tied up in a towel, her pose and the dappling of the light changing subtly each day.

In March, Shook moved in closer, making cropped nudes of her torso, exploring the forms and contours of her body, from both the front and back; these pictures have an aesthetic echo of old school Modernism, but with a more 1970s era personal mood, as the bodily examination feels intimate and attentive rather than actively male gaze abstracted. A few weeks later, she moved on to clothed head shot portraits, each facial expression punctuated or amplified by hand gestures, often isolating or framing an eye, a nose, or a mouth like a mask, with a kind of self-supplied re-imagination.

By May of 1973, Shook was back in full body mode, standing near the wall and the avocado plant again, now doing more expressive poses, mixing a little dance or yoga with more monster-like frights and scares, some nude, some partially clothed; compared to the facial portraits, these pictures feel like even more of a playful release, or a moment to let loose from too much photographic seriousness. But then the pendulum swings again, and still other works (undated, but from the same period) find Shook in a quiet reclining pose, her nude body cropped and reoriented with more shadowy nuance, as if she was trying to see her own familiar body with yet another set of eyes.

While these images, and two more that include her daughter Krissy (which would ultimately take shape as a project of its own), provide a succinct introduction to Shook's daily self-portraiture project, it seems logical that an appropriate next step for this body of work would be a scholarly monograph, which can more definitively set up the art historical context that surrounds the work and better place Shook inside its structure.

What is clear is that in the early 1970s Shook was pioneering a unique brand of daily experimentation, mixing observation, performance, and confessional identity creation, and improvising within the confined constraints of just a few aesthetic variables. Importantly, she stepped beyond making her female body the subject of her photographs to making versions of her self the subject – the introspection in these pictures is sometimes intense, giving the simple setup more charge and tension than we might have normally expected, especially when stretched out to cover month after month of looking back at herself. Few of us have inspected ourselves with such curiosity and brave creativity, and the consistent sensitivity and conceptual rigor found in these pictures requires that Shook's rightful place in arc of 1970s photography be better researched and clarified.