Pastiche and Parody:

Imitation's Role in Julie Heffernan's Self-Portraiture

Kyle Cupit

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In Julie Heffernan's images of self, an autobiographical obsession that consumes the artist's entire oeuvre, the genres and imagery of a conventionally feminine visual rhetoric are inescapable. But while it is undeniable that her works are at first glance embracing of an essentialist notion of femininity, a closer look at their maker and their execution reveals an agenda more socially and politically aware, an elaborate paradoxical weaving of imagery and agency that is at its heart not only feminine, but purely feminist.

Artists today work within a postmodern climate characterized by visual references to the aesthetics of the past, a quality artist and art theorist Adrian Piper referred to as, "a dissolution of faith in intellectual progress, and a corresponding attitude of mourning for the past glories and achievements of all previous stages of Euroethnic art history."[1] Within this atmosphere of longing for a time when the social-political-cultural-visual connection seemed more relevant and fundamental to society than it does at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Julie Heffernan utilizes her daunting technical skills as an artist to reference the creators and creations of history with a more personal and less woeful motive. With the proficient brush of an accomplished woman painter appropriating from and competing with the so-called "Great Masters," she utilizes the practice of imitation via parody and pastiche to create visual puzzles filled with art historical references that keep the viewer from ever completely reaching understanding. I intend to redefine the boundaries and intents inherent in Heffernan's use of those imitative practices by examining her background, working methods, and their role in her work, shedding the negative connotation associated with mimesis in contemporary culture and restoring imitation's potential for polemic through a decidedly feminist lens.

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[1] Adrian Piper, "The Triple Negation of Colored Women Artists," *Feminism-Art-Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 61.

Using three paintings held within North Carolina collections as exemplifiers of her oeuvre's suggestion of meaning and simultaneous prohibition of comprehension, I will demonstrate the feminine-feminist binary that lends her works so much of their power.

The derisive attitude with which pastiche is regarded, and parody is not, can best be understood by tracing the words back to their origins. Stemming from the Italian word "pasticcio," meaning, "pie," pastiche was originally intended for use within the culinary realm. Referring to a mixed dish, it bore with it the connotations of assemblage and combination that encouraged its later application to the fine arts.[2] In 1677, Roger de Piles defined "pastiche," as by this time pasticcio had become known as, "paintings that are neither originals nor copies."[3] Parody stems from the Ancient Greek word "parodia," a term two thousand years older than "pasticcio" originally used to describe emulative singers.[4] In both methods, copying is taken into account and made obvious by the artist for themselves and their audience. Parody and pastiche are bound by their purposefully revealed, textually indicated natures.

The difference lies in their evaluative characters. While pastiche is seemingly evaluation-free, parody brings with it an overtly evaluative nature. Parody obviously implies a critique of its source, while pastiche does not. This freedom from evaluative qualities has hindered the perception and reception of pastiche over the course of the past centuries and decades, relegating it to the realm of plagiarism and forgery.[5] Cultural theorist Frederic Jameson exemplified this attitude when he defined pastiche as "blank

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[2] Richard Dyer. *Pastiche.* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 8.
[3] Ibid., 22.
[4] Dyer, *Pastiche*, 40.
[5] Ibid., 24.

parody,"[6] however, nothing could be further from the truth. The self-conscious nature of pastiche's imitative production lends it an advanced form of self-reflexivity.[7] Pastiche's value lies in its historicity, its ability to be critical and acknowledging without being parodical. A work of pastiche intrinsically devalues the original from which it borrows, imitates, or emulates, by pointing to the source's arbitrariness.[8] Whether intended or not, pastiche robs the original of the aura of the irreplaceable, the mythical type of historicism we attribute to "masterpieces" evidenced by Western art history's hagiographic worship of a timeline of "Great Masters." For this reason I argue that the power of Heffernan's feminist agenda lies within her use of both exposed pastiche, enabled by her daunting familiarity with the art-historical canon, and a conventionally feminine visual rhetoric, focusing on the polemical potential of imitation.

Julie Heffernan's rigorous academic training serves as the foundation to which her work's technical and intellectual virtuosity is indebted. After graduating from Catholic school, she went on to earn her BFA from the University of California at Santa Cruz, and her MFA from the Yale School of Art by the age of twenty-five. Heffernan has lived in New York since 1998 and currently holds the position of assistant professor of fine art at New Jersey's Montclair State University.

A year after the completion of her master's degree in 1985, Heffernan received a Fulbright-Hayes grant to work in Berlin, where her aesthetic identity began to take shape. Her initial Berlin paintings, which were large, and satirical in the style of the Neoexpressionists, left her artistic vision unfulfilled. However, her experimental attempt at these did not pass without benefit to her aesthetic development: it was the taxing nature

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[6] Ibid., 137.
[7] Ibid., 92.

of her work during that year in Germany that led her to the discovery of what she calls "image streaming." After many twelve-hour stints of painting, Heffernan began noticing that her exhaustion took her to a place between sleep and consciousness, where fantastical imagery flooded her head. She began attempts to quickly jot down and incorporate these images into her work.[9] Leaving the large expressionist paintings behind, she rejected the anti-beauty atmosphere of the 1980s art world in favor of sensuous naturalistic paintings.[10]

Following her trip to Berlin, Heffernan began exploring the genre of still life (fig. 1) as a potential platform for her recently discovered practice of "image-streaming." It was here that her process of aesthetic borrowing began developing towards the complexity common in her full-length figure portraiture, since her still-life paintings serve as contemporary reinterpretations of the genre at its climax, seventeenth-century Dutch *vanitas* paintings (fig. 2).[11] Heffernan's allusion to the history of still life serves as the basis for her own reinterpretation: her still life paintings can be read as a commentary on the gross wastefulness of post-industrial society. These works' indebtedness to the past as a foundation for critique on the present is a quality that exemplifies the unapologetic use of pastiche that unifies her oeuvre.

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[8] Ibid., 157.

[9] Bill Rodriguez, "Dream Weaver: Julie Heffernan's Fecund Cornucopia of Imagery," *Boston Phoenix*, December 17-23, 2004. http://www.providencephoenix.com/art/top/ documents/04340687.asp (accessed October 23, 2008).

[10] Jennifer Moles, "Where's Julie? Searching for Signs of Identity in Julie Heffernan's *Self-Portrait as Infantas at the Well" (Master's Thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill,* 2006), 4.

[11] The seventeenth century Dutch were, in turn, familiar with the Ancient Greek and Roman practice of painting still life pictures of food, as well as the work of Baroque master Caravaggio, who had painted *Basket of Fruit* (fig. 3) at the turn of the seventeenth-century, and whose influence upon the genre was significant. Alan Chong and Wouter Kloek, *Still-Life Paintings from the Netherlands: 1550-1720* (Zwolle: Waanders Publishers, 1999), 13, 19

The three Heffernan works I have chosen to represent her full-length self-portraiture, *Self-Portrait as Wunderkabinett*, *Self-Portrait as Dirty Princess*, and *Self-Portrait with Birds in My Fingers*, were painted in three successive years beginning in 2003. These three works demonstrate the artist's utilization of titles, settings, and styles of dress to create a multitude of characters. Much like a young woman tearing through her dress-up box, Heffernan utilizes her impressive familiarity with the art historical canon as a wardrobe filled with centuries-worth of options—appropriating, assembling, combining, and reinventing as she pleases.

Self-Portrait as Wunderkabinett (fig. 4), painted in 2003 and now owned by the Mint Museum of Art in Charlotte, North Carolina, provides the most literal view of this dress-up like crafting of personality types. Translating to "Cabinet of Wonders," the title itself references a Renaissance room-type used by the aristocratic elite for the display of bizarre but precious curiosities. Cabinets of Wonders, also known as Cabinets of Curiosities, predated museums and were a sign of high status because of their great cost. In Heffernan's piece, opulently dressed women gaze out at the viewer languidly, as birds rise among mysterious baubles circling an extravagant chandelier. The room itself is filled not with the varied objects of curiosity that the title suggests, but rather with the women themselves as objectified knick-knacks. A full-length mirror serves as not only a reiteration of material wealth, but a possible shape-shift of the artist herself. Lining the walls are Heffernan's own artworks, calling to mind one of the most opulent and famous of art-centric *Wunderkabinette*: the Studiolo of Francesco I de' Medici (fig.5), located in Florence's Palazzo Vecchio. Dominated by a program of thirty-four large Italian

Mannerist paintings executed between 1569-70,[12] paintings that act as cabinet doors for Francesco's collection, the room is unique with regard to the importance placed upon the display of paintings despite its primary function as a *Wunderkabinett.* Considering her extensive art education, it seems impossible that this reference would be lost on the artist, and the Studiolo's art-centric aspect must have appealed to her continuous visual quest for identity. Her references to the history of aristocratic art do not stop there: the women's varied poses and timid awareness of the artist call to mind Velasquez's *Las Meninas* (fig. 6), the delicacy of the figures, genre details, and the painstaking attention paid to the minutia of the clothing call to mind the aristocratic portraiture of the Northern Renaissance (fig. 7), and the fantastical imagery's denial of terrestrial dictates and unabashed delight in things magical and mystic parallels the ideology and production of the twentieth-century Surrealists (fig 8). The whimsical nature of this piece can most likely be explained by Heffernan's use of "image streaming," a working method strikingly similar to the automatic writing techniques of those subconscious-obsessed Surrealists. [13]

Housed at the Ackland Art Museum in Chapel Hill, *Self-Portrait as Dirty Princess* (fig. 9) shows Heffernan presenting a different version of her identity. Although painted in 2004, a year later than *Wunderkabinett,* the visual premise is similar: a woman stands within a gallery of paintings adorned by an elaborate chandelier. The most obvious difference is the singularity of the figure, and thus the suggestion that it is this central female that represents Heffernan. In *Wunderkabinett* Heffernan therefore places herself

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[12] Larry J. Feinberg. "The Studiolo of Francesco I Reconsidered." *The Medici,* Michelangelo, and the Art of Late Renaissance Florence. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 47-48.

[13] Moles, "Where's Julie?," 9.

everywhere and nowhere, while here she clarifies in what way the painting is a self-portrait. The young woman again glances languidly at the viewer, now standing naked from the waist up, draped in dead game and garlands of flowers that emanate from her waist. Here birds fly within an elaborate room reminiscent of the elite salons of the French Rococo, such as the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, creating the impression of extravagant wealth. In her slender proportions, bare breasts, and gentle S-curve, the female's figure type can be read as a direct reference to Botticelli's Birth of Venus, whose Goddess of Love now serves as Heffernan's mannequin. The imitation of Dutch still life and genre painters, mentioned in accordance with her early works, appears again in the details of this painting. The skirt thick with flora and fauna calls to mind the careful studies of artists like Pieter Aertsen, Pieter Claesz (fig. 2), and Maria van Oosterwyck (fig. 11). Never once in Heffernan's paintings does she expose her genitalia. Instead what we see is a metaphorical lifting of her skirt to reveal a magically shape-shifted female sexuality that is at once tempting and elusive.[14] This exploration of metamorphoses links Heffernan to a historical chain stretching back to Ovid and calling to mind the work of Renaissance master Hieronymus Bosch[15] (fig. 12), who utilized loaded iconography to create images rife with sexual metaphor and allegory that depend upon personal interpretation for meaning.[16]

Even when Heffernan shifts her visual focus, as she has many times throughout her career, (still-life to full-figure works being the most dramatic turn), she remains reliant on appropriation, historical assemblage, and a postmodern sense of stylistic

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[14] David Humphrey. "Fuzzy Nimbus." *Julie Heffernan: Everything That Rises.* (Utica, New York: Brodock Press, 2006), 25.
[15] Marina Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds: Ways of Telling the Self.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 4-5, 23.

hybridism, as demonstrated in her 2005 painting *Self-Portrait with Birds in My Fingers* (fig. 13), in the collection of the Weatherspoon Museum in Greensboro. While the image at first seems altogether different—the figure is larger, no longer in a gallery-like setting, and the space flattened—the piece is consistent with the previous two paintings in its ethereal color palette and lighting, its focus on the central female, and its metaphorical transformation of the underneath of the subject's skirt. Here the artist stands gazing at the viewer, again impassive and adherent to a Botticellian sense of beauty. Birds are again present, although larger and entangled within a dense background of multicolored acanthus leaves, an overt reference to classicism, and thus a flaunting of her own intelligence. The animals of her skirt are gone, but the flowers frozen in a whirlwind of motion remain to disfigure and disperse her sexuality. Below the canopy of her rose-woven skirt a city burns, acting as this picture's most overt reminder of the artist's use of "image-streaming." A cindering automobile in the bottom left-hand corner serves as a nightmarish juxtaposition to the opulent beauty of the self-portrait above. Heffernan's cryptic vignettes call to mind the darkness of childhood fairy tales stemming from the pantomime theatre of the Victorian Period. Like Bosch and Surrealism, fairy tales often employ shape shifting, allegory, and metaphor. The painters contemporary with Victorian fairy tales, such as Richard Dadd and John Anster Fitzgerald (fig. 14), explored the subconscious and the taboo topic of sexuality in their works,[17] just as Heffernan does in hers. Like the other two works examined, this piece is a deftly painted self-portrait created via an intricate weaving of strands pulled from the canon of art history, and is thus reliant on imitation for creation and meaning, or suggestion thereof.

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[16] Lisa Tung, *Earthly Delights*, (Boston, MA: Massachusetts College of Art, 2004), 5.

The binary of intellectual pastiche versus feminist polemic that Heffernan straddles is dependent upon my claim that her oeuvre displays a sense of "essential femininity." In *Lexicon of the Debates*, a seminal text on feminist issues, Komar and Bartkowsi define essentialism as "the belief that there is an immutable, eternal, and transhistorical essence of femaleness and maleness," and go on to say that "For the essentialist, sexual difference is innate, natural, inborn, and persistent..."[18] An aversion to essentialism is expected because of the dangerously oppressive homogeneity with which it approaches gender, and I by no means intend to say that Heffernan herself views the world through an essentialist lens. Rather, the diversity of her paintings and the subversively feminist agenda behind them suggest the opposite: she recreates herself in each painting through setting, style of dress, composition, color, and title, crafting wildly disparate versions of femininities and feminisms. Lise Shapiro Sanders wrote in 2007 that contemporary feminism had transformed, "from a political struggle emphasizing women's shared oppression to an anti-essentialist discourse focusing on the construction of female identity..."[19] Why I call Heffernan's works "essentially feminine" rests in their paradoxical dependence upon patriarchal definitions of femininity, and women as creators, in order to undermine those views. Heffernan does not overtly question the "singularity" of femininity that those definitions put forth, but instead prescribes to an aristocratic, patriarchal concept of what it is to be "feminine" as a means of furthering her thoroughly postmodern agenda.

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[17] William Conger, Jan Susina and Maria Tatar, *Pixerina witcherina*, ed. Barry Blinderman and Timothy Porges (Normal: University Galleries of Illinois State University, 2002), 41.
[18] Wendy Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski, "A Lexicon of the Debates," *Feminist Theory: A Reader.* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 47.
[19] Lise Shapiro Sanders, "Feminists Love a Utopia: Collaboration, Conflict and the Futures of Feminism." *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration.* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 4.

During the course of patriarchal art history's systemic, institutionalized exclusion of women from success within the fine arts, female painters have been confined, until the twentieth-century, to the realms of still life, flower painting, genre scenes, and the occasional venture into portraiture. Heffernan remains purposefully entrenched within those genres. Her colors also quite often reflect the light palette subscribed to by women, her brushwork typically decorative in its careful attention to roses, butterfly wings, and opulent dresses, and her subject matter introspective as has been attributed to the "naturally emotional" nature of the female by the male writers of Western art history.

But for all the essential femininity in her paintings' imagery, they are feminist in their agency—her display of virtuosity in the canvasses' ruthless attention to detail, her development as a figure painter, and her role as intellectual and physical creator all challenge the patriarchal notion that procreativity and creativity cannot be manifest in one. As her 1980s feminist contemporaries turned away from the "medium of the male" to alternative channels like photography and installation artwork[20], Heffernan daringly wielded a paintbrush to begin an oeuvre that continues to be a testament to feminism in the fine arts. Additionally, her oeuvre's focus as a collection of self-portraits is radically assertive in its placement of the artist as both subject and object—giving Heffernan complete control over how her own body is represented, and reinforcing the bond between imagery and agency for this female artist. Through intellectual engagement with the art of imitation and an artistic adroitness rivaling any male painter she advances a subversively feminist agenda, examining what it means to be both feminine and a

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[20] Linda Nochlin, "Women Artists Then and Now: Painting, Sculpture, and the Image of the Self." *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art.* (New York: Merrell Publishers Limited, 2007), 49.

feminist postmodern female artist in a painted autobiography stretching over two decades, a superbly crafted cabinet of curiosities for us all to muse within.

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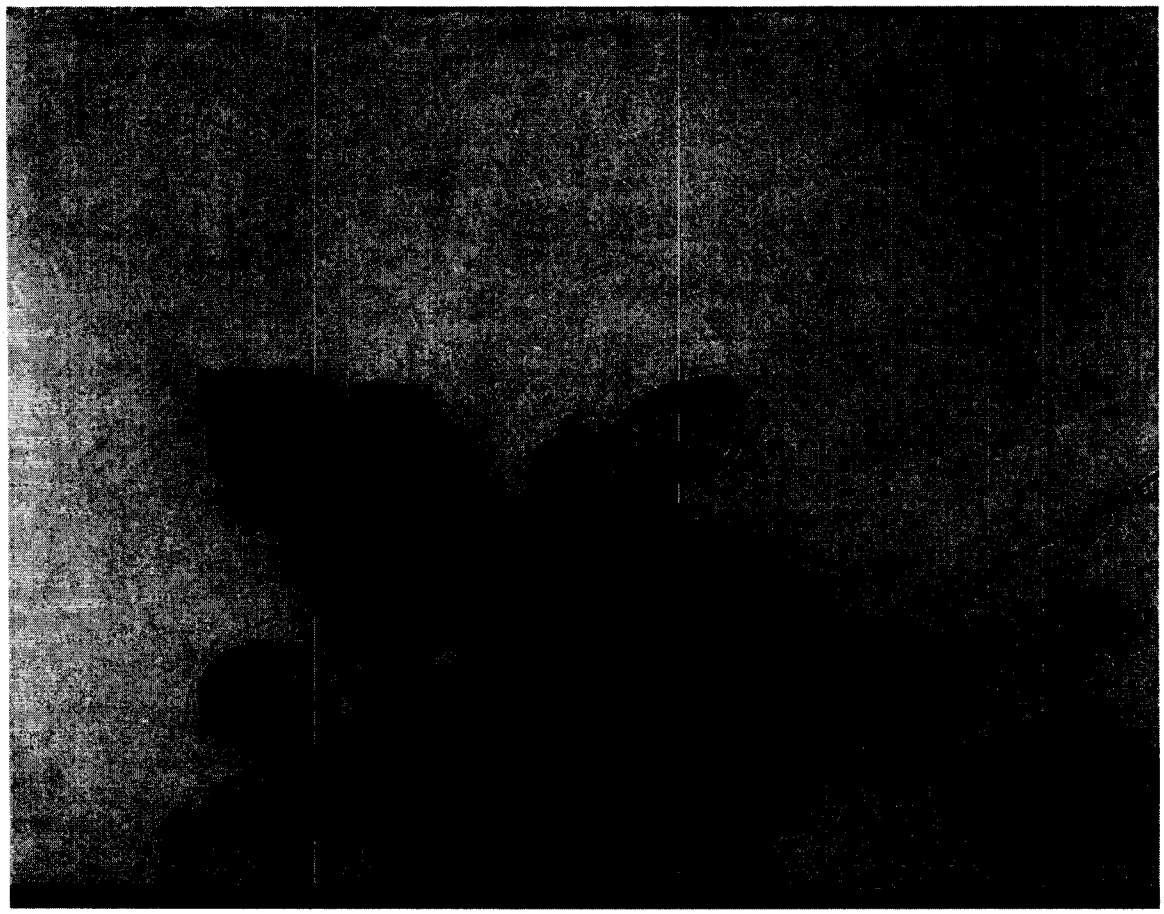
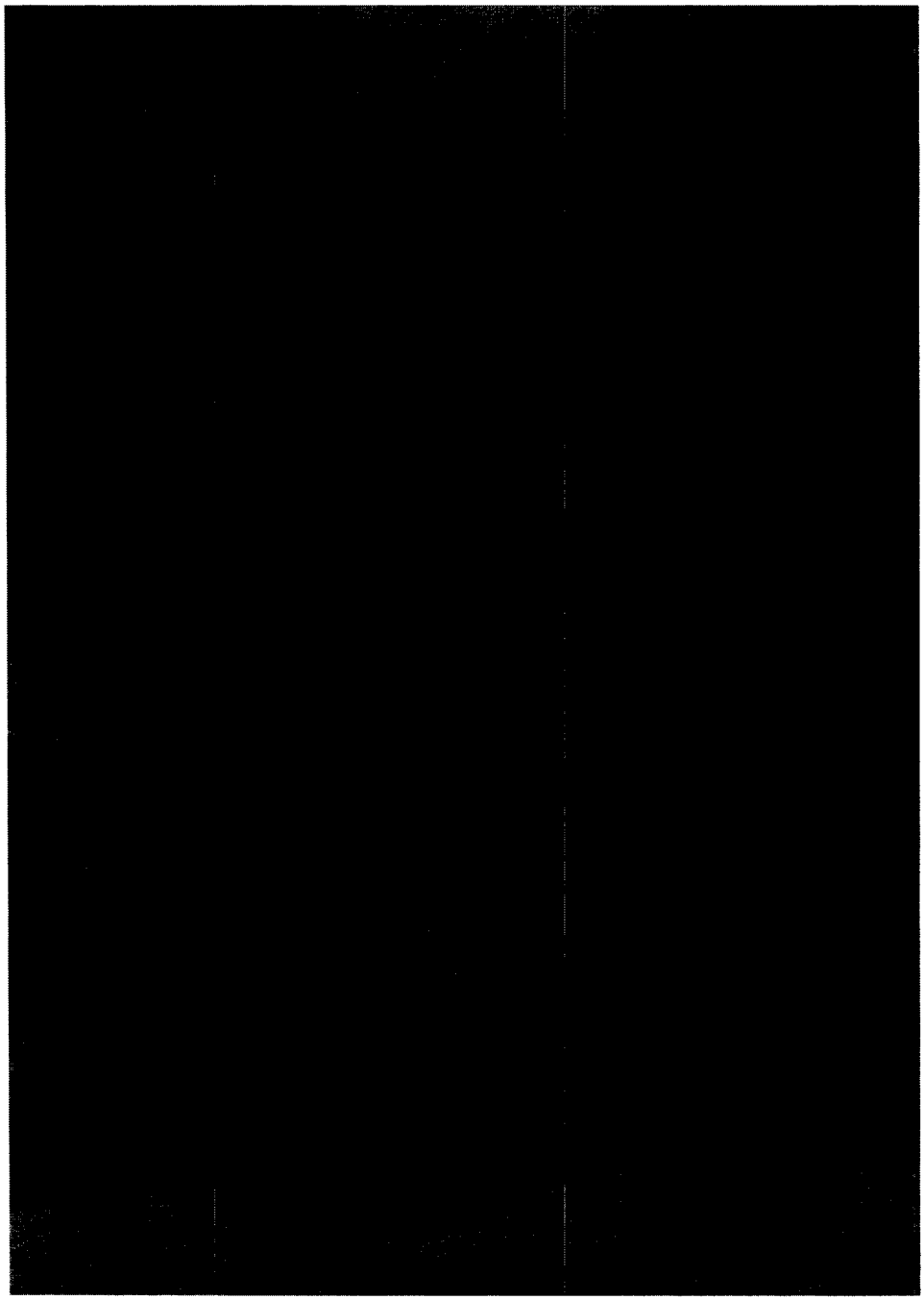
1. Julie Heffernan, *Accumulated Self-Portrait,* 1996, oil on gessoed paper,: 48.26 x 63.5 cm, Weatherspoon Museum, Greensboro, NC.

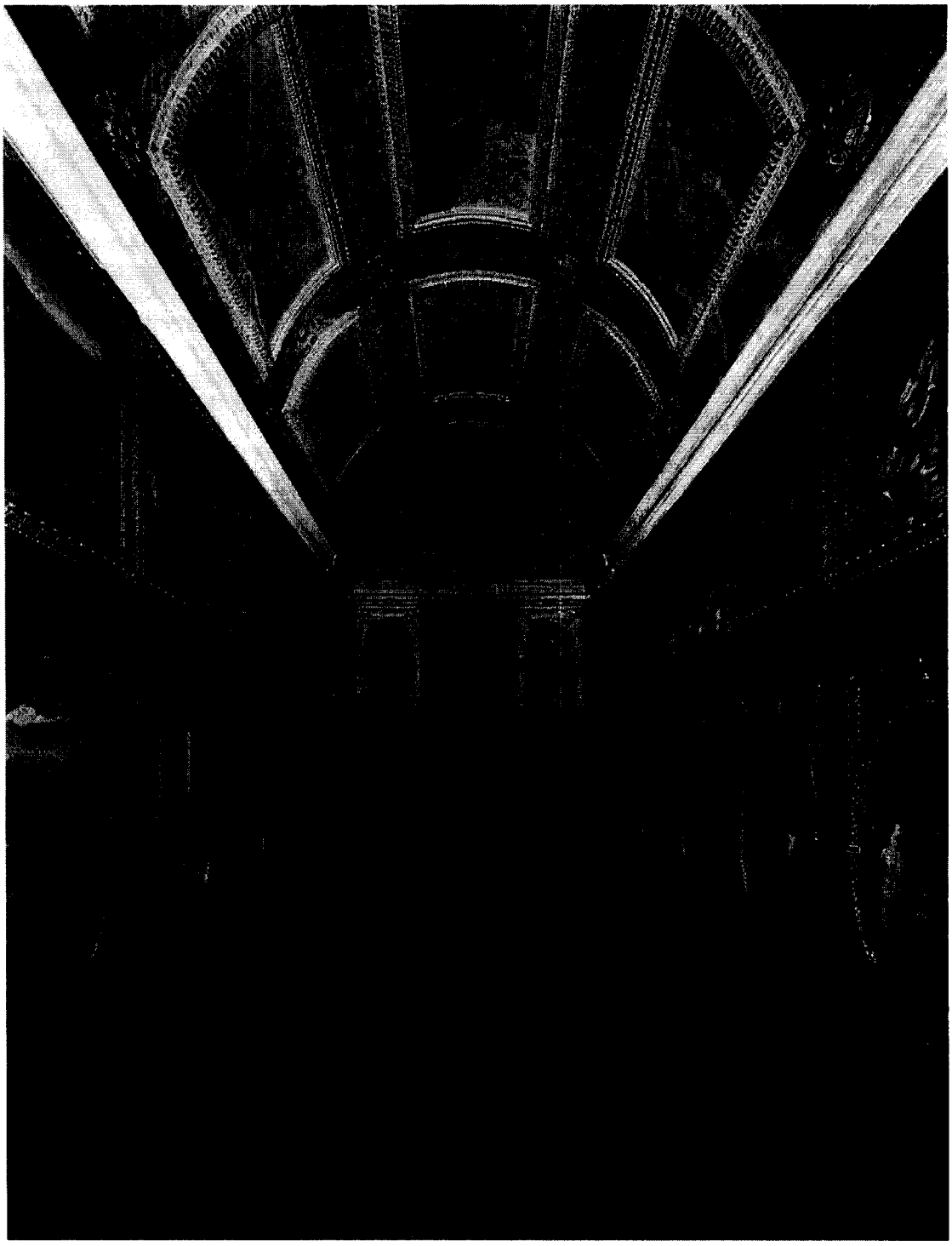
2. Pieter Claesz, *Still-Life*, 1633, oil on canvas, 38 x 53 cm, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Kassel.



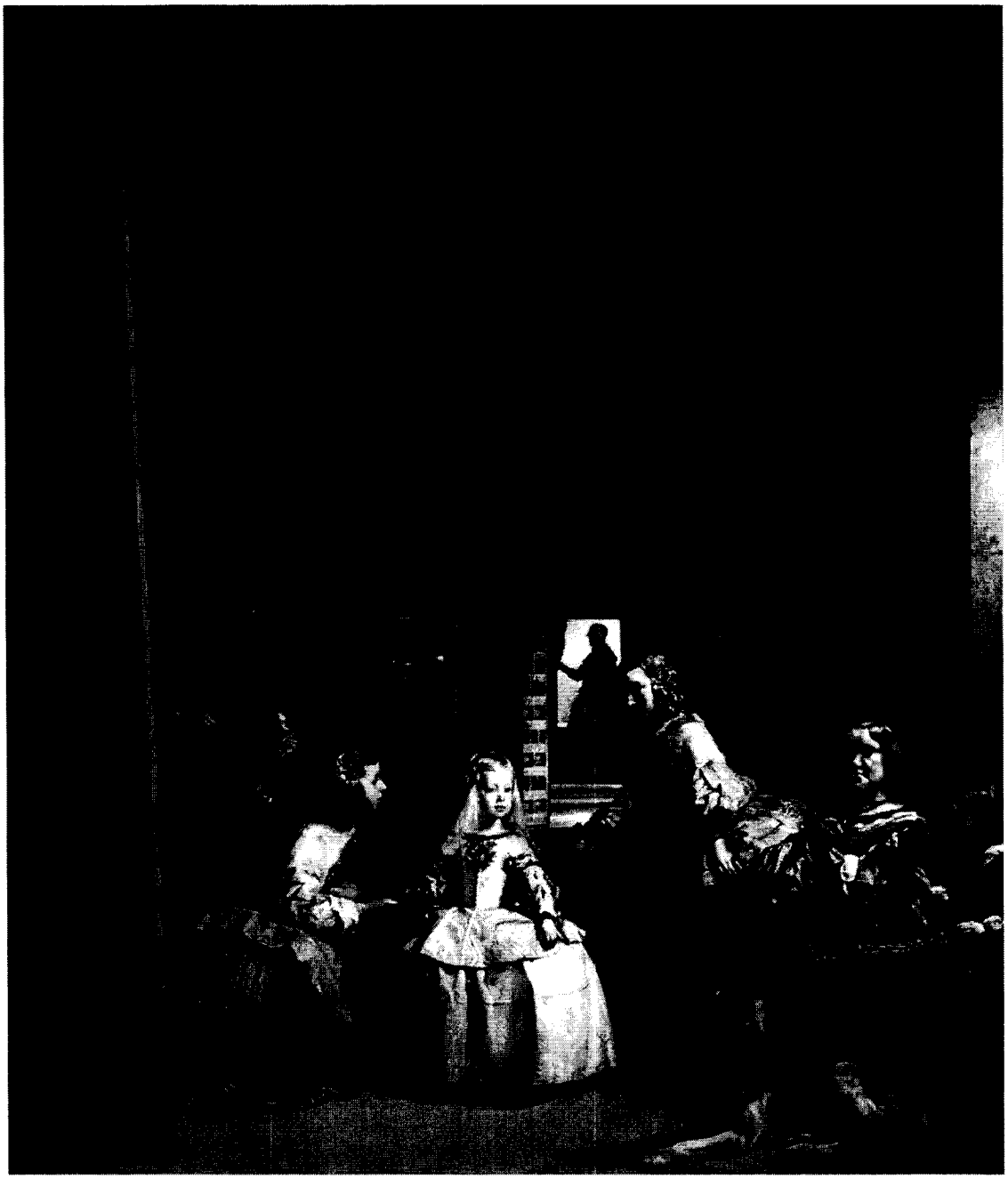
3. Caravaggio, *Basket of Fruit*, c. 1599, oil on canvas, 31 x 47 cm, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana, Milan.



4. Julie Heffernan, *Self-Portrait as Wunderkabinett*, 2003, oil on canvas, 208.3 x 147.3 cm, Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte, NC.

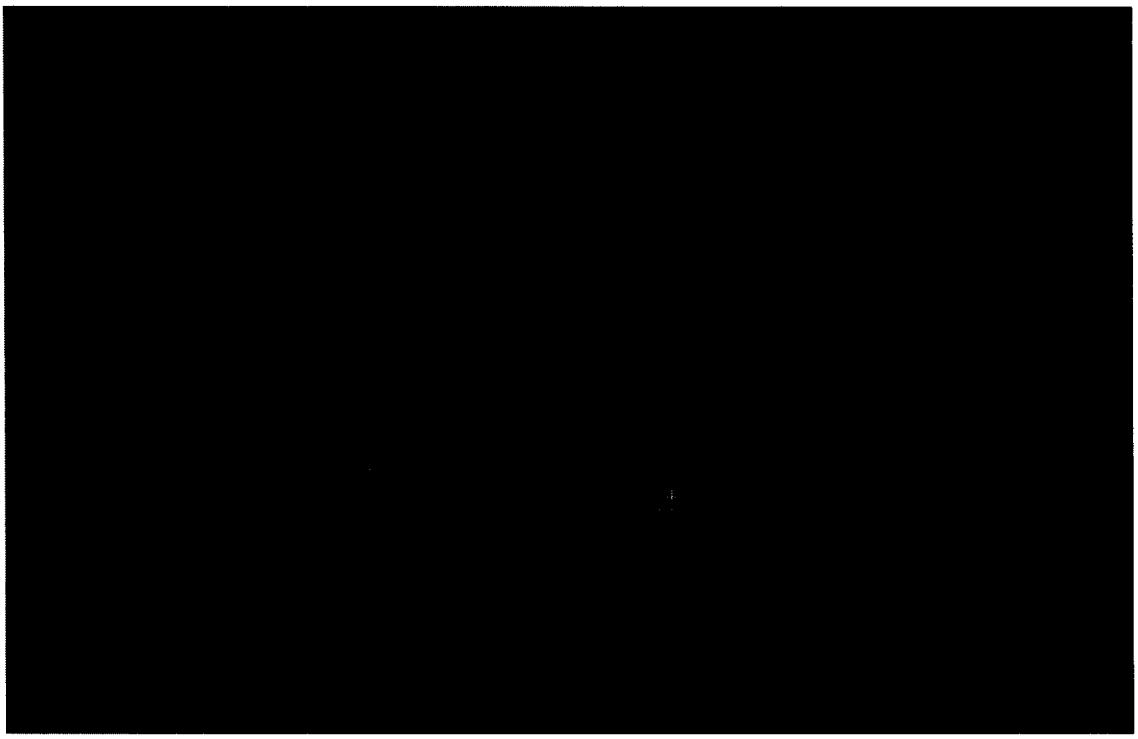


5. Giorgio Vasari, *Studiolo of Francesco I de' Medici,* 1569-70, oil and panel on slate, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence.

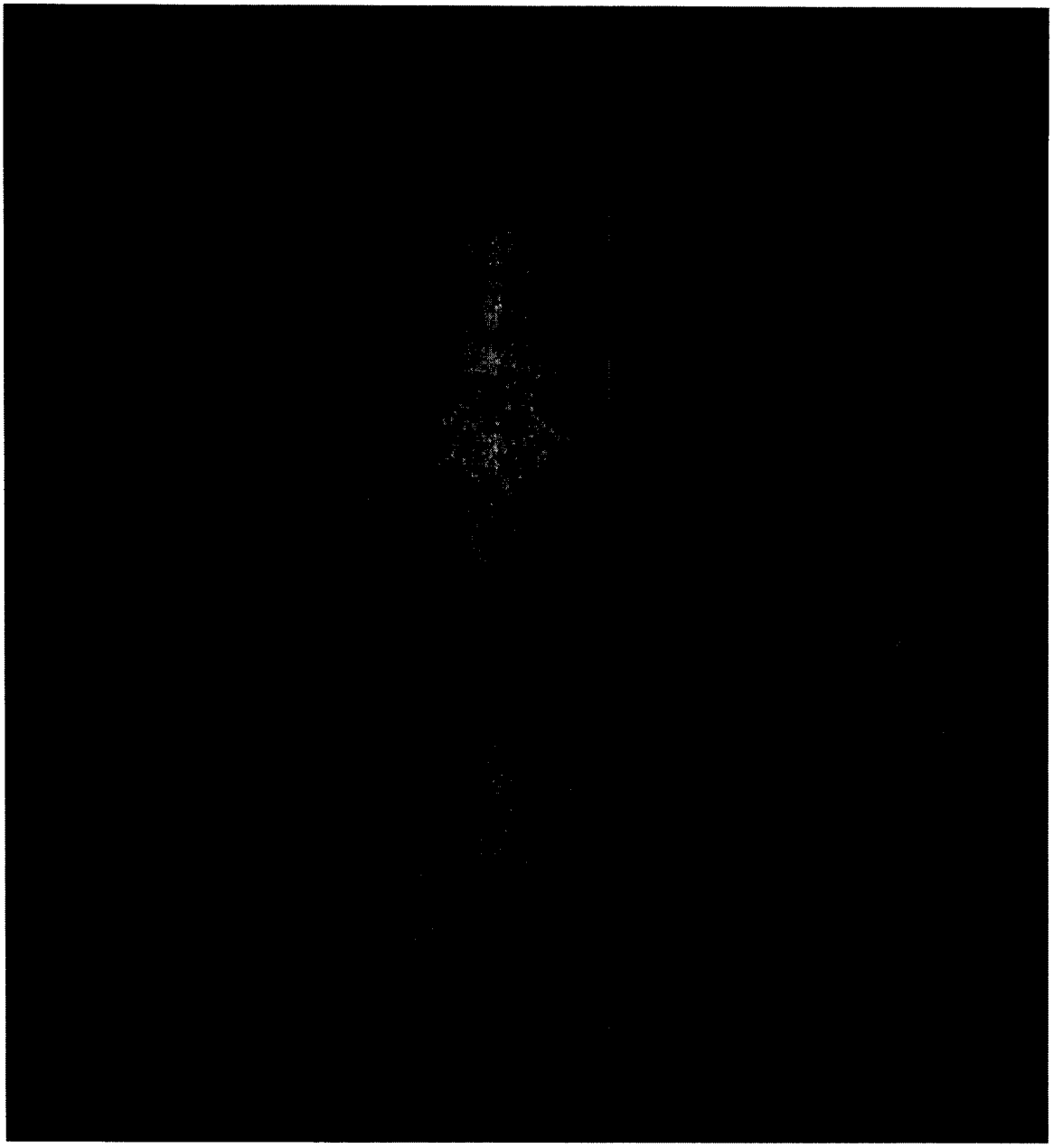


6. Velázquez, *Las Meninas*, 1656-57, oil on canvas, 318 x 276 cm, Museo del Prado, Madrid.

7. Jan van Eyck, *Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and his Wife*, 1434, oil on oak, 82 x 60 cm, National Gallery, London.

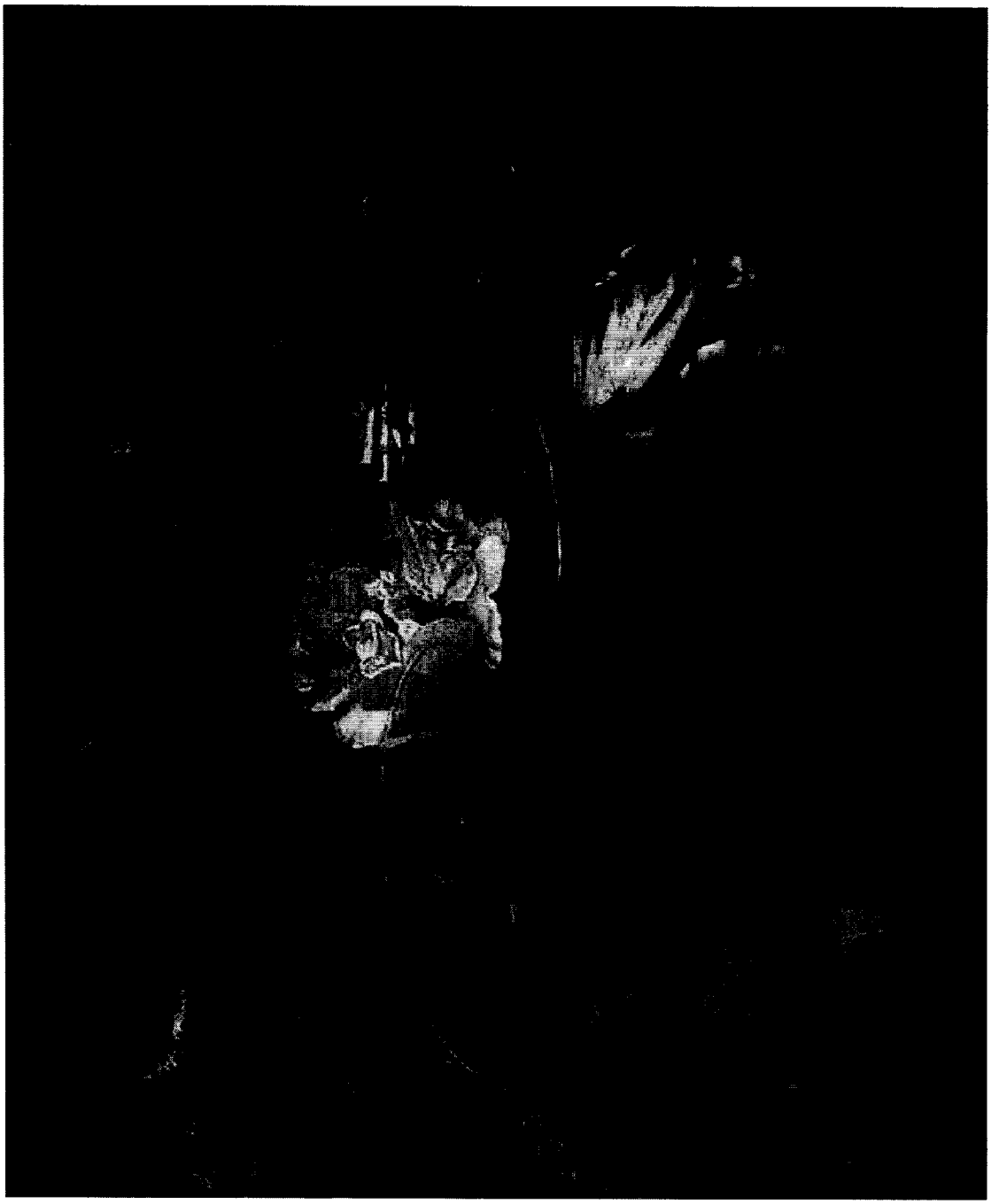


8. Dorothea Tanning, *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, 1943, oil on canvas, 407 x 610 mm, Tate Gallery, London.

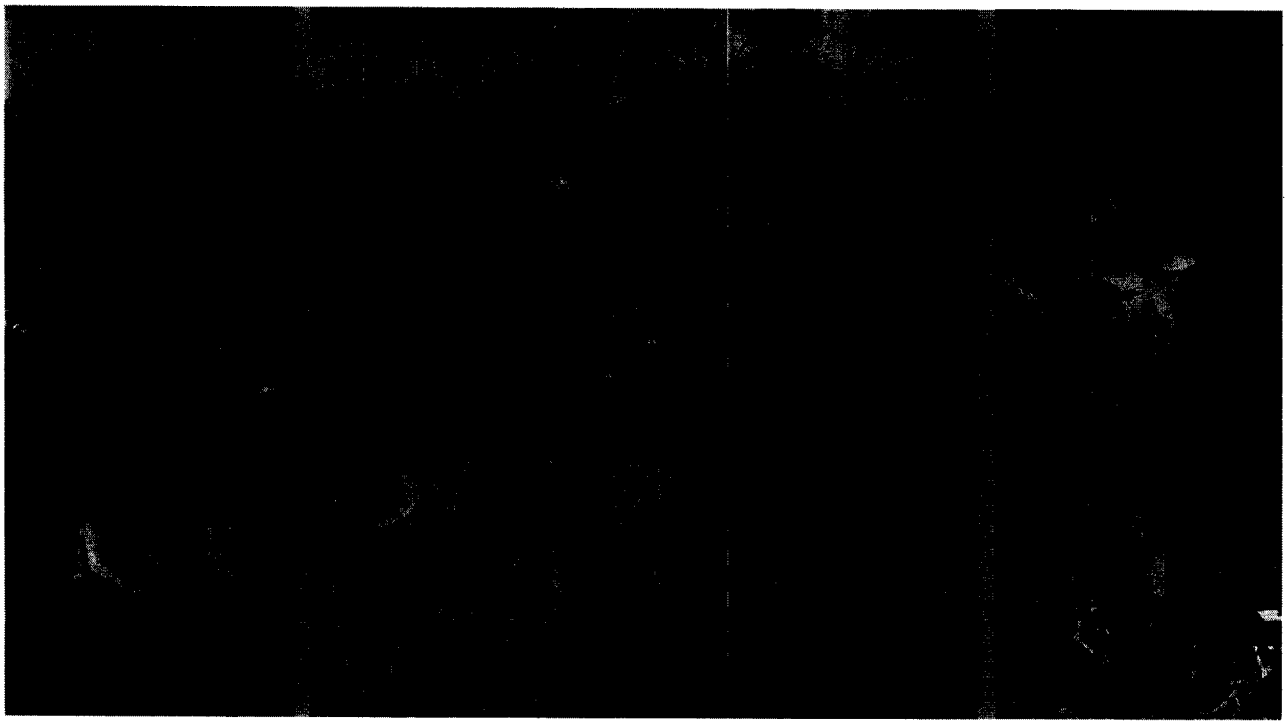


9. Julie Heffernan, *Self-Portrait as Dirty Princess*, 2004, oil on canvas, 75 x 68 in, Ackland Museum, Chapel Hill, NC.

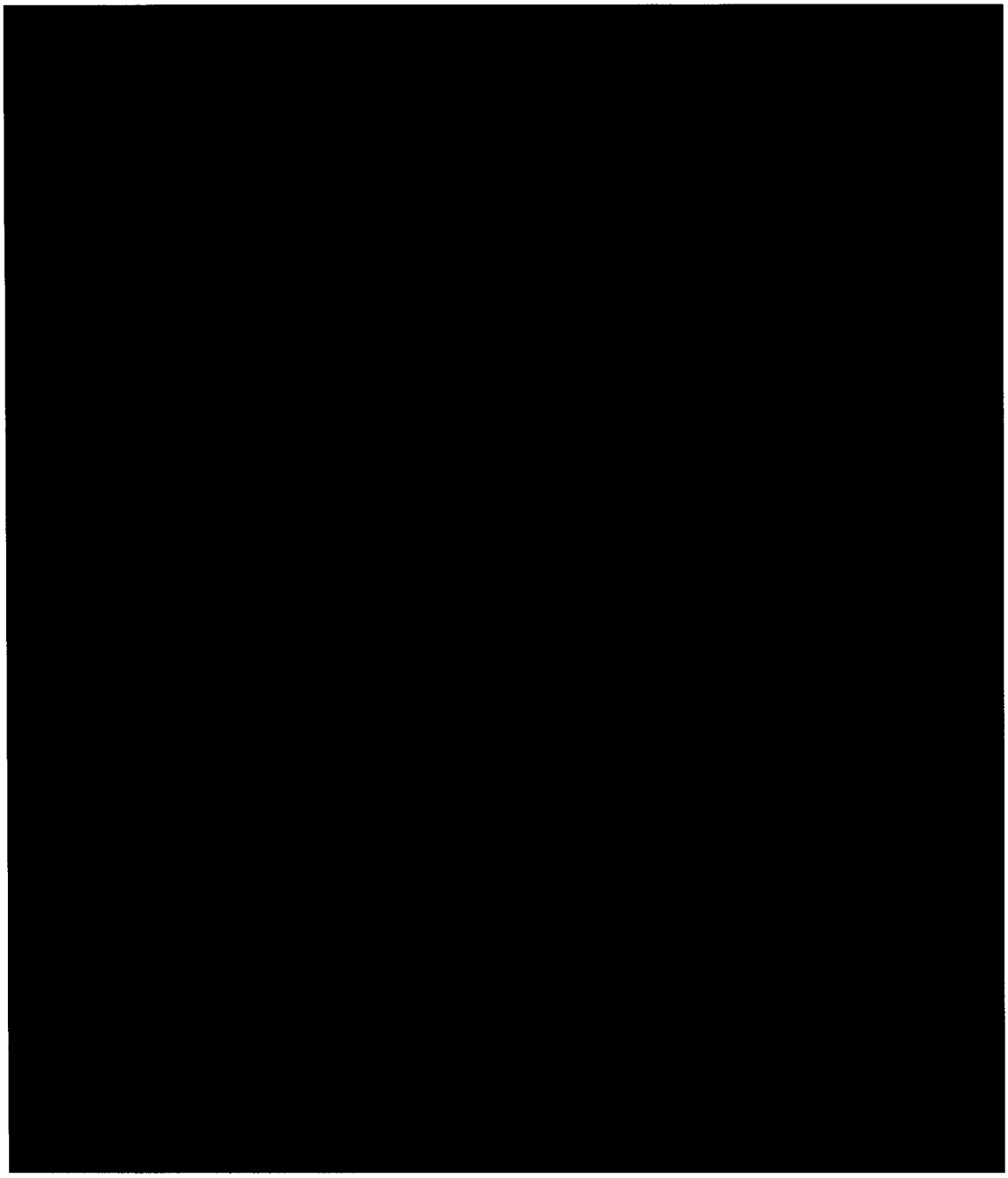
10. Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*, c. 1485, tempera on canvas, 172.5 x 278.5 cm, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence



11. Maria van Oosterwyck, *Flowers and Fruit*, 1670s, oil on canvas, Galleria Palatina (Palazzo Pitti), Florence.



12. Hieronymus Bosch, *Triptych of Garden of Earthly Delights,* c. 1500, oil on panel, central panel: 220 x 195 cm, wings: 220 x 97 cm, Museo del Prado, Madrid.



13. Julie Heffernan, *Self-Portrait with Birds in My Fingers*, 2005, oil on canvas, 56 x 60 in, Weatherspoon Museum, Greensboro, NC.

14. John Anster Fitzgerald, *The Captive Robin*, c.1864, private collection.