

# A MIRROR UNTO ITSELF

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By Krystal South

PORTLAND, OR. It began as utility; I was looking to purchase a mirror for my home, and having little luck at local thrift stores I took to the popular website craigslist.org, searching for “wall mirrors” in my home town. I’ve been using craigslist.org on and off for many years, mostly for disheartening job searches and buying antique furniture, and though slight structural changes have occurred, craigslist and the economy it represents continue to echo the DIY and reuseculture that drives this city. Craigslist allows any internet user to post an ad for the sale of an item for free, and for that sale to be mediated but in no visible way benefited by craigslist as a company. This service serves as a local exchange of goods and services, allowing the market participants to name their own price and terms. The text based ads of varying verbal comprehension are often supplemented by one or more photographs of the item in question.

It was these photographs that began to intrigue me on my mirror search. The photos of items for sale on craigslist had always fascinated me; tactics such as placing a coloring book next to a television to show the scale or taking two photos from the most slightly different angle stood out to me as a new perspective on the power and use of the photograph. In the case of craigslist, the photos serve to achieve a specific goal: the sale or trade of an object to someone else for cash or another item.<sup>1</sup> These photographs are not snapshots to record an event, nor are they artistic photographs that push the boundaries of the photographic medium. They appear to me as an attempt at both utility and aesthetics. The utility is obvious, to sell, but the aesthetics may be more deeply buried. To present something as aesthetically beautiful will increase the chance that someone will desire its purchase, achieving the goal of the post. But the sellers and buyers come from all different backgrounds, so there are a bevy of tastes involved. A decision must be made: to enhance or neutralize the physical properties of the object for sale.

There are two extremes to this approach: one is to inflict a large amount of personality bias onto the object, depicting it in its context in the original owner’s home and giving personal provenance to the object. These photographs mimic snapshots with the object as central figure, from its best angle. The second is the opposite, finding a contextually neutral place to photograph the object; on bare taupe carpet or against a white wall. These photographs impersonate both catalog product shots and documentation of art objects, attempting to let the pure beauty of the object in a vacuum shine. Though most photos fall somewhere between these two extremes, often a foot or a dog slips into the frame and we are snapped back into the reality of these exchanges.

Mirrors present a special problem in regards to photography, one must present the mirror from a particular angle to not be captured in its reflection. On craigslist, sellers avoid this problem through various means; by propping the mirror up and depicting it from an angle, or laying the mirror flat upon the ground to capture the full mirror from above. Some do not avoid this problem at all, inserting themselves into the image as feet, legs, or their entire bodies with a glare of reflected flash.

I began collecting my favorite images of mirrors from craigslist with no specific purpose in mind, perhaps out of some sadness that after the item was sold and the posting deleted, these photos would no longer exist, their purpose fully served. As I began collecting, I ventured out into the craigslist of other cities, looking for patterns in their objects and modes of depiction. Brighter cities had a harder time, Vegas had the gaudiest mirrors, and I began to notice that I could see a reflection of the people of various locales in their mirrors.

What also became clear is the domestic setting most of these mirrors came from. Often, interiors are reflected, giving us a reversed view of the environment of the object and providing insight into their owner’s habitat. The mirror photographs become then, to me, unintentional self portraits that occlude the self or represent it fractured into pieces.

1: Trade is another amazing sub-sect of craigslist: relative values are placed by individuals on two things seen to be equal, for instance, Playstation 2=ferret with cage.



Plate 1

Mirrors have long been used in historic self portraiture to reflect the artist unto himself upon a planar surface. Florentine painter Johannes Gump depicted himself in 1646 gazing into the mirror as he paints the image we see. [Plate 1] This image is probably representative of how self-portraits were made before the invention of photography.

Norman Rockwell painted his triple autoportrait for the cover of a 1960 Saturday Evening Post while paying homage to great self-portrait artists before him such as Dürer, Rembrandt and van Gogh by placing their images within his own. We see Rockwell’s actual reflection next to the image he depicts, an idealized version of himself, as surely most self-portrait artists are inclined to do. [Plate 2]

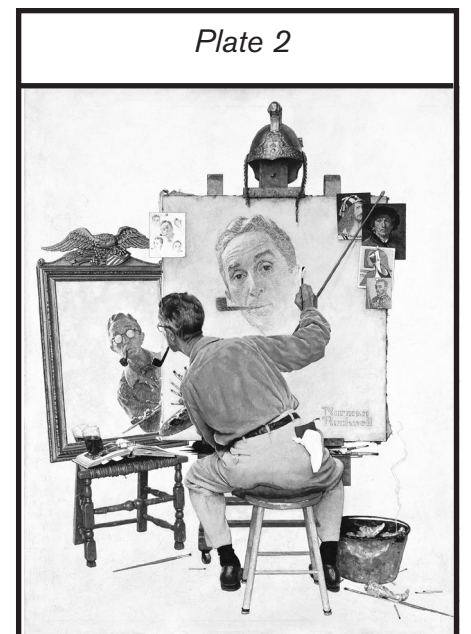


Plate 2



Plate 3

One of my favorite self-portraits is a 1928 photograph by French artist Claude Cahun. [Plate 3] In it, Cahun poses with an authoritative direct gaze at the camera, while her reflection in the mirror shows her from another angle that reveals the artist as soft and seemingly uncertain.

In sorting through the hundreds of photos that I collected from around the United States, I found myself confronted with developing a system of organization to recontextualize these images. I found endless taxonomies

within the group; interior/external, with/without human appearance, framed/unframed. I settled on the simplest solution that inflicted as little of myself onto the process as possible, which was to divide them by horizontal and vertical, as they were originally found, and place them in a grid so that all of them could be viewed together. The order of the photos within the grid was determined only by the random file name given by the craigslist servers to the photos.

The problems presented in taking photographs of mirrors also arose in making this work. I found it impossible not to see this collection as some sort of archival self portrait that reflected something about myself as the collector of these images. Perhaps all of these images combined make up the idealized mirror into which I will reflect myself, or maybe they show glimpses into lives which (in my imagination) parallel my own. Regardless, these grids of images contain artifacts of human existence that I found to be beautiful, worth archiving and representing to you.

Back from whence they came, I present these images both into the physical context of Store Gallery within Pioneer Place Mall, and back onto the internet. I am offering these posters as a free download on my website, to be printed as you see fit, in hopes that they might reveal something of yourself or themselves to you.

Please visit <http://www.krystalsouth.com/mirror> for the free download and more information.