The Eye

by **Pedro Meyer**

even though the picture above is only of the eye, it is intended to be a self-portrait. There is nothing to suggest that a self-portrait has to include all of the face, is there? The reason that I wanted to explore this image of the eye, is that it led me down the road to several topics, which I found would be worthy of exploration.

If we look at self-portraits throughout the history of painting, we will discover that they strongly reflected the presence of mirrors. In this self-portrait of Rembrandt, for instance we are told that the painter made an interesting mistake, which he later corrected. An X-ray of the canvas reveals the artist holding his brush and palette in the wrong hand -in other words, as they would have appeared in the mirror that he would have consulted in order to paint the picture.

From the history of photography, we can see that self-portraits were not made as often with the aid of mirrors as they did for painters. These self-portraits were more often than not just made by tripping a cable connected to the shutter, or a self-timing device so prevalent in modern cameras. It is obvious that the process was inevitably one of chance. Did one trigger the shutter at the right moment?

Today with the advent of certain digital cameras the

process is starting to take a new direction. Some of these cameras have a small screen that swivels around and which the photographer can now consult in order to judge the image being created, much as the painter did with the aid of mirrors. The construction of these models departs radically from that which was available up to now, and as with the advent of each new tool throughout the history of art, new creative options emerge. However as with so many tools that come out from this digital era, here we have yet another instance whereby a new tool allows us to accomplish something that was possible before (with the use of mirrors), but then also takes it a few steps forward. The ease of use introduces many subtle differences in how we create, and that is the step forward.

What are some of the reasons behind making a self-portrait other than the narcissistic inclination some might consider to be the main motivation. I would venture to say it's self-exploration. Why does someone keep a diary for instance, if not for a similar reason ?

As I inspect an image of myself, all sort of discoveries could take place. Aside from the obvious: " is this how I really look?", I might become captivated, for instance, by thoughts related to mortality as I review such a self-portrait. Or as in this case which leads me to examine sections of my body. The eye became increasingly more interesting as I narrowed down the possibilities for a self-portrait.

But why the eye? It occurred to me that this portal to our brain is at the very center of all photography. What more significant element than to capture the eye of the photographer? Without the eye, there is no photography. I am clear we can have pictures taken without a photographer, the cameras in a bank do that, but then without the eye of the viewer to inspect what those cameras had captured, there would be no photography. The loop has to be closed, in one form or another by the presence of the eye.

As I looked upon the picture I had just taken with the aid of the digital camera, I was struck by the little white square in the eye, reflecting the light that was directed at my face. It reminded me of images described by Jonathan Miller in his wonderful book/catalogue: On Reflection, which traces such reflections in the eye all the way back to the Hellenistic artists in Egypt "who recognized the importance of showing the reflected luster in the human eye." As Miller suggests, "without such specks of white the gaze of the subject would seem dead and inattentive".

Many have thought up to now that the act of placing that little white patch of light in the eye —as Jonathan Miller describes—, was a deliberate act by the painter, while in the case of the photographer, well, it just fell into place when you made the photograph. In thinking like this, the effort by the photographer is obviously devalued giving higher merit to the work performed by the painter, given that it was a deliberate creative act and did not just happen, as allegedly is the case with the photograph.

However today with the presence of digital technologies, we can no longer make such assumptions when it comes to photography. How would you know that the little white patch was not placed there by the photographer? Either before making the image, by placing some lights strategically to produce such an effect, or by deft digital alteration much as the painter did to his image. The case is that the presence of that little white patch can no longer be thought off as being there without the intervention of the photographer. Much has been gained for photographers by seeding this doubt as to what if anything has been altered within the image.

Granted, the innovation for creating that white patch within the eye should go to the artists in Egypt of long ago. However today we have our own contemporary contributions that we can think of and which advance the artistic discourse as well.

For instance, the image of my eye is a typical image created with the aid of a camera; in other words, we don't see with such detail with our ordinary vision. It requires a close-up inspection for our eye to train in on the detail, however at that moment we also stop seeing the overall, the entire face; we can't do both at the same time.

The pupil of our eye is a lens that is either fat or slim, as the case may be; it is not a pinhole. The adjustments made by the eye allow us to focus either on the close-up or on a distant scene. Muscles inside the eye have to thicken the lens to focus nearby objects or flatten it to focus on a far away object. The photograph, however, allows us to have access to viewing the close-up and the far at the same time. That is a distinct contribution brought about by a photographic vision.

In closing, let me just remind you that what you are seeing before your very eyes at this moment, is not actually seen as such by your eye. The image that the lens in your eye is able to construct, is no different than that which we can see on the back of a view-finder camera, in other words, it will be upside down. It is only in our brain where that image gets turned around and adjusted in all sorts of manners to enable us to identify the objects "seen". At that moment the specific color, texture, or light, as well as shadows, give us the ability to determine the space and identity of that with which we are dealing. The question is: do we see with the eye, or with the brain? Is the eye the equivalent of a scanner, and the brain of the computer? Will a computer someday be able to decide on it's own to create it's self-portrait?

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