

Julie Heffernan



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Unabashed Hotheads: The Self-Portraits of Julie Heffernan

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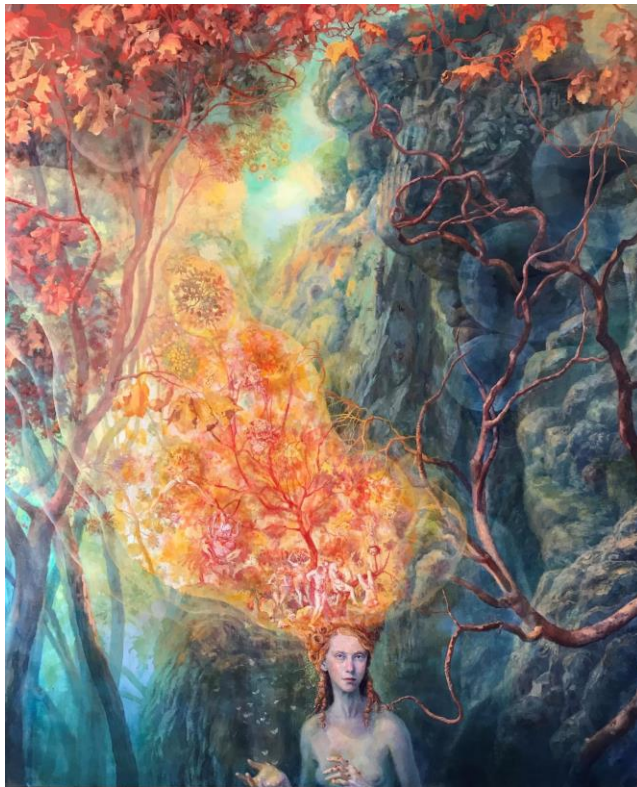
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COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND CATHARINE CLARK GALLERY

Julie Heffernan, *Self-Portrait as Hothead*, 2019. Oil on canvas. 78 x 64 in.

Artist Julie Heffernan's style can be described as a contemporary mix of Rococo, [Surrealism](#), and Baroque, with a dash of the seventeenth-century Dutch still-life Masters. Known for her symbolic use of the nude self-portrait, Heffernan has recently traded her earlier earthy palette for more saturated colors.

Her juxtaposition of contemporary themes within a co-opted structure of Old-Master references has grown louder along with her palette. When Heffernan shifted her focus to the climate crisis, she wanted her subject matter to be “stridently *visible* I needed aggressive paint and explosive color to bring those ... disasters to life.”



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Julie Heffernan, *Self-Portrait as Infanta Maria Theresa Playing Coriolanus*, 1995. Oil on canvas. 47 3/4 x 61 3/4 in.

The artist first used the term “self-portrait” when she was inventing scenarios of subconscious imagery overlaid on fruit to create “a portrait of interiority.” She speaks with intimate candor about what could be considered her first proper self-portrait, driven by experiencing an ectopic pregnancy two years prior. Inspired by a [Diego Velázquez portrait](#), in *Self-Portrait as Infanta Maria Theresa Playing Coriolanus* (1995), Heffernan combined her own body, complete with abdominal bandage, with the Infanta’s head. By merging with the queen, who herself had lost five of her six children, Heffernan felt a direct linkage: “I was suddenly aware of all the women in history who’d died in childbirth.”

To avoid objectification of the female nude, Heffernan gave her Infanta a direct gaze as Velázquez had done—a straightforward look that was “... always essential to position her as a woman with agency, a confrontational force,” she explained. The self-portrait then became a way of addressing her audience directly: “... presenting myself as a ... host, inviting viewers to enter the worlds I was making, [and] offering them a sense of female subjectivity”



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Julie Heffernan, *Self-Portrait in the Bedroom*, 2003. Oil on canvas. 67 x 68 in.

Heffernan used an allegorical self-portrait device in certain earlier works where flame or animals served as proxy for her form in figureless paintings: a trail of fire rises off a [Baroque interior](#) floor; her red hair merges with smoke; flames lick off a chandelier to the ceiling. “I grew up in a Catholic family The saints [on holy cards] were usually holding some kind of attribute ... and they had radiant halos.” One of her first paintings where fire functions metaphorically is *Self-Portrait in the Bedroom* from 2003. A little girl stands on a bed; behind her head is a bright halo-like shape that coalesces into a forest fire. Rather than a saint’s holiness, this functions as an extension of the figure’s mind, explains Heffernan: “the world’s heating up.”



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Julie Heffernan, *Self-Portrait as Netherworld*, 2004. Oil on canvas.

Heffernan's use of fire has now culminated in paintings such as *Self-Portrait as Hothead* (2019). She turns up the volume with *Hothead*s, a body of work she began prior to the #MeToo movement, in which she honors the intrinsic power of independent-minded women. In many works in her recent exhibit at the Catharine Clark Gallery in San Francisco, Heffernan's self-portrait stands in front of a wall of portraits depicting women-identified activists and cultural icons.



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND CATHARINE CLARK GALLERY
Julie Heffernan, *Self-Portrait with Rescuer*, 2019. Oil on canvas. 64 x 54 in.

Also important to Heffernan is “... how imagery ... can be used both to support important ideas and to propagandize for problematic ones.” After an intensive study of art history, Heffernan concluded that, since artists were typically in the service of those in power, many history paintings now appear as propaganda. In works such as *Self-Portrait with Rescuer* (2019), Heffernan holds lengths of twisted scrolls that look like segmented film strips. Scenes of Old Masters’ art on one side and contemporary journalism on the reverse comprise the double-sided motif—Heffernan’s chance to expose what she considers suspect, “... and juxtapose it with imagery that functions as a more neutral and objective documentation of events.”



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Julie Heffernan, *Self-Portrait as Redhead*, 2019. Oil on panel. 24 x 20 in.

At Catharine Clark, Heffernan invited twenty-seven artists to display works inspired by historical hotheads. While most participants chose to depict or symbolize trailblazing women for this salon-style wall, an “anonymous” thread was explored by artists including Sandow Birk honoring doctors treating COVID-19 patients, and Kara Maria’s series of anonymous breast cancer survivors.

As [Virginia Woolf](#) said, "For most of history, ‘Anonymous’ was a woman." Not any longer, if Julie Heffernan can help it—she encourages feminists to “... SPEAK UP LIKE HOTHEADS—loudly and more persuasively than ever....”



COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CATHARINE CLARK GALLERY
Julie Heffernan, *Self-Portrait with Sanctuary*, 2014. Oil on canvas. 102 x 76 in.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amy Funderburk is a professional artist and freelance arts writer based in Winston-Salem, NC, specializing in visionary works in which she explores the intersection of the physical world with a more fluid spiritual realm. She works out of the Sternberger Artists Center in Greensboro, NC, and maintains a blog, [Drinking from the Well of Inspiration](#), to provide deeper insight into her creative process. Follow her on twitter: [@AFunderburkArt](#)

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