

Morimura Yasumasa: Borrowed Selves

By Iseki Masaaki



Self-Portrait as the Prodigal Son 1636, Morimura Yasumasa, from "Morimura Yasumasa —Rembrandt Room" held at the Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Sept. 10 to Nov. 3, 1994

In the previous articles for this journal I have introduced the new crafts movements that are among the facets of modern Japanese art which I have observed. Now, however, I would like to conclude that series and, starting with this issue, discuss several artists involved in modern Japanese art who are very interesting as individuals. In doing so, I must note that these artists are not necessarily representative of Japan's art scene, which is currently developing in many and varied directions. "Representative" could be taken to mean "the best in the field." Instead it is that these individuals have unique

identities and their strong personalities could be said to be characteristic of modern art in Japan.

Indeed, considering that they have already received international recognition, it goes without saying that they possess special talents, however, it is extremely difficult to rate artists who are "representative" or "the best" in today's field of criticism, so I believe that it is best to leave the final decisions up to unbiased third parties.

Since unveiling a photographic work that was a composite of self-portraits of Vincent van Gogh and himself in 1985, Morimura Yasumasa has continued pro-

ducing pieces in which he inserts his own disguised image in Western masterpieces. Because the works in this series are experiments in parody that critically challenge art history, they induce surprise and laughter as well as diversion. At the same time they hint at perversity and insanity and are extremely modern in expression. As a rule, his works have been photographic self-portraits and he has worked directly with photographs or computers. In the latter case since 1989 it has been technically possible to divide roles of multiple characters in the technically original works by his self portraits. This has led to even further variations on Morimura's concept, "use of the mind and body to express the self."

It seems that the production techniques are fairly complex. He executes manual tasks together with his staff and says that, beginning with costumes and make-up, one character requires around six hours of detailed work. Naturally the question is what Morimura intends with the self-portraits contained in the elaborate reproductions inserted in the original works.

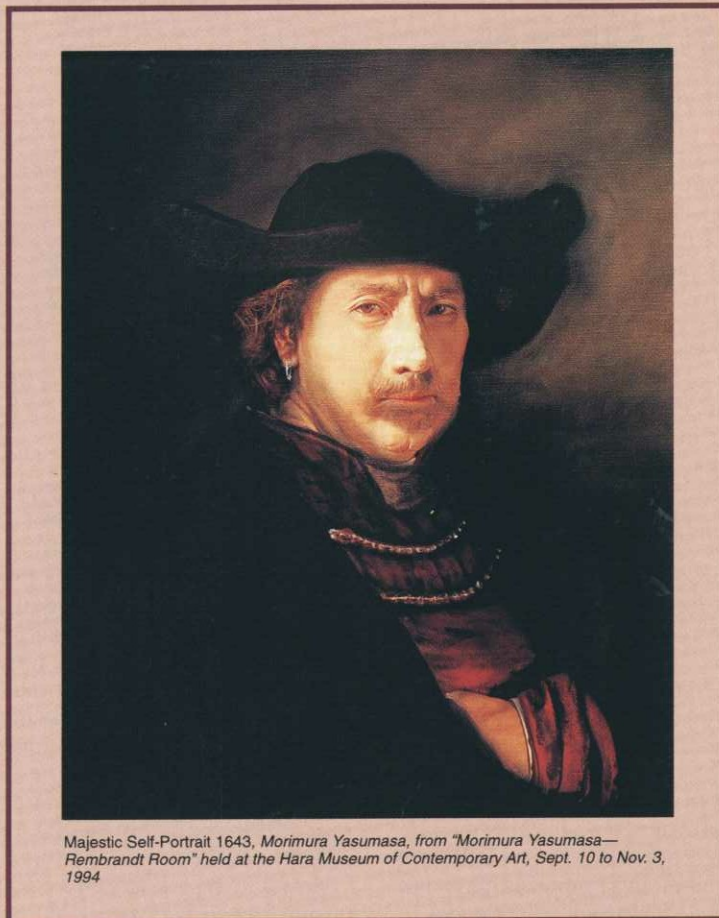
These works include the 1988 piece *Doublonnage (Marcel)*, (*Doppelgänger*), modeled on Marcel Duchamp; the 1990 series *Bijutsushi no Musume (Girls of Art History)* after Velasquez and Goya; and *Mojin no Guwa (The Parable of the Blind Man)* after Breughel, *Kamigami to no Tawamure (Playing with the Gods)* after Lucas Cranach, and *Kaidan o Oriru Tenshi (Angel Descending a Staircase)*, all from 1991, with images taken from Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and many more.

Because in all of these works the people in the originals are replaced by Morimura in various disguise, the selves expressed by the original characters have been paradoxically transformed into Morimura's intense ego. For example, in the piece *Doublonnage (Marcel)*, Morimura has changed Duchamp's Marcel dressed as a woman

in the original into himself in female attire, or, in other words, inserted an "overlapping" ego, and, moreover, has produced a mirror effect with double hats. Morimura's borrowed self in this work can indeed be said to challenge the way that Duchamp inverted the ego by dressing as a woman.

In the battle against these great artists from the past and the masterpieces they bequeathed, he has subsequently focused on confrontations with Rembrandt, who left the largest number of self-portraits behind. For a long time Morimura appears to have had a deep interest in Rembrandt's works and his life itself. This might be natural. The recent exhibit, *Rembrandt Room*, served as a major stage for Morimura's experiments.

In the notes on the exhibit concepts he puts it this way: "Rembrandt is an extremely important artist. I think that particularly when we ask ourselves what the 'self' is today the questions Rembrandt posed at the beginning of the modern era have not yet lost their validity. The themes this time focus on the issue of the 'self' as it pertained to



Majestic Self-Portrait 1643, Morimura Yasumasa, from "Morimura Yasumasa—Rembrandt Room" held at the Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Sept. 10 to Nov. 3, 1994



Doubleluggage (Marcel) 1988, Morimura Yasumasa

Rembrandt and a quest for the images not only of our times but the future as well."

We are able to see the issue of the self that the two artists have in common. Here also the modern artist makes new discoveries regarding the past maestro and through these we are also able to uncover a new history of art.

Through the *Rembrandt Room* exhibit Morimura experiences Rembrandt's life, along with the lives of the people around him, from his youth through his waning years. By superimposing his own self-portraits on Rembrandt's, Morimura produces nothing less than two new self-portraits. Further, in his *Self-Portrait as the*

Prodigal Son 1636 (Self-Portrait, Disguised as the Prodigal Son—1630), 1994, a piece based on a 1630 work featuring Rembrandt himself and his wife, Saskia, that employs the pretext of the tale of *The Prodigal Son at the Tavern*. Morimura plays the part of both people. Put differently, four self-portraits are produced here. To Rembrandt, self-portraits using the medium of the mirror were undoubtedly confrontations and struggles for supremacy with the self, but to Morimura it is likely nothing less than limitless quoting of the self against the self. His challenge of Rembrandt has not yet ended.

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