

ART

Artists Turn the Brush on Themselves

By WILLIAM ZIMMER

SUMMIT

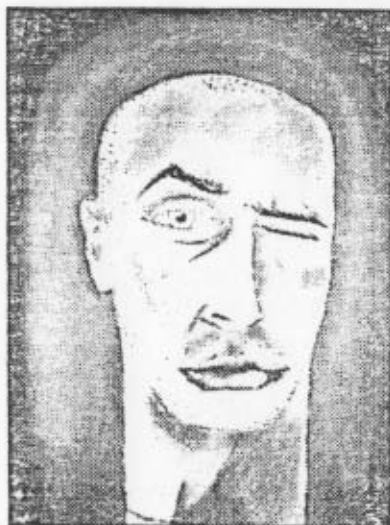
IF the show of self-portraits at the New Jersey Center for Visual Arts here were an automobile, it could be sold as coming with a lot of extras. First, it has not one but two portraits by each artist, done at different times, but the bonus is that a photograph of the artist accompanies the paintings as a sort of reality check.

What makes "Self-Portraits: The Changing Self" especially engrossing, however, is that Sharon Gill, Joan Good and Perijane Zarembok, the curators, have put together an enriching mix of well-known and little-known artists who make a specialty of using themselves in their works.

The late ceramist Robert Arneson used his bearded face as a foil for a whole range of attitudes from satirical to poignant. One of his sculptured portraits here, "Bore," shows him in an attitude of lassitude, but he is wearing theatrical makeup as if to emphasize that this is only one of many possibilities.

The painter Francesco Clemente has often pared himself down to essentials, including a shaved head. This reductiveness is evident in one portrait here, in which one eye is wide open and the other a firm slit, as if to emphasize elementary opposites.

Luis Cruz Azaceta has often used self-deprecation as a strategy, and here he takes a leaf out of Kafka with



"Self Portrait," pastel on paper by Francesco Clemente.

"The Artist Cockroach." Mr. Azaceta seems to say that life is best observed from an ignoble vantage point.

In not every case does having two portraits substantially contribute to a deeper understanding of an artist. But Leonard Baskin, best known as an illustrator, leaps into a genuine profundity. His earlier portrait, made 20 years ago, is a straightforward woodcut, but "Weeping for Renzo Grazzini," from 1990, transcends illustration. In this black-and-white gouache, the figure has abstracted features, but the wetness of the gouache technique movingly em-

phasizes that he is crying copiously.

Nicholas Africano made a reputation for himself in the 1970's for self-portraits featuring a small, thickly painted image of himself in the middle of an empty monochromatic field. The figure was always a bit self-mocking, as in "Fat Stomach," but a more recent work, from 1990, shows that diminution has been replaced by thinness of paint application. The work's title, "Demon," suggests that Mr. Africano senses a fresh vitality.

The term "portrait" is used loosely in this show. In 1978 Joan Semmel created "Sunlight," a painting of her body in a precise Photo-realist style, as if she were looking down at it sprawled on a bed. The results are a not-always-coherent tangle of limbs, breasts and hair. These are challenging pictures, and it is disappointing to report that "Looking Glasses," a painting from 1988, painted impressionistically, seems simply sloppy.

The show introduces little-known artists, many with a sly sense of humor. Michael Bergt's "Saint Michael" is a sendup of early Renaissance panel painting. Framed by a golden arch, the artist is about to wreak vengeance on the devilish art world as he stands with one foot on a packing crate. A crowbar near his foot reads like the end of a forked tail of a defeated antagonist.

Charles Parness contributes two good jokes 10 years apart. In "Monarch," Mr. Parness, wearing an elaborate crown, is bedeviled by a butterfly perched on his nose. "Pearl,"

painted last year, is four images of the bearded, seemingly affable artist wearing Hawaiian shirts and playing with models of Japanese planes and American ships.

The Chinese-born artist Hung Liu plays with the idea of anonymity. In "Resident Alien," an outside duplication of a green card, she identifies herself as "Cookie Fortune," while in "A Third World," a length of cloth around her head changes Ms. Liu from Chinese to Indian.

Mary Joan Waid shows herself in pieces. "New Beginnings" is a haunting enlarged close-up that focuses on one eye and the gardenia tucked behind one ear. That declaration of rebirth gives way to the more elegiac "Past and Present," in which the artist's face is glimpsed in a mirror surrounded by family snapshots.

A large color photographic print of the Russian-born Rimma Gerlovina, made in collaboration with her husband, Valeriy Gerlovin, is tantalizing for the symbols on her face and chest, for its mystical title — "Tree of Life" — and for the wispieness of Ms. Gerlovina herself. Her long crimped hair recalls Dürer's in his famous self-portrait.

Others in this ample show include Jack Beal, Mary Frank, Gregory Gillespie, Jan Holcomb, Duane Michals, Judy Mooneis, Janet Taylor Pickett and Jimmy Wright.

The exhibition continues through next Sunday at the center, 68 Elm Street. Hours are noon to 4 P.M. Monday through Friday and 2 to 4 P.M. Saturday and Sunday.