

PARTOU ZIA

PORTRAITS BEYOND SELF

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21 EASTCASTLE STREET LONDON W1W 8DD

ART FIRST

CAT NO. 1 **Self Portrait on Tresco**, 2006, oil on canvas, 60 x 60 cm





Portraits beyond Self

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The Self. It seems we know what we mean by ‘the self’. Day-to-day remarks, such as, ‘I’ll go by myself’, or ‘You do it yourself’, are clear enough.

But if we go further, as in *Landscape Portrait, Wales*, we encounter a question that has occupied a vital place in the art and thought of the past 100 years or more. The face and the place are detailed and specific. But the question they pose is both universal and historically pressing.

What *is* our relationship with the earth? How far is what we assume to be ‘our’ consciousness produced by place? Ever since Europe set forth to ‘discover’ the world, it has also been embarked on a journey of self-exploration. This came to a crisis in the 20th century as Europe’s ‘others’—women, those it had colonized, those who rebelled—found voice.

Perhaps artists have always probed aspects of this idea. Partou Zia certainly did, taking it in directions that enabled her to re-invent what self is in the every-day. As a woman of Iranian origins, educated in England, she already had a complex

CAT NO. 2 *Landscape Portrait, Wales*, oil on canvas, 2007, 76 × 102 cm

sense of self. But this is not exactly what she explores in this series of subtly brilliant works. It is what informs them, but with her unique talent, she never stops with questions as they are usually posed. She reformulates them, enabling genuine discovery.

The result is works that image an expanded awareness of what we take for granted in portraits, in landscape and in relation to the consciousness that inhabits them. It presents us with the issue of whether any of her paintings are self-portraits in the accepted sense at all. A mythic figure by an inverted tree with strange flowers breathes into the clouds; a head grows out of the landscape; a St. Joan figure plants a red flag defiantly, high above a valley. These paintings conform perhaps the least to our idea of self-portraiture, yet they evoke Partou herself just as clearly as the drawings that come closest to what we might expect of the genre.

The two nude portraits in this exhibition are entitled *Self Portrait* (2001) and *Self Portrait* (2002)—cat. nos. 4 and 5—though they are, of course, of the artist, and could have been so called, especially as they show her at work. There is a sense of being caught in the moment, like Rubens' famous portrait of his wife, Hélène (1630s, known as *The Fur*). This means they do not primarily convey a sense of a reflection in the mirror, or of some ordinary scrutiny of the face and figure, but rather a manifestation in paint of the relation between artist and viewer.





CAT NO. 4 Self Portrait, 2001, oil on canvas, 102 x 92 cm



CAT NO. 5 Self Portrait, 2002, oil on canvas, 153 x 183 cm

The mysterious light switches (or plugs) that appear in many of Partou's works are present here, mischievously reminding us of the invisible energy that powers our normality. Body and background merge into each other as if made of that energy rather than flesh and walls.

And how those touching details reinforce the delicate impact of the slightly later of the two images, that of 2002: the gleam in that blue earring, complemented by the yellow paint on the end of her brush, the little painting of the rider at eye level to the artist's right.

The viewer is implicated in these images. If we understand the self as implying separation and self-absorption, then these are not self-portraits. The merging of background and foreground that characterizes many of Partou's works is indicative of a move beyond the clear spatial differentiation of many Oedipal or phallic visual structures. Partou's work is not about the ego. It is about a de-differentiated corporeal being.

The paintings with two figures are especially interesting to think about in exploring this idea.

In Accord II (2007), cat. no. 6, twinned figures embrace while in the background two lone trees—or are they plumes of smoke?—lean towards them, and two pairs of slippers float, suggesting home. If this is a self-portrait,



what kind of self does it portray? It is not narcissistic, as neither of the figures looks at the other, or indeed at us as viewer, or again at Partou as painter. She is not examining a self constituted through the gaze, or the scopic field (in the language of today's media theory). What she has articulated escapes the structures posited in dominant theories because it is about touch. What matters about these figures is that they know each other through their bodies.

In *Fenced Horizons* (2005), cat. no. 7, and in *Shadow Writing* (200?), cat. no. 8, the figures are equally intimately joined. But here Partou explores not only the consciousness of a single person, but also that of partners.

To read or write in shared space is to enter an augmented space, beyond even a dream-scape; in the former, the reader—fingers tense with concentration—is seemingly joined at the neck to her partner, while the radio is whimsically plugged into the sky as if it were Prospero's; in the latter, the rhythm of the intensely focused heads leads almost inevitably to the curve of the road they conjure.

But in neither case is the place inhabited by the figures clearly separated from the landscape. In *Fenced Horizons* the bed dissolves into the blue-green of the swirling space that is not-quite-bounded by the fence; in *Shadow Writing* the blue behind the heads continues right across the painting, and the light space beside the road is like another page folded out from the book.



The road is dark, however, and though there is warmth and safety, there is also precariousness. Equally, the whites in *Fenced Horizons*—of the pages, on the woman's face, in the background—seem drawn to the bowl, dangerously perched on the table. This is a fully realized extended world, not an idealized other-world.

It is a world of colour and joy and humour; but also of risk and endeavour and the unfamiliar. To go beyond self is no easy journey. Partou had her books and her art to accompany her. We now also have hers.

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CAT NO. 9 **My Flag**, 2006, oil on canvas, 153 x 183 cm



CAT NO. 10 **Landscape Portrait**, oil on canvas, 2007, 76 x 102 cm



CAT NO. 11 **In the Beginning**, 2008, oil on canvas, 153 × 183 cm



PARTOU ZIA

Partou emigrated from Tehran to England in 1970. After studying Art History at the University of Warwick and Fine Art at the Slade School of Art UCL she was awarded a PhD for her writing and painting by the University of Plymouth in 2001. She lived and worked in Cornwall with her husband the painter Richard Cook until her death after a courageous battle against cancer in 2008.

This photograph by Bob Berry shows Partou in the historic Porthmeor Studios in St Ives, previously occupied by Borlase Smart, Ben Nicholson and Patrick Heron. She was the first recipient of Tate's pioneering residency programme there, in 2003. The resulting exhibition at Tate was accompanied by an illustrated catalogue, *Entering the Visionary Zone*, with an insightful essay by Dr Virginia Button.

To accompany Partou's first exhibition *Thought Paintings*, at Art First in London, extracts from Tate's commissioned interview between curator Sara Hughes and Partou, about the Residency and its impact on her subsequent work, were published by Art First.

For her solo show *The Grey Syllable* in 2005 an accompanying catalogue included Dr Penny Florence's remarkable foreword, *Paint me an Angel* and *Blue*, the perceptive essay by Susan Daniel-McElroy, then Director of Tate St Ives.

Partou's Memorial Exhibition at the Exchange in Penzance took place in December 2008. Dr Penny Florence, author of this catalogue, began her penetrating assessment of the artist's achievement during the last five years of her life. Dr Florence has continued to work on Partou's writing—the plays, journals and poetry—in preparation for future publication.





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