

# EMERGE



ART ON DEMAND 8.3

ALICE  
MACKENZIE

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Artists have created self portraits throughout history, and they have done so for a variety of reasons: to announce their skills to potential patrons, to explore their own identities, and sometimes for the simple reason that they are their most easily available sitters. Artists have also utilized various approaches and techniques in their self-portraits; elements such as performance, careful posing, and elaborate costuming and role-playing have sometimes intermingled to create self-portraits that aided in the development of unique artistic personas. Such paintings may not always have been intended to authentically portray the artist as themselves, but rather they existed as a way for artists to cultivate both a public image and an aesthetic to better aid their practice.

Emerging, Vancouver-based artist Alice MacKenzie draws inspiration from the long history of elaborate costuming and adopting of alternative personas in self portraiture, although in her case she does so specifically in order to examine and interpret aspects of her autistic identity. The current exhibition features two distinct but related bodies of work that are both composed entirely of self-portraits: a series of black and white digital prints titled *Family Self Portraits*, and a varied collection of self-portraits, painted in oil in intense colours. Both bodies of work serve as a way for MacKenzie to both document and examine her personal experience with autism, as well to reflect on other family members that she suspects may have been neurodivergent (but undiagnosed).

A particular focus in much of MacKenzie's work is the concept of "masking," in which autistic individuals alter their behavior to disguise their autistic traits and act more similarly to their non-autistic peers. All individuals—neurotypical or otherwise—mask to some extent,



Cover: *Did She Dress Herself?*, 2022, oil on canvas, 30 x 36 in.

Above: *Elizabeth II (Mother)*, 2022, digital photography/ collage, 10 X 12 in.

but neurotypical masking is often less extreme and, as a result, not as debilitating to the individual. Oftentimes, autistic masking is a behavior that is automatically learned as a survival mechanism or coping strategy, and the behaviour can present itself unconsciously, even uncontrollably. In all cases of autistic individuals, masking takes a toll and can be devastating in the long term. Having to suppress your innate instincts and desires for so long, often starting at a very young age, makes it difficult for many autistic individuals to understand what aspects of their personality are maintained for others, and which are naturally theirs.

Again, this behavioral adaptation is something that both autistic and allistic people experience, though for autistic individuals the consequences can be far more damaging.

MacKenzie's own experiences with masking are referenced through both the titles and the process behind her paintings. For example, in *You Look Just Like Her*, thin layers of paint bleed on top of each other to create a hazy, ambiguous portrait. This careful build up of paint is suggestive of the layers that comprise MacKenzie's identity. Each layer – indecipherable on its own—is representative of an aspect of MacKenzie's personality. These layers of paint are characteristic of facets of a mask that have been present for so long that they have become just as present as MacKenzie's unmasked qualities. These masked and unmasked selves are fiercely intertwined, even impossible to distinguish or separate. In this work, MacKenzie's figure seems almost to blend into the background, appearing just at the cusp of being an entire or distinct person. Her gaze is direct, but her expression is neutral to the point of unrecognizability; it is impossible to read or entirely understand. The title itself calls to mind a sort of visual mimicry—the artist looks just like her masked, neurotypical-presenting self, but when unmasked, acts nothing like her.

Inspired by the elaborate roles that artists before her have portrayed in their self portraits, in other works MacKenzie presents herself in an ornate costume,

adorned with flowers. The costuming she uses in *Did She Dress Herself* is a conflicting pantomime between reality and artifice – fairy wings, flowers, and roses ornament a (many-breasted) corset worn by the artist. While the persona performed in this work appears whimsical, a closer look reveals a rigidity underneath. MacKenzie's pose is static but steady, with her profile looking away, seeming uninterested in the viewer. The unreserved presentation of the corset that she wears—a particularly female restraint—along with her defiant pose and gaze away from the subject, compels the viewer to consider the painting and its mood differently. The artist has discussed this particular portrait in the context of a sexual assault that she suffered, and as such it could be read as a powerful reclamation of both sexuality and power —requiring the viewer to fully look at the performative aspects of the painting to fully grasp the reality underneath them.

The related series titled *Family Self Portraits* consists of twelve digital prints that are each a collage of two separate portraits—one of MacKenzie herself, and the other of a member of her extended family. The comparisons themselves are careful and highly detailed – the artist recreates the same tufts of hair and shadows to make a series of images that are not only about familial ties and family resemblances, but which also explore the possibilities of neurological similarity. Research suggests that most cases of autism are the result of genetic factors that are passed down through families, reminding the viewer that these portraits

exist as a display of other people related to the artist who may theoretically have the same condition, or the same genetic potential for it.

Through the use of elaborate costuming and familial ties, Alice MacKenzie's introspective works prompt the viewer to examine the ways that their own personal masking – neurodivergent or otherwise – can alter the ways in which they view themselves. Viewers are prompted to differentiate between their natural instincts and the masks that they wear throughout their day, and to contemplate if unravelling their masks could lead to a more authentic self. Through her unreserved self-portraits, MacKenzie's work is in effect a visual unraveling of her own mask, utilizing aspects of performance in the pursuit of a more complete understanding of the self.

Aaron Scobbie  
Emerge Curator



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## ALICE MACKENZIE

Alice MacKenzie (b. 1994, Canada) is a multidisciplinary artist based out of Vancouver. Her work centers around an interrogation of representational art through a neurodivergent lens, with an emphasis on process and learning. She writes: "As a disabled artist and art educator, the creativity I cultivate within my practice and teaching helps me to more authentically connect with myself and navigate the world around me." MacKenzie's work can be found in private collections in Canada, the United States, and Europe.



Above: *You Look Just Like Her*, 2022,  
oil on canvas, 30 x 26 in.