

Celia Paul: The Artist Mistaken for a Muse

Background Notes

Rosemary Waugh — 1 November 2023



Celia Paul, *Self-Portrait in a Narrow Mirror*, 2019, oil on canvas, 142.2 x 71.1cm. Image courtesy of Victoria Miro/Celia Paul.

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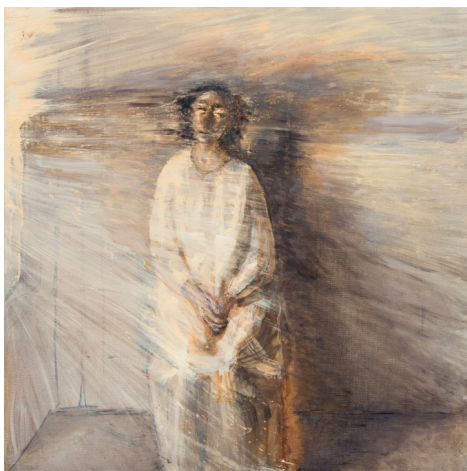
A naked woman lies on a black bedspread, a small dish containing a split-open boiled egg by her side. There is no warmth or intimacy to the scene; the prone female is presented to the viewer with the same clinical gaze as a body on an autopsy table. The split egg, meanwhile, feels like a cruel joke. It could be hinting at the unseen reproductive organs of the women lying down, but the more immediate echo is found in her uncovered, soft breasts, including the one gently cupped by her left hand. Despite small areas of pink and peach, it's the use of stark white and metallic grey which stand out on the skin. This is cold flesh and it's this sensation of coldness which seeps out of the canvas and into the viewer.



Lucian Freud, *Naked Girl with Egg*, 1980-81, oil on canvas, 75 x 60.5cm. Image courtesy of The Lucian Freud Archive/
Bridgeman.

Look now instead at a very different image of a painted woman. Here, a dark-haired figure sits upright in a chair, her hands clasped almost reverentially in her lap. Clothed in a simple white dress, she tilts her head upwards to better receive the blast of warm sunlight

entering through the window. The image emanates warmth. In its simplified devotion to the female pictured and hits of golden luminosity, it almost resembles a modern-day painting of a Christian saint. But the human connection is too strong to keep it in the realms of lofty religiosity. In its domesticity and familiarity lies its beauty. This is a painting of a sister, a friend, a woman. And she is sitting in sunlight.



Celia Paul, *Kate in White, Spring, 2018*, oil on canvas, 143 x 142.5cm. Image courtesy of Victoria Miro/Celia Paul.

For many years, and perhaps still to some art fans, Celia Paul (b. 1959) was known mainly for her connection to Lucian Freud (b. 1922). The pair met when Paul was a student at the Slade School of Fine Art in London and Freud was a visiting lecturer. At his insistence, she quickly became his lover and, later, the mother of one of his many children. She also became one of his models, posing for several paintings including that disconcerting image just discussed, *Naked Girl with Egg* (1980-81). Even after an intense and tumultuous decade together, the pair stayed close. In the weeks leading up to his death in 2011, Paul visited Freud on more than one occasion, including giving him a bath and tenderly washing his back.

The public's incomplete view of Paul is not lost on her. In 2019, she told a journalist who interviewed her for the *Guardian*: "When Lucian died, I was shocked by how I was seen in the world. I was 'Lucian Freud's muse'. I felt I needed to do something about this."

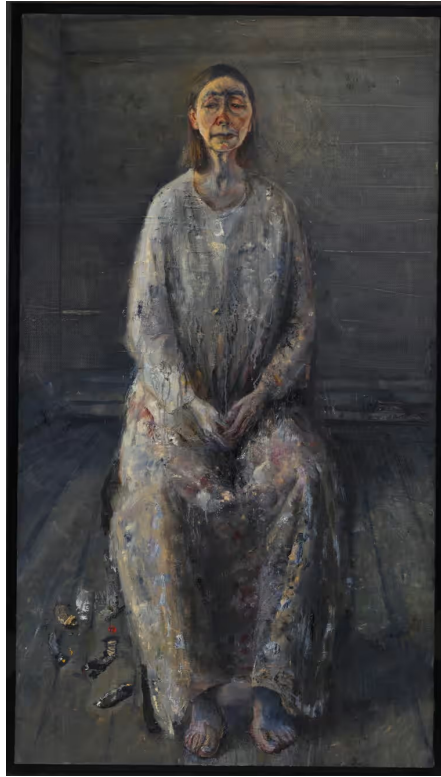
Her response, as she went on to explain, was to literally write her own story, a 2019 work called *Self-Portrait* which details the pair's original meeting, what it was like to model for him, and so much else about her upbringing and inner life as an artist. Art critic Rachel Cooke has called it, "One of the greatest ever books by an artist," and it gives a rare and beautiful insight into Paul's process and unique world view. But Paul really didn't need to assert her own status as an artist and human independent from Freud by writing a book. She is, as author Zadie Smith has summarised, not a "muse who later became a painter, but... a painter who, for ten years of her early life, found herself mistaken for a muse."

Since her admission to the Slade in 1976, Paul has been consistently and conscientiously creating a body of artwork that proves her to be one of Britain's most emotionally adroit and endlessly inquisitive painters. That in itself should be enough to indisputably reserve her a place in the canon of Great British Artists. But changing fashions, most notably the era of Young British Artists and a preference for anything other than "old-fashioned" figurative painting, have also contributed to Paul being overlooked. She was, perhaps, born slightly too late. If we really want to discuss a link between Paul and Freud, then it could be through their work. Both artists demonstrate a preference for painting multiple portraits of the same subjects who, often, are family members or close friends. Both bring an intensity of focus to the people or things they paint which make the most familiar faces, locations or items feel almost alien in their uniqueness and newness. Although Paul, especially latterly, has also created a collection of lithe, moody seascapes and other landscape works alongside her great array of portraiture. There are also links between Paul's output and other artists of the post-war 'School of London' that Freud is associated with, most notably Frank Auerbach.



Lucian Freud, *Painter and Model*, 1986-7, oil on canvas, 159.6 x 120.7cm. Private collection.

But the differences between Freud and Paul remain the most fascinating. The last painting Freud made of Paul shows her fully clothed, upright and attending to her vocation: painting. *Painter and Model* (1986-7) is a very different beast to *Naked Girl with Egg*. This time, the prone naked body in the picture belongs to a man – Paul’s friend, Angus Cook – and Paul is shown wearing a paint-splattered smock and holding a paintbrush. But there is a distinct unease to the composition. Paul looks downwards towards the floor, her features slightly pinched. While she holds a paintbrush, she is not shown actually in the act of painting. Her bare right foot squashes a tube of paint, its contents squelching out. It’s as though Freud wasn’t quite comfortable with this figure of the female artist and didn’t quite know what to do with her.

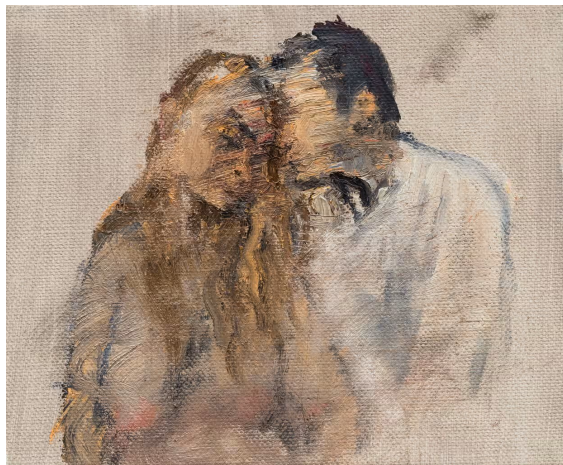


Celia Paul, *Painter and Model*, 2012, oil on canvas.
Image courtesy of Victoria Miro/Celia Paul.

In 2012, Paul painted a self-portrait with the same title, *Painter and Model*, which feels like a repudiation to how she is shown in Freud's identically named picture. Here, she is again captured in a voluminous paint-covered dress, her bare feet surrounded by paint tubes. But instead of looking downwards, she faces directly towards the viewer, her expression and poise dignified and introspective. A very different artist's view of an artist than the one painted around 25 years earlier.

Along with Auerbach, the artist Paul most associates herself with is Gwen John. There's an obvious biographical link between the artists, with John famously having a relationship with the much-older Auguste Rodin – a fact that has often overshadowed her own artistic genius in her reception, like Paul to Freud. But the true link is purely artistic. Following *Self-Portrait*, Paul published a second book, *Letters to Gwen John*, in 2022. In it, she elucidates on why she has long felt “mysteriously connected” to the other artist. She also explains, early on, how the links between the two eclipse the synthetic Paul-Freud/John-Rodin biographical parallel. Paul writes: “I have painted myself in silent seated poses, still as a statue, and so have you. Perhaps, through you, I can begin to trace the reason for my transformation into painted stone.”

She also mentions how, “We were driven to find our true creativity by leading interior solitary lives; we both became interested in abstraction (and the idea of God) later in life”. And, most strikingly, how, “Both of our talents are entirely separate from the men we have been attached to – we are neither of us derivative in any way.” Yet somehow, “We are neither of us considered as artists standing alone.”



Celia Paul, *Lucian and Me*, 2019, Oil on canvas.
Image courtesy of Victoria Miro/Celia Paul.

Paul's description of her transformation into statue-like being in her self-portraiture is intriguing. To the outside eye, they look 'statuesque' in a dignified and almost regal way. Yet their soft, breathing humanity prevents them from becoming stony and remote. There is one painting, in particular, where Paul's presentation of herself is particularly unlike a statue. *Lucian and Me*, a small 2019 painting gives a hazy view of two figures: a long-haired woman being gently nuzzled by a bigger, white-clothed man. The intimacy is beautiful; these are two gentle beings sharing a private moment entirely separate from any public preconceptions of identity or status. He turns towards her, nose in hair and she looks like the centrepiece of the image: the true subject of the artwork.

Further reading

Paul, Celia, *Self-portrait* (London: Jonathon Cape, 2019)

Paul, Celia, *Letters to Gwen John* (London: Jonathon Cape, 2022)

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