



**THE FEMALE GAZE**  
WOMEN ARTISTS MAKING THEIR WORLD





# The Female Gaze Women Artists Making Their World

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## Feminism, Identity, and Self-Representation: Self-Portraiture Reimagined

Anna C. Chave

Men, who normally acquire their fathers' surnames at birth, generally possess a continuous, readily traceable identity throughout their lives in that fundamental way. Female identity, however, is typically multiple, mutable, and comparatively evanescent under patrilineal systems, at least for women who marry. Thus, Elaine Reichek's *Sampler (E.R.)* from 1999 (pl. 21) displays an embroidered panoply of names by which the artist is and has been known, ranging from the diminutive "Laney Reichek" to the married "Elaine Reichek Engel" (with the poetic monogram "ERE" stitched as if on bridal pillowcases) to the formal "Mrs. George Clark Engel Jr."—nomenclature that elides completely Reichek's youthful identity. Born in 1943, "Ms. Reichek"—another of the sampler's stitched monikers—was of a generation that included the founders of the feminist art movement in the United States, the same generation who coined and lobbied for the honorific "Ms." as a title that, like "Mr." (and unlike Miss and Mrs.), served potentially to detach their identities from their spouses' and thereby to downplay the centrality of their marital status. Like many women of that and succeeding generations, Reichek elected to retain "her" name (which is to say her father's surname) for professional purposes. While she thus maintained a sense of continuity with her girlhood self, she also divorced her professional self from her life as, for instance, the mother of children bearing the surname Engel. Like many women, in short, Reichek inhabited differing identities in differing contexts, and her *Sampler (E.R.)* visualizes this repertoire of selves through a diverse, transmuting network of names and initials, painstakingly and fetchingly stitched in shifting colors, from vanishing white to girly pink to severe black, and myriad lettering styles, from plain to elegant to florid.

Historically, the humble, charming form of the sampler served both as a creative outlet and as a means of training and discipline for girls, whose competency in

*Detail, checklist, page 266.*

*Diane Edison, Self-Portrait, 1996.*

needlework counted as partial evidence of their marriageability. Here, however, and through other samplers in which she reworked and glossed canonical artworks by such artists as Jasper Johns or Andy Warhol, the adult Reichek deviously arrogated this girlish, archaic, vernacular handwork form to at once conceptual and feminist purposes (and was awarded a 1999 solo projects show at the Museum of Modern Art—normally no support to feminist enterprises—for her efforts). Attempts at investigating, reimagining, and revaluing women's traditional arts had counted among the foundational feminist art and art-historical initiatives of the 1970s. But whereas, for instance, Judy Chicago delegated the elaborate stitchery on the placemats of her iconic *Dinner Party* (1974–79) to a corps of female needlework adepts, wishing to keep her artistic distance from the hands-on chores of realizing her designs, Reichek (though not a needlework buff in her private life) insisted on performing the work herself, honoring by foregrounding a kind of intensive, repetitive labor typifying the domestic work conventionally delegated to women.<sup>1</sup>

In ways both social and legal, to inscribe one's name is to lay claim to one's identity, to be counted. Making a deliberate, contrived showpiece out of this banal and basic act holds extra resonance for a female artist, however, given that female artists' identities were historically widely subject to erasure. Likewise foundational to feminist art history, then, were extensive search and rescue missions (beginning in the 1970s) devoted to recovering a history of women's work in forms both high and low: proof that, despite their virtual invisibility in the art-historical record, a quotient of women somehow managed to practice as artists over the centuries, notwithstanding the formidable institutional and social barriers to their doing so. Such proof at times emerged in the form of the self-portrait, of course, including the evidently straightforward image of the female painter at work at her easel. For that matter, women's art is sometimes broadly viewed as having evinced over time a particularly self-focused or autobiographical aspect, while critics and

historians have in any case often tended to frame female artists in biographical terms.<sup>2</sup> Sitting before the mirror as one's own chosen subject was, after all, a relatively economical and uncomplicated prospect that helped circumvent certain institutional barriers to practice, and some women did make a specialty of that undertaking. Frida Kahlo, for instance—who numbered among those erased women rehabilitated by an emergent generation of female art historians<sup>3</sup>—was effectively debarred by her gender from participating in the internationally prestigious Mexican mural movement that served as a major showcase for her husband Diego Rivera's epical work. So, working mostly on a modest scale, she would turn persistently to herself instead as a subject.

As a genre, self-portraiture may be seen as an eminently meaningful way of acting on the time-honored injunction to “know thyself,” as the ancient Greek aphorism dictated. And there have of course been some prominent male artists, such as Vincent van Gogh, who have been drawn to the genre. But the specter of the woman who studies herself unendingly in the mirror is profoundly familiar to us in a distinct way; for it reinforces the trope—propagated by Sigmund Freud, among others—of women as endemically narcissistic. An ingrained concern on women's part with their own appearance is more readily explained not as a special psychic endowment, however, but as the artifact of their historical need to attract men in order to secure for themselves and their offspring certain basic economic, legal, and physical protections. Plus, a major network of industries has long proliferated to promote and sustain the premise that women look inferior if they do not religiously enhance their appearance through makeup and other means—blandishments from which men are comparatively exempt. Historically, women's greater focus on the private realm has followed also, of course, from their relative lack of access to the public one. But since the private realm tends to be typed as comparatively narrow and inconsequential, this has at times served as grounds to diminish women's creative contributions. As feminist scholars have taken pains to show, however, the private and domestic realms possess

their own considerable depths, such that statements of public moment and consequence can and do hail from this arena. For example, Frida Kahlo's half-length self-portrait *The Broken Column* (fig. 1) provides a fantastic account of the trauma her body sustained from a catastrophic traffic accident that she suffered as an adolescent. Painted after one of Kahlo's many surgeries, it depicts her stripped torso clad in a tortuous-looking orthopedic corset, such as she actually wore. But she strategically redeployed some iconic folk and sacred art conventions—showing herself pierced with nails like a variant Saint Sebastian whose solemn face is traced by schematic tears—to evince and trouble certain larger narratives concerning martyrdom and sacrifice. Then, too, the artist's fractured spine, which she makes visible in a grisly cutaway view, emerges not as interlinked vertebrae, but instead as a crumbling Ionic column: what has shattered is not just one woman's bones, but a pillar of Western civilization, metaphorically speaking. And in view of the painting's 1944 date and the postapocalyptic landscape surroundings it conjures, the calamity in question in this image may be seen as having topical, global valences. Thus, the highly politicized Kahlo, who claimed some Jewish ancestry, slyly invokes at once personal, legendary, and world-historical experiences with horror.

For male artists, refashioning the female figure has been an accustomed pursuit; the paradigmatic viewer and patron in the West has been a straight male, for whom the sexualized female form (the female nude being the paradigmatic nude of the modern era) counted as a routine visual pleasure. By contriving to paint herself, whether in the nude or costumed, Kahlo—and other female artists who turned purposely toward the mirror—both occupied the proscribed role of the authorizing subject (the artist) and investigated and reanimated the position of the object, crafting potentially unaccustomed visions of feminine subjectivity and embodiment. There lingered the risk, however, that those visions could be simply annexed to the dominant norms of a masculinist and heteronormative visual regime, a risk women reckoned with

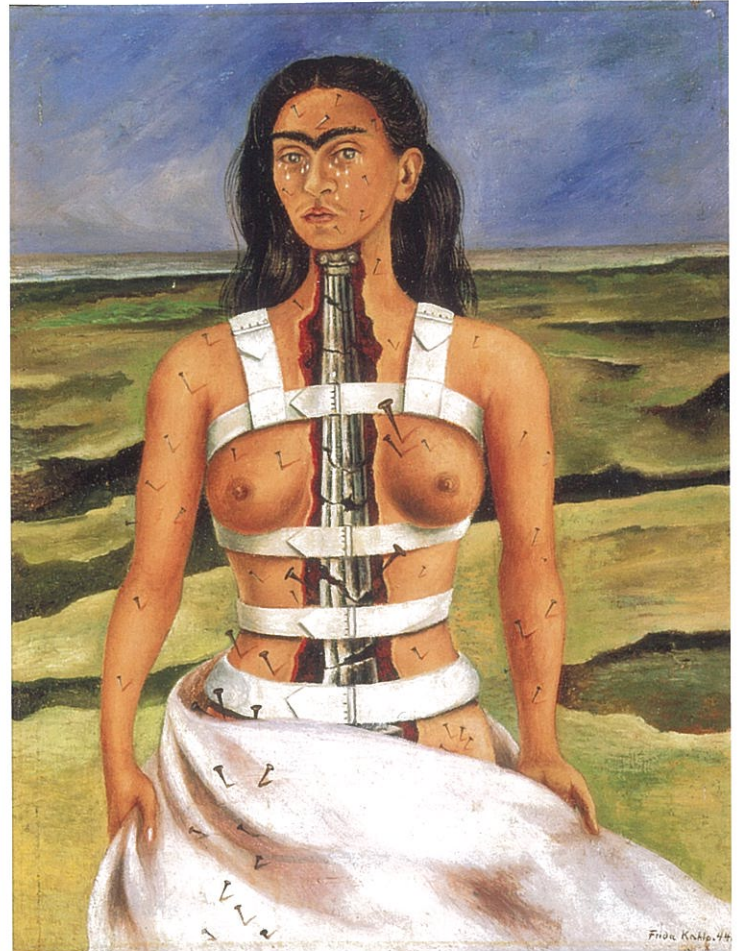


FIG. 1 Frida Kahlo (1907–1954), *The Broken Column*, 1944. Museo Dolores Olmedo, Mexico City, Mexico © 2012 Banco de México Diego Rivera & Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, México D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/Photo: Schalkwijk/Art Resource, New York



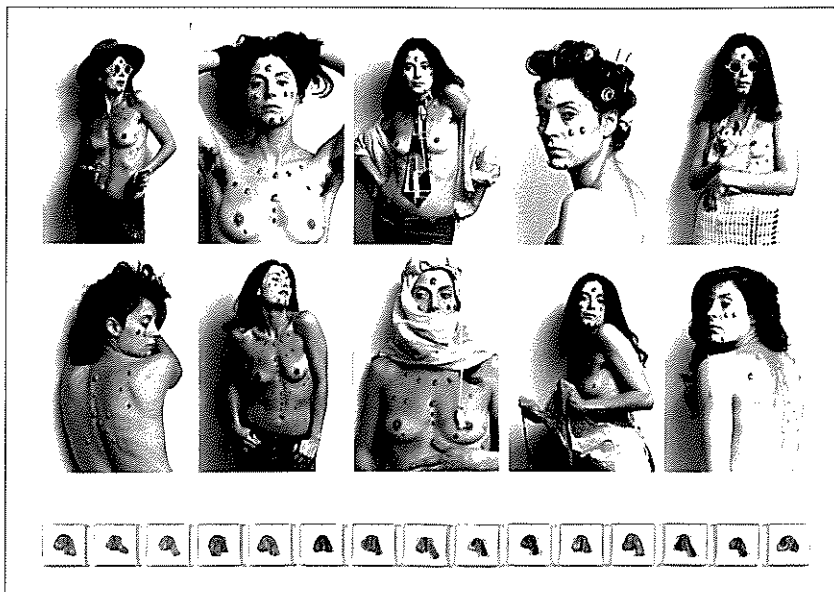


FIG. 2 Hannah Wilke (1940-1993), *S.O.S.-Starification Object Series*, 1974-82. Gelatin silver prints with chewing gum sculptures; 40 × 58½ × 2¼ inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Purchase, 433.2006/© 2012 Marsie, Emanuelle, Damon and Andrew Scharlatt—Hannah Wilke Collection and Archive, Los Angeles/Licensed by VAGA, New York/Photo: The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, New York

in different ways. When Hannah Wilke vamped for the camera in an array of roles that rehearsed and remade mostly erotic tropes of femininity that circulated in the commercial culture—in her *S.O.S. Starification Object Series* of 1974-79 (fig. 2)—other feminists generally looked askance, finding, or fearing, that the spectacle of Wilke's nearly naked, attractive body left insufficient critical distance between itself and the conventions it invoked, notwithstanding that the antic artist unconventionally decorated herself with exquisitely intricate little sculptures made of chewing gum painstakingly formed in the shape of vulvae. Through that faux scarification, she rendered herself not just imaginatively penetrable, but freakishly, excessively so.

As another example, in the case of Alice Neel, whose forte was portraiture, she mostly deferred painting her conventionally attractive—fair, light-skinned, and curvaceous—self until that self no longer conformed to the received outlines of the artist's model. But in 1980, Neel notoriously made up for lost time (fig. 3), incongruously portraying her nude, white-haired, eighty-year-old body poised on a festively striped armchair such as Matisse famously used for posing some of his nubile odalisques. Unlike those indolent women, Neel is seen at work, with a slim erect paintbrush in one hand and a limp white rag in the other. And whereas the odalisques'

gazes were often a blur, the bespectacled Neel eyeballs at once herself and her viewers with a gaze that is alert, frank, and ultimately unsparing in its assessment of the ways in which the combined forces of time, hardship, and repeated childbearing have taxed her physical being. Besides the swollen ankle, knee, and knuckle joints, there is the, by turns, caved-in and bulging torso with greenish and purple tinges that loosely resembles an outsized uncooked turkey carcass.

The challenge of balancing the extensive demands of motherhood with the intensive demands of being an artist proved a long-term one for Neel—who attained some renown in the 1970s for shocking portraits of extremely pregnant nudes whose countenances seem to harbor ambivalence, if not terror, at what lies ahead (*Pregnant Woman* [1971] and *Margaret Evans Pregnant* [1978]). Even as Western women gained greater control over their reproductive lives and greater access to workforce opportunities, studies have persistently shown that they have not gained much relief from their disproportionate, socially assigned child-rearing duties, which came to be dubbed a "second shift." Some artists have addressed the problem of the competing claims of motherhood and career by pressing their children into the service of their art. Photographer Sally Mann's *Immediate Family* project of 1992, with its sensual and at once, or by turns,

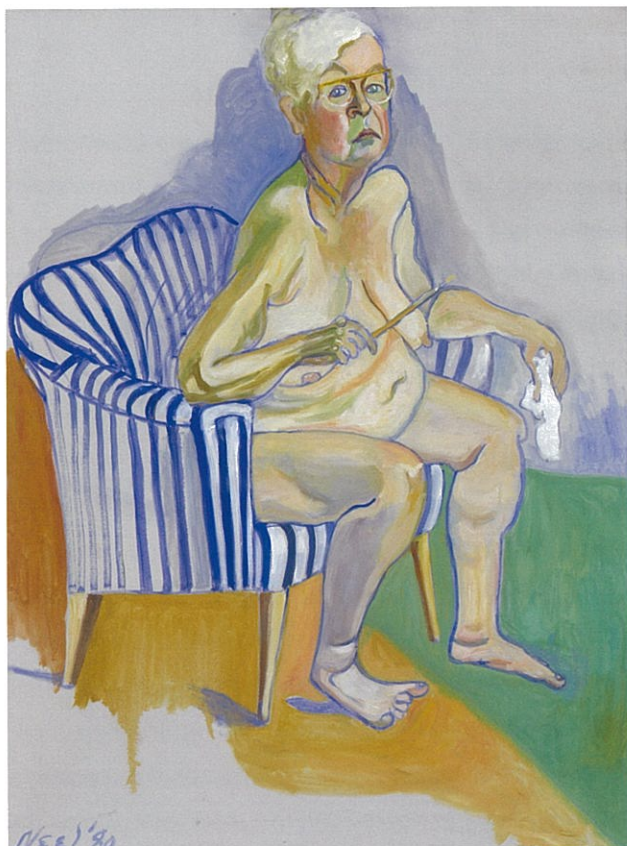


FIG. 3 Alice Neel (1900–1984) *Self-Portrait*, 1980. Oil on canvas; 53¼ × 39¾ inches. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, NPG.85.19  
© The Estate of Alice Neel, courtesy David Zwirner, New York

FIG. 4 Raquel Montilla Higgins (b. 1944), *Mama y Yo (Mamma and Me)*, 1994. Oil on canvas; 40 × 40 inches. Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Art by Women Collection, Gift of Linda Lee Alter, 2011.1.156



idyllic and disconcerting vision of her offspring's rural childhood, is a particularly iconic and controversial case in point. But among the artists included in the Alter collection, there is the case of Katy Schneider, whose conservative, though loosely daubed, paintings trace the mundane satisfactions of a young New England mother at home and in her studio, as in some mid-1990s self-images of the artist as a pregnant nude and in *Self-Portrait with Olive and Mae* of 1997. In the latter work, one of the seated artist's hands lies sandwiched between her loins, while her other (painting) arm is displaced by the figure of a child who emerged from those loins and who serves here, in tandem with her sister, not only as an instrument of, but also as a potential impediment to, her artist-mother's labors—the rapt, obedient countenances of the almost bobble-headed girls notwithstanding. Raquel Montilla Higgins, by contrast, conveys the vantage point both of a daughter and of a woman past childbearing age in a practically glyphic conjuring of the artist's own birth. In the 1994 oil painting *Mama Y Yo* (fig. 4), which Higgins engagingly contrived to resemble white chalk thinly, concisely scratched on a blackboard, the squatting figure of Mama—whose mouth is agape in her otherwise blank face in an iconic expression of agony and awe—assumes the outlines of a capacious upholstered chair (read: mother as giant, enveloping lap), while the elliptical seat cushion of that chair evinces an at once open-mouthed, vulvic, piscine, and infant-shaped graffito (the “Yo” or “I” of the title). Rather than consult the mirror in a time-tested way, Higgins imaginatively revisited and poetically recast some archaic and modern tropes of the feminine and maternal in an engaging form of tribute.

Numbering among the key initiatives of feminist artists who emerged in the 1970s was a bid to recuperate, revise, and revalue prehistoric mother goddess imagery. Such was the intent of Ana Mendieta, whose more abstract or glyphic “Siluetas” (pl. 13) of her own body's form—most of which were rendered in natural settings with elemental materials (earth, fire, water) and then recorded photographically



(beginning in 1973)—loosely anticipate Higgins's later act of graphic shorthand. But for all of the sanctity, not to mention the more mundane rewards, attached to motherhood, maternity has historically also been deeply implicated in the constriction of women's professional possibilities, consigning women generally to become what Simone de Beauvoir indelibly called the "second sex." As Schneider's anodyne vision of her apparently integrated professional and personal lives suggests, however, women's stories—especially now in the West—are not only stories of struggle, but also of fulfillment (if modestly so in the case of Schneider, who has not as yet enjoyed great professional recognition). Even some women who came of age at a time when professional success was practically a fluke for female artists did manage to prosper and to constitute exceptions. Joan Brown, for instance, enjoyed relatively effortless success early on, with strong support both from her cohorts in the San Francisco Bay Area art community as well as from an enthusiastic New York gallerist (though long-term success proved more intermittent and partial for the artist, who worked far from the art world's center and its critically sanctioned visual modes). In a tightly framed, bust-length self-portrait of 1972, in which she depicted herself in her mid-thirties, Brown's clear, aquamarine eyes stare straight ahead from her flushed, luminous face, projecting an intently serious, self-possessed effect (pl. 3). Set off by a flat background broadly brushed in that archetypically feminine hue—hot pink—her frontally poised, yet slightly off-center visage is fluidly, incisively outlined in streaks of white and ice blue enamel paint. That paint's "speed" suited Brown's interest in working in a way that was "very, very spontaneous—working off the top of my head"—an interest shared in common with her Beat peers.<sup>4</sup> Eccentrically garbed, Brown's head sports a severe black turban ornamented with an "Eskimo" pin, whose miniature visage of a panting sled dog playfully undercuts her solemn demeanor. Given her esoteric spiritual leanings, the turban may evince a woman intent, not only on sight, but on insight. And the Eskimo reference seems to correlate with

the painting's icy blues, which recur around Brown's eyes and in her collar, its lively pattern scratched by the handle of her inverted brush.

Brown was slightly older than the generation of women who spearheaded the feminist art movement—which took root south of her in Los Angeles, as well as in New York City and elsewhere in Western Europe. But while she did not herself join the cause, Brown broadly resembles, despite her efforts at self-exoticization, the mostly white, straight women of mostly middle-class origin who did so, pursuing above all the goal of expanding women's presence in an all but monolithically male, and no less monolithically white art world. By contrast, the African American, lesbian artist Diane Edison represents a distinct counter-type to the dominant face of the feminist art movement, as she represents in a sense also the repressed of that movement. During the mid-1980s and '90s, the art world took a turn toward "multiculturalism," and queer theory erupted into art-historical discourse, as feminist and other activist art historians began to embrace more multifactorial approaches to identity issues. Feminists generally had long struggled with being typecast as an unruly bunch of man-hating dykes. And lurking behind such stereotypes were ancient tropes for the lethal woman, such as the mythic Medusa who had snakes for hair and whose gaze turned men to stone. The long, copious, snaky-looking dreadlocks that Edison wears in her riveting *Nude Self-Portrait* of 1995 (pl. 11), and which she redoubled by a sinister shadow haunting the background of her velvety pastel (part of a network of distinctive shadows that play also across her dramatically lit body), seem implicitly to invoke that Medusan specter.

In a famous French feminist text of 1975–76, "The Laugh of the Medusa," Hélène Cixous proposed at once to reclaim for feminists, and to skewer, that stock psychoanalytic figure of the castrated, castrating woman (witness in the Medusa example the phallic spectacle of that snaky hair). "You have only to look at the Medusa straight on to see her," Cixous exhorted her readers. "And she's not dead. She's beautiful

and she's laughing."<sup>5</sup> Feminist artists historically have often had recourse to laughter, using humor as a strategy to rechannel and blunt the sting of women's anger. But Edison—who has stood to be thrice marginalized, on account of her race and sexuality as well as her gender—is not prepared to soften the tidings that the longstanding experience of neglect, diminishment, and exclusion breeds ill-feeling. In her *Nude Self-Portrait*, she is by no means laughing, and her middle-aged, dark-skinned, fleshy figure deviates sharply from the dominant norms and ideals of feminine beauty—ideals long devolving principally from white models, of course. With her imperious gaze, Edison forces or dares us to stare at her naked torso; and though her body is utterly normal, it appears exceedingly anomalous precisely on account of that fact (as did the aged Neel's body, for that matter), since the range of what gets visualized as normal in the dominant culture tends to be so very narrow. Most reliably motivated in her studio, she says, by feelings of anger, Edison assumes here a theatrically confrontational pose. With an arm akimbo and her chin hiked up, she glares down her nose at the viewer, and so tightly does her lavish figure fill the picture frame that she does not, as she says, "give the viewer much room to back away."<sup>6</sup> Edison thus revisits and reclaims the gendered racial stereotype of the angry black woman, overlaying it with the ordinarily distinct stereotypes of the sexually forward black woman and the (physically and morally) strong black woman. In view of the visually muscular and traditionally masterly technique with which she renders herself, Edison might be typed, or dismissed, as a comparatively conservative figure (as happened also to the expressionist Neel in her day). But that technique is put here to subversive purposes, to the ends of constructing what still undeniably registers as a profoundly unfamiliar incarnation of the figure of an artist/author, notwithstanding the diversification of the art world's membership in recent decades. On the one hand, in this particular figure, we have evidence that the art world's dramatis personae do now include some figures who look totally unlike the historic norm for the Western master or

artist; on the other hand, we implicitly have also the bracing news that she is animated by rage. Edison gives us the unvarnished image of a pissed-off, fired-up, possibly troublesome woman—a tonic image for a time when feminism and identity politics were being brought safely under academic and other institutional umbrellas, where they mostly remain.

## NOTES

- 1 This account relies in part on an (undated) conversation with Reichek, in part on an email communication from the artist, December 22, 2011. Some of Reichek's recent work is machine-stitched.
- 2 The most egregious case of a female artist who was long written about almost strictly in biographical terms is Georgia O'Keeffe. See Anna C. Chave, "O'Keeffe and the Masculine Gaze," *Art in America* 78, no. 1 (January 1990): 114–25. Regarding the ways in which women are subject to different biographical treatment than their male peers, see also Anna C. Chave, "Minimalism and Biography," *Art Bulletin* 82, no. 1 (March 2000): 149–63.
- 3 The text that especially revived interest in Kahlo is Hayden Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983).
- 4 Oral history interviews with Joan Brown conducted by Paul Karlstrom on September 9, 1975 (no. 3, p. 3) and July 15, 1975 (no. 2, pp. 35–36), Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. In these same interviews, Brown spoke of her desire to "paint people in a more simple, direct way than I have before. It's something I've been after for about two or three years," while discussing her engrossment with Egyptian art, which she perceived as evincing "a very graphic, simple . . . almost cartoon style" (no. 1, July 1, 1975, p. 24).
- 5 Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), 255.
- 6 Telephone interview with Diane Edison, December 23, 2011.



21 ELAINE REICHEK (B. 1943)

Sampler (E. R.), 1999

Embroidery on linen; 20 x 12 inches



13 **ANA MENDIETA (1948-1985)**

*Untitled* (from the *Siluetas* series), 1980

Gelatin silver emulsion print; 39½ × 53¼ inches

© 1980 The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York





3 **JOAN BROWN (1938-1990)**

*Untitled (Self-portrait in Turban with Eskimo Dog Pin), 1972*

Oil enamel on canvas; 23 $\frac{7}{8}$  × 17 $\frac{7}{8}$  inches

© Estate of Joan Brown, courtesy of George Adams Gallery, New York





11 **DIANE EDISON (B. 1950)**

*Nude Self-Portrait, 1995*

Pastel on black paper; 44¼ × 30 inches

© Diane Edison, courtesy of George Adams Gallery, New York

