

Sculptor Evan Penny feels his age

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Sculptor Evan Penny stands between striking likenesses of himself at TrepanierBaer Gallery Tuesday January 17, 2012. His exhibit, Young Self, Old Self - A Portrait of the Artist is on show now. Photograph: Ted Rhodes, Calgary Herald

Was sculptor Evan Penny feeling his mortality when creating his latest exhibition, Old Self, Young Self: A Portrait of the Artist, currently on view at TrepanierBaer Gallery?

When the 58-year-old Alberta-reared artist sculpted a head-and-shoulders portrait bust of himself in his early twenties was there a yearning for the past?

Conversely, when he fashioned an accompanying sculpture depicting himself as a man in his eighties, was there a sense of despair as to the inescapable ravages of time?

“Inevitably that’s a part of it,” Penny admits, sitting next to the startlingly lifelike busts, each nearly 3 feet tall, which represent the extreme ends of his adult life. “It’s a byproduct of the exercise.”



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But Penny is quick to point out the two tall black- and-white photographs, one of each sculpture, flanking the objects. Captured in this manner, the busts bespectacled and posed as one would be for a photographic portrait, these images seem even more natural and lifelike than the sculptures themselves.

Indeed, the photos are every bit as important to the exhibition as the sculptures, Penny insists, because they prove the point he’s trying to make with *Old Self, Young Self*.

“Imagining ourselves as younger or older is something we do all the time and this is kind of a meditation on that,” Penny says. “But underlying it all is this acknowledgment that the way we imagine ourselves in the past and in the future is defined by our relationship to photography.”

“How would I imagine myself in the past had I no photographic records? It would be entirely different. And how would I imagine myself in the future were

there no photographic records of family? . . . Everything to do with how we imagine the past and the future is bound up in photographs.”

With this as his thesis statement Penny posed for two pictures using 3-D scanning techniques. In one, taking inspiration from old photos of himself, he tried to embody his spirit as a young man, slightly insecure, but open to the world, head held high.

For the second photo, channelling a picture of his father, Penny tried to imagine how it would feel to be that age, his shoulders drooping slightly, an air of aching bones and tiredness emanating from the image.

From those new 3-D photographs and photos he was consulting, Penny ultimately produced the two portrait busts featured in *Old Self, Young Self*. They are, of course, imaginary portraits of the artist — how he could have looked and how he guesses he will look one day.

These silicone sculptures bear the hyper-realistic hallmarks of Penny’s work, which have made the former Alberta College of Art and Design student an artist of international note.

We see this incredible attention to detail in the finest hairs on the sculptures, from the white nostril hairs on the old Penny as opposed to the darker variety in his young man portrait. We can see ourselves reflected in the gazing flecked brown eyes on both sculptures, fashioned from clear UV plastic, and the way each wrinkle in the old man’s neck contrasts so sharply with the smooth, pale skin on the young man.

Old Self, Young Self: A Portrait of the Artist is part of a larger travelling exhibition called *Evan Penny Re Figured*, which is currently on view at the Museum der Moderne, in Salzburg, Austria.

So what sort of self journey was it for Penny, emotionally and spiritually, to age himself to the end of his life while creating this exhibition?

“This became very personal,” he says. “In a way it made me appreciate how some cultures have a prohibition about images of oneself. Because those images become quite powerful.”

Creating the images in *Old Self, Young Self* certainly changed Penny’s own self image.



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“Now I have a very plausible image of myself as a much older person,” he says.

“It’s in a photograph as believable as any other image of myself. It’s shifted how I think of myself.”

“And not necessarily in a positive way,” he laughs.

“But that says something about the power of the image. Once it’s there, it’s hard to unimagine it.”

Evan Penny’s Old Self, Young Self: A Portrait of the Artist is on view through to Feb. 18 at TrepanierBaer Gallery.

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