



I believe that a woman's femininity is found in the way she wears her hair. This is me over a glass putting my femininity forward.

PHOTOGRAPH BY HELENE BARBE, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC YOUR SHOT

PHOTOGRAPHY PROOF

The Un-Selfie: Taking Back the Self-Portrait

BY MARIE MCGRORY



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The selfie: on a slow day, I probably see twenty while skimming social media. Other days, I am sure that number is in the hundreds.

When *National Geographic* staff photographers Mark Thiessen and Becky Hale ran a [Self-Portrait assignment](#), it got me thinking. I can't say I was particularly excited about the assignment at first. The advent of the selfie had left me with some misconstrued ideas about how unoriginal it is to turn the camera on yourself. A selfie is one of the easiest images you can take—after all, many people have a camera

lens facing them every time they check their phone. Selfies are a way to show off a new haircut or your favorite outfit. They are a way for a group of people to take a photo without having to talk to a stranger.



At one point, the self-portrait became more than just a portrait of myself. I started to look beyond what I saw inside the mirror, searching for my one and only identity. I noticed that while trying to showcase our multiple selves, we tend to peril our individuality, and it becomes more and more difficult to embrace our uniqueness. I called these multiple selves “shadows.” Doppelgänger. Perhaps things we want to be but we’re not. Photograph by Felicia Simion, National Geographic Your Shot



Me birdwatching. Photograph by Roine Magnusson, National Geographic Your Shot

Whether shot at arms length or reflected in a mirror, selfies have become such a common image for me to see each day that I almost forgot the beautiful and vulnerable place from which they originated. Of course we saw some pretty classic selfies while editing the assignment. And they too have their time and place. But by week two of the assignment, I was beginning to feel reinvigorated by a phrase I had left out of my vocabulary for far too long: self-portraits.



30 years ago I reveled in my youth and beauty. 30 years ago I bought my first camera and took a self portrait, feeling powerful and new. 30 years ago nobody told me that age comes with a kind of aching grief for the loss of your youth and beauty. 30 years went by so fast, but I still feel like that young girl inside. Photograph by Katrina Kiefer, National Geographic Your Shot



A moment caught with a self timer one afternoon with my son. Photograph by Amanda Dawn O'Donoghue, National Geographic Your Shot

Self-portraits are *not* selfies. They are beautiful and revealing. The good ones are extremely difficult to make. After sifting through thousands of these images, I was astounded to see that the final edit was, essentially, faceless. I didn't need to see someone's face to learn about their essence—Ocean's battle with cancer, Katrina's struggle with aging, Amanda's four-decade love for baking.

These images reminded me of why I loved studying self-portraits during my first photo classes in high school. They are about artists, showing themselves in the way they want to be seen—revealing something deeply personal, illustrating something they cannot explain with words.



I noticed the beautiful shadows on the wall of the pool while it was being drained and had to insert myself into the scene. Photograph by Tytia Habing, National Geographic Your Shot



My eight-year-old eyes couldn't believe it when the first loaf I baked emerged perfectly from the oven. Just like in the book I had checked out at the library. Forty years later, I am still enamored with bread and the process of making it. Photograph by Amanda Starling, National Geographic Your Shot

All of this reflection started quite a discussion in our office about self-portraits that we have loved—Janna remembered Maynard Owen Williams's reflective self-portrait and Coburn shared Cindy

Sherman's Untitled 96. In recent memory, I took interest in Kyle Thompson's work. This project revitalized my love for those raw and revealing moments when a photographer turns the camera on themselves.



Sometimes I experience a disconnect, a sense of confusion as to who I am as an artist. This mentally clouded state is emotionally draining. I enter into a state of isolation, brought on by my own uncertainty. This photo was inspired by my own lack of confidence in my artistic abilities—both the development of my own style and the meaning behind my photography. Photograph by Taylor Chan, National Geographic Your Shot



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