



the self-portrait
became the picture of
a hero.





THE PORTRAIT

The Portrait in
History

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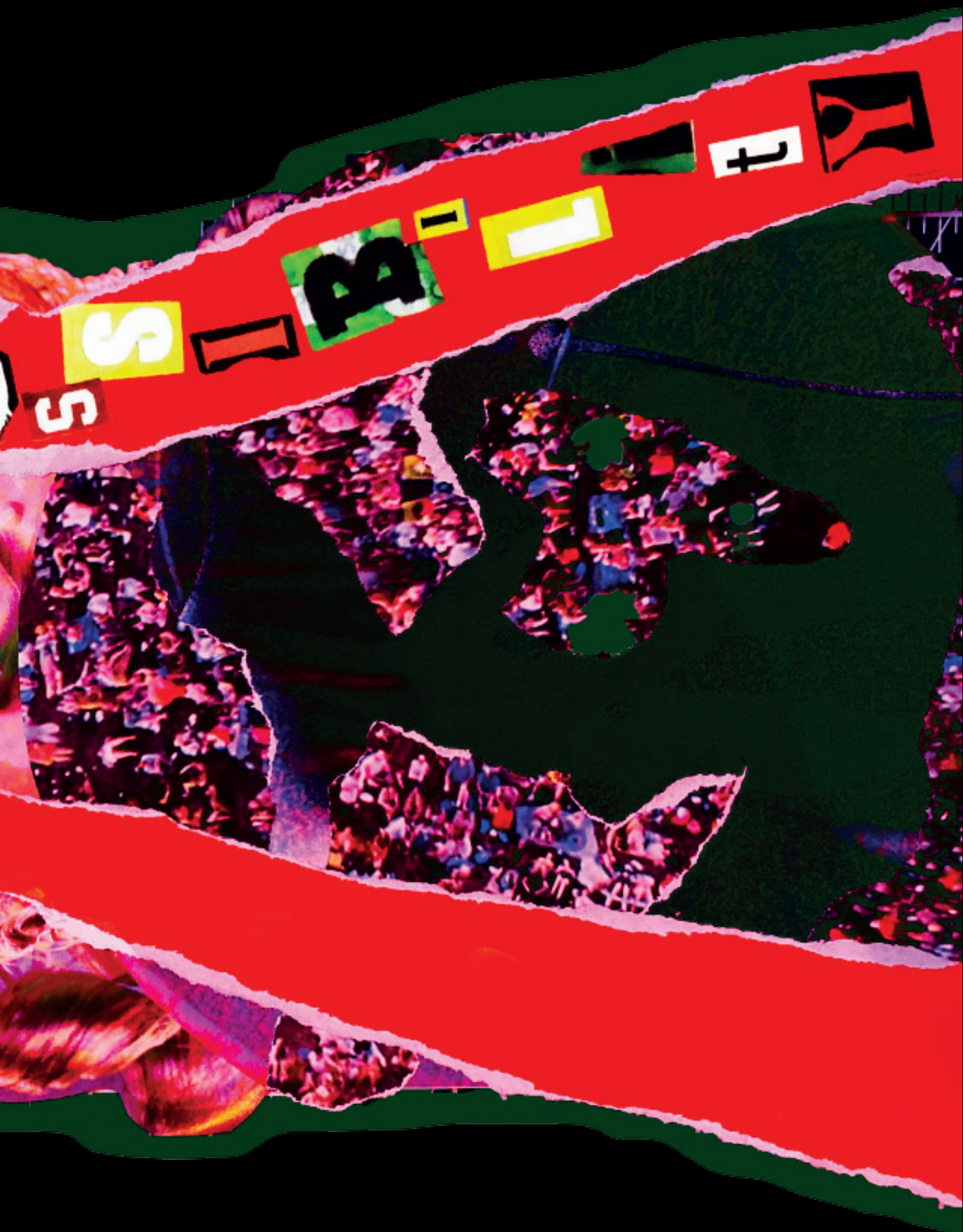
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So the mirror misrepresents, but it also shows a world of possibility. *Las Meninas* makes a tremendous claim for the power of the artist, both literally and metaphorically. The remarkable skill of the piece makes it clear that the painter is capable of accomplishments others are not. Only twenty years earlier, Velázquez had to pay the same kind of tax on his art that a shoemaker did on their shoes. Here Velázquez claims the power of Majesty for art by association and by depiction. He also put a red cross on his costume, indicating his claim to the status of nobility, before he could actually claim to be a noble in real life. Today, when it is common to see paintings sell for millions, even hundreds of millions, the elite status of the artist is taken for granted. It is in fact a relatively new and unusual idea that arose first in the imperial nations of the modern world.

Las Meninas plays with what we can see and what we cannot. It keeps out of sight the source of the Spanish monarchy's power and authority, namely its empire in the Americas. Louis XIV (1638-1715), the Absolutist king of France, who married the older half-sister of the Infanta seen in *Las Meninas*, had an obsidian mirror in his Cabinet of Wonders, said to have been plundered from Moctezuma IwI himself, the last Aztec emperor (ruled 1502-20). Obsidian is a material formed by cooled lava that is both black and reflective. Mexican artist Pedro Lasch, who has worked with the black mirror, emphasizes that "In pre-Columbian America, as in many other cultures, black mirrors were commonly used for divination." The Aztecs directly associated obsidian with Tezcatlipoca, the deadly god of war, sorcery, and sexual transgression.* Three of the European mirror image was a place of power, its American equivalent added violence, sexual ambivalence and storytelling to the imperial mix.

In both the pre-encounter Americas and in medieval Europe, the mirror was a place of divination, where fortunes were told and where contact could be made with the dead and other spirits. In short, the mirror is a visual bridge between past, present and future.

The imperial portrait in the Absolutist era (1600-1800) was, then, never just one image. The portrait of the individual who happened to be king also depicted the Majesty of the King, or the power of representation itself. The self-portrait of the artist claimed that art was the work of nobility not artisans. The mirror reflects either the real king and queen or the painted portrait of the King. Or, in some not quite mathematical but nonetheless perfectly intelligible sense, both. The black mirror and the optically incorrect painted mirror show us how things are now, but are also a place to access the past and the future. These reflections and images were a combination of theatre, magic, self-fashioning and propaganda that were key to sustaining royal power.



SEXUAL TRANSGRESSION

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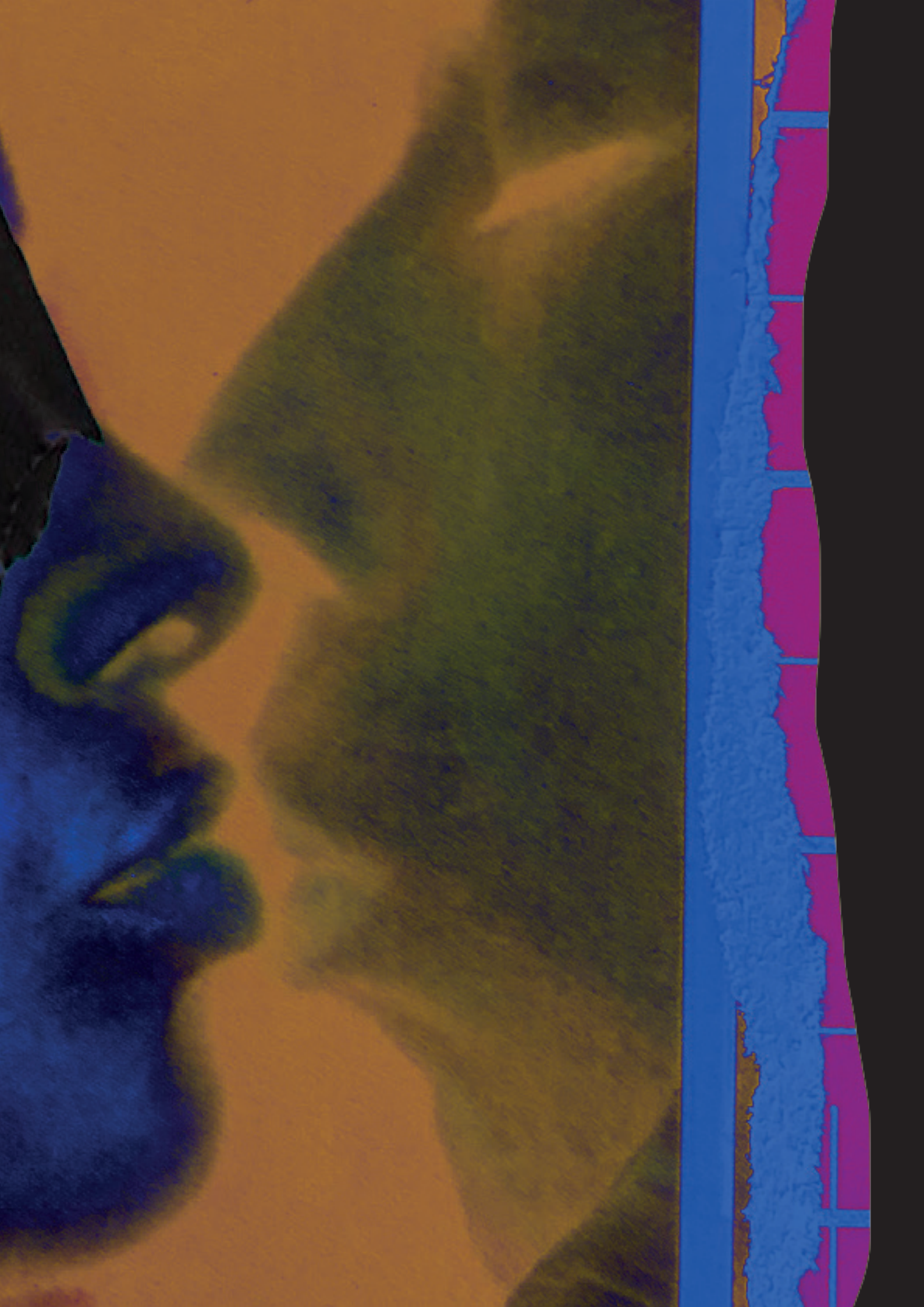
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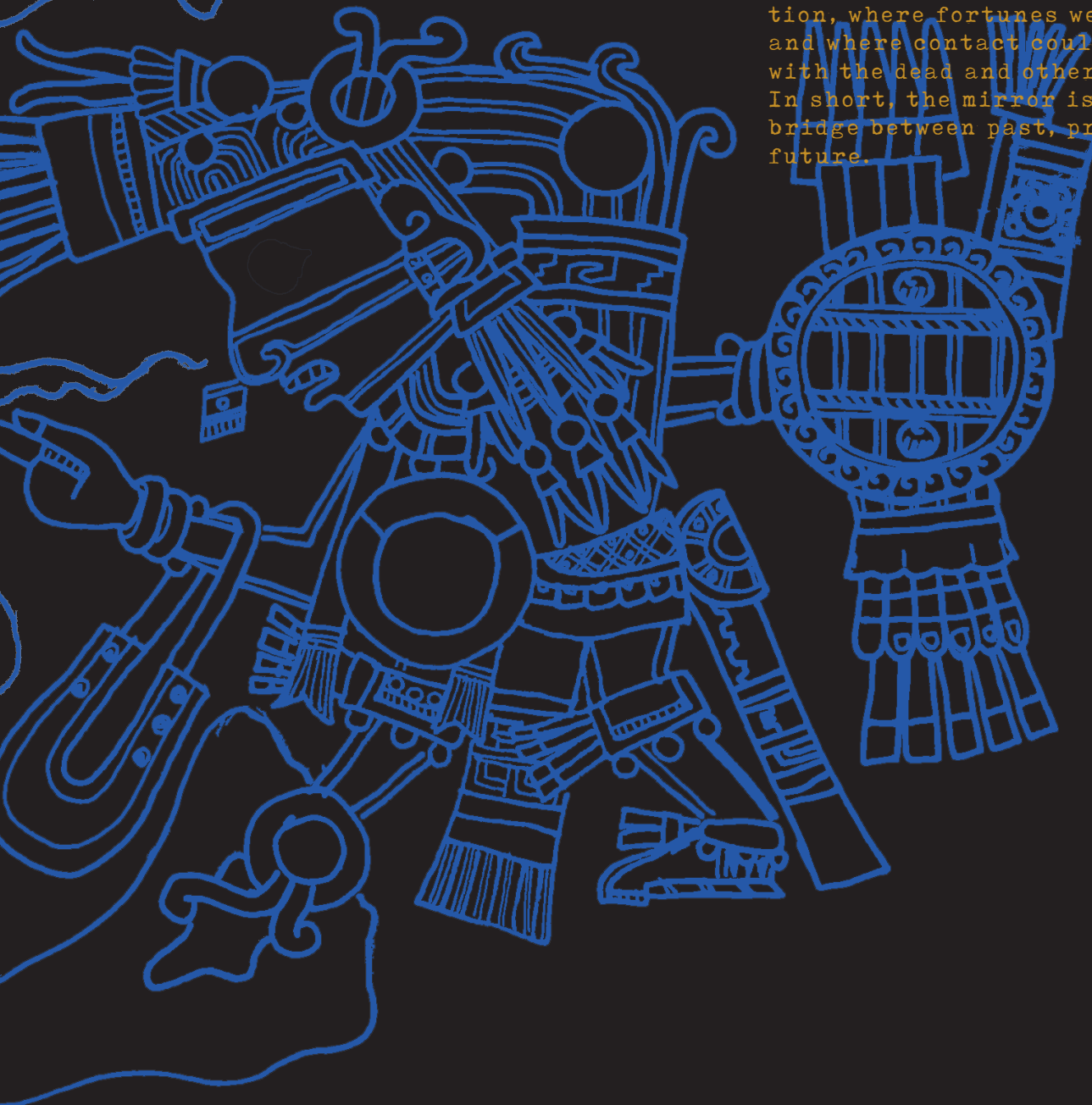
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The background is a complex, layered collage. At the top, a bright blue sky transitions into a yellow and green landscape with a winding road. Below this, a purple and white patterned structure, possibly a building or bridge, is visible. The overall composition is dynamic and colorful, with a strong sense of depth and movement.



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Artists also conceived of themselves as heroes in different ways. What did the modern artist hero look like? In 1839, Louis Daguerre in France and William Henry Fox Talbot in Britain finally produced photographs that 'fixed', meaning that the light-sensitive surface stayed as a visible image, rather than blacking out. Another French practitioner, Hippolyte Bayard, also invented a photographic process at this time. Doomed to the margins of photographic history because his colleague Daguerre was credited with the invention, Bayard nonetheless might be credited with inventing the selfie in his Self-Portrait as a Drowned Man (1839-40). He also invented the photographic fake because he was not, of course, actually dead.

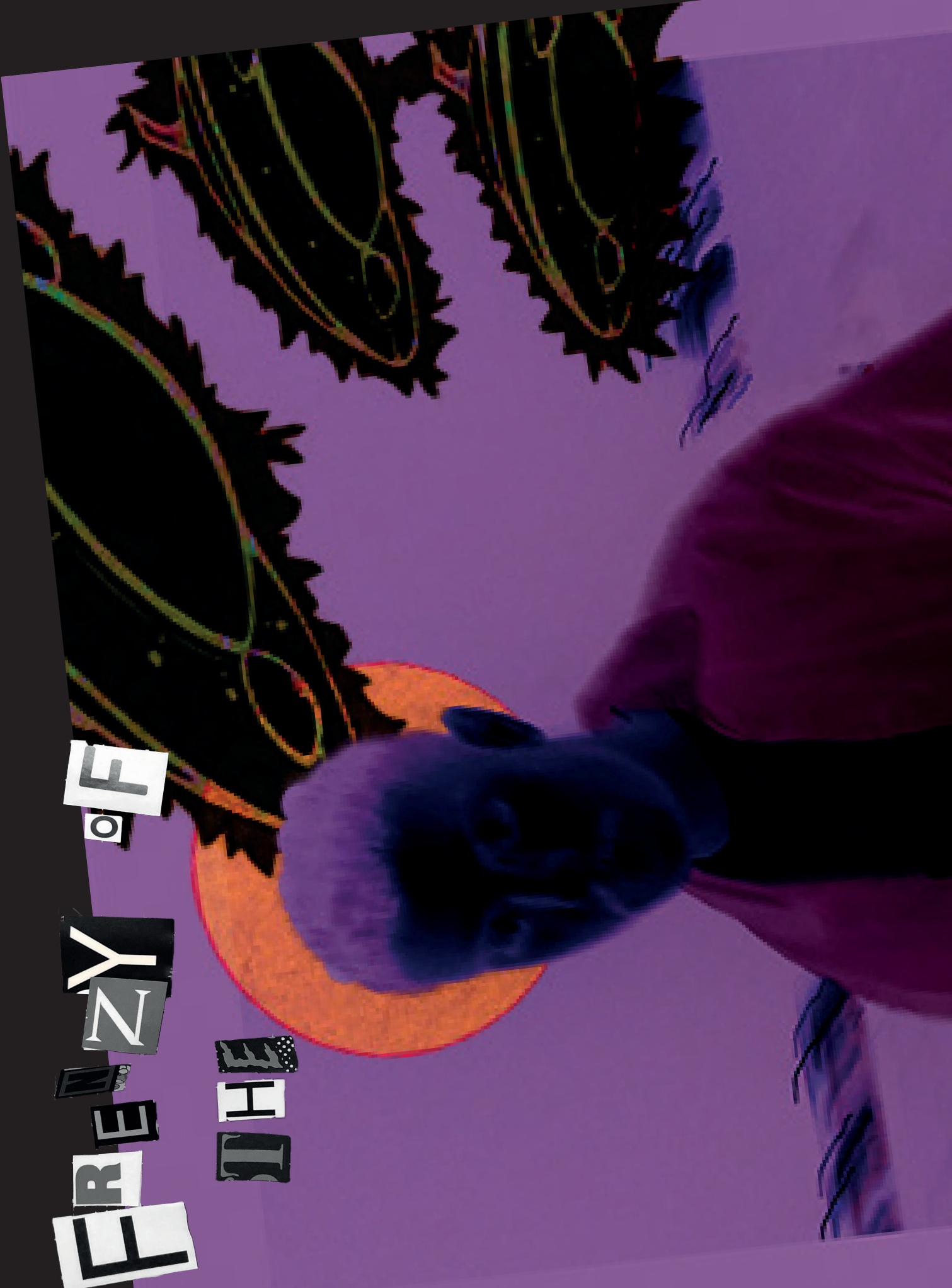
Like many a Romantic hero before him, following the example of the poet Goethe's hero Werther who committed suicide in Goethe's enormously successful 1774 novel The Sorrows of Young Werther, Bayard pretended to prefer death over dishonour. His photograph is what the writer Ariella Azoulay has called an 'event' (2008). It presupposes that the community watching it can imagine the heroic narrative of the author's suicide and understand his disappointment. Some people even thought that Bayard really was dead and discussed how the dark skin on his hands and face was the consequence of drowning, rather than of exposure to the sun.

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In their classic study *Old Mistresses* - the title is a pun on the phrase 'Old Masters', used to mean distinguished artists of the past with the implication that such artists would be men - Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock studied the history of women artists (1981). *The self-portrait with her daughter raised particular issues because women were not even supposed to be artists, according to the received prejudice, so a painting by a woman showing a woman artist was doubly defiant.* Parker and Pollock described how in Vigée-Lebrun's Self-Portrait:

The novelty [of the painting] lies in the secular and familial emphasis, the *Madonna and Child* of traditional iconography replaced by mother and female child locked in an affectionate embrace. This portrait of the artist and her daughter elaborates that notion of woman, emphasizing that she is a mother.

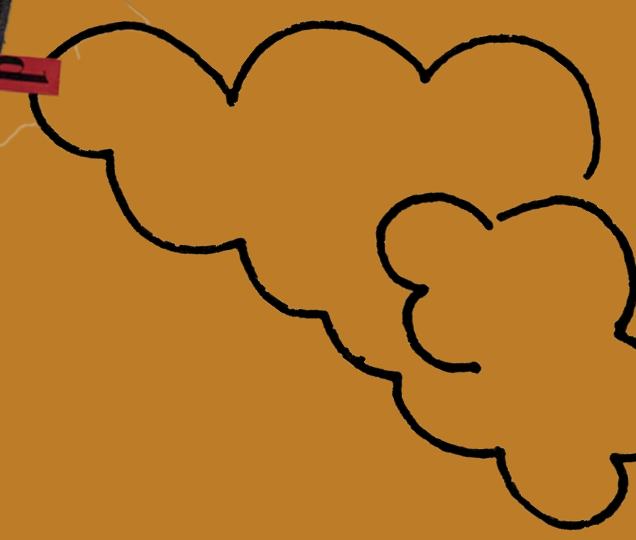
Vigée-Lebrun had taken the Christian image of the Virgin Mary and Infant Jesus and given it a secular and contemporary spin. Notably, both the artist and her daughter look out at us confidently, unlike the traditional downward glance of the Madonna in paintings by artists like Raphael. Still, as Parker and Pollock pointed out, there was a Catch - 22 here. In celebrating her role as a mother, unusual in the period when women would often leave their children with wet-nurses, Vigée-Lebrun's picture seems from our perspective like a cliché. The restrictive doctrine of the woman as the domestic angel by the hearth, caring for children but not active professionally, was actually a creation of the nineteenth century. For modern feminists, trying to escape what Betty Friedan famously called 'the feminine mystique' (1963), Lebrun at first looked like more of the same. It took Parker and Pollock's close attention to context and detail to see her work differently. If the nineteenth century visualized women as domestic help-meets, their counterpart was the idealized Great Man, or hero, as imagined by the historian Thomas Carlyle. For Carlyle, writing in 1840, 'great men make history' (Carlyle 1840). Artists also conceived of themselves as heroes in different ways. What did the modern artist hero look like?






madonna

child



new between the two.





In the last years of Absolutism, the new order was already emerging. The royal artist Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun painted portraits of the **French Queen**, Marie Antoinette. She also painted a number of self-portraits. To borrow a cue from John Berger, can you see which is which?

Both women look out at the viewer directly from the painting, against a scumbled background of loosely handled non-representational paint. Both are dressed as fashionable, modern women in the loose style of the period, with their finely handled sashes showing the skill of the artist. Perhaps the informality of the pose with her child allows us to see Vigée-Lebrun in her *Self-Portrait with Her Daughter* (1789). **The portrait of Marie Antoinette** (1783) became the subject of a scandal precisely because of its informality. At the same time, by so blurring the difference between the Queen and the artist, Vigée-Lebrun claimed a new level of equivalence

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When the old monarchies collapsed during what can be seen as the long age of Revolution (1776-1917), a new 'frenzy of the visible' accompanied and was part of the social transformation (Comolli 1980). Across this era, dramatic inventions of new media like lithography, and especially the various processes we call photography, portraits and self-portraits, seemed to revolutionize the visible. Visual media were democratized. Until this time, the ordinary person might have seen visual images in church, on coins, at parades or in carnivals. By the mid-nineteenth century, there were new museums of art; illustrated newspapers and magazines were being published; and visiting-card photographs could be bought cheaply. New ways of being came to be imagined and visually represented, including the modern artistic 'genius', nearly always male, but also the woman artist. The heroic artist took some of the aura of the King (or Queen) and transferred it to him-or herself. Brought down to earth, the self-portrait became the picture of a hero.



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