The artist is a colossal father figure in this uneasy painting. Seen in a mirror, he dwarfs his tiny children. It is a painting of alienated and anxious self-consciousness. It is as if he is painting a monstrous stranger. He reminds us of the fact that mirrors have been essential in the creation of self-portraits for centuries, and that technical fact is made disturbingly explicit as the artist coldly views his reflected image. Freud’s self-portraiture exposes at its sharpest his acute sense of the discomfort of being a person.

The artist lets us see everything in this etching – how he works and how he lives. In fact, art and life are gloriously inseparable for Rembrandt. He is sitting happily at home with his wife, Saskia, their mutual contentment cosily apparent. His shadowed face and drawing hand contemplate their combined image in a mirror that reveals art not as a remote formal activity, but as a part of life.

Picasso always portrayed himself with big eyes that seem to swallow up the beholder, insisting, even as he turns himself into a painted object, that it is he, not you, who does the looking. Those eyes were never bigger – or braver – than in this disillusioned, atheist painting of the artist battered by time and recognising the nearness of his own mortality.

Frida Kahlo’s shorn hair floats as if it were a living thing in this dreamlike painting. Has she really cut off her hair? As a painter of many self-portraits, she had often shown herself wearing a Mexican woman’s traditional dresses and flowing hair; now, in renunciation of the husband she was about to divorce, she painted herself short haired and in a man’s shirt, shoes, and oversized suit (presumably her former husband’s). Kahlo is a martyr to love, as the song lyrics written on the picture reveal: "Look, if I loved you it was because of your hair ..."