

Self-portrait as a Young Boy



MY FATHER SELF-MEDICATED WITH ALCOHOL. He was eventually a full-blown schizophrenic whose behavior confused me as a child.

From as long as I can remember, I have found sanctuary in art. As a child and young adult growing up in Detroit, I would visit the Detroit Institute of Arts and admire the work of Picasso, Matisse, Diego Rivera, and Rembrandt. (Much later I learned that this museum's collection is one of the best in the world.) I literally would bring a lucky penny as a donation because I was poor but so excited to walk through the admission doors into a wonderful world of human expression and joy. They would always let me walk past the welcome desk

because they knew, as a young teenager, I was running from or coming toward something. I was one of their best and most frequent visitors.

At about the age of twelve and a half, my mother bought me a set of paints—first oils, then acrylics. I had been studying the careful brushstrokes on the walls of the DIA for many years prior with hungry eyes, and the quiet observation finally paid off. It turned out that I had, through just looking and studying, learned a lot, and I had a talent for painting and working with pastels, most often painting still lifes and portraits.

During this time in my life, I had few

friends at school because of my father. I felt I couldn't invite other kids to my house because of my father's erratic behavior and unpredictable schizophrenic episodes. They wouldn't understand. Later, my father voluntarily went into a psychiatric hospital in Detroit for treatment. He went through hell. Finally, when he got much older, he stopped drinking and his schizophrenia went into remission.

Yet, when I was young, I went through the brunt of his nonviolent but often confusing and irrational behavior. In survival mode, I quickly turned to art and the love of emotion on canvas to somehow reckon with much

of the pain I witnessed and went through myself. I painted and painted and painted. I found old windows on the side of our house and painted on those. I painted on cardboard, canvas, wood, and glass. I loved the texture and the possibility of freezing the narrative of human experience as a living pictorial document in time, preserving forever the emotion an artist went through at the exact moment the picture was rendered. It was magic. It was showing others what they might have missed in the glimpse of an eye. It was showing the world that we are all different, experiencing pain and joy in our own rightful ways, illuminating for others the need to be free.

## *An Anchor in the Sea*

TRACY ROSS

ARTWORK BY THE AUTHOR

Later, in my midtwenties, while in college, I had a break with reality and was diagnosed with my own rare form of schizophrenia. I had inherited similar symptoms of delusion and depression, along with chemical imbalance, from my father. Yet, through it all, my love of art remained the same. And more significantly, the art, the smell of the paint and linseed oil, the brilliant colors of the pastels, the acrylic and watercolors remained the same. It did not become a part of my delusion; it remained as I had remembered it before my episode and breakdown.

Eventually, I went into remission like my father after several painful years of medication and cognitive therapy. Yet the fascinating element that I now realize is that through all my pain, my fear and paranoia, my misinterpretations, my delusions, my imaginings, and terrifying mental scenarios, the Rembrandts, the Picassos, the Matisse's, the Andy Warhols, and the Pop Art sculpture—all that my eyes could see—spoke truth to me through the illness. Art was and still is my saving grace.



Several pieces that I painted when I was very young accompany this essay. I have no training in art; I am entirely self-taught. But when I painted, I allowed emotion to take over, providing me a flexibility of technique that was spontaneous and expressionistic. Through pain and confusion, I learned that art can be a sanctuary, a church of the mind in which we find peace, catharsis, and freedom. Looking back on my years of traveling, moving to different towns, working, writing, I am amazed to see that art got me through the pain. The pieces I painted when I was young remind me of the saving grace that is art. Art helped me to reach out to the universe during a time when I could often find no hope.

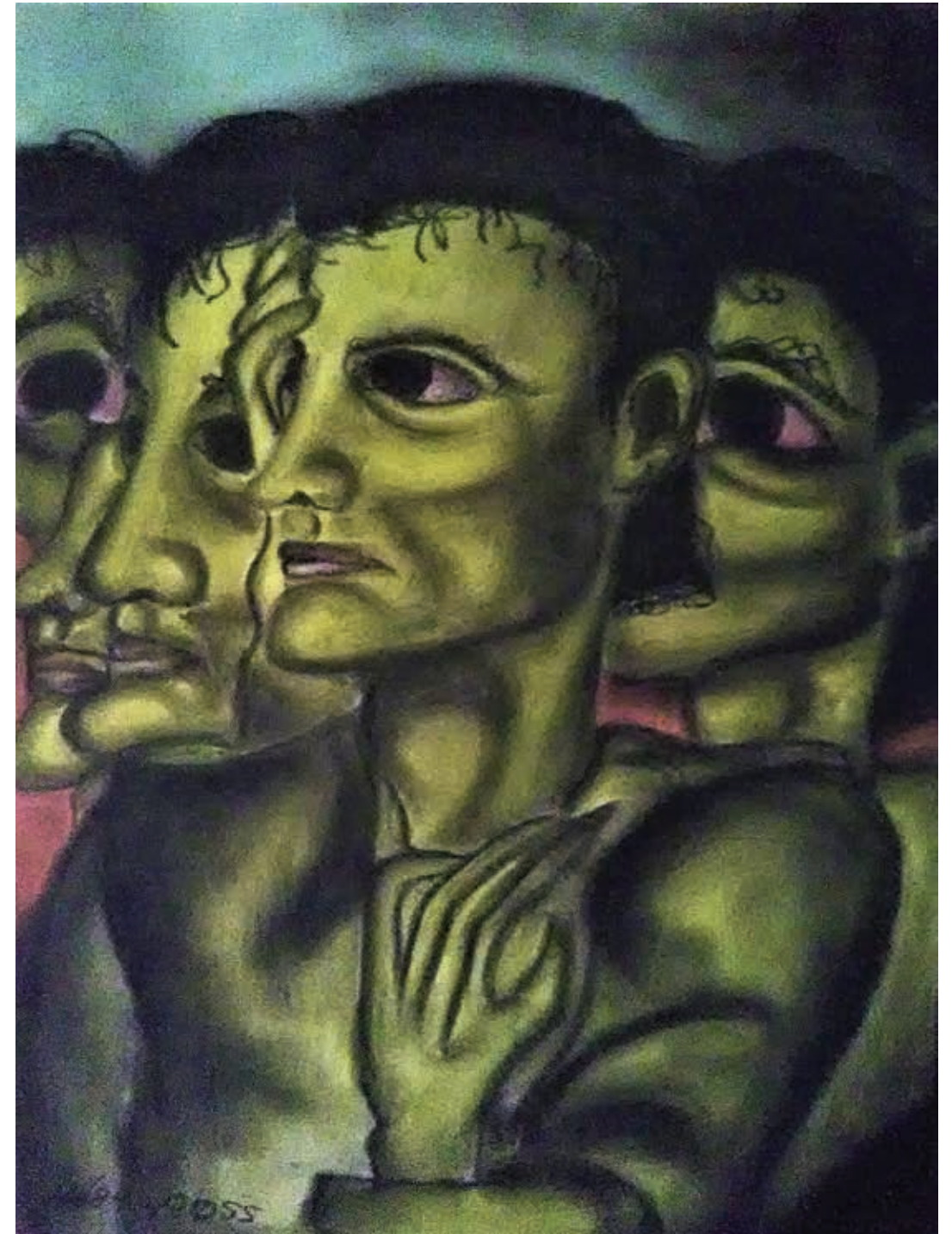
I now write more than I paint, yet I know the feeling of becoming free in the moment, free of the insanity, free to give something of oneself to the power of the universe. For a moment, art allows me to forget myself while remembering the truths and beauty that surround us. Through living with art, one can conquer despair with visions of grace. One can find an anchor in a sea of madness. ✎



Portrait of Egon Schiele



Portrait of Andy Warhol



Illness