



I Turn the Camera on Myself

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PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

IAM ON THE BEACH, VIRGINIA Beach. We've come down from Vermont for a last indulgence in summer before the winter sets in. Back home the leaves are changing color and there is a threat of frost. Here the temperature is in the 80s, the evenings are warm, and the sounds of the ocean are a balm for me.

Looking towards the water there is a long line of horizon. The beach is miles long. We are here for the next ten

days. I am soaking in sun. The heat on my skin is welcome. I hardly ever let myself sit for so long; it's been hours now. I'm a little scared of the water—these high waves—so I don't enter the water often. Our beach neighbors have opened a bag of chips, and the gulls are riding the wind above, looking for an opportunity to sweep down and retrieve one. Someone has caught the thermals with a colorful kite, and it is flying in loop-de-loops. The sounds of

beachgoers filter through the air; it is comforting.

I have a little sketchbook, and from time to time I scratch something onto a page. But this is not how I make art. Not my means and not my subject. I'm a poet and painter. Still, what does not rest in me is my need, my desire to make art. I have not brought my paints or inks. Of course I haven't. I knew there would not be the opportunity or space to create as I would in my studio at home. And one of the reasons I have come here is to rest. And yet, I am antsy.

What I do have is my phone. And my phone has a camera. I take photos of the expanse of ocean before me. I rise early and catch the sunrise, the long horizon, the cloud formations. I take photos of the gulls balancing on the wind, standing in flocks all facing the same direction, and the pipers rushing toward and away from the waves. Also, the cargo ships stacked five, six boxes high over the deck, huge from where I observe them, massive. And the military ships; Virginia Beach is just south of the Naval Station in Norfolk. I take photos for memories and as references for my art as the horizon plays a large role in my work.

And then I turn the camera on myself. In my family there is a joke about how I don't take a good photo. That is, I rarely look good in a photo. And it's true. Family photos are full of

awkward looks and stances—if I'm in them at all as I am often the one taking the photos. It's okay. I've come to terms with it. My beauty is an inner spirit hard to catch on film.

I also don't have a clear knowing of what I look like. I know I'm pretty; I've been told that. But I don't look in the mirror all that often. And I've reached that age when women are often told beauty is in the young. I'm in my fifties.

With the camera now on me, I consider how taking photos of myself may be a way to see myself from an outsider's point of view—how I look on my exterior. It may also help me to become comfortable with my aging face.

Myself as subject—it's an interesting enterprise. In one aspect, I am very much at the center of the piece; after all it's a photo of me. But the process of creating a self-portrait demands a certain distance as well. One must consider the artistic view. Is this image working? How is the light, the composition? Is the subject exhibiting something beyond the obvious? To do that one must remove one's ego from that of being the judged subject. Making art for me—writing or painting—is one way to learn about myself, to explore the depths of me. But there must be a kind of detachment to allow the work to become itself, to become its best self. In doing so, I become acclimated to my image; any uncomfortableness I have with it falls away.

I take many photos. Hold the camera so that I'm in the viewfinder. I turn my head this way and that. Raise and lower the camera—snap, snap, snap. I use the photo setting and then the portrait setting to see how they are different and which gives me the best image. Everywhere I go I sneak in a few photos. I'm thinking about the backgrounds, light, colors, and my expression. Each day my clothes are different, my hair is different. I take direction from myself well. I'm a good model. And I'm always there.

I delete the worst images. The ones in which my face is turned totally away, you can see up my nostrils, or my face is displaying a fake smile.

Working in this way, the process moves these photos from selfie into the art of self-portrait. I have a few editing apps on my phone that help me take the raw images and deepen them into an art. I am making decisions about color and texture; the apps are my tools. I'm feeling into the images as I would my paintings. I want them to show aspects of personality, of emotion, of what is within. I want each to hold their own weight.

My poetry often describes my inner self through exterior landscape. It is interesting to turn that around—to have the exterior



describe the inner self, to turn the poem to image and image to poem.

We come home. But I continue the project. I am learning, pushing boundaries of technique, and deepening my understanding of the project in general. I often follow my intuition—as I did at first by turning the camera on myself—and come to an understanding later. This is a fundamental trait of my artistic life. If I understand on a cerebral level what I am doing and why I am doing it, my work seems lifeless. My best work lives in the mystery of creation. Pushing into the unknown, being willing to make mistakes, to let those mistakes be an opening to wisdom and often the door to a kind of beauty I would not have reached otherwise.



Taking these photos of myself was a door. To share them—to post them to my Instagram account—was the door of exposure. I had to face the fear of seeming very caught up in my own image and post them anyway. I knew my images were not demonstrating a narcissistic characteristic, but I feared others may think otherwise. It took bravery to post them.

I think of Emily Dickinson hiding away her little poems, and I understand the impulse. But to post was to stand beside myself and my own, knowing that something deeper was happening within me as I worked

on this series of self-portraits, and to stand by my belief that the images themselves held that truth.

I wish I could put into words what happened to me deep inside. It's complex. On a practical level it had to do with using the tools on hand to create, in this case my camera—learning how to work my camera and how best to utilize the apps to get the looks I wanted to create. But the happening was neither entirely practical nor entirely artistic. What happened had to do with inner and outer identity, and with trust—trusting the process. It was about stepping into an uncomfortable place—even though it is uncomfortable—to see what would happen and where it would lead.

I am still following this path; where it will lead is still an unknown. We are on a journey, always on a journey the heart sutra tells us. We'll see. I'll see.

The self-portrait allows for a deepening within the self; I feel the truth in that. For me, the means has been my camera. In the seeing of oneself, it has allowed for a deepening of self-contemplation. And in the seeing of oneself, there is the opportunity to accept oneself, myself, as I am, the many, as I am, as I am, as I am.

We are multifaceted beings, and to accept this is a fundamental necessity of learning to be all we are and can be. That has been my own mission in this lifetime, and the self-portrait has furthered that journey of discovery. ♦

