

How to Be an Artist

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Jerry Saltz, *New York's* art critic, as Salvador Dalí, based on a photograph by Philippe Halsman. Photo: Photo by Marvin Orellana. Photo Illustration by Joe Darrow.

Art is for anyone. It's just not for everyone. I know this viscerally, as a would-be artist who burned out. I wrote about that last year, and ever since, I've been beset — every lecture I give, every gallery I pop my head into, somebody is asking me for advice. What they're really asking is “How can I be an artist?”

When, last month, Banksy jerry-rigged a frame to shred a painting just when it was auctioned, I could almost hear the whispers: “Is that art?” This fall, the biggest museum event in New York is the Whitney's retrospective of Andy Warhol — the paradigmatic self-made, make-anything-art-and-yourself-famous artist. Today, we are all Andy's children, especially in the age of Instagram, which has trained everyone to think visually and to look at our regular lives as fodder for aesthetic output.

How do you get from there to making real art, great art? There's no special way; everyone has their own path. Yet, over the years, I've found myself giving the same bits of advice. Most of them were simply gleaned from looking at art, then looking some more. Others from listening to artists talk about their work and their struggles. (Everyone's a narcissist.) I've even stolen a couple from my wife.

There are 33 rules — and they really are all you need to know to make a life for yourself in art. Or 34, if you count “Always be nice, generous, and open with others and take good care of your teeth.” And No. 35: “Fake it till you make it.”

Lesson 16: Learn the Difference Between Subject Matter and Content

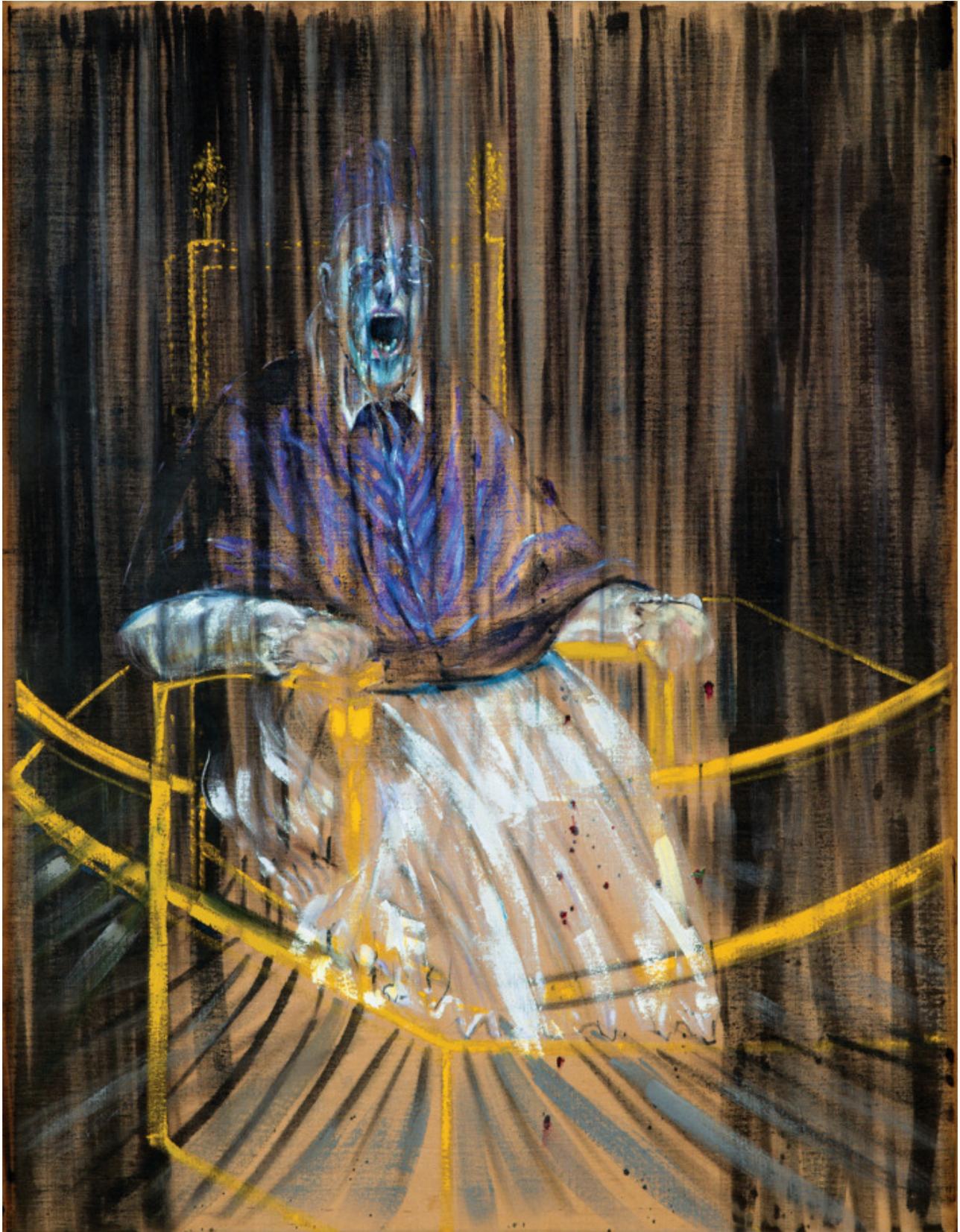
One of the most crucial lessons there is!

The subject matter of Francis Bacon's 1953 *Study After Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* is a pope, a seated male in a transparent sort of box. That's it. The content might be a rebellion or an indictment of religion. It might be claustrophobia or hysteria or the madness of religion or civilization.

The subject matter of Michelangelo's *David* is a standing man with a sling. The content might be grace, beauty — he was just 17, if you know what I mean — pensiveness, physical awareness, timelessness, eternal things, a form of perfection, vulnerability. This content is High Renaissance. Bernini's *David*, made 120 years later, is Baroque — all action and drama.

When you look at art, make subject matter the first thing you see — and then stop seeing it.

Try to find the content in a painting by Robert Ryman, who has been making almost-all-white work since the 1950s. Ask what Ryman's (or any artist's) ideas are and what his relationship to paint is, to surface, to internal scale (meaning what size brushstrokes were used in the work), to color. What is white to Ryman? Note the date: 1960. Why would he make this painting then? Would this have looked like other art at the time? How would it have been different? Ask yourself what else was being made then. How is the work hung on the wall? Is it in a frame? Is the stretcher or surface thick, thin, close to the wall?



Is this painting about the pope or insanity? Photo: © The Estate of Francis Bacon.
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How is this like or unlike other almost-monochrome works by Ellsworth Kelly, Barnett Newman, Agnes Martin, or Ad Reinhardt? **Is the surface sensual or intellectual?** Does the painter want you to see the work all at once or in parts? Are some parts more important than others? Is every part of the surface supposed to be equally important? What are the artist's ideas about craft and skill? Do you think this artist likes painting or is trying to paint against it? Is this anti-art? **What is Ryman's relationship to materials, tools, mark-making?** How do you think he made the work? How might it be original or innovative? Why should this be in a museum? Why should it not be in a museum? Would you want to live with it? Why or why not? Why do you imagine the painting is this size? Now try a Frida Kahlo.

Exercise: Compare These Eight Nudes

Forget the subject matter — what is each of these paintings actually saying?



Beachbody, by Joan Semmel, 1985. Photo: Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York © 2018 Joan Semmel/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



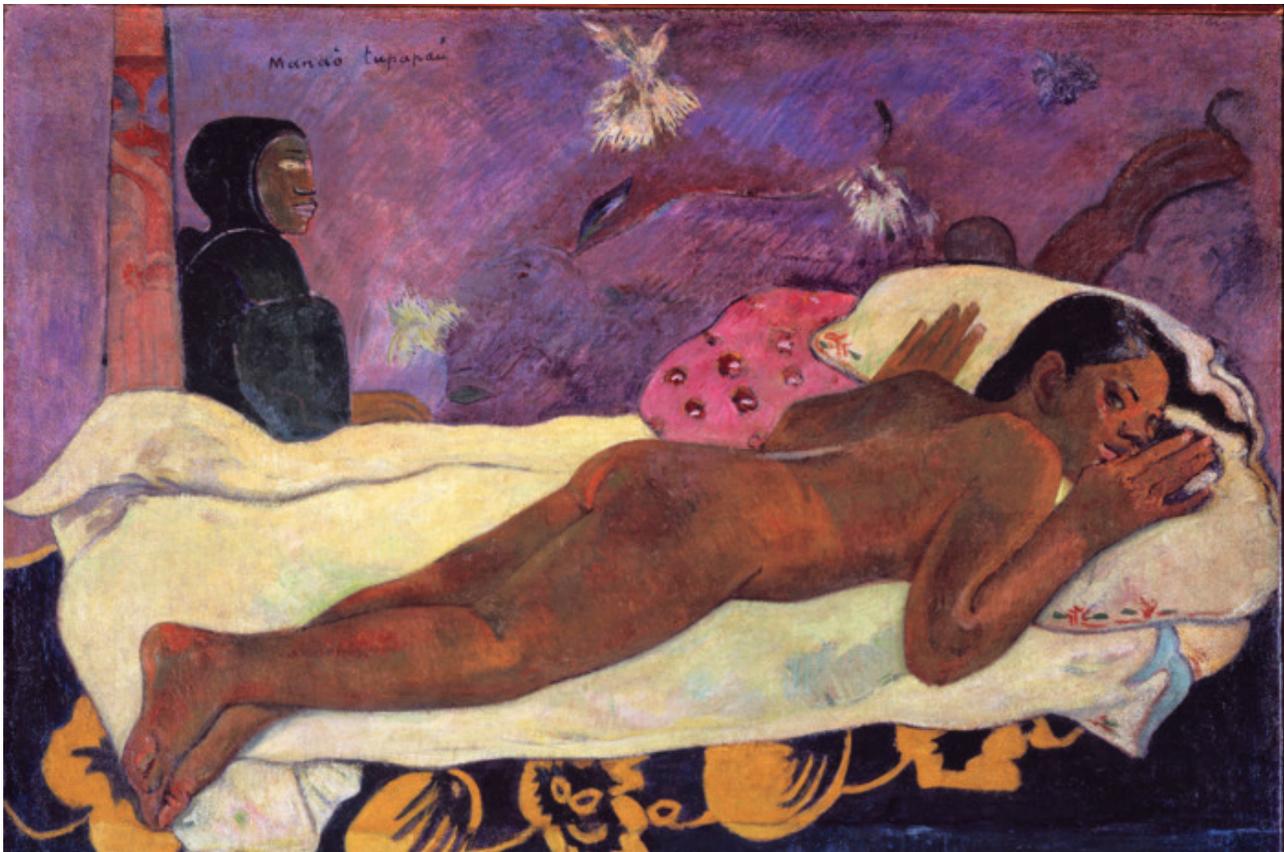
Rokeby Venus, by Diego Velázquez, 1647. Photo: Art Media/Print Collector/Getty Images



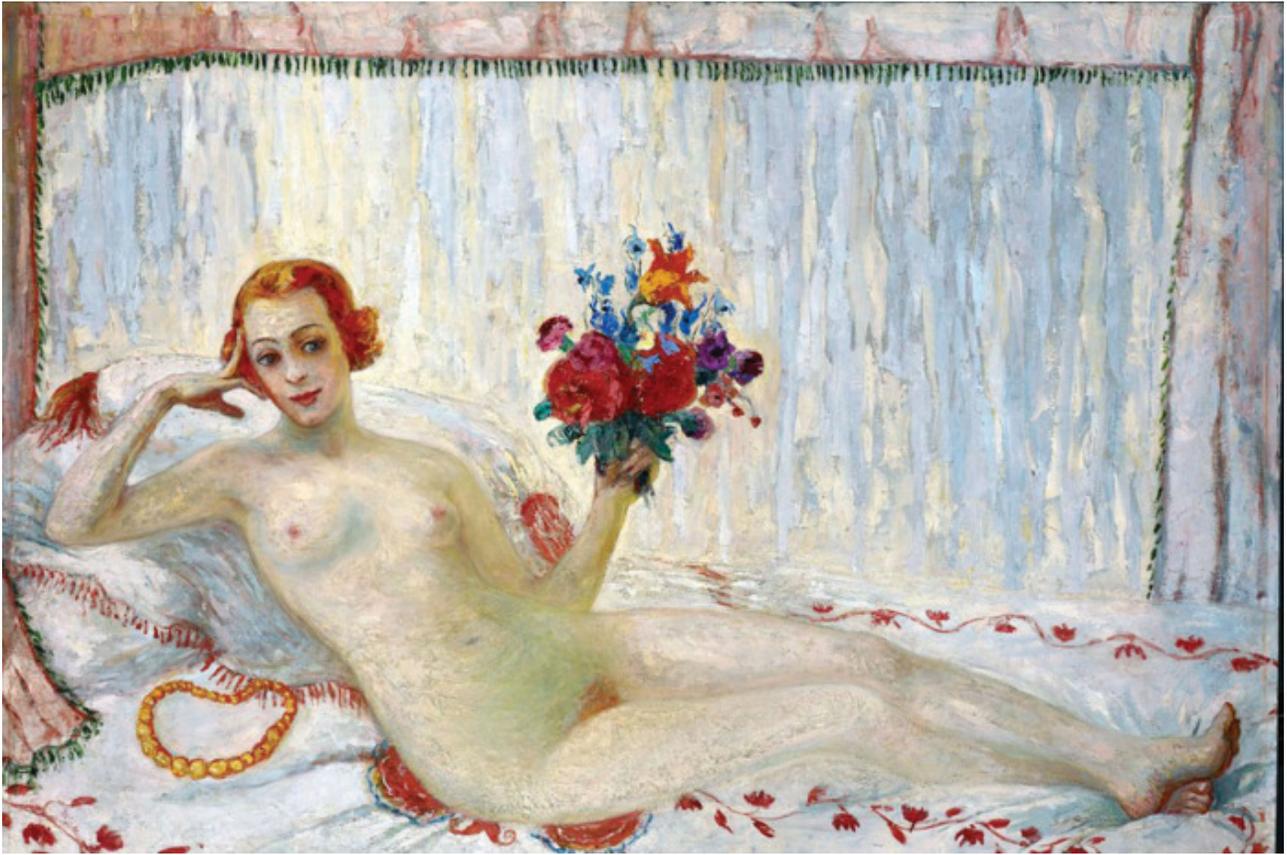
The Naked Maja, by Francisco Goya, 1797–1800. Photo: Buyenlarge/Getty Images



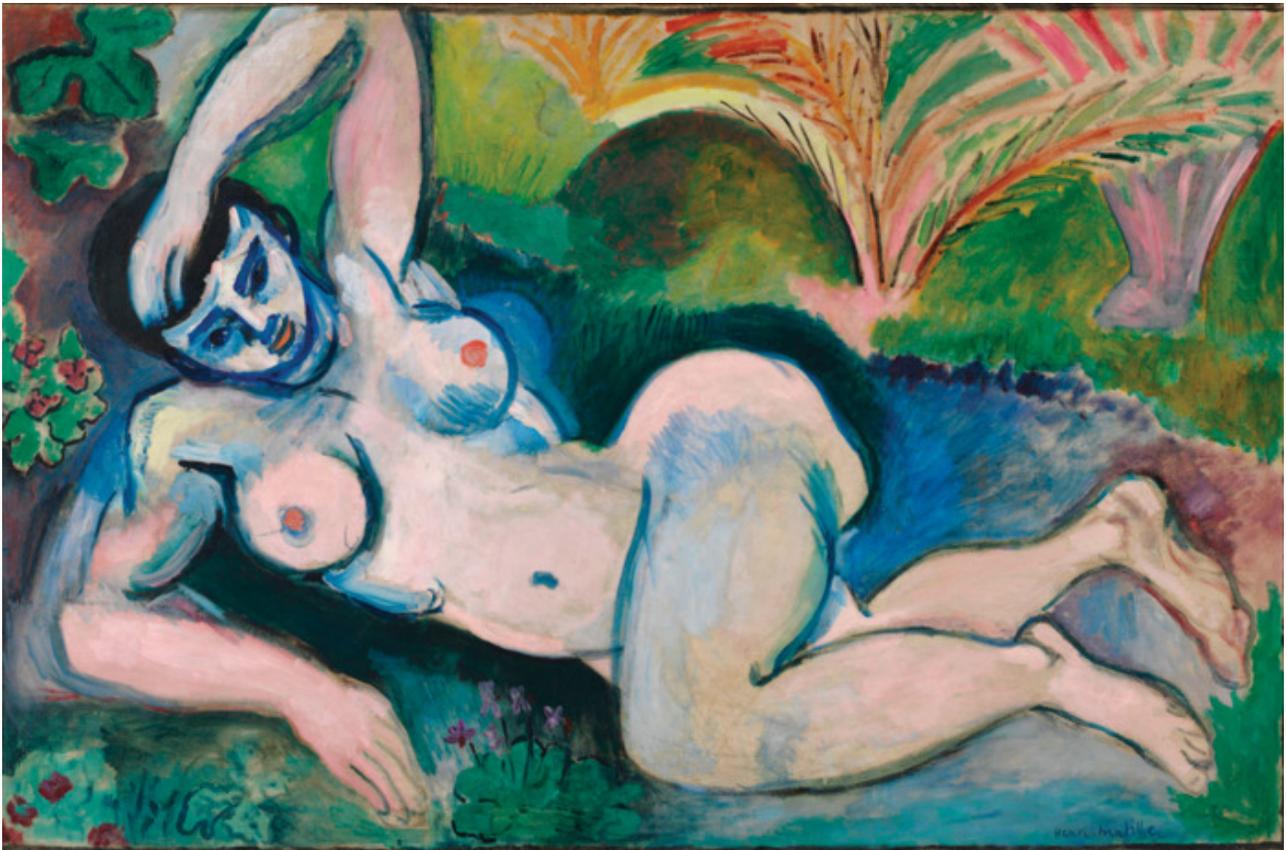
Olympia, by Édouard Manet, 1863.



Spirit of the Dead Keeps Watch, by Paul Gauguin, 1892.



A Model (Nude Self-Portrait), by Florine Stettheimer, 1915.



Blue Nude, by Henri Matisse, 1907.



Imperial Nude: Paul Rosano, by Sylvia Sleigh, 1977. Photo: © Estate of Sylvia S. Alloway