



Perched on the Edge: Reflections from the Studio Armchair

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[Gallery lights drop, brief darkness before spots come up on the two chairs and the blank canvas. The Painter and the Reader are seated. A saxophone is heard at a distance, slowly approaching the performance space, the music soulful and gritty]

Reader: To artists, the studio is a womb, refuge, cave, meditation chamber, chapel, laboratory, and study--in sum, what Camus called "a whale." For me, the studio is both hermetic symbol and sanctuary.

A studio is created when an artist claims a space, raising a bubble of heightened awareness, willingly submitting to a process that leads to the ecstasy and ravages of transformation. The defining requirement of all studios is to provide mental, emotional and, if possible, physical solitude—in part because the work is messy, in part for reasons of instinct, like animals looking for a nest in which to give birth. Finding and becoming intimate with one's studio consciousness, and the metaphysical furniture it contains, is the defining task of the artist. No studio, no art. **[Sax: squawk. Painter gets up, approaches the work wall, begins to paint.]**

To be admitted to an artist's studio is to enter a place where the creator gets naked to themselves and their personal unknown, a place of divine, purposeless, open-ended play: *lila*, as the ancients

called it. As is prudent, few artists grant admission to this, the inner-sanctum without some reluctance (stale coffee, empty bottles and material debris notwithstanding). One's physical studio, properly considered and sanctified, may be a rustic cabin in the woods, on scaffolding high in the air, a corner of the garage, a rented darkroom, a computer, at the kitchen table or before an easel in school. The place is not the point, but the physicality matters. Over the years, my studios have been in dilapidated warehouses, basements, converted bedrooms, garages, and large closets. Sometimes an adequate substitute can be conjured on a park bench, or even an outdoor café, far from home. I can, on occasion, conjure a studio on a crowded plane. Cars are harder; I don't know why. The truth is, I can work nearly anywhere, at least to some degree. While the studio is a place, it is more importantly, a facility of mind, body and spirit.

[Sax: sweet, serene, ethereal]

As a kid, I persistently got in trouble for drawing during church service; the notion, albeit mistaken, is that one can't draw and listen at the same time. I was reprimanded with a cutting look and quick hand gestures for me to quit tearing open the tithe envelops in search of a bit of blank space, Mom's eye's raging, her finger and jaw furiously jabbing toward the pastor. **[Sax: bellow]** This became routine, and heightened my resolve, developing into a family conflict that culminated with a conflagration of my sketchbooks in the family fireplace. I drew nudes as often as I could in those days, the equally specious and only half-true theory being that one

couldn't draw nudes without being in a state of lust. **[Sax: grunt]** Exactly. Busted, but only partially. **[Sax: question]** In church I think the tearing noise is what gave me away; like Dad's snores, the tearing sounds registered protest and boredom. I didn't draw nudes in church, mind you, but I should have. **[Sax: honk]** Wimp! When choosing a pew—symbolically my first studio chair--the presence of an adequate supply of tithe envelopes became of paramount importance. Such was my terror of suffering a sermon without a metaphysical shield.

I was so desperate for virgin paper, I often used the inside leaves of the hymnal, which of course provoked even less approval. I was a bit shy about actually tearing pages, but I did so a couple of times. 'Shy' is not quite right. Mostly I feared the ecclesiastical repercussions. In those pews, I first experimented with blind drawing, scratching under the faded blue cover, the clandestine work taking form at my side, sight unseen, my secret protest, eyes forward, feigning attention while asserting my studio mind in blissful secret.

And then there was the hunt for pencils, those stubby little yellow ones favored by churches; razor sharp, too sharp for my taste, sticking point up like little pricks in holes drilled into the woodwork. I suppose I could have brought my own, but to pilfer was significant to my adolescent studio mind, using their own tools against them was a form of divine revenge on my part, even righteous rage. My spirit railed, moaned and shuddered, defining evidence of my protest against sanctimoniousness and delusion, a revolt persisting to this day. **[Sax: guffaw]**

There must be dozens of old hymnals in that mid-Western Baptist church with scratches and doodles, faded by time. At least I hope mute evidence by my unsigned hand of the possibility of maintaining an active studio-of-the-mind under metaphysical, theological and social pressures. Perhaps those old hymnals have now been drawn over by other budding artists. I hope so. More likely, on a Saturday afternoon some poor sot earned a Boy Scout merit badge by erasing my doodles into faded glory.

As I paint in my studio, I listen to music for inspiration. Ironically, given my failed Baptist upbringing, I often listen to sermons—Alan Watts is my current favorite, going on so charmingly with his British accent about Taoism and Zen. Better yet, when I am really in the Tao, stripped of even its gentle dogma, I listen to the perfectly imperfect silence of

the woods outside my window. Sanctuary. Studio. Spirit. No sermon, no religion. Art.

[Silence: Painter at work, sounds of brush, charcoal on the surface]

I love my studio; it has a door I can close and windows to the Oregon forest. To my family it is a place where one doesn't bother Dad too much or too often. One definitely does not poke around in there without an invitation. Mysteries lurk, even for Dad, perhaps *especially* for Dad. That is the point. While in it, Dad takes few calls and is cranky about interruptions, and he only reluctantly descends to the dinner table. Sometimes spirit can't wait but dinner can. When I leave, I turn toward the center and bow gently, sealing it against the outside world, against the corrosions of our societal somnambulance.

[Sax: Blues, mournful]

My own father, who died last spring, was not an artist but he had a small, locked office in the basement. I always wanted to explore it. He liked to go to his basement cave when family pressures and noise got to be too much. Now I know all fathers create such a refuge in one form or another. I imagined that his office contained secrets kids should not know. Occasionally, I took the opportunity to poke around a bit. He kept old financial records in there, dusty books from college, tools he didn't want us kids messing with and odd stuff that no doubt carried memories. No nudes. That disappointed, but didn't surprise me. The whole space smelled like Prince Albert tobacco. While there I came to know him as a man, not just a dad. I never confessed my trespass, but I love him more for having done it. May my own sons poke around in my studio while I'm gone, but they shouldn't let me know, at least not yet. I need it to be like that. The mystique is important, even more than the fact. Boundaries, real and imagined. **[Sax: honk]**

I grew up smelling turpentine. My mother has always been a working church painter, as she would say. I owe her a certain sense of the sacred lunacy of art. She likes to tell all who will listen that unlike her heathen son, when she paints a tree it looks like a tree. (She doesn't *say* 'heathen', but her tone implies as much. She is, well, wrong.) In any case, she did murals on dining room walls in every house we ever lived in, and claimed tables here and there willy-nilly on which to rest her palette, right next to

the laundry or dirty dishes. I liked that. She had a studio space in our house in Kansas City. I distinctly recall that her studio chair was wobbly, the legs threatening to splay apart. Ugly, I thought. Rosy ruffles made it seem even prissier. Symbols. Still, she paints trees convincingly... **[Sax: squeal]**

Since my first years as an artist—at least as soon as I conjured my first private studio space—I have had a special studio armchair. I have never been able to read in it. I have other chairs for that. No, this one has another purpose, and besides, it is not all that comfortable. It doesn't need to be. The Studio Armchair is a metaphysical symbol of that delicate state of consciousness most characterized by a certain poise...neither tense nor eager, but of calm focus. I do much of my work as a painter while sitting in my ratty, rose-colored studio chair with a cup of coffee in hand, blissfully doing nothing with glistening eyes gazing.

[Sax: lazy, slow tempo. Painter sits]

The armchair, in service for thirty years, is a rag-tag junk-shop thing with padded arms and smooth rounded ends. The worn layers of upholstery suggest a snake having incompletely shed its skin. The lowest layer shows frayed former glory, perhaps brocade silk. The molting upper skin is nondescript and of lesser quality. Perfect again.

This chair is, to the everyday mind, the sort of thing we see dumped by the side of the road. The truth is I stole it. It might have been abandoned, but I "claimed" it without permission. The metaphysical significance of having "stolen" a symbol of awareness is oddly appropriate as it provides secret, if deviant, comfort, sort of like...(Okay, I confess) drawing nudes in church. **[Sax: nervous laugh]**

My wife Carmen, who as an artist should know better, has encouraged me to reupholster it from time to time, but I would actually like it *less* if it looked new. A new armchair has no history, no humility, no *soul*. Drops of paint like boxer's sweat have christened my armchair again and again. Ugly though it may be to those not seeing a metaphysical symbol, it is—as Carmen calls it—my throne. When in it, I am sovereign. All artists are (or should be) sovereign in their studios, especially in their armchair. (This is the second defining task of the artist: to become aware and sovereign in their 'studio', to find their metaphysical 'chair').

Indeed, when others visit my studio I discretely rush to claim my chair before they do. At least, I like to think I'm discrete as I'm not a good judge of social grace in these moments. But, they seem to instinctively try to beat me to it **[Sax: Eek]**; and it makes me panic. **[Sax: shudder]** Curious. **[Sax: Rimshot]** Such chairs are, I swear, a magnet: the calm epicenter in the maelstrom of *samsara*, the sweet spot in the 'studio' from which all things are made possible, and around which all things revolve. On the rare occasions when someone beats me to my chair, I have difficulty finding my voice. In the chair, I know who I am—and, more importantly, who I am not *yet*.

Oddly, not all chairs can become so invested. I have two frumpy old armchairs in my studio space, a set straight out of a 1960s style coffee house. Perfect. The white chair is fine for visitors to sit in but will never be *the* studio armchair. I don't know why. Of the two, my throne is the more humble and worn. It is not even comfortable, but one sits ON my chosen chair, not IN it. For years my chair has had a broken and detached back cushion stapled to a wooden framework. I can slide it back and forth, up and down, to suite my most slothful moods. I sometimes caress the smooth wooden ends of the frayed arms with affection, casually like one rakes the naked back of a lover; sometimes I grip them in terror with the intensity of someone facing a ferocious wind, my cheeks rippling under the assault. It is, after all, a place of reflection, a perch on a windy abyss at the frontier of my sublime, sensual and spiritual wilderness.

Camus' anti-hero Jonas was a professionally successful artist but a rather weak guy, racked by self-doubt and loathing, fearful of making an authentic mark. Wimp! **[Sax: burp]** Sometimes when in my chair, I resemble Jonas intently and morbidly staring at a blank canvas—as any existentialist must—contemplating the absolute *impossibility* of creating...which is most often overcome by grace, recklessness, fatigue or madness. (*Take a leap, you wuss!*) **[Sax: siren wail. Painter vaults to work wall]**

Though I rather prefer the sublime metaphoric language of Eros, it is traditional (and a bit depressing) that one uses martial terms when talking about studio struggles. One speaks of the *campaign*, of the painter's *attack*, *advance*, *retreat* rather than the *seduction*, of the painter's *kiss*, *caress*, *coital embrace*.

Yet, my chair is a boxer's stool upon which the fighter sits momentarily preparing for the next round against a nearly implacable foe—an amorphous hydra-headed blob combining my rigidity, pride, pretense, stupidity and insensitivity to all that I am not. The metaphysical sense is that the studio armchair is an old and trusted friend amid a crowd of alien energies, a concrete symbol of the last protected and semi-rational reference point in the creative encounter, just before diving into the Zone of Terror between The Known and The Becoming, where the full force of the ebb and flow has sway. **[Sax: moan]** And sway it does—sometimes like a tidal wave, sometimes like leaves on a soft breeze. At times, the sway is so violent I need a seat belt. The chair steadies my dizziness and condenses my emotions... I then vault into the fray anew, a relative pipsqueak against a heavyweight in the ring, hoping to land a blow or two before energy flags, hoping to capture the standard of beauty before it fades into normal consciousness.

[Silence: hear Painter at work]

The armchair is my retreat, a place of silent reflection, of giving up, of gazing, of choosing. From here, I see unexpected correspondences, patterns repeated without thinking, unexpected forms emerging in crystalline simplicity, now buried in error... then resurrected in one deft stroke ventured without knowing how... the occasional undeserved gift, seized in time or lost in flux.

Quoting Lao Tzu, Alan Watts likes to remind us that...*the great Tao flows to the right and to the left; it loves and nourishes all things yet does not lord it over them or claim credit...* But I do. **[Sax: chirp]** I even sign the work and offer it up for exhibition and sale. Yes, we artists take credit for stuff stolen from the Great Beyond. Beyond what I don't know, except that it is beyond the petty little self we already know is a lie, from way beyond the back fence, where the coyotes whimper and whine. But we do choose just what to steal from secret troves in dark abundance, like thieves in the night stealing aunt Stella's cameo necklace while leaving uncle Ralph's new Rolex untouched. Artists must admit they are fundamentally *Nothing*: active nothings like hollow reeds with electricity and psychic wind blowing through them. The more hollow the better.

[Sax: hollow and reedy]

[Softly] While I revel in the redemptive value of such larceny, I am not big on the pop notion that art is self-conscious *self expression*, or its high-brow equivalent: *the construction of identity*; in fact I think the idea is a crock. **[Sax: pop]**. I proclaim that little bit of heresy from my chair, because, well, I am sovereign while in it, and I am willing to be seen as such. **[Brief silence: Painter sits]**

The dreaded Work Wall, the inner expanses of the whale's belly is a mystical screen of shifting mirages and ghosts of things not yet material, images not yet chosen into being, the place of military campaigns, where the residual offal coalesces as art—the place of seductive conquest, where energetic lust forges new visions.

My studio work wall is long, loaded with nails pulled and painted over, of paint that slopped over the sides of dozens of pieces, large and small. I occasionally have to white it out; Blake would have called this cleansing the doors of perception. The floor space between the chair and the wall is electrified, a risky band of real estate that is, for artists, genuine hallowed ground: dream space of battles, illicit acts, altars, shrines and offerings. Sometimes, like Chagall's famous image, one seems to leap over it without touching the floor. Occasionally, the physical space and the solid surface are One, the inclusive stage of the creative dance, the locus in which the artist makes love and attacks simultaneously—violent war and sensual peace, the place where dualities collapse, where Picasso so quaintly cast the artist as heroic matador, work wall as charging bull, the studio floor as bloodied arena. Dangers lurk. In order to focus, one must ignore the cheering and jeering crowds in the background, suspend vanity, the monkey of self-consciousness.

Metaphysically, the significance of the studio and its interior parts—the Work Wall, the Studio Armchair and the expanse between them—fosters what the alchemists called the marriage of spirit and matter, a sexy *chymical wedding* where imagination expands, the self shrinks and awareness is spit out of the whale humbled, naked, renewed.

[Sax up tempo, wailing, jubilant: plays in gallery for 30 seconds to 1 minute, then keeps playing and walks out of gallery, out of building, beyond courtyard. Spot lights drop]