

Self Portrait

By: Bianca Roth

Day after day I am stuck in the same position. When the lights are on, I hear people whispering softly around the room. Many come up to me and every day, a mother bends down to her child and tells them I am one of the many important self portraits of Van Gogh, a mad man who cut off his own ear. It's funny for me to hear him described as a "mad man" and even funnier to hear "how important I am to Art History" when all I do is just hang on this wall watching people stare. When the lights turn off, I can hear the loud noises outside, and I hang on the wall and try to recall a time where I felt a purpose. I try to grasp specific memories from a time where I wasn't surrounded by cold walls and still lifes. A time with Vincent Van Gogh. He created so many of us, portraits especially. As he would paint, he brought us life, through talking and interacting with us; what some refer to as madness. I didn't think he was mad, he entertained us. No one understood him, over one hundred years ago we were not appreciated "exceptional" and "unique." I can still hear the crackle of the fire from that night in the barn, when so many of us were destroyed. Before his death, Vincent made us survivors swear to never reveal our gifts, fearing that more of us would end up destroyed. Every night I try to take myself back to this time, where I did more than hang. However, the cold, lifeless walls consume me in this same lifeless routine.

My new home is New York city. I am the only one with a face on the wall in my room. I hang across from Sunflowers, which are very pretty, I like looking at them, but I wish I could see another face from time to time, one I could talk to when the museum visitors aren't here.

On certain days, people dressed in fancy black and white clothes come to my floor when all the visitors have left and admire me and the rest of my colleagues. They write things down on their clipboards as they discuss things like our "value" or the next "exhibition," which usually means I will be traveling to a new city soon. This group is often made up of new people but some I recognize from previous times. There is always the same lady who tells the people what they need to know. She seems young, pretty, but is always wearing all black and never gives a real smile. This lady in black is always at the museum. I see her when the visitors are here, I see her at night, and of course, I see her leading the group of fancy people through the floors.

I can tell there will be no visitors today because I can see the sun peering in through the window blinds, it is daytime, but there are no visitors yet. I am going to be bored. I wish the sunflowers knew how to talk.

I can hear footsteps through the hall, these are not the sound of visitors' footsteps, these are the click clack of fancy people's shoes. I wait as I hear the steps turning the corner into my room; sure enough it is the lady in black. She has someone else with her, a little girl. The lady in black leads the girl in front of the sunflowers.

“Here sweetie,” says the lady in black, who I now assume is her mother, pulling out paper and crayons from her large purse, “sit here and draw these pretty flowers. I’m sorry but I have a very busy day so just stay out of trouble.”

“Why couldn’t Beth come over and play with me today?” the girl asks.

“Honey, Beth is not coming over to play anymore, I’m sorry but she is unreliable. We’ll look for a better Beth. I have to go now, but just stay here and color and don’t make trouble. I’ll come back to get you when it’s time to go home.”

“Okay.” The girl said. I can tell she is a bit disappointed. She watches her mother walk across the hallway and greet the other fancy people.

The lady in black leads the fancy people through my room, and as usual, they all stare at me for a long time and talk about my “innovative technique” and “exquisite brushstrokes.” Soon they move along to another room, leaving the little girl sitting alone on the ground in front of the sunflowers.

I watch her as she draws the flowers over and over again on her paper. I rather like her drawing. Each time she draws the flowers she uses different colors and makes them slightly different. She speaks to them as she draws,

“And you will have pink petals, and you will have purple...” she says to each flower as she creates it. Once she fills up the notebook halfway, she becomes bored with this assignment and decides to walk around the room. Unlike most visitors, she does not come up to me first to admire me with appreciation. Rather, she gives me a quick glance and moves along to the other paintings with brighter colors. Once she takes a quick look at each painting for no more than a minute, she becomes bored with them as well and goes back to drawing. This time, she begins to sing to her flowers as she draws them. When I hear her voice, I am struck by the familiar feeling of creation and comfort that I felt so many years ago in Vincent’s barn. My ears are mesmerized by her voice, with every word she sings I gain another vision, smell, and memory from my past. I can feel myself breaking through the lifeless walls of the museum, I am almost transported back, when suddenly the walls trap me again.

Her voice is quickly disturbed by her mother calling to her from the hallway. The girl picks up her paper and crayons and quickly runs in the direction of her mother's voice. Shortly after, the lights in the museum are turned off and I try to call those fond memories back to my mind.

I hear the same steps the next morning coming in from the hallway. The girl is back! I am excited to see her again. Rather than handing her paper and crayons, her mother gives her a small rectangular device, which I have seen many visitors hold for listening.

“I’m sorry honey,” her mother said, “it’s going to be another boring day and I won’t be able to find another babysitter for another week or so. I have to work on the upcoming exhibition but I promise we can get pizza and ice cream for dinner tonight.”

“It’s okay. Can we watch a movie too?” The girl asks.

“Yes, of course we can.” She gives the girl a kiss on the forehead and walks back to the hallway to meet the rest of the fancy group.

The girl stands in front of the Sunflowers and begins to play music out of the rectangular device. She walks around the room looking at the paintings again but this time she walks to a beat. She sways back and forth and begins to move her feet gracefully. I have never seen a visitor in the museum move in such a fluid way. It looks like fun. As she begins to move more and more throughout the room, she starts to sing. She walks up to a painting with flowers in a lake and makes up a song about it. Once again, I am reminded of the memories I had in the barn when Vincent interacted with me. I am suddenly compelled to say something to her. I recall Vincent's warning, and coil back into my shell. I listen to her more, and crave the feeling of attention and purpose. "What's the worst a little girl could do?" I think to myself. I suppose the worst is she runs away screaming to her mother who surely wouldn't believe her if she told her a Van Gogh painting came to life and talked to her. How absurd! I debate with myself back and forth until I stiffly get the words out, "What are you doing?" She stops moving, and slowly takes turns off her music. My room seems even more silent than usual. She looks around the room, bewildered.

"Who said that?" She asks quickly. I look around the room to see who else it could be besides me. The flowers and lakes in the other paintings would not be able to say anything.

"Well, um I did." I respond. She keeps looking around the room with a frightened look on her face, and even looks past me a few times. "Over here!" I say. She keeps looking and starts to walk toward the hallway.

"Um, hello?" She peers out of the room.

"No no no!" I say getting frustrated, she hasn't looked at me yet. "I am right over here! On the wall across from the sunflowers. She turns around slowly and stares at me with confusion and almost disgust. This is not the stare am I used to. A change is nice. She slowly walks toward me until she is standing right in front of me. She turns her head to the side, pondering how I could have possibly said something to her, you know, being a painting and all. She looks at me this way for a while until she finally breaks the stare.

"How can you be talking?" she asks.

"Well, same as you, I guess."

"Hm," she says, assessing whether or not she is going to believe I can talk, or just run away scared. Her face changes, "So, did you like my performance?" I found her lack of a dramatic reaction to be a bit odd.

"Your performance? Well yes, that was very nice I enjoyed it very much!" I tell her, wishing we had spent a little more attention on me and the fact that I am a painting that can, well, talk!

"Thank you very much" She did a little curtsy to show her appreciation. "You know, actresses on Broadway do performances like that."

"Wow. Are you on Broadway?" I ask her.

"Not yet. But I want to be when I'm older." she says with confidence.

"Well I like your singing and dancing very much."

"Thanks! I like your hat!" I like that she compliments me on something other than just my "brush strokes."

“What is your name?” I ask.

“Kelly.” She smiles. “What’s yours?”

“Well, I don’t really have one,” I tell her.

“I know you were made by that guy who chopped his own ear off and sent it to his girlfriend! His name was Von Gog-h,” she tries to read Van Gogh’s name from my title plate.

“Oh yes, the famous ear story.” I say to her

“Did he have his ear when he painted you?” she asks. I do not know much about this ear story. This must have to do with his “madness”

“Well as I recall he was not earless.”

“Oh, well maybe he did it after he painted you?”

“Maybe.”

“Well anyways,” she moves on. “It says here that your title is *Self Portrait with a Hat*. That’s kinda a name!”

“Yes, I guess you’re right!” I said satisfied. “Why haven’t you come to the museum before now Kelly?” I ask her.

“I have. I just usually go to the fun rooms with more colors,” She says. “I don’t like it here very much though. I’d rather be at home playing, but Mommy says Beth isn’t a good babysitter, so I have to come here after school until she finds a new one.”

“I don’t like it much here either.” I told her.

“I know!” she agrees “There’s nothing to do but look at stuff!” I laughed, she was right. “There’s a whole city of things to do outside! Trust me, it’s way more fun out there.”

“Yes, I know.”

“You know about the city?” She asks surprised.

“Yes!” I tell her. “It may come as a surprise, but I have traveled on exhibitions around the world, and with Van Gogh’s gift I am able to remember and learn throughout my travels.”

“Gift?” She asks.

“Yes. Not every painting can talk! Just Van Gogh’s. He talked to us as he painted and treated us as if we were alive, and slowly we gained consciousness.” I can tell by the look on her face that she is trying to process this information.

“Do you talk a lot?”

“No,” I tell her, “you are actually the first person I have talked to in many many years.”

“But why would you want to talk to me? I’m not an artist.”

“Well no, but you reminded me of him. You talked and sang to the drawings and paintings just as he did and my lost memories came back. Once again I craved attention.”

“Wow.” she says trying to take it all in. “And now you just hang here all day?”

“Yes. All day.” She seems to dislike the idea of staying on a wall all day even more than I do.

“So you don’t even get to talk to anyone?”

“No.”

“But you could if you wanted to?”

“Yes.”

“So why don’t you.”

“The other portraits and I tried to years ago, but no one besides Van Gogh: appreciated this gift and burned the barn where Van Gogh left us. A few other paintings and I were saved by neighbors, but most were destroyed.”

“I won’t tell anyone that you can talk, I promise!” She says. “You know, you are very famous now. I wish I were and didn’t have to go to boring school all day.”

“School sounds much more appealing than sitting up here having visitors stare at me all day.”

“Not to me.” she says with confidence. “I would love to have people stare at me all day for being famous. I want to walk down the street and have people run up to me and ask for photos and autographs.” This sounded like an overwhelming lifestyle, yet not too far off from the one I was living. “If I were a famous Broadway actress,” she says, “I would be able to sing and dance all day, every day, and I could travel with my friends all across the world.” I can see her wild imagination in her eyes .

We talk for the rest of the afternoon, and I can tell Kelly is very passionate about singing and dancing, much like Vincent was about painting. She tells me about her dream to one day become a famous actress on Broadway. Kelly tells me all about the shows that travel around the world for years. She already knows the songs and dances to many Broadway musicals. She would make a phenomenal Broadway actress.

The sun melts and begins to peer in through the bottom of the blinds on the windows, and Kelly’s mother calls to her from the hallway.

That night, rather than wishing for old memories to find me, I focus on the new memories I made that day. I lock them in tight in my mind, anticipating what the next day would bring.

The next afternoon, I am so excited to see Kelly. As usual, she walks in with her mother who then hands her a large bag.

“I am not sure why you need all this,” her mother says, “there’s so much fascinating art to look at here to keep you occupied.”

“Don’t worry about it Mommy.” says Kelly, “Goodbye, I’ll see you when it’s time to go home.” She eagerly hugs her mother goodbye and watches her walk to the hallway. Once the click clack of the her mother’s heels vanish, Kelly says, “Hey!”

“Hello!” I respond.

“I brought you some cool things! Want to see?” I feel so excited and grateful that she would think to bring me something!

“I would love to!” I respond with excitement. Kelly pulls something out of the bag and puts it behind her back.

“Look!” she pulls out something that looks like a book. “It’s a Playbill magazine! This is where they talk about all the Broadway shows and actors. I brought you all of mine so you could see.” She dumps out the bag and Playbill magazines cover the floor. Kelly goes through each one

and tells me about the different characters and plots for each play advertised. For someone who has never seen an actual Broadway play, Kelly sure knows a lot about them.

“I have one more thing to show you.” Kelly says once we get through all the Playbills.

“More? What is it?” I ask.

“I made up this routine, so tell me for real if you like it or not, for real! Mommy says if I actually want to be on Broadway I have to deal with rejection and criticism.”

“Well alright then, go on.” I say. Kelly begins her performance. She sings and dances all around the room. She lights up as if she has a spotlight on her. I can imagine her beaming on a stage as a famous performer one day.

Kelly returns with her mother every afternoon. Each day I pick out a play from her collection of Playbills and she comes back the next day with a song from that play, memorized, and a dance to go with it. She gives me something to look forward to every afternoon.

Kelly’s mother has been staying later than usual with the fancy people, which gives Kelly and me more time together. Her mother finally comes to take her home, as she always does, “Time to go home sweetie, I’ve got to be here early in the morning tomorrow to pack up the pieces for the exhibition.”

“Okay Mommy!” She then turns to me and waves, “Goodbye Self Portrait!” Of course I don’t respond, or I will send Kelly’s mother to the hospital with a heart attack.

“I love how you have found a way to make a little friend at the museum, you are so imaginative,” Kelly’s mother says. I watch the two of them walk away. Once the lights are out I close my eyes and listen to the sounds of the city, looking forward to seeing Kelly tomorrow. I am disturbed before the sun comes up the next morning. The lights are dimmed in my room and there is a large open crate in front of me. The Sunflowers are not in their usual spot on the wall, but there is a closed crate, just like the open one in front of me. Suddenly I am being lifted off my spot on the wall and lowered into the open crate. I notice some fancy people around me but I don’t see Kelly’s mother. I am lying face up, so that I am forced to stare at the ceiling, I much prefer the sunflowers. I begin to panic, but am forced to stay frozen. To my relief, I hear the familiar click clack of heels on the floor.

“Sorry I’m late.” It is Kelly’s mother’s voice. “My daughter was upset that this Van Gogh was going on exhibition, she’s kinda made him her imaginary friend I guess,” she laughs, “Let’s get this one, Sunflowers, and the rest in this room on the truck so we can get them to California as fast as possible.” The lid closes down on my crate. Time for more travel.

I eventually make it to California. They place me, again, in a room with no other portraits, across from the Sunflowers. I am back in the same routine as I was before Kelly; day after day on the wall with people staring. However, in this routine, rather than struggling to find happy old memories, my mind is filled with newer ones, ones with Kelly. I remain at each museum for a few months until the Sunflowers, all other paintings, and I are packed up again into crates and move to another museum. I feel like a traveling Broadway actor myself, going

from museum to museum, being on display for a couple months, only to pack up again and move to another city.

More visitors come to see me now in these other museums than they did when I was displayed in New York. I assume this is why I have not been back. I have lost count of how many nights it has been since the last time I saw Kelly, it must be years. I think about her often. She has become my new Van Gogh.

Our exhibition has just moved back to New York, this means today is going to be buzzing with visitors. Shortly after the doors open, my room is full of people, all pushing to get a photo. I notice one woman who has been waiting in the back finally able to move up to the front, but she doesn't have a camera. She looks at me straight in the eyes and slowly lifts up something in her hand, a book with a familiar bright yellow strip at the top and bolded black letters. I look down at the rest of the book and, to my surprise, happen to recognize the face printed on the cover. Her hair is a different shade of blonde and her face looks a bit older, but I can tell without a doubt that it is Kelly, right there in front of me holding up her very own Playbill. She made it.