A Woman’s Work

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

I had always wanted to be an artist. I guess I felt that I was creative, but what I really liked was the idea of flicking a little paint onto canvas and selling it for $10,000. It struck me that it could be so easy if I had talent.

The art teacher at school said that I was competent, but I lacked “a true creative drive”. He said that artists need to be driven, and that I was just the opposite. I thought that he was an idiot. He was talking about another kind of artist. I was not one of those. Artists can be misunderstood – like Van Gogh. I was one of those kind.

I picked up girls by doing portraits of them. I started at school and then I did it after I left. I would sketch their face and then say – “What I really want to do is paint you, in color”. Then when I got them alone I would say: “Not just your face but your very essence … your whole body … naked”. Plenty went for it.

I used watercolor on paper mainly. Canvas and oils are too expensive. If you don’t get laid you don’t want to waste good materials.

But I was not giving these things away. I might say: “Would you parents be able to pay my price?” Not for a nude, but maybe a sketch. I just needed anybody to buy anything I had done. Nobody did.

So, I had to get a job. It was working in an art department for an advertising firm. Nowadays it is all on screen, although it can start with some sketches. People want to see a hundred variations. I was slaving away at the board or the screen. It was hard work. The very opposite of my dream.

One of our biggest clients came to call on our firm to discuss pitches so I was called in to assist with brainstorming. You know the thing – some wise ass in front of the client throwing out ideas and I scribble an image. I forgot what it was, but the product was aimed at women, so he brought his wife along. He did not want one of his employees and did not trust our executives, so he brought his wife.

After about an hour she complained that looking at stuff while sipping coffee was hard work. She said to her husband: “I have never worked harder in my life. You will owe me a spa treatment for this. A whole day.”

I made me wish that I was there, in the spa. She hardly said a word about what we showed her and what she did say was dumb. I remember thinking that whatever her job was, I would happily do that for a living, because it sure looked like sitting on her ass sipping coffee.

Then I was going through some of the water colors of girls I had painted and fucked. There were some pretty ones, but most were ordinary. But if you want to get a girl to bed you need to tell her that she is gorgeous and show her how you see her. You take out some sharp angles, soften the lines, plump up the lips and the eyes. I knew the tricks.

“Is that how you see me?” she would say. “I look beautiful. Let’s make love.”

I had some self-portraits. When I am not getting laid, I have to keep my hand in, as it were. I guess it is a bit like art masturbation. You use yourself to do what you do and keep limbered up for your next turn at bat. It was just that those seemed to be reducing in number. I was working way too hard.

I pulled out one of my sketches of myself and decided to turn it into a water-color painting of a woman. I had in mind the wife of that client, but it was over my face. I wanted color and eye makeup and lipstick, and her flowing hair. It turned out to be really very good. I found myself looking at me as a woman. I looked magnificent.

I suppose that you think that you look good when you paint yourself. There is a story that when Leonardo da Vinci painted the Mona Lisa it was a self-portrait of himself as a woman, which is why he carried it around with him. I don’t know about that, but I hung my Mona in my apartment, and I didn’t have too much of my own art on the walls. It is actually not that good.

I lured some girl around and she saw it hanging there. She said: “That girl is stunning. Is that your sister. She is really very beautiful.”

I figured that I now had an independent view of things. If I had been born a chick, I would be beautiful. If I had been born a chick, I might be like the trophy wife who inspired that painting – in part. I might be sitting on my pretty ass complaining that do nothing was just too much.

Anyway, that night did no go so well and I ended up alone. I took down my painting and put it beside my mirror and I used some artists’ pastels to color my face – I mean my real face, not the one I painted. I used a little black water color straight from the tube for my lashes. It was just another exercise, or so I told myself. Like using my face for a canvas, although in watercolor I paint on paper.

But it was uncanny. I was the woman in my painting. I was magnificent, or very beautiful. Far too attractive to work like a slave, or even work at all. That was how I felt anyway.

I had no women’s clothes in my studio/apartment. Why would I. But I did have some drop cloths spattered with paint. I decided to fashion myself a flowing dress and check out the whole thing. It looked great, except for hairy legs showing. A razor soon fixed that.

Artists say that when the creative juices are flowing, don’t turn off the tap. Keep it running. Ride the river. See where it takes you. I tore off a strip of the paint-stained fabric and tied up my hair a little.

Painting a portrait is not about reproducing the light and color that the eye sees, but about reaching into the soul. A truly great painting of a subject should reflect the character of the subject, or at least the artist’s opinion of that character. But now looking at the reflection of my latest work of art I found myself doing the reverse – looking at what I had created and asking – “who is she? What is her story – her personality? If only she could speak.”

“You’re wasting your life here. You will never make money like this. Find a rich man and take his money.” She spoke. Her lips moved, and it was a woman’s voice. It was haughty and disdainful. It was not like me, and yet it came from me.

If you are thinking that this is the thin edge of madness, don’t think that the thought did not cross my mind. But art sometimes involves walking along that cliff edge of sanity. And in this case, I was experimenting with creativity.

I looked at her and laughed. The laugh was mine. I adjusted it to hers. Yes, she had a voice. Yes, she had a plan. I did not. Could she step outside and pursue her plan, whether or not it was meant to succeed? I had no idea, but it seemed to me that I would be a fool for not giving her the chance.

“Find a rich man and take his money,” she said. Then an idea came into my head. I knew a rich man, although I had never met him. It was simple. I called up Malachi Rosen.

“Malachi, it’s Jacob. I am calling about something that you said your father might be interested in. A young female artist. Graphic and performance art. Talent is a matter of taste, but interesting she certainly is. I mentioned your father to her and she would like to meet him. Her name is Rebecca. She is actually a cousin of mine. No, she doesn’t do portraits – hers is more abstact, but you could ask. I would love to, but I will be too busy to come with her. Just call me back with a time and I will send her over.”

Once I put the phone down I had a few doubts, but after I has set my camera up and taken a few professional selfies, I felt much better about things. Just wearing the “clothes” I had made, I set the camera to take shots of me in various poses. I discarded most of them, but kept the rest for a portfolio. It called it “Rebecca Peach – The Artist as Art”. I sent a copy to Malachi

But these clothes would not work with Mr. Rosen. I would need something to mold my body and conceal my junk, and then something arty – boho perhaps? I sort of liked boho styles.

I went online and punched in “crossdressing” and was surprised to see that there was a supplier near me. I mean it was a clothing store with a back room to cater for a special clientele. I decided to call in – but dressed as a guy.

Sure enough, I went to the counter to ask about their special service and shop assistant took me out back. She said that I should invest in “a shaper” which had a tight crotch, a corseted waist and gel tits. I found one that would fit. She said that she had shoes in my size with a heel that would be easy for me to handle – “trainer wheels”, she said. She showed me some wigs, but in the end, she said – “If your hair was straightened it could be styled so you wouldn’t need a wig.” She gave me the name of a nearby salon who could do the job.

I walked out of there with undergarments, shoes, a patterned dress, and embroidered jean jacket and a shoulder bag. I then went to a cosmetics store and bought the proper art supplies for what I had to do.

Once I was dressed I experimented some more at home. It was as my portfolio said – “The Artist as Art”. I had created Rebecca Peach and I was adding the finishing touches. Things like the way she walked, or used her hands, or spoke. I needed to work on these things, but the internet is full of useful advice.

It was not until the following day that Jacob called me and told me that his father was interested in meeting Rebecca that very afternoon.

I decided to go to the hairdresser recommended by the “trans-boutique”. I dressed up as Rebecca and went out. I had an extended period of uncertainty. People looked at me, and it seemed to me that absolutely everybody knew that I was a guy dressed as a woman. It made me feel sick. I wanted to run home and hide. But then I started to wonder if they might just be staring at the woman I had become. Plenty of people stare at women – I did. And women too, if they admire my dress or perhaps they are wondering why my hair looks such a mess.

My stride started to become more assured, but I did my best to make sure it looked feminine. I gripped my bag so that my arms would not swing and give me away.

But the lady in the salon knew. I said that I had been recommended, and she guessed where from.

“Oh yes, we can style that hair,” she said. “And perhaps redo your makeup.”

“I am an artist,” I explained. “With my makeup I am going for something striking – perhaps even a little outlandish.”

“How wonderful,” she said. “I think I know exactly the look you are going for, if you will let me…”.

I have heard that women love going to the salon, and initially I had no idea why. The smells if not unpleasant seemed heavy in the air, the conversation seemed pointless, and the time that passed was just money out of my shallow pocket. But it is about beauty. It about changing looks and changing moods with it. The inane dialogue is all part of it, so I felt happy to join in – or rather, to ask questions about what they were talking about.

They say men are from Mars and women are from Venus. If you want to learn Venusian the salon is a great place to do it.

The hair was perfect. Some color highlights and curls that still kept a wild look, but held off the face with a nice clip. And the makeup on the face was right too – exotic without being bizarre. If I thought my own efforts made me beautiful, this work made me gorgeous.

“You’ll walk out here feeling like a million bucks,” she said. I always feel that way – feel like I should have the money anyway, but I did feel great.

I went to the apartment of Saul Rosen, the father of Malachi, the son he begrudged giving money to. Quite how I thought he could be an easy mark seemed a poor decision as I waited for him to answer the bell.

“You must be Rebecca,” he said. “Come up. Get into the elevator and press P”.

The doors opened directly on to the ante room of a plush apartment. Then Saul appeared. I had never met him or seen him before. Hearing Malachi speak of him I expected some stooped old man but he seemed surprising youthful and fit, with greying hair the only sign of age. But he exuded power and wealth. This was what I wanted. He would never pay a man to do nothing, but would he pay a woman to do nothing?

“You seem like a very interesting young lady,” he said, after we exchanged a soft handshake. “Tell me, why to you want to meet me?”

“I have heard from your son through my cousin Jacob that you like beautiful things; that you are a collector of works of art?” Was it too early get straight to the point? I judged that it was not. He seemed like a man who might value the forthright, and dislike wasting time.

“That would be true,” he said. “You have something for me to look at?” He looked to see if I was carrying anything, but my bag seemed too small.

“You are looking at it,” I said. “It is something of my own creation. Rebecca Peach. Something that you might like to add to your collection. Not to hang on a wall, of course. I am best displayed sitting on a sofa; or on a chair at a fine restaurant; or lying on a lounger at a tropical resort.”

His brows furrowed, but I thought – ‘what is the worst that can happen? He shows me the door. I have lost money at a boutique and a salon’. I braced myself.

Then came the smile. It started in the eyes, which seemed to sparkle as if in those old movies when the fool of a male lead falls in love. It made me wonder if my eyes were sparkling back, leading him on. But as the smile went to his mouth, it went to mine too.

“Is this work of art expensive?” he asked.

“Very,” I said. “But I accept payment by instalments.”

I could see him thinking for a moment before he posed the next question – “Is this work visual only, or can I expect more … something … more tactile.”

“Why, Mr. Rosen! I hope you are not suggesting anything improper!” I feigned mock shock.

“Visual only then,” he said, but he did not appear too disappointed.

“I fear that if you scrape through the surface this work of art will be a major disappointment,” I said. “So why would you want to deface a work of such beauty?” I struck a pose and I could see that I had won him over.

That was two years ago. But you can’t go two years – not even two weeks – before looking a little deeper, and perhaps checking provenance, and asking Malachi whatever happened to his friend Jacob? It was just that by that time, this particular work of art had become a fixture in his apartment, and across the restaurant table, and on his arm.

It was just that on the lounger at the tropical resort this particular work of art needed a touch up top and bottom to look good in a bikini. But by then I had become so accustomed to life as a woman, that seemed such a tiny thing to surrender.

Not that I am suggesting that a woman’s work is not as easy as I thought it was when I started. I imagine it could be hard if you don’t know what you are doing. I do. I am the work, you see.

The End

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