

Art Saved My Life by Nancy Calef October 2019

The walls of the room in the dormitory scream emptiness. I look out onto the damp, dark stone campus buildings and see a few lights in the chapel and in the nuns' living quarters. The end of my first college semester and living with the Sisters has taken some getting used to. Christmas Day is almost over and all I've eaten is a bag of raw string beans and instant oatmeal. The books I plan to read during the holiday week are stacked up high by my bed, but none call out tonight. This is a pit in which I cannot remain. I walk to the empty living room and bring my large sketch pad. I lie on my stomach on the carpet in front of the TV and begin to draw the madness I feel in my head with colored pencils and pastel. The sky-colored blue and green of the water merge with strange figures and distorted faces. I am sixteen. Being away from home for four months has not healed my childhood traumas and the lingering effect of my mother's psychosis. Her bi-polar condition created uncertainty and violence in our household, and my mild-mannered father did little to protect me from her negative and destructive behavior. This holiday I am not going home.



Deaf, Dumb & Blind, oil on canvas, 36" x 48"

My mother had assumed the role of my theatrical manager and booked me for modeling and acting jobs since I was five. I walked runways, posed for endless photography sessions and performed at auditions. By the age of twelve, I had experienced professional rejection, was told to have a nose job, and had been propositioned by other models and photographers.

The demand to remain thin was relentless. I was continually monitored, weighed and restricted in my diet. I soon discovered purging. I could secretly eat all I want and then throw it up. It was my perfect rebellion to having no control over any part of my life. When my mother became aware of my self-destructive actions, and regularly followed me to the bathroom, I began to starve myself.



In the Spotlight, oil on canvas, 36" x 48"

In order to escape the repression and misery at home, I took the early college admission exam and was accepted to a women only Catholic college in New Rochelle, New York. I was months from my sixteenth birthday, anxious, terrified, and excited to be free. In the nuns' hands I would be well

protected Or so my parents believed, as I weighed eighty nine pounds. quit college after my second year, and moved to San Francisco.

Through drawing, painting, sculpture, and writing, I threw myself into the creation of art and began to express my deepest fears. The creative process allowed me to tackle difficult and painful issues in my life. I became absorbed in my artistic vision, occasionally forgetting that I still struggled with a deep, dark problem.

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My hotel room has beautiful multi-colored tiles surrounding the bathtub. In Valencia, Spain for the night, I'm waiting for my train to Cadaques. I've been traveling alone for three months, starting off in Belgium and making my way through France. My stack of drawings lay on the dresser. I've been drawing continually out of every train and hotel window, in cafes and restaurants. Images pour out of me, giving me a center. It's been eight years since I spent Christmas alone on the college campus starving myself. I'm still binging on occasion when loneliness and rejection overpower me. I eat granola and watch old movies. I purge and sleep, and wait until the darkness passes.

5:00 am and I'm awake. I shower in the beautiful bathtub. It's slippery and I fall and hit my right upper ribs with great force. I lose my breath, then compose myself. The yoga teacher taught me to breath into the pain and identify its source. The pain is unbearable and I can't take a deep breath. I gingerly get myself out of the tub and put on a simple dress. Should I go to the emergency room? I lie on the bed, but can't get sufficient air. I wait until the light is beaming through my window, and I slowly make my way down to the lobby just one floor below. I tell the deskman that I fell and need to see a doctor. He calls a taxi and helps me in, instructing the driver to walk me into the hospital to the emergency room counter.

I remain calm, although my heart is racing, and realize how alone and isolated I really am. I must trust my instincts, remain alert and present. My top rib is cracked and the one below badly bruised. The doctor sends me off with a prescription for painkillers that I never fill. Within in a few days, I'm sketching in nearby restaurants and parks, feeling strong enough to travel to Cadaques, the beautiful coastal town where Salvadore Dali spent much time painting. There I establish the lifestyle I would maintain for the next thirty-five years. I learn to heal myself. I draw every day, walk, and listen to my inner voice. I follow my muse, and establish a purifying, challenging and investigative relationship with my creative process. The hash-filled cafes and bars, occupied by international seekers, are perfect venues for me: public, yet immersed in my own vision. That relationship pours out and over to those around me, and I find a way to connect wherever I go. Creating art becomes my language as I travel throughout Europe for almost a year. People approach me and want to see my work. I start selling portraits and drawings of crowds. I begin maintaining myself financially. Occasionally, I still

purge, but often don't, as I grow accustomed to eating only when I'm hungry. My impulses toward self-destruction are replaced by relentless production. I develop the clarity and ability to channel my self-loathing and guilt into the artwork, one piece at a time.



Inevitability Line, oil, sculpture, fabric, found objects on canvas, 48" x 60"

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My reflection in the mirror shows fear. I've been nervous all day, reflecting my lack of control over the event about to unfold and my fear of its unknown outcome. This is my first solo art opening in a major gallery in downtown San Francisco, and I had to sign a contract. People may reject my paintings. Yet, I somehow believe my process will sustain me if I'm true to it and remain uncompromised. It has been thirteen years since my travels in Europe. Drawing has become the gateway drug to a deep and positive addiction to painting. I'm now weaving together narratives about contemporary life, often creating three-dimensional works in high relief, using clay, oils, and

found objects on canvas. I feel like a photojournalist, working feverishly to capture social, political, and spiritual issues facing society in my lifetime. I spend endless hours highlighting the greed, injustice, and need for love and unity. I begin calling my paintings "Peoplescapes." Having spent so many years struggling with my demons, it seems natural to turn my scrutiny to the study of the human condition. When the old painful insecurities arise my creative techniques continue to serve the healing process.

The gallery will be filled with twenty of my oil and 3D paintings created over the last ten years. I haven't purged in twelve years. I fell in love with a man that believes in my talent, forces me to grow, and travels the world with me. With the greatest respect for one another, our love deepens. He yells from the other room that the taxi is on its way. The anxiety is palpable in my chest. I could be a failure. You're already a success my husband tells me. Look how far you've come.

Art saved my life and I'm forever grateful.



Live Show, oil, sculpture, fabric, found objects on canvas, 30" x 40"