



.fifteen portraits.

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by  
Francesca Penchant

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*La femme . . . accomplit une espèce de devoir en s'appliquant à paraître  
magique et surnaturelle; il faut qu'elle étonne, qu'elle charme;  
idole, elle doit se dorner pour être adorée.*

Woman . . . performs a kind of duty when she endeavors to appear  
magical and supernatural; she should dazzle men and charm them;  
she is an idol who should be covered with gold in order to be worshiped.

From “*Eloge du Maquillage*” (“In Praise of Makeup”)  
by Charles Baudelaire

## introduction

In the book *If you Want to Write*, Brenda Ueland writes that art comes from a desire to share something you love with others. “At last, I understood that writing was this: an impulse to share with other people a feeling or truth that I myself had.”

The fifteen self-portrait photographs in this book are the result of a year of artistic experimentation. Like many artists, I make art to make my inner world known, to create a world that is so vibrant that everything I make reflects my obsessions, visual vocabulary, and psyche. The intention of the project is to create photographs that depict women who are strong, mysterious, dark, emotional, expressive, surreal. Growing up in a matriarchy with a strong mother and sister affects one’s ideas of women, and the photographs reflect those ideas about female power.

Any photographer who takes self portraits confronts the charge of narcissism. Another interpretation is possible. Female artists, in particular, often use themselves in their work, for example, performance artist Marina Abramvić, photographer Cindy Sherman, and plastic-surgery artist Orlan. In so doing, these artists explore identity and tap into something deeper than ego. For me, costume and photography are vehicles to express what is underneath appearances.

### *Inspiration*

Natural forms inspire me—tree forms, the texture of bark, clusters of leaves, gnarled branches, the monochromatic hues in a landscape. The textures in the depths of a bush, or a group of trees, or some tall grasses draw the viewer in. Walk past some tall, reedy grasses or drive past a forest. The closer plants rush past more quickly than those further away in a fluttering, vibrating way. Slowly passing by a group of trees is like an eerie Hitchcock pan, when the foliage in the foreground moves faster than that in the background. About twenty-five years ago, I noticed this effect riding in a bus full of American art students, driving from Milan's Panza Collection, the art collected by Giuseppe Panza (1923–2010). We drove past a large, barren forest of black trees, against a bright, twilit sky, and rushing past made the dark branches vibrate against each other like the flicker of a strobe light. Very moved, I wrote this about it: "Driving to Varese, I was fascinated by the leafless forests of trees, creating a dense hairiness that constantly moved alongside the bus."

Observing nature has a calming effect. Similarly, abstract art has the same calming effect because the eye can get lost in the piece. An abstract work of art is a maze for the eye, a mandala. The mind loses

itself pleasantly in the textures, colors, and forms. There is no analytical classifying and deciding. There is only following the forms, like watching a river flow. There is no judgment, only perceiving. Abstract art represents the vastness of the universe, the beauty and perfection of nature. Within slow and meditative moments are infinite time and infinite existence.

In the photos are forms, colors, and concepts that are found in nature. Some of these forms are foliage, branches, hair, veins, and fur. Dramatic colors—black, white, red, blue—that recur in the photos are deeply rooted in the psyche, and can represent night, stars, moon, blood, fire, water, and so on. The photos also evoke nature's universal concepts such as the seasons, death, mother, and the elements.

In making fiber art and costume, I am also inspired by ancient art. One example of this is the painting in the Villa of the Mysteries just outside Pompeii. The Villa has dark red murals that depict an initiation ceremony that used to take place there in ancient times, among the mostly-female Dionysian cult members who lived there. The murals depict women enacting mysterious rituals whose meanings are not entirely known, the most striking of which shows a winged female figure whipping one of

the initiates. The murals intermingle the spiritual, the frightening, the beautiful, and the female in a way that resonates and endures.

*Advice for artists*

The best advice to give artists is to make as much art as possible. Artists are powerful in the way that they can create their own worlds. They are like magicians. Or, they are like scientists: They have questions that they want to explore, they research the questions, they make experiments, and they share their findings. Voltaire wrote, “The happiest of all lives is a busy solitude.” Even if you do not show anyone your work, making your own world has done you good. The process of making is fulfilling in itself.

Most artists who want a middle class life need to get a job. Find a job that gives you energy to focus on your projects, because when artists have to focus on basic survival, their creative projects suffer.

Often, art-career books do not tell artists what they want to know—essentially, how to make art, how to be working artists. That is the most important thing: to make art. Marketing your art, developing a filing system, or working fifty percent of the time on administrative details ultimately does not matter. Instead, follow your interests and your

obsessions. Making art will make the road clear. Develop a practice, develop habits of making art regularly every day or every week. Learn how you work best. That’s all that matters. Everything else will fall into place.

## annotated bibliography

Arbus, Diane. *Diane Arbus: An Aperture Monograph*. New York:

Aperture, 1972. Aperture published this monograph of eighty beautifully composed photographs of outsiders and “freaks” the year after Diane Arbus committed suicide, helping to cement her international reputation.

Calloway, Stephen. *Baroque Baroque: The Culture of Excess*. London:

Phaidon Press, 1994. This coffee-table book explores twentieth-century excess in Western culture, decade by decade. A must-read for decadents and dandies.

Hustvedt, Asti, ed. *The Decadent Reader: Fiction, Fantasy, and Perversion from Fin-de-siècle France*. New York: Zone Books, 1998. *The Decadent*

*Reader* is a collection of late nineteenth-century French novels and stories that celebrate decline, decay, and perversity. Authors include Barbey d’Aurevilly, J.-K. Huysmans, Guy de Maupassant, Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, Rachilde, Octave Mirbeau, Joséphin Peladan, and Remy de Gourmont. An excellent introduction to the Decadent movement.

Huysmans, J.-K. *À Rebours (Against the Grain)*. New York: Dover

Publications, 1969. *À Rebours* is the most important novel of Decadent literature, which flourished in nineteenth-century Europe. It focuses

on Jean des Esseintes, an eccentric, reclusive aesthete who loathes bourgeois society and retreats into the realm of the senses.

Lautréamont. *Maldoror*. Translated by Paul Knight. London: Penguin Books, 1978. First published in 1868, this blasphemous book concerns Maldoror's exploits, the most notable of which is falling in love with and seducing a shark.

Lloyd, Carol. *Creating a Life Worth Living: A Practical Course in Career Design for Aspiring Writers, Artists, Filmmakers, Musicians, and Others Who Want to Make a Living from Their Creative Work*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997. A practical, hands-on guide to becoming a working artist.

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Ueland, Brenda. *If You Want to Write*. St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 1987. Writer Carl Sandburg called *If You Want to Write* "the best book ever written on how to write."

## annotated filmography

*Kwaidan*. Directed by Masaki Kobayashi. Japan: Toho Company, 1964. *Kwaidan* is an anthology film based on four ghost stories that earned an Academy Award nomination for Best Foreign Language Film. The beauty of the acting, writing, costumes, and sets are unmatched.

*La Belle et la Bête (Beauty and the Beast)*. Directed by Jean Cocteau. Performed by Jean Marais and Josette Day. France: DisCina, 1946. *La Belle et La Bête* is a fantasy based on the traditional Beauty and the Beast fairy tale, published in 1757, about a hideous man-beast who falls in love with a beautiful young woman.

*La Dolce Vita*. Written and directed by Federico Fellini. Performed by Marcello Mastroianni, Anita Ekberg, Anouk Aimée. Italy/France: Riama Film et al., 1960. This film follows a week in the glamorous life of Marcello, a hedonistic paparazzo journalist living in Rome.

*Mildred Pierce*. Directed by Michael Curtiz. Performed by Joan Crawford, Jack Carson, Zachary Scott. United States: Warner Brothers, 1945. *Mildred Pierce* is a film noir based on the 1941 hardboiled novel by James M. Cain about a housewife's attempts to attain the American dream, and satisfy her spoiled daughter Veda.

*Rebecca*. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. Performed by Laurence Olivier, Joan Fontaine, Judith Anderson, Vincent Price, George Sanders. United States: Selznick International Pictures, 1940. *Rebecca* is a psychological thriller based on Daphne du Maurier's 1938 novel about a timid, young bride tormented by the memory of her husband's dead first wife.

*Sudden Fear*. Directed by David Miller. Performed by Joan Crawford, Jack Palance, Gloria Grahame. United States: R.K.O. Radio Pictures, 1952. Incomparable Joan Crawford plays a wealthy, middle-aged playwright who falls in love and marries a good-for-nothing actor (Jack Palance), with dangerous consequences.

## on photography

According to Susan Sontag in *On Photography*, photographs are:

A semblance of knowledge	Naughty
Informative	Consumerist
Validating	Addictive
Evidence	Compulsive
Elegiac	Ante-raising
Dignifying	Shocking
<i>Memento mori</i>	Desensitizing
Another world	Deadening
Instruments to reverie	Objectifying
Implicitly magical	Exploitative
Laying claim to another reality	Aggressive
Seductive	Predatory
Promiscuous	A sublimated murder

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Snow Woman, 2014





June, 2014

Puerto Rican Woman with a Beauty Mark, 2014



Marcella, 2014



La Elvira, 2014



Linda, 2014





Táino, 2014

Doom, 2015





Cleomatra, 2015

Crow Woman, 2015



Dolores, 2015



Isabella, 2015



Glenda, 2015





Princess, 2015

Akane, 2015



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