

Becoming Vincent

Russell Rainbolt

Art Professional, Rainbolt BFA, Honors, USA

*Corresponding author

Russell Rainbolt, Art Professional, Rainbolt BFA, Honors, USA.

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Vincent van Gogh, by some curious process of mythification, became an insurmountable obstacle to me when I was young. Vincent was indeed a brilliant, sadly tortured young man, a drinker of absinthe, an artist pushed beyond his sanity by his desire to paint, until, finally his all-consuming fire ended by a bullet from his own gun. That sort of melodrama is unbeatable.

Even Michelangelo's presumably difficult time painting the massive Sistine Chapel ceiling was no match for Van Gogh's angelic glory. Vincent never sold anything, was never appreciated or loved for who he was, and yet his paintings are some of the most beautiful objects on earth. He was a spiritual guide and mentor.

But I wondered, was the guy next to me or the woman sitting there bent over her easel going to be one that turns the world upside down with their art? Would they become the next immortal icon, like Picasso or Warhol? It was frightening, but exhilarating to imagine that one of us could be the next beacon of artistic magnificence.

Inside that dream, I would find myself back in the little market on 23rd St. in Manhattan, staring at the Campbell Soup cans, wondering how Andy Warhol came up with his idea to begin with. That meant more research, although with a bit of persistence, I would have met him in Soho at Leo Castelli's gallery.

I lived at the Chelsea Hotel, back when Tom Waits lived there. We used to say hello to each other, but I never saw him in the daytime coming or going from the Chelsea. It was always late at night.

Arthur C Clarke, the science fiction novelist whose work with Stanley Kubrick on 2001: A Space Odyssey propelled him to astronomical fame, had a penthouse apartment on the roof of the Chelsea. My roommate, Tom Toombs and I used to go up and snoop around on the roof, looking at the gardens and hoping someone famous would appear. The roof itself had a great view, especially at night. We would sit up there listening to traffic and stare at the city. It was a different kind of starry night, a saxophone invariably playing somewhere a few blocks south of us.

One day Tom was truly bewildered by two women, easily 6 foot tall, who lived just up the stairs from us. Both wore somewhat scanty shorts and a halter top with extraordinarily high heels.

Each day they walked the tiniest of Pekingese dogs he had ever seen, never leaving the area of the Chelsea, never taking the dog on a longer, much needed walk. Tom was even more confused by the obvious answer, and I was sternly refuted "because they are so nice to chat with.

After a few months we chanced upon a nice apartment nearby. It was much less expensive than the Chelsea and we decided to move there immediately. We I dragged our belongings to SVA, School of Visual Arts, where we had classes in the daytime and then brought them back to the new apartment. That night, Tom and I climbed down a rope from our second story window and made our escape in as cinematic a way as possible. And we did it at around midnight so the only people who saw us with the two women walking their tiny Pekingese dog.

We waved to them, the dog barked a few times, but we knew that it wasn't goodbye because we had moved only a few blocks away.

Settling into 28th Street was easier because it had two separate rooms where we could paint our canvases in our own separate rooms. Tom had the wider room with the kitchen in it. I had a mattress in the closet that went on the floor at night. The best part was that I could see the Empire State building out of my window at night and could here all the conversations and sex through the heating pipe that traversed the floors in the building.

The roof of this building had an even better view than the Chelsea Hotel, and we hung out for the first week on the roof almost every night, looking at even more of Manhattan, the windows twinkling in the frosty winter air, smoky breath and bulky coats making us look like monsters on the roof.

One evening around 9pm we were on the roof and heard a roar followed by the screeching of brakes. Three police cars were stopped on the street below our building, their lights flashing arcs of blue all over the buildings and windows next to them.

There was a sudden splash of white light pouring up from below; search lights trained on us blindingly. We were on our tiptoes looking over the edge of the roof wall when the megaphone blasted "FREEZE! Put your hands over your head.

In shock we dropped back onto the roof, and I remember falling over for a split second. Tom was already racing toward the door on the roof, and he motioned for us to get out of there.

The elevator was just past the door and luckily it was close to us because the doors answered immediately. We barely spoke on our way down and for some reason we thought we could sneak past the Police Sargeant who was ordering men upstairs, running in full gear and with rifles. Our building superintendent caught site of us but before he could speak, the Police Sargeant asked if we were the ones on the roof. When we sheepishly nodded "Yes." the Sargeant touched the mike and said "False Alarm. Halt and Return." It was a blur at that point, but I remember being ordered into our room, while the Sargeant was yelling at our Superintendent for calling the police and saying that there was a sniper on the roof. "How would that look on the news if we shot two college kids off of your roof on a mistaken call? Huh? It would be plastered on every news channel across the country.

Needless to say, we weren't allowed on the roof again. My friend Tom left a note one day and left SVA one spring afternoon. The note asked me to mail his things home to his parents, which I put together as best I could. Some of my classmates said he had put on a robe, was smoking grass and left New York City for a hike northward to Maine and Canada on a trip to save his soul. I had just gotten some artwork printed in the Village Voice thanks to the editor George Delmerico, one of my instructors, and I wanted Tom's opinion of the art.

But that was never to be. I suppose he was one of the lucky ones because a classmate I didn't know ended up in Bellevue in the psychiatric ward. Perhaps he or she turned out to be the new Vincent van Gogh.

It's difficult to tell. I was close to the scene but maybe not close enough.

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