



NOW

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All I desired was love, a family and creative success. At 36, I had none of it. All thousand years of a brand-new millennium lay ahead. Yet, divorced, unemployed and lost in a buzzing new city where a thing called the Internet was being invented, I awoke each day hobbled by equal parts guilt and shame for the mess I'd made of my life.

From this darkness, I turned to painting, a fanciful diversion I'd never done. The idea was to get lost in fields of color. To feel and not think. To allow raw emotion to ooze its way from my aching soul to my hand and the brush it held. On cardboard boxes I collected from recycling bins on my San Francisco street, I began a daily ritual. Music up loud, sun slanting through the kitchen of my century-old flat, barefoot on the faux-brick linoleum, I explored: acrylic washes, impastos, graphite markings, smudged oil crayons. No training meant no rules. Untethered whimsy.

I painted what I saw in front of me: whiskey glasses, flowers, hillsides peppered with homes. Weeks and then months passed, and I began to feel a door inside crack slightly.

One summer morning, standing before my rickety aluminum easel in ripped, paint-splattered Levis, I decided to try my hand at portraiture. My subject stood in the studio of my mind's eye - the woman of my dreams. My challenge was to replicate this being in two dimensions. Her face I could not see, but her laughter rang out and her sensual power I felt in my arms, both warm and clear as the California sky outside my kitchen window.

At thirty-seven, clean shaven, I still passed for late twenties, with plenty of glimmering bronze in my irises. A daily surf ritual kept my



body toned. Still, more gray than black assaulted my ever-present stubble. Time was of the essence. The kitchen floor felt cool on my knees, as I sketched in graphite pencil the naked body of a confident young woman. I sat up and raked at my unruly dark curls, as I studied the beginnings of this figure. The leg I'd just drawn was clumsy, so I leaned back in. Eraser shavings flew.

Day after day, bathed in morning light, I rubbed away at the 40" cardboard rectangle which, weeks earlier, had been rubbish. It now held a distinct outline, and I placed it onto my easel and stepped back ten feet.

Was this the shape of my beloved? Her shoulders tilted playfully. Her arms reached in each direction. She could have been a gymnast on a beam, hip cocked in a show of sass. Or a dancer twirling joyfully. Or a woman on the street, mid-double-take, thinking, now this guy's worth a second look. Her torso needed more torque. I grinned at her. I needed coffee.

My parents split when I was four, and I'd always promised myself I'd never make that same foolish mistake. Laughably, I knew my marriage was doomed as I watched my ex, kind, lovely and worthy though she was, walk down the aisle toward me. I'd hurriedly asked her to marry soon after we met, and in the months that followed, as I realized we were simply incompatible, I did not have the guts to call it off. And so, standing at the altar, I allowed my weakness to become the atomic bomb that blew our young lives and my self-respect to smithereens.

Though two years had passed since our divorce was signed, my self-inflicted wounds still festered. I saw my future - sitting three feet from a snowy TV in a filthy terrycloth robe, alone watching nature shows and spooning tuna from a can.



My salvation lay in the ragged lines of that graphite silhouette. Amped on caffeine, I cranked the music, removed the cardboard from my easel and replaced it with a 40"x30" canvas of muted blues and pinks, a free-form mix of color I painted a few days earlier. I donned a paint-covered blue oxford and pulled on my trusty ripped-kneed Levis.

An old wood stove housed my painting supplies. Titan Buff was the color today, a calming off-white, leaning toward beige. I scooped a healthy spoonful onto my palette, grabbed a long brush with medium bristles, dipped it into the paint and impulsively painted the word NOW in large capital letters amidst the pink-blue sea that filled my canvas. I wrote it again on the opposite side of the canvas, this time in smaller letters. The hip hop brought a languid groove, and I began to dance in front of the piece, jabbing and dabbing the word NOW wherever I saw space.

Half an hour later, I rotated the canvas 180 degrees and continued to add NOW wherever it felt right. Before long, the piece was a dizzying maze of NOWs in every direction, many of the words barely legible. I noticed that the word NOW backward spelled WON. After several hours, my knuckles lay coated in beige, and I felt invigorated by a morning lost to pure creativity. Brushing my teeth, I grinned through a minty mouthful of foam at the sight of beige paint on my left ear and unruly hair.

The following morning, I again knelt on the floor above my cardboard silhouette. Her left shoulder felt a bit thick, so I trimmed it down and redrew to add suppleness. My tongue poked from my mouth like a kid shooting marbles, as I erased any remaining errant marks from the cardboard, perfecting the figure to one long clean set of feminine curves. Within an hour, she was ready.



I still could not visualize a face, so my silhouette stood headless, as if my love was an ancient Greek Goddess memorialized in statue. The hair on my chest and arms held a blizzard of shavings, as I stood and lifted her from the ground and blew one last time, a final cleansing breath of life. I placed her on the easel, walked to the fridge and poured a glass of lemonade, keeping my eye on her throughout. She's ready, I thought, as I guzzled my juice. I seized the stencil, dropped back to my knees. ... and, with the blade of a utility knife, released the love of my life from an old box.

When I stood again, my tan hands grasped her curvaceous hips. Arms outstretched, I stood surprised that I could even approximate a human figure. Wasting no time, I eased my chaotic tableau of muted blues, pinks and Titan Buff NOWs, then held the silhouette before it. Finding just the right spot, I pressed her firmly to the canvas with my left hand and grabbed a red pencil from the easel tray. I traced her outline. When I lifted away the stencil, there she stood.

Suddenly, I knew exactly what I was doing. All my tools lay at the ready atop the ancient wood-burning stove: paints neatly arranged by color, brushes in an old coffee pot, a red plastic Solo cup of water and a clean rag to wipe away mistakes should the bottom of my hand smudge something.

I squeezed a pinkie-tip dollop of cadmium red onto my palette. Placed the minute tip of my finest brush into my mouth, wetting it to a tight point, then dipped it into the paint. I applied one small capital letter: N. Then I dipped the tip in my water cup, dried it on my jeans, put it back into my mouth, dipped it in the paint and added another letter: O. Rinse and repeat: W. My head bobbed subtly to the music, as I studied the curves of my simple red pencil line with one tiny word atop her right shoulder. This time the word NOW stood precise, clear and laser focused. I put the brush tip back into my mouth and began again. With my face inches from the canvas, I did

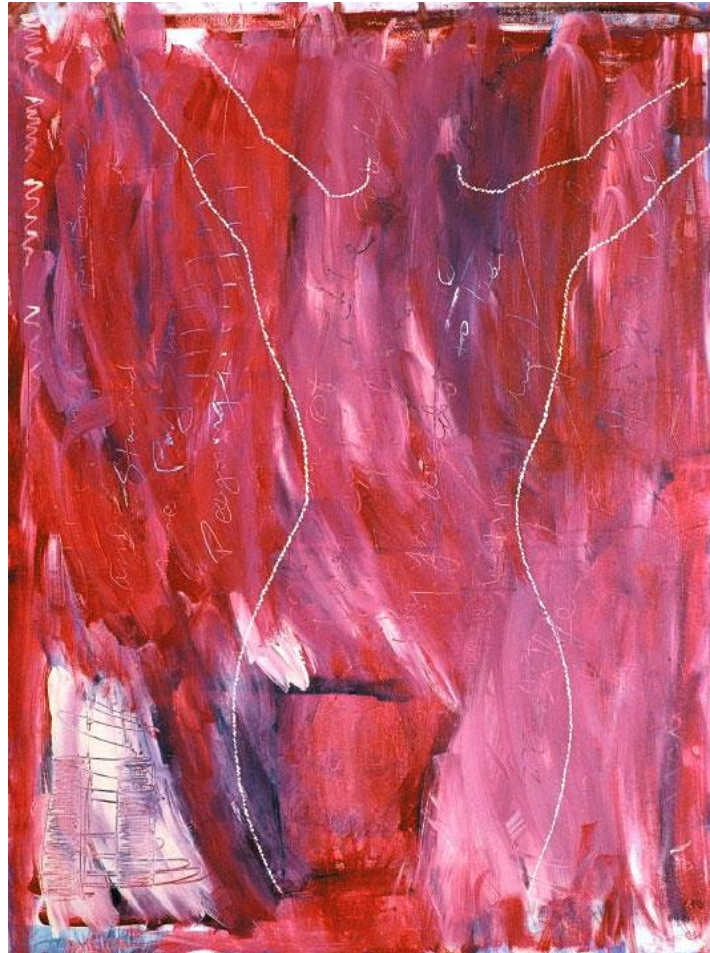
this action again and again and again. Until the outline of my silhouette stood composed completely of this tiny word repeated over and over and over, each letter no bigger than a baby's eyelash.



NOW Every Bit of It

Standing across the room, if you didn't know better, you'd think all these NOWs mere brush strokes. But I knew clearly that each was a precise mantra to solve an existential problem. I named this new painting, Every Bit of It, a declaration that this woman would be all that I sought, that I would be all that she sought and that no desire would go unfulfilled. This first NOW painting begat a second and a

third and, eventually, became a series. Each a tone poem registering the emotion present the day it was born. The silhouette evolved. No longer looking back, she now stared straight ahead with muscular arms raised in victory. Upright. Strident. Sure. She would, after all, feel as lucky to have me as I would to have her.



NOW Explain It to Me One Day

Midway through that year, I was invited to show these paintings in a salon, where some of them sold. Later, I was invited to launch and helm a tech magazine. Suddenly, I had creative momentum, job satisfaction and camaraderie to further lift me from my precipitous fall.

My painting flourished and became a daily practice. By the time I finished the series in 2003, thirty-five NOW paintings had poured from within. The tedious process of writing that three-letter word in paint thousands of times, day after day, year after year, reinforced my unbending intention to solve my problem.



NOW Laughter Warm as Rain in the Tropics

Still, the fact remained that I was alone. But just a couple months after I painted the last of the NOW works, something unexpected happened. I met someone online. In her profile photo, she stood beside a sporty Mini Cooper on a windswept ocean bluff ... smiling like a happy child beneath a pixie, indie-rocker haircut. Yet, her 5'2" hourglass figure and tan bare midriff was all woman. She gave good email, witty, playful exchanges in which she was not afraid to throw a punch. Her snappy eloquence made me laugh. But she was serious too. And spoke lovingly of her family, a mother in real estate

and a father who got up every morning and headed off to his Rockwellian existence at the same pharmacy where he'd worked for forty years.



NOW Every Bit Of It detail

Like my own, her parents had divorced long ago, and she yearned to get the family thing right. To raise a beautiful child. Or several. This woman had verve. Beauty. Clarity. She even lived on a houseboat in Sausalito, just over the Golden Gate Bridge.

But, most amazingly of all, when Jodi stood before a NOW painting, it was as if I'd drawn a chalk outline of her body. Married seventeen years, with two magnificent sons, my artist heart NOW beats full where once it stood empty.