

How to Get Over Yourself, According to Jerry Saltz

Feeling creatively stymied? Get over it, says this Pulitzer Prize-winning art critic.

By **Jerry Saltz** Updated Feb 14, 2020



I never went to college. I have no degrees. I was a long-distance truck driver until I was 41, and I had never written a word in my life until then. I loved art and tried to be involved in it but then always crawled back to what was easier: feeling embittered and afraid, taking half steps, and hiding behind excuses. I lived my life in resentment, jealousy, envy, anger, and self-pity. With the inner lights out, the world was less dangerous or alive. In this way

I exiled myself from a life I'd wanted since I was 20. I froze myself with fear. "What if I'm no good? I'm a fake. I don't have enough time or money. I'm not original. I have no relevant ideas. I'm bashful and a bad schmoozer. I have bad hair." So, I lived in a self-imposed hell. As some of you did. Or still do.

I recently wrote a book, *How to Be an Artist*, about this paralyzing state and how to get out of it. It's also about how to live your life with more fun and creativity. In my case, I looked at as much art (good or bad) as I could and tried to hang around artists (whether they wanted me there or not). Besides communing with other vampires—aka other creative people, the spiritual sustenance for any creative person — the most important thing of all was getting to work. Work is the only thing that takes away the curse of fear, and real experience helps to cast out the demons.

Making an enemy of envy is also helpful when clearing out your creative conscience. Through the lens of envy, everything appears jaundiced and dysmorphic. It sees that other people have better necks and social skills and bigger bank accounts. Envy eats the artist in all of us alive. Drive it out or it will kill your spirit and make you bitter.

The good news is that we are all artists in our own way and creative when we need to be. Being creative is a definition of being alive. Art, music, fashion — it's all about the power of expression. As an art critic, I couldn't tell you the first thing about reviewing fashion, but I know that style is one of the fundamental things that make us *us*. It has been right in front of us for as long as our species has existed. The entire history of art can be viewed as a record of fashion. Even when it is bad or non-fashion, fashion is a statement, a uniform, a revelation of self-love, social class, philosophy, or self-hate. It is our barbaric yawp and everyday letter to the world.

All that energy comes from the same place — the drive to create, imagine, find purpose, feel presence from our undetermined surroundings, to speak in forms, colors, shapes, configurations that signal status or dreams.

Whether we're communicating through language or canvas or fabric, art

and its many facets can restore us as human beings. From our love of making things we learn how to be more comfortable in our own skin.

So, whatever it is you want to become — be it a painter, poet, potter, or designer — get started now! Be open, versatile, flexible, find the rhythms that suit you, and set things in motion even if they never come to fruition. You are a freedom machine. I promise you that if you get to work, surround yourself with people who share your interests, and cast aside envy, the best is yet to come. Take it from this former truck driver who managed to get over himself and eventually snag a Pulitzer: One fearless instant can last a lifetime.

By Jerry Saltz

Jerry Saltz, the senior art critic at New York magazine, won the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism in 2018. His new book, How to Be an Artist, comes out on March 17.

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