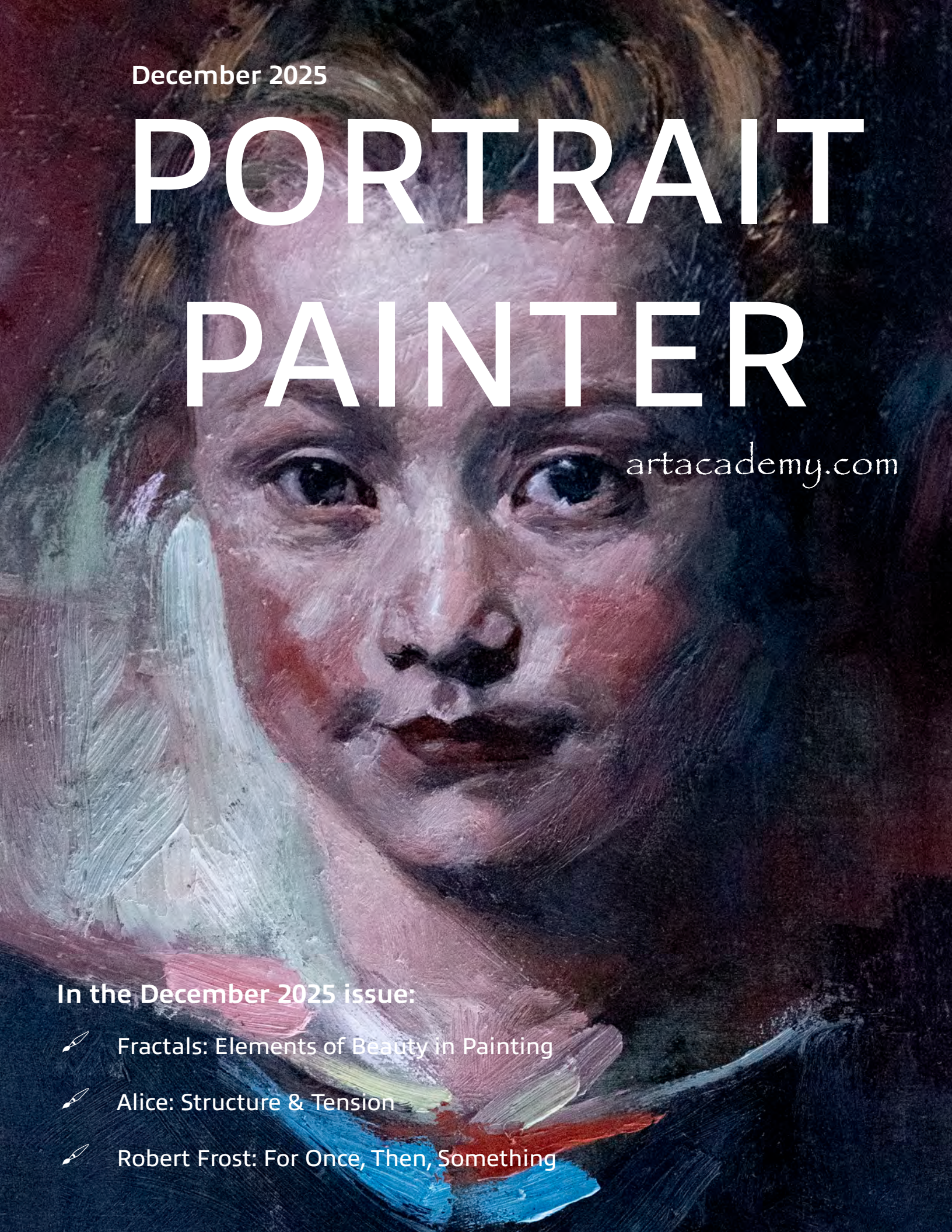




December 2025

PORTRAIT PAINTER

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In the December 2025 issue:

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A Word ...

It's been a busy Autumn, it passed in a blink of a weary eye.

This issue is for the advanced portrait painter. It is a bullet riddled signpost angled precariously on a lonely highway. And it is fraught with controversy—fractal recursions and dynamic iterations in portrait painting, all in the pursuit of creating a painting that has a compelling presence .

It offers the plateaued painter a way forward.

This issue also serves the studious beginner well. It points toward a pathway. With a plan.



Michael Britton
November 2025

Fractals: The Elements of Beauty in Painting—A Polemic

After 12 years of study tethered to a mediocre teacher/painter, Velázquez was nearly condemned to an uninspiring career of mediocrity himself.

Velázquez' *Portrait of a Man* exhibits all of the trappings of a poorly trained painter. The portrait is feature-centric, ungrounded in solid structure. The axis of the facial angle drifts toward the center (a common beginner's error) amongst a litany of poor decisions.

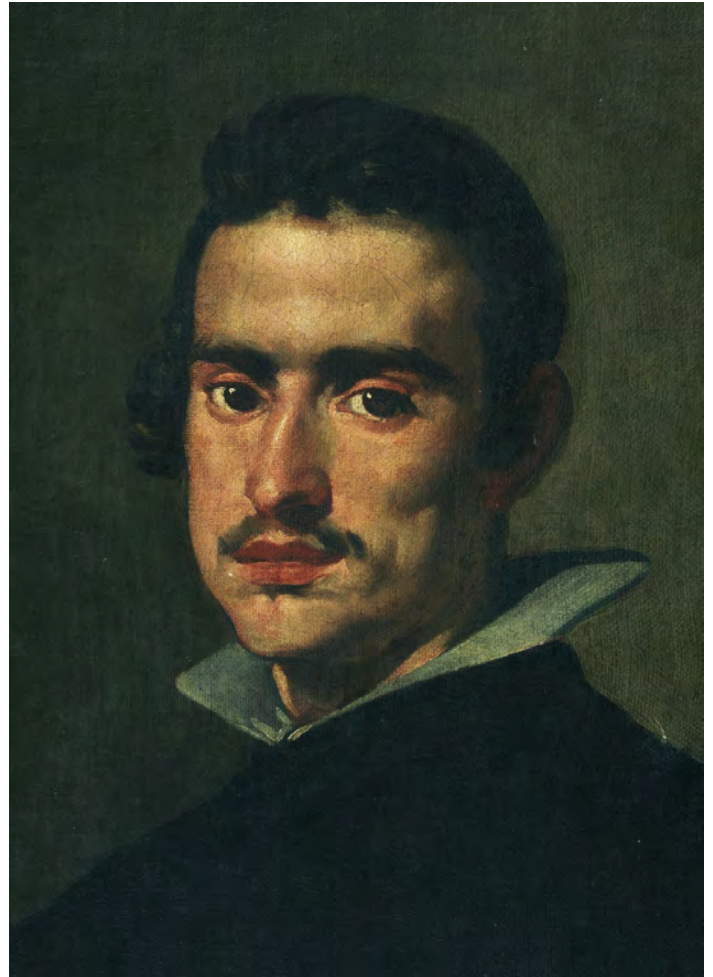
I say this as a caution to every beginning artist: Mediocrity begets mediocrity. Choose your instructors wisely.

To be fair, Spanish painting in the decidedly unfrivolous era of the Inquisition was mannerist, provincial and, well, downright autarkic. There were exceptions, of course. There are always exceptions.

Velázquez got a few lucky breaks. First was being appointed the Royal Court's painter—the competition was not particularly heated—and, second, and more profoundly, were his shared painting sessions for eight months (1628-29) with Peter Paul Rubens.

Together they studied and copied the palace's extensive collection of Titians. Alas, any written correspondence between the much younger Velázquez and Rubens is long lost.

Rubens copied and studied Titian well into his 50's. Consider that Rubens had well-established himself as one of the finest painters of the Baroque (derived from the Portuguese *barroco* : a malformed pearl) and one can readily surmise that he was looking for something.



Diego Velázquez, *Portrait of a Man*, 1623

More often than not, an artist's gut instinct serves as an insistent guide who will point toward a dark and menacing thicket entreating you to go that way while they retreat into the familiar embrace of a hot toddy.

Before I allow myself to get entangled in a thicket of my own making it should be understood that great art always defies analysis. However, sober analysis is required to gain some insight to what makes a few paintings utterly compelling.

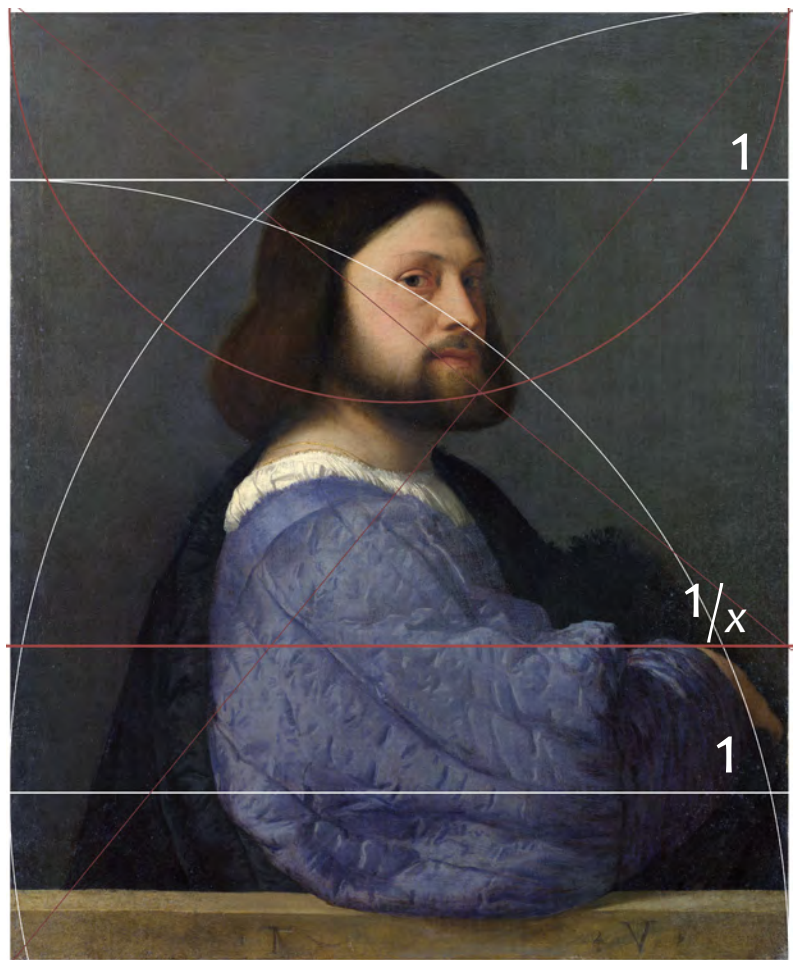
Technical virtuosity certainly plays its role, but it is only one part of the trifecta of art making (the other two being Spirit and Construct). Let's focus our bleary eyes on the hoary technical: And don't be expectin' no facile tips & tricks! This ain't the venue for palaver and treacle. I train serious artists.

Structure & Unity are the primary elements of good painting. Structure begins with your choice of canvas (the dimensions of your painting support) which define the first four lines of your composition.

Titian's *Man in a Quilted Sleeve*, 1509, has a published dimension of 81.2 x 66.3 cm which works out to a proportion of 1.2247. Hold onto that thought for a moment.

Shape, like color, has its complements. A dynamic rectangle's complement is the difference between that rectangle's reciprocal and the square. [A reciprocal mirrors the larger shape and is defined as $1/x$.]

Titian's canvas looks to be pretty darn close to the complement of the $\sqrt{\Phi}$ (Phi) rectangle. $\sqrt{\Phi} = 1.272$. Φ is the golden, irregular number 1.618. (It's the number of the world's soul according to Plato.) Divide 1.272 into 1 gives the reciprocal of 0.7862. Stay with me ... subtract 0.7862 from 1 to get 0.2138. That is the reciprocal value of $\sqrt{\Phi}$'s complement. [It's actually a tad more complicated, but this gets the job done neatly.]



Add 1 (a square) to that complement and we're very close to Titian. Only a measly 0.0109 difference. Well within my tolerance.

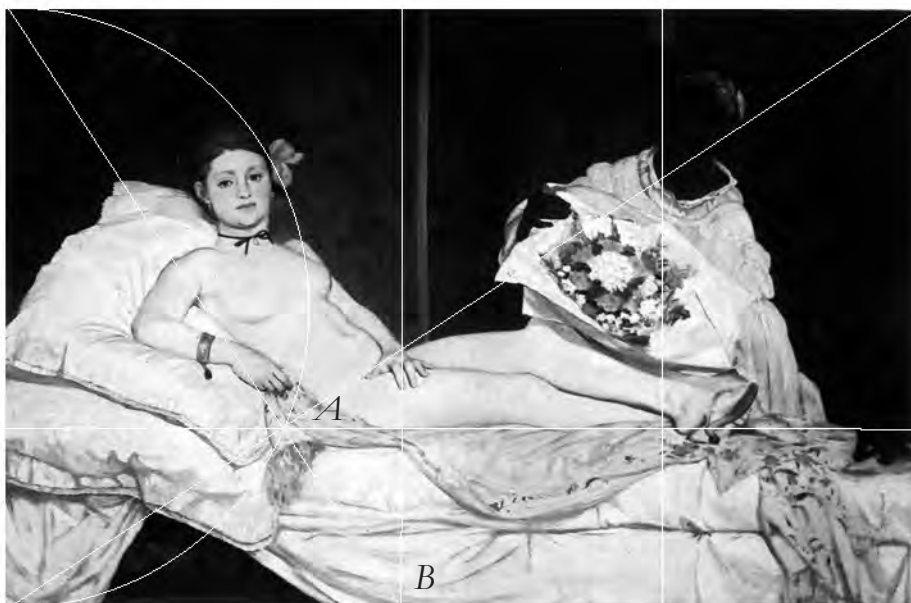
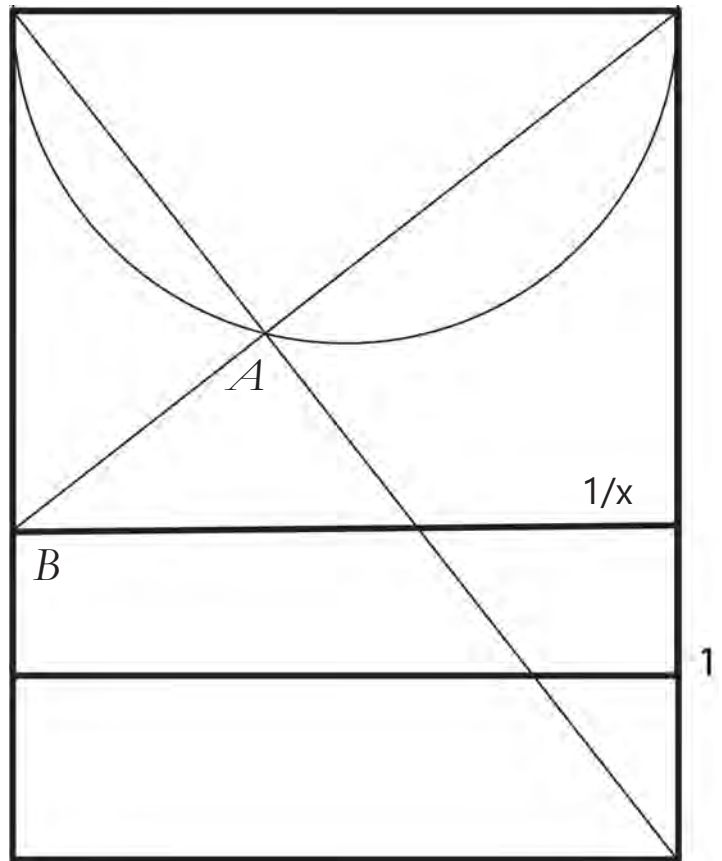
Tolerance! you say.

Well, stretcher bars breath. They expand. They contract. Also, linen rots with the passage of centuries and paintings need to be relined and ironed onto a fresh linen. Just like at Motel 66. So put aside your pitchforks and allow me this precious tolerance.

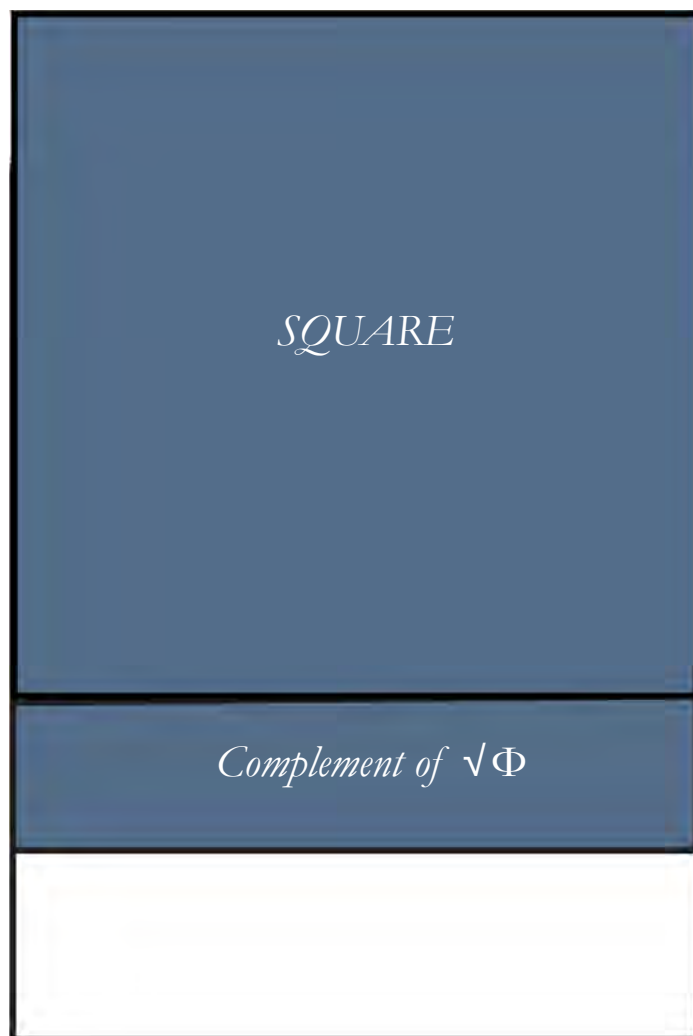
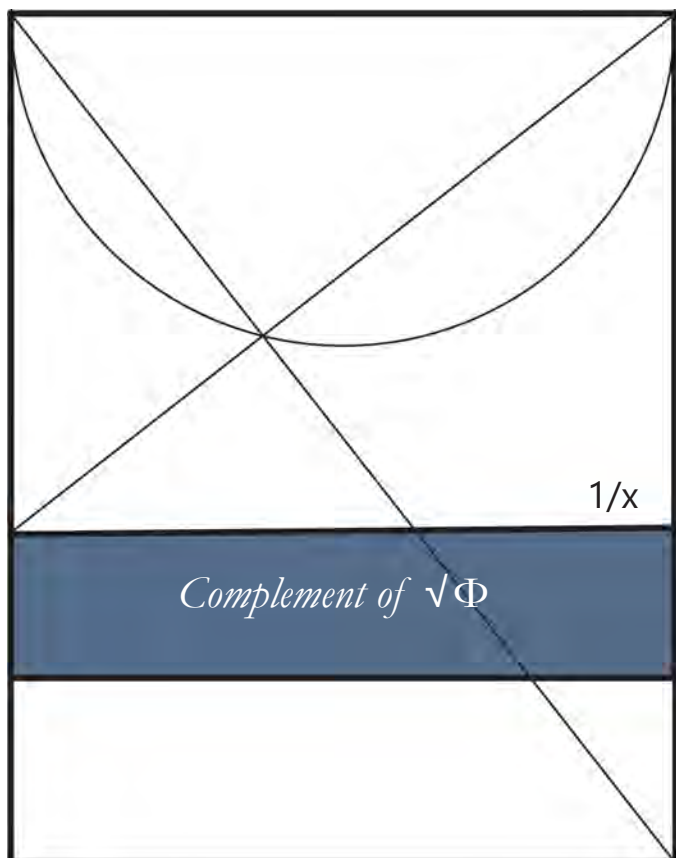
In my portrait painting workshops I strongly recommend the 11x14" canvas. It's a $\sqrt{\Phi}$ dynamic rectangle and begins the process of sensitizing the student's eye to dynamic shape.

Pictured here is my beloved $\sqrt{\Phi}$ canvas.

The two most powerful tools of composition are: The **rabatement** (1) which is simply a square rendered onto the end of a rectangle; second, is the **reciprocal** (1/x) which mirrors the canvas.



Manet's construction for *Olympia*, 1863, the reciprocal is determined by placing a semi-circle onto the end of his canvas and where the primary diagonal intersects the semi-circle at 'A' a secondary diagonal is rendered. Where it meets the edge of the canvas at 'B' ... well, there's the reciprocal. Neat and elegant. Rather beautiful too.



Within the armature of my $\sqrt{\Phi}$ rectangle the blue-gray area is the complement—the difference of the square less the reciprocal.

Beneath the square is the remainder. It ain't got a name.

Voila! Titian's *Man in a Quilted Sleeve* fits very nicely within our newly constructed dynamic rectangle. Thank you very much!

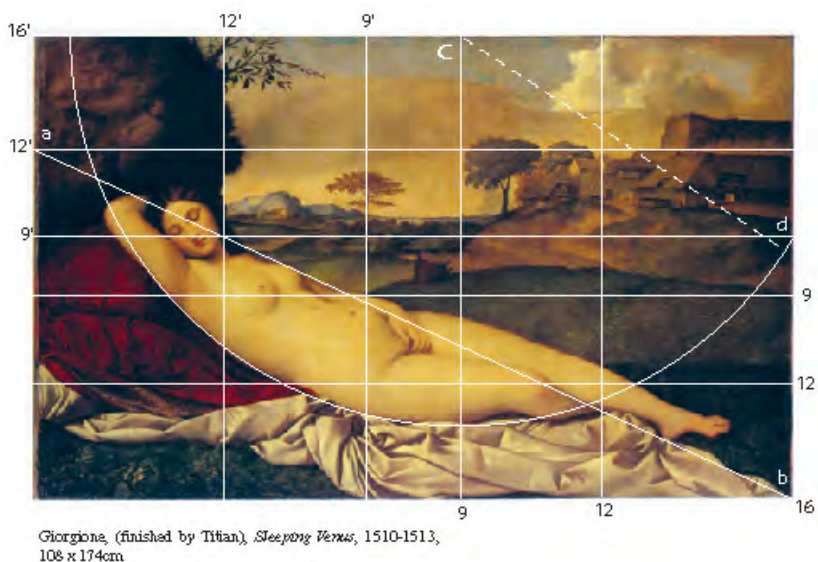
For most of you I strongly (always strongly) recommend drawing out this geometry with compass and ruler in hand. Accurately sketch out a $5\frac{1}{2} \times 7$ " rectangle and go to town with it and see what wonderful discoveries manifest.

Let's move on to the next layer of painting structure: that's the harmonious divisions of space. Titian very likely employed Octaval divisions instead of dynamic symmetry. I'll stick to dynamic symmetry as it is, frankly, the better route.

As both proof of my weaving polemic and an example of Octaval composition, illustrated here is Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus* laid out in all her double diatessaron (9/12/16) splendor. [A small note: The diagonal *cd* should meet at the horizontal 9' caesara (division) thus defining the radius.]

Giorgione died early and Titian finished the painting. Bomber Harris rendered it to crispy ash in the Dresden fire-bombing of February 1945.

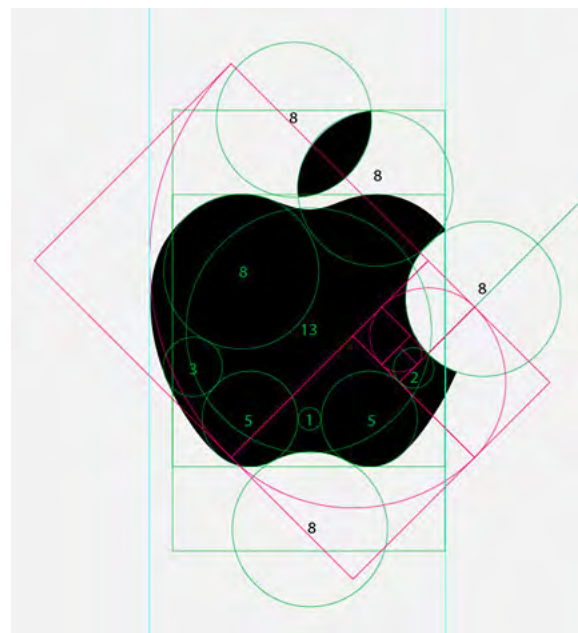
I've kept my analytical deconstruction of Titian's *Man in a Quilted Sleeve* rather elementary. Otherwise ... you know ... things quickly become confusingly complicated. Involute is the word used in rougher neighborhoods.



Many of you may be wondering why would I want to be bothered with this. Well, it depends on your ambition. If you're happy with just mucking about with paint, that's fine.

But if your desire is to create compelling works of art then you need every advantage you can glom your grubby, paint smeared hands onto. Structure conveys your message directly to the viewer's unconscious mind and engages them emotionally.

Corporations employ dynamic symmetry to create their logos. They understand just how powerful a tool it is. Illustrated here is the schematic of Apple's logo.



But Apple's logo didn't come easy.

Apple launched itself onto the world's heart-hardened stage in 1976 with this sorry-assed logo depicting Newton lounging beneath an apple tree.

This is what happens when you hire an amateur. An untrained dilettante. This logo miserably endured for about a year.

Rob Janoff, the designer of Apple's now familiar logo, has a few succinct words of advice for designers and artists: Keep it simple.

Let me add to that a few pithy words of my own: Simple in and of itself is meaningless. Simplicity derived through a wall of complexity ... well, that's a keeper.



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Once the underlying geometry is settled upon and the color scheme set—a pochade, or thumbnail sketch, is never a bad idea—the act of painting begins.

Grabbing a 20x30cm canvas (an Octaval diapente) from my rack I applied an imprimaturi similar to Ruben's practice—a lightly applied yellow ochre subsequently streaked with charcoal dust.

Had my intent been an indepth and carefully rendered copy of Ruben's *Clara Serena*, 1606 I would have let the yellow ochre dry fully before streaking it. I confess. I streaked it wet-in-to-wet. An expediency aborting the mother-of-pearl effect of Ruben's practice.

With an extended compass and ruler in hand I established an armature of geometry. Do something often enough and it becomes ingrained.

You acquire the ability to sniff out the key that unlocks manifest possibilities. You just know what will work and what won't. That's the difference between a trained professional and the stumbling self-taught.

A 2B length of Nitram charcoal close at hand was pressed into service to minimally strike my arabesque in correspondence to my determined geometry.

Ruben's would have simply used a round-brush dipped in brownish ochre or bistre, but I've been on a Sargent kick for the past few months in my workshops. So, it's kinda a Rubens/Sargent fusion.

I've said this a million times: the beginner's primary agenda is to acquire the skill of striking shape accurately and consistently. Few bother to do so. Art does not reward the many.



With a limited palette of titanium/zinc white, yellow ochre, indian red and ivory black I loosely rendered the planar structures of Clara's head, painting with a sculptural sensibility.

I have no interest in doing a direct, illustrative copy of Ruben's. My intent is a study of fractal relationships applied in a more contemporary approach while retaining Ruben's wondrous expression. A high order indeed.

The essence of painting with a sculptural sensibility is applying your brush strokes with a sympathetic correspondence to the underlying anatomical form. In other words, carving out the forms almost as if modeling in clay.

You do so by spotting-in the color/value notes as if succinctly plonking in colored pieces of clay.

The general rule of spotting color/value notes is: 1. Select your color/value; 2. Place it accurately; 3. Shape it to correspond with the anatomy and expression.

The bulk of an artist's training lay in the acquisition of their drawing/painting skill-set. Essentially understanding the articulation of space and pictorial syntax. Alas, there are no short cuts. But there are plenty of dead-ends. Choose your instructor carefully. Drawing and painting for dummies produces just that. Dummies.

At this early stage of serving up the facial half-tones in the abstract my focus is the structure of the head. Do not be feature centric! Pay heed to John Singer Sargent's advice: 'Spend a week painting a portrait without the features and you'll learn something about the modeling of the head.' No more Mr. Potato heads, please.

Yes, I know, I know ... there are errors aplenty. Poor Clara looks as if a wasp has stung her cheek. It will heal. She will survive.



Once you've acquired the skill of accurately, and consistently, striking shape (the arabesque) the next hurdle is the interiority of the facial matrix—the placement of the anatomical structures and landmarks.

A side note: Stay far, far way from the Andrew Loomis' portrait drawing method. Yes, it is popular. It caters to the madding mob and replaces one set of poor drawing issues with another. It is ultimately a dead end. Likeness and spirit is found within the geometric specificities of each portrait and not through a cookie-cutter system of generic proportions.

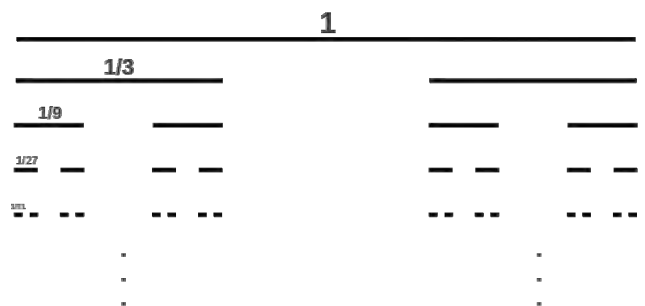
In the first part of an artist's training we learn how to improve and refine our drawing by first striking shape/proportion and then verifying with relational measures (i.e., how does the measure from *mental protuberance* (base of the chin) to the inferior aspect of the *frontal orbital eminence* (the brow line) relate to the width of the face) and plumb lines. Not the other way around—don't pre-measure. Striking first then checking is a sure and gradual process that will carry you a long way.

But this, too, has its limits. And thus we return to Rubens and his quest of Titian.

Technical virtuosity alone, other than offering up a hollow visual spectacle, does not impart compelling art. Nor does erstwhile emotion. Nor does narrative—every story has been told innumerable.

It is within the language of painting, it's pictorial syntax, that compelling art resides. Just as a writer strives to place a specific word to fit its proper place and meaning, the painter strives to fit their brush strokes within the harmonious assemblage of their painting.

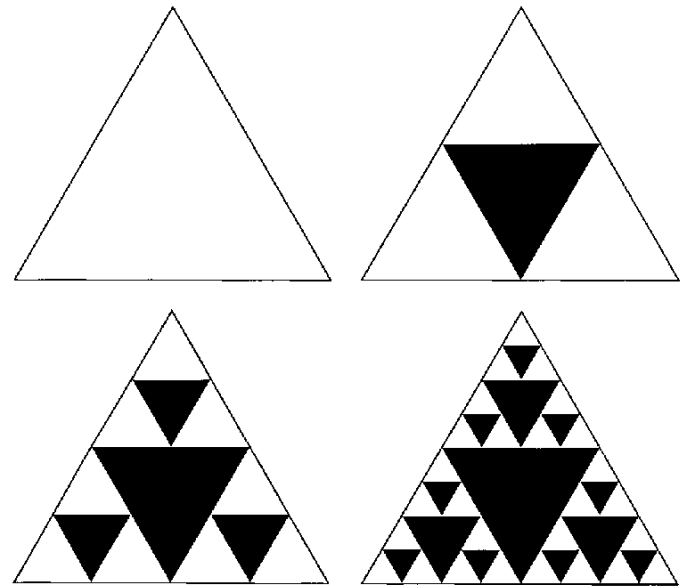
Fractal theory invokes seemingly complex but self-similar, reciprocal shapes and structures in nature. Basically, a fractal is a geometric form that features self-similarity. Self-similarity infers that a part of a fractal has a similar structure to the whole.



Let's unpack fractal theory and apply it to portrait painting. An inviolate rule of painting is to work from **general to specific**. The Cantor Set illustrates this quite well. Beginning with the initial big shape (yep, that hoary dictum again) its interiority is, step-by-step, reduced and refined to every-smaller shapes. Plastic painting—for chrissakes! Another term! Meaning painting with a sculptural sensibility—is an asymptotic process of refinement—painting general to specific with increasing veracity of form.



My painting process, and teaching, stresses the awareness and relationships of triangles for assembling the myriad interior facial forms. I find triangles much easier to accurately place than rectangles. There are only three triangles: equilateral, isosceles and right-angled. Placing and verifying (plumbing vertically and horizontally) the apogee and base-points of a triangle within an anatomical form provides significant dividends toward facial expression.



Sierpinski's triangles marries this painting process and fractal theory quite succinctly. Alas things are never quite so straight-forward. Fractal and chaos theory intertwine with sweaty, incestuous embraces.

The significant difference between illustrative, academic painting and plastic, sculptural painting is that the academic is linear. It travels from A to B like a budget airline from one dismal metropolis to another. Sure, it gets you there, but it is a cramped commute. Not a journey of wondrous exploration.

Let's review: We began with the selection of our canvas (the painting support whether it be canvas, linen, panel, whatever) which is then deconstructed with Euclidian (Dynamic Symmetry) geometry into an erector set of harmonious divisions of pictorial space (rabatements, reciprocals, diagonals and arcs).

The arabesque, the BIG shape, is struck. No need for a studied preparatory drawing that is subsequently colored in. That's the academic, illustrative approach. A lesser painting practice.

The initial half-tones are served up in the abstract with a sculptural sensibility. The 'drawing' and relational placements of the anatomical forms are checked and corrected with both stylus (a measuring stick) and plumb lines. Should major and disastrous errors be discovered it is prudent to scrape down the whole mess and begin anew.

And now ... the main event! The abstract structural surface.

In retrospect I wish I had prepared a proper panel with true calcite gesso and better apply my imprimaturi. I wish I had used lead white instead of titanium/zinc.

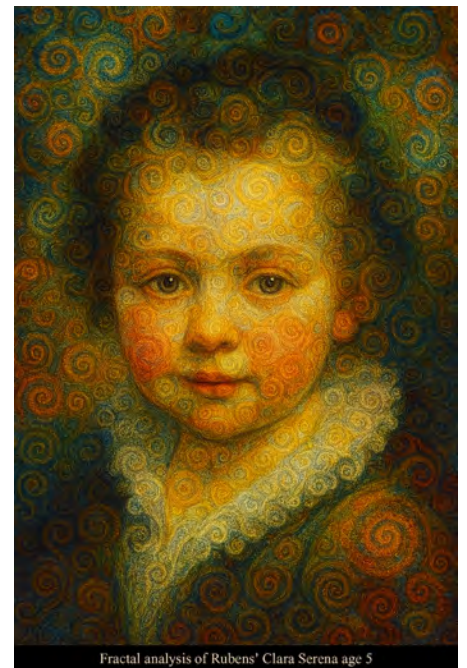
My original intent for Clara was a quick study. An exercise in fractal discovery that I would very likely assign to the trash bin the moment my daily hoagie arrived.

No sooner had I swilled my sixth coffee of the morning I was well down the rabbit hole.

The abstract structural surface is your diction. It is your brush play that carries forward your narrative. Thin and thick passages of paint. Warm and cool interplays of color and tone. Warm reds juxtaposed to cool greens. Each brush stroke rendered with a sympathetic concordance to the anatomical structure. Planar edges knitted with brush. Knife. Sometimes obscured and blurred with my fingers.

I queried OpenAI to analyze the fractal relationships within Rubens' *Clara Serena*. The result was a resounding disappointment. I think OpenAI had better keep its day job for a while longer.

There come a time, soon or late, when a painter who has acquired a rock-solid foundation of knowledge and practice must take a quantum leap of faith. I have little doubt that Rubens instinctively felt the fractalities of Titian and sought to understand them. Fractal was not coined until 1975 by Benoît Mandelbrot to describe complex geometric patterns in nature. Fractal is derived from the Latin *fractus*: broken or fractured.



Fractals can either be **recursive** (self-referential) or **iterative** (repetitive or looping).

In painting recursive fractals (the assemblage of concordant brush strokes) construct the facial forms. That is the bulk of the painting process particularly in the first pass of the pentimento.

Dynamic iterations reflect movement. They are oft codas of colored brush strokes that provide both velocity and tension.

It is through looking and copying master paintings that one gradually grasps the keys of fractal beauty. Rubens surely guided Velázquez through this rabbit warren of wondrous discovery.

For Once, Then, Something

by Robert Frost

Others taunt **me** with having knelt at **well-curbs**
Always wrong to the light, so never seeing
Deeper down in the well than where the **water**
Gives **me** back in a shining surface **picture**
Me myself in the summer heaven, godlike,
Looking out of a wreath of fern and cloud puffs.
Once, when trying with chin against a **well-curb**,
I discerned, as **I** thought, beyond the **picture**,
Through the picture, a **something** white, uncertain,
Something more of the depths—and then **I** lost it.
Water came to rebuke the too clear **water**.
One drop fell from a fern, and lo, a ripple
Shook whatever it was lay there at bottom,
Blurred it, blotted it out. What was that whiteness?
Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, **something**.

When faced with a difficult proposition such as fractal recursions and dynamic iterations in painting it is helpful to look to another art form for understanding.

Robert Frost's *For Once, Then, Something*, 1923, is a powerful, even strange, poem that delves deep. It's narrative is transparently about narcissism, a word borrowed from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

Instead of rhymes, there are echoes: **well-curbs** ... **water** ... **picture** ... well-curb ... picture ... water. Echoes are iterations.

Me ... **me** ... **Me** / **something** ... **Something** ... **something** : Recursions are the armature of the narrative. "Something"—vague, casual—is the crux of the narrative—an insistent echo sounding the beginning, middle and end, spiralling downward into the well.

In Ovid's poem, Echo is a nymph smitten with unrequited love for Narcissus.

Repetition / Resonance are the tools of both the poet and the painter.



Michael Britton, *Alice*, 2025,
20x30cm, Oil on Panel

Painting plastically, with a sculptural sensibility, utilizes the materiality of paint as diction. It contributes heavily to a painting's presence.

Paint is given meaning through both its layers, its scar tissue—remnants of myriad corrections and change of direction—and its abstract structural surface of fractal recursions and dynamic iterations.

It is a never-ending quest that gives one's life purpose and meaning.

Earlier in this polemic I talked about shape having its complement. Like color.

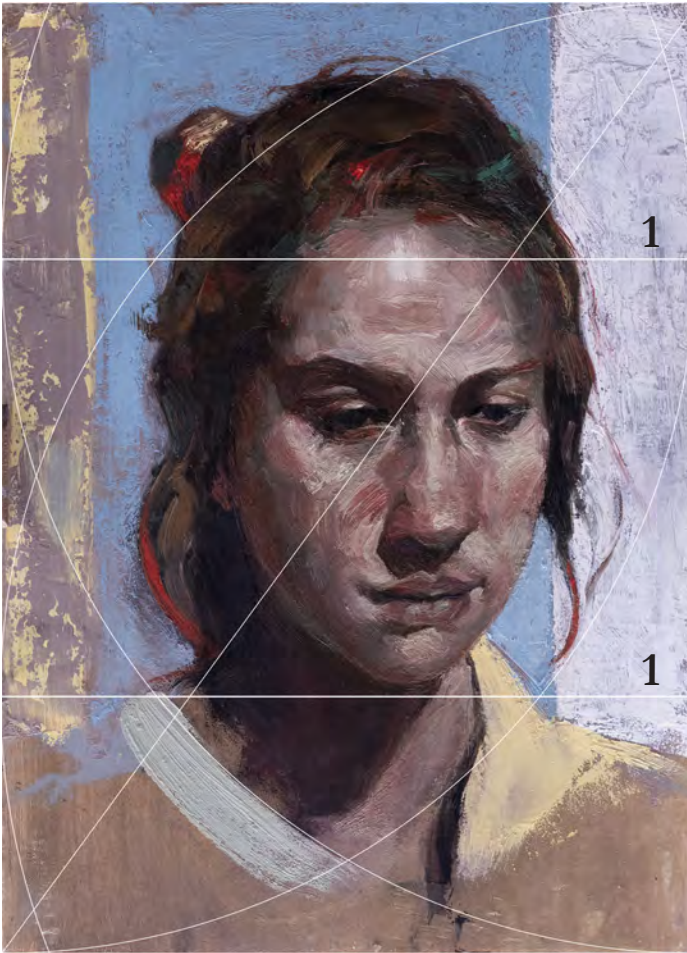
Like color, shape, too, possess emotional resonance.

With *Alice*, as with my *Clara Serena*, I sought out emotion with a high brutalist brush work. Painting is built upon both unity and contrast. Like a game of Jenga it is an exquisite balancing that creates narrative tension.

I take pains to subjugate my technical prowess. Technique often obscures the emotional narrative by announcing 'what a brilliant fella' or gal a painter is. Clever technique is a magician's trick. Once you know the trick it ain't so wonderful.

But painters are magicians. We create illusionistic spectacles from inert materials. Pigment and oil manipulated upon canvas.

There will always be an anguished ambiguity of technique and expression. We all want to be seen and liked. You need both technique and expression to convey your narrative.



I placed Alice's head slightly to the right. Common practice would be to place her head slightly to the left. The model's gaze carries weight. My intention is to exacerbate the anxiety in Alice's expression.

The geometric construct anchors Alice's head within the canvas. It is a simple construct of both rabatements, a primary diagonal and corresponding arcs.

I forget how I decided upon the left-side curve of red hair. It was a rationale decision, but I'm old now. I forget things.

The color scheme is the primary harmonic triad of red/blue/yellow. A playful, child-like harmony that I sought to twist inside out. Yeah, I'm that kinda guy.

Tragically, my tube of Cerulean Blue had dried out. It was beyond resurrection. I

seldom use it and was loathe to pony up \$140 when I can readily mix up a serviceable cerulean with Prussian blue and Naples Yellow and a few tweaks of tint, shade and tone.

A well-trained artist can smell color. The untrained, self-taught will thumb through their catalogue of tips and tricks. Forgive me that outburst. I'm old now. I get cranky.