



Drawing the Personal

Art journals and what they bring to the artist are like patches of rainbow that manifest into seminal works of art, leaving its colour behind in our souls

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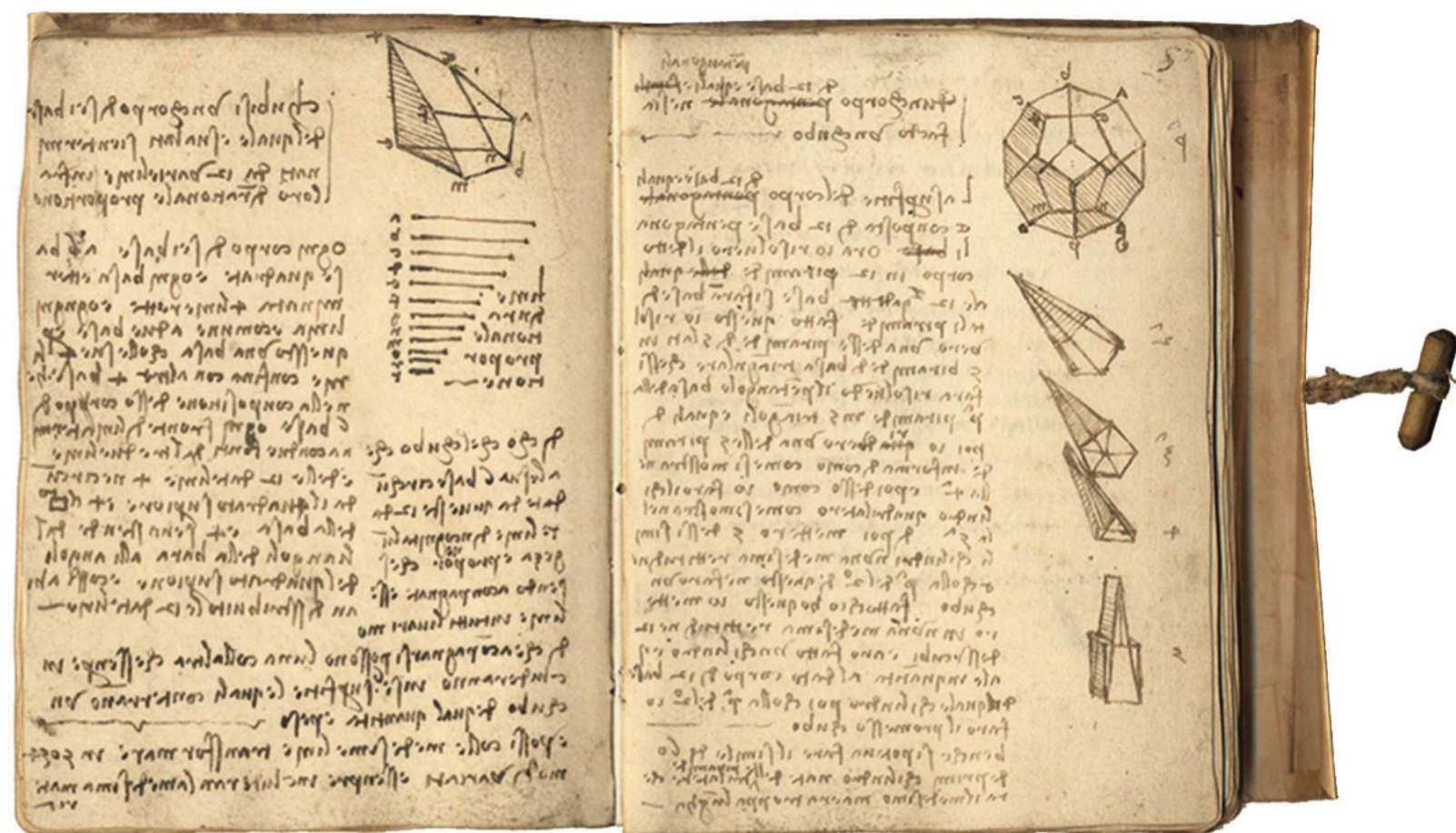
A blank page can often be intimidating. It asks of you something that you are not quite aware of yet, and the anticipation of this unknown to be unfurled onto an unblemished platform is enough to wake up the imposter syndrome. Why slurry something that is beautiful in its emptiness, in its invisible well of possibilities, with thoughts and ideas unworthy of this beauty?

This is where words come in handy. The ‘page’ is too daunting on its own, but when confined into another – a diary or journal or jot book or notebook, even Post-it – it loses itself into a more relaxed aura. The page is suddenly ‘a’ page, one of many, that helps transcend ideas into something more concrete, making the abstract more real, without the clutter of confusion or the need to winnow it down into something rich and potent. The page is now much more inviting, a potential playground of predictability leading to something unpredictable, hidden as it were in the mundane, in the everyday, taking shape as images in word or wordless splendour.

The Auguries of Age

At the age of 26, Leonardo da Vinci began the practice of maintaining a journal for all his ideas related to art, architecture, engineering, anatomy, philosophy, science, nature and anything that captured his vivid imagination. Written in his famous ‘mirror-writing’, the journal is an

amalgamation of his drawings and musings, a practice he continued till the age of 67. Out of the staggering 20,000 to 28,000 pages of notes and sketches, a little over 7,000 pages have survived, now in museums and private collections. In fact, Bill Gates bought a part of the collection for \$30 million. And while da Vinci’s sketches and words give us a glimpse of his fascinating mind, what truly remains is his need to use the journal – and not necessarily only his finished work, many of them that remained unfinished – as a record of a life well lived. He writes in his journal, ‘What is fair in men doesn’t last. Old age creeps up on you. Nothing’s more fleeting than the years of a man’s life, but there is time enough for those who know how to use it. What’s the point of passing the Earth unnoticed? A man who does not become famous is no more than wood smoke on the wind of foam upon the sea, but I intend to leave a memory of myself in the minds of others.’¹ It is interesting to see that for da Vinci, the journals weren’t just a means to an end, but an end in itself where the need to leave a legacy behind not only stripped the journal of its personal façade – research shows us that da Vinci seldom included anything from his private life, except for two entries when his father died² – but it elevated the supposed behind-the-scenes musings to a much higher level. It showed us that genius was often in the journey, not in the destination.



Leonardo da Vinci's notebook: Codex Foster II, Collection of National Art Library, Late 15th Century to Early 16th Century. Image Courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum.

The Heroine of Pain

In Mexico, artist Frida Kahlo carries this lovingly dramatic epithet and it is apt for someone who made her pain and suffering the subject of her art. Kahlo’s ‘theatre of the self’ has been irresistible through the ages. And so, when the facsimile of her diary that chronicles the last 10 years of her life was published 40 years after her death by Abrams, the frenzy surrounding it was understandable. Originally on display at the Frida Kahlo Museum in Coyoacán, Mexico, the diary, with 70 watercolour illustrations, was strangely devoid of the personal truths that Kahlo never shied away from. ‘There are few dates in it, and it has nothing to say about events in the external world—Communist Party meetings, appointments at the doctor’s or even trysts with Diego Rivera, the artist whom Kahlo loved so much that she married him twice. Instead it is full of paintings

and drawings that appear to be dredged from her fertile unconscious,’ wrote Kathryn Hughes in *The Telegraph*.³ And this is echoed by New York Times writer Deborah Solomon too: ‘There are neither startling disclosures, nor the sort of mundane, kitchen-sink detail that captivates by virtue of its ordinariness...the irony is that these personal sketches are surprisingly impersonal.’⁴ And yet, it gives us a window into her troubled landscape, the images stark and vivid; the words few and searing, and the complete opposite of what da Vinci set out to create with his journals. Here, Kahlo is not concerned so much with leaving a legacy, a record of her work as much as she is concerned with providing us the context in which she situates her work, the pulsating, shape-shifting contours of her mind. As art historian Sarah M. Lowe rightly points out, ‘In Kahlo’s paintings you see only the mask. In the diary you see her unmasked. She pulls you into her world. And it’s a mad universe.’⁵



Images from the Book *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait*, Photographed by Hagit Azoulay-Rozanes, Published by Abrams in 2005.

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The Song on the Street

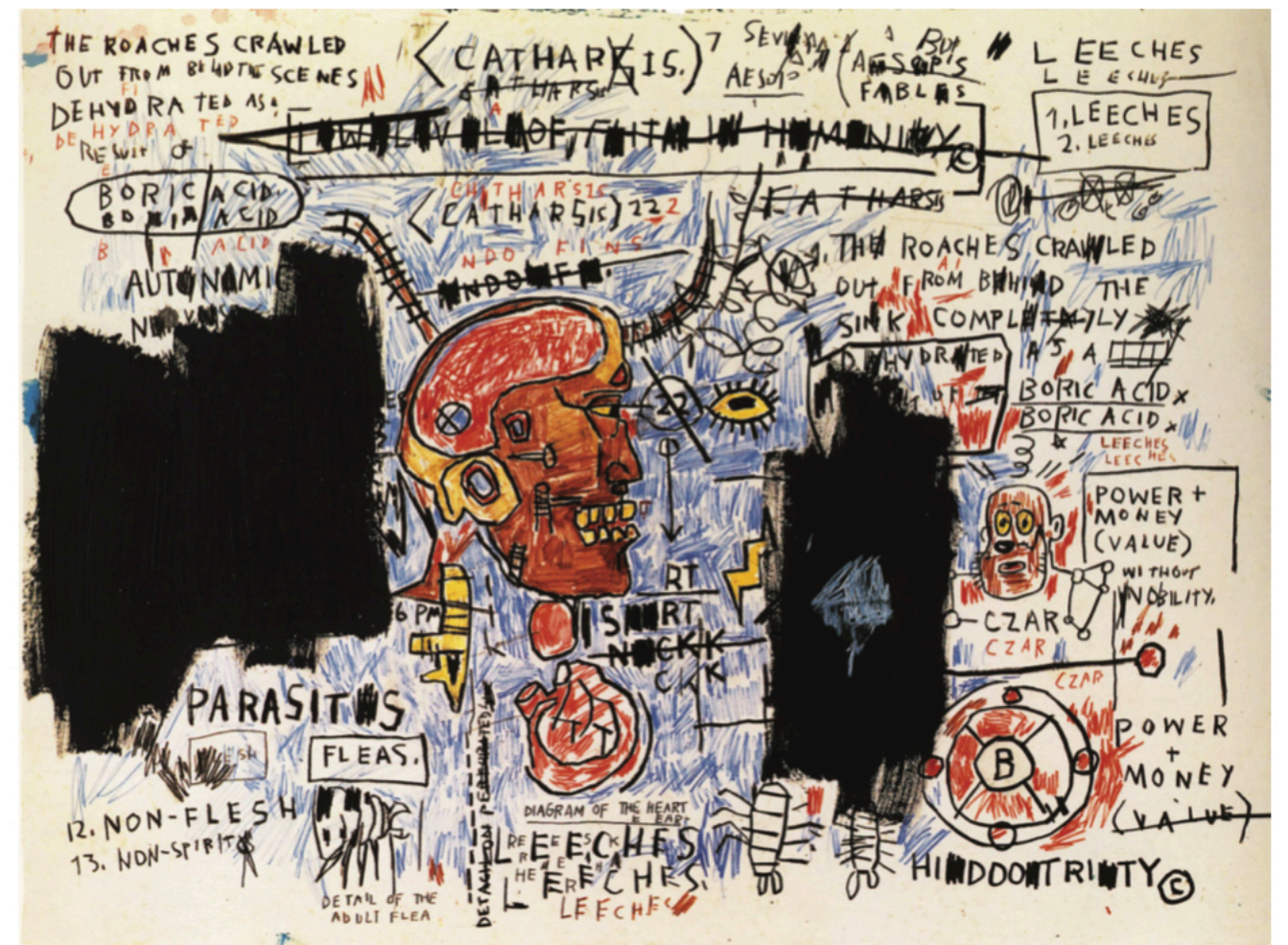
There's a song on the radio
Where they say wavy hair instead of black
Considerable cloudiness
So it was sung by some white girls
20 years later.⁶

In 2015, the exhibition 'Basquiat: The Unknown Notebooks' premiered at the Brooklyn Museum featuring 160 pages from Brooklyn-born graffiti artist Jean-Michel Basquiat's notebooks. And in her review for the *New York Times*, Roberta Smith begins with 'Language was Jean-Michel Basquiat's first artistic language'. 'The words he deftly spray-painted on the walls and buildings of downtown New York in the late 1970s and early '80s – signing them "SAMO©" – were unlike any other graffiti of the time. They had an arresting presence, a combination of graphic refinement, aural strangeness and compressed meaning that made you stop and ponder. Their themes, rhythms

and even their letters also formed the foundation for the paintings that would soon fix Basquiat prominently in the still understudied history of the medium in 1980s New York,⁷ she continues. Basquiat, who tragically died at the age of 27 due to a drug overdose, was a self-taught artist influenced by comics, advertising, children's sketches, Pop art, hip-hop, politics, and everyday life,⁸ and his notebooks, revealing his love for words and the visual aesthetic a set of letters can contain, have neither da Vinci's ambition or Kahlo's surreality, but a much more organic purpose. His notebooks were his thoughts come to life in words, in poetry, in rhythm, later finding their verve on walls or on canvas. This was poetry on the move, running across the page with an urgency born out of the time and space he occupied and the urgency of art itself. This was an artist making a statement – not of the future expanding outwards or of a past spiralling inwards but of the very tangible present – simultaneously unmaking the past and making the future.



The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat/ADAGP, Paris, via ARS, New York; Hiroko Masuike, via The New York Times



Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Leeches*, Acrylic, Charcoal, Crayon, Pastel, Pencil, 22.44" x 30.11", WikiArt



In the Here and the Now

What does the tradition of journaling bring to contemporary art? Does it contain the rigour of da Vinci, the wildness of Kahlo or the urgency of Basquiat? Especially in a very problematic year that went by? Artist Dhruvi Acharya, who famously produced one painting for every day of the lockdown, made the 'journaling' of our times itself a piece of art, not only helping her digest the uncertainties around but also alleviating that very same phenomenon for us, the viewer, through the certainty of her creations. Here was memory in

transit made concrete through fluid imagination. Or as graphic novelist George Mathen aka Appupen, who maintains three sketchbooks at a time, says, they are 'like nets that catch all the ideas running through my mind'⁹ – here was fluid imagination made concrete in memory. Or, if we circle back to where we began, we listen to artist Sameer Kulavoor, who says, 'Drawing and writing in a sketchbook is therapeutic. It gives me those moments when I can just focus on a page.'¹⁰ Because, ultimately, we always come back to the page.

- 1) <https://www.journalinghabit.com/observing-journals-leonardo-da-vinci/>
- 2) <https://owlcation.com/humanities/Interesting-Facts-about-Leonardo-Da-Vincis-Journals>
- 3), 4) <https://www.openculture.com/2019/05/frida-kahlos-wildly-illustrated-diary.html>
- 5) <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/1995/09/frida-kahlo-diego-rivera-art-diary>
- 6) <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/05/t-magazine/jean-michel-basquiat-notebooks.html>
- 7) <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/03/arts/design/review-jean-michel-basquiats-unknown-notebooks-at-the-brooklyn-museum.html?auth=linked-google>
- 8) https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/basquiat_notebooks
- 9), 10) <https://www.hindustantimes.com/fitness/indian-artists-offer-tips-on-how-to-start-sketchbooking-in-2020/story-8Uzw3r6UumEh7UWARO6LBJ.html>

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