



CREATING SELF-PORTRAITS

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WHAT IS A SELF-PORTRAIT?



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A self-portrait is a representation of an artist created by the artist themselves. Throughout the history of art, self-portraiture has been a way for artists to document their appearance, explore their identity, communicate ideas, or express emotions.

In photography, the concept remains the same. A photographic self-portrait is an image in which the photographer is also the subject. Instead of standing behind the camera, they step in front of it and become part of the story they are creating. The artist takes on both roles, creator and model, making decisions about the concept, composition, lighting, pose, and final presentation of the image. A self-portrait is much more than a photo of yourself. It's a way of expressing ideas, emotions, or stories using your own body as the subject.

People often use the terms self-portrait and selfie interchangeably, but they're not quite the same. A selfie is usually just a quick photo taken by a person, often with a smartphone, to capture a moment, an experience, or their appearance. Its primary purpose is usually communication or personal documentation, and it is often shared quickly on social media.

A photographic self-portrait, on the other hand, is generally created with artistic intention. Unlike a selfie, every aspect of the image, from the concept and lighting to the composition and editing, is deliberately planned by the photographer. The photographer is also the subject, but the focus extends beyond simply capturing what they look like. A self-portrait is a thoughtfully created photograph where you're using yourself as the subject to express an idea, evoke an emotion, tell a story, or create a piece of art. What ultimately distinguishes a photographic self-portrait is not the camera being used or the method of taking the picture, but the intention behind creating it.

A selfie documents a person. A self-portrait expresses a person.

MISCONCEPTIONS:

- **Every self-portrait has to be deeply meaningful or conceptual.** While many artists use self-portraiture to explore identity, emotions, or life experiences, that's only one approach. A self-portrait can simply be an intentionally crafted image of yourself. It doesn't have to tell a profound story, although many photographers choose to use the medium that way. A self-portrait can be conceptual, symbolic, documentary, experimental, humorous, or simply an opportunity to practice a new technique. It can be a carefully constructed fantasy scene or a quiet portrait taken in your living room. There is no rule that says it has to tell a complex story. Sometimes the goal is simply to create a beautiful image, experiment with light, test a new idea, or challenge yourself creatively.

- **Self-portraiture is mostly for women or that you need to be conventionally attractive to do it.** Neither is true. Throughout art history, artists of all genders have created self-portraits. Some wanted to study themselves, some wanted to experiment with new techniques, document their lives, or simply because they were the most accessible subject. I think this idea comes from cultural stereotypes about who “likes” taking photos of themselves, combined with how much emphasis we see today on appearance, especially on social media, where everything is curated and perfect. But self-portraiture isn't about looking good. You're not creating images to be judged on attractiveness. You're using yourself as a creative tool as a character, a subject, or a way to tell a story. Self-portraits can be beautiful, strange, emotional, abstract, or even unsettling. What matters is what they communicate, not how perfect you look. If you've ever thought, "I'm not attractive enough to create self-portraits," I'd encourage you to let go of that idea. You don't need to look like a model. And if you feel self-conscious, remember: a self-portrait doesn't even have to show your face. It can be your silhouette, your hands, or a reflection. What makes it a self-portrait is simply that you intentionally placed yourself in the frame. So, your appearance isn't what makes a self-portrait interesting. Your ideas are. You just need curiosity and the passion to create.

- **Creating a self-portrait requires expensive equipment.** It doesn't. Self-portraiture is defined by the relationship between the artist and the subject, not by the camera being used. Whether you use a professional camera, a smartphone, a film camera, or even an instant camera, you're creating a self-portrait as long as you are intentionally making an image of yourself. Likewise, you don't need an elaborate studio, expensive lighting, or a collection of props. Some of the most compelling self-portraits rely on little more than natural light, a simple background, and thoughtful composition. While high-end equipment and complex sets can expand your creative possibilities, they are tools not requirements. What matters most is your vision and your willingness to step in front of the camera and create.



This image didn't require a studio, or even a seamless backdrop, or any professional lighting. I simply used the gray wall in my bedroom as the background, darkened it slightly during editing, and photographed the image using natural light coming through the window.



This portrait was just as simple. I skipped the backdrop again and used a few inexpensive LED lights attached to a light stand to create the effect. That's it.



This image was a little more elaborate, but it still didn't require renting a studio or tons of equipment. I photographed it in my apartment using a seamless paper backdrop, a single light with a softbox, and a few affordable props that are easy to find online.

I share these examples because I don't want you to think that creating self-portraits requires a dedicated studio or thousands of dollars' worth of



WHY DO ARTISTS MAKE SELF-PORTRAITS?

- Self-Reflection
& Exploration
- Establishing Identity
- Accessibility
- Control



WHY DO ARTISTS MAKE SELF-PORTRAITS?

- **Self-Reflection & Exploration.** For many, self-portraiture is a form of self-reflection. It becomes a way to explore questions of identity, document the passage of time, express emotions, or process personal experiences. Rather than simply showing what they look like, artists use self-portraits to communicate how they see themselves or how they feel.
- **Establishing Identity.** Self-portraiture allows artists to shape how they are seen. Throughout history, artists have used self-portraits to establish their identity, present themselves to the world, challenge stereotypes, question social expectations, or make statements about gender, culture, and society. Instead of letting others define them, they create their own representation.
- **Accessibility.** For some people, it's simply the most practical choice. A photographer always has one model readily available, themselves. Not everyone has access to professional models, and hiring them can be expensive. Some photographers are introverted and feel more comfortable working alone. Personally, I often create self-portraits while traveling. Instead of trying to coordinate with a local model in an unfamiliar place, it's much easier to step in front of the camera myself and focus on bringing my creative vision to life.
- **Control.** Finally, self-portraiture also gives artists complete creative control. Because they are both the photographer and the subject, they don't have to explain their ideas to someone else or compromise on poses, expressions, or timing. They can experiment freely, work at their own pace, and keep refining an image until it matches their vision.



BENEFITS

- Practice anytime
- Experiment freely
- Develop posing skills & Become a better director
- Build problem-solving skills
- Discover your artistic voice
- Gain confidence in front of the camera
- Create without limitations

BENEFITS

- **Practice anytime** – Your model is always available, so you can create whenever inspiration strikes without coordinating schedules.
- **Experiment freely** – Try new lighting, compositions, editing techniques, or concepts without worrying about wasting someone else's time or patience. If something doesn't work, you can simply adjust it and try again.
- **Develop posing skills & Become a better director** – By posing yourself, you learn what feels natural, what looks good on camera, and how subtle body language changes an image. Having been in front of the camera yourself, you'll give clearer directions and better understand what your subjects are experiencing.
- **Build problem-solving skills** – Self-portraiture requires you to think like both the photographer and the model, constantly finding creative solutions to technical and artistic challenges.
- **Discover your artistic voice** – Without the influence of a model's personality or interpretation, your ideas become the primary focus, helping you develop a more recognizable visual style.
- **Gain confidence in front of the camera** – The more you photograph yourself, the more comfortable you become being photographed, which is valuable even if you later work with other photographers.
- **Create without limitations** – You aren't dependent on someone else's availability, budget, location, or willingness to participate. If you have an idea, you can bring it to life on your own.

CHALLENGES

- You're doing multiple jobs at once
- Constant switching between roles
- Technical juggling
- It can be physically and mentally exhausting



CHALLENGES

- **You're doing multiple jobs at once** – You're the photographer, the model, the art director, and often the set designer. That means thinking about lighting, composition, camera settings, posing, and storytelling all at the same time. Beyond the camera work, I also often build the concept physically: create or source props, plan the scene, carry everything to location, and set it all up myself.
- **Constant switching between roles** – One moment you're adjusting light and framing like a photographer, the next you're stepping into the frame and worrying about how you look, how your hair sits, whether your makeup works, or whether you even like how you look. Switching between “artist” and “subject” requires a different mindset, and it can interrupt creative flow.
- **Technical juggling** - You're constantly moving between being the photographer and the subject, which slows down the entire process and can be time-consuming. You have to manage camera settings, focus, lighting, and composition while also being inside the frame. There's no assistant or model to help troubleshoot in real time, so you're responsible for everything working on your own. So it's very easy to make mistakes and overlook some details.
- **It can be physically and mentally exhausting** – Running back and forth between the camera and the set, repeating takes, fixing details, and troubleshooting everything alone takes time and energy.



HOW TO CREATE A SELF-PORTRAIT

- Start simple
- Use what you already have around you
- Use the world around you
- Keep your first ideas very minimal
- Make your workflow easy
- Take your time and shoot a lot



Start simple. You don't need complex setups. A window with natural light, a plain wall, or even a corner of your room is more than enough to create strong self-portraits. Focus on understanding how light falls on your face before adding anything complicated.

I photographed this image at home in my apartment. I simply used the gray wall in my bedroom as the background, darkened it slightly during editing, and photographed the image using natural light coming through the window. That's it. I created a moon-shaped earring out of foil and used inexpensive small LED light to light it up.



Use what you already have around you. Everyday objects can become powerful storytelling tools: chairs, mirrors, fabric, lamps, or even just shadows on the wall. You don't need to buy props to start creating interesting images.

I created this self-portrait during a brief stop in Copenhagen on our way to the Faroe Islands in 2018. When I came across the colorful waterfront houses, I knew I wanted to create something there. The concept was simple: to become part of the architecture itself. That's why I built a miniature rooftop to wear as a hat. The roof was made entirely from shipping-box cardboard, cut into dozens of tiny pieces, glued together by hand, and painted red.



Use the world around you. Your environment can become your set. Outdoor locations, streets, forests, empty buildings, or even everyday urban spaces can serve as your background and part of the concept itself. You don't need to build elaborate sets—often the location already tells half the story for you, for free. Instead of treating the background as something secondary, let it become part of the idea.

All of these self-portraits were photographed during my travels. In some cases, I packed a few small props, but for some of them, I didn't need much at all because the environment did most of the storytelling. Instead of treating the location as just a background, I made it part of the concept. The landscape became the set, and I simply stepped into it as another element of the scene. I love working this way because every place has its own personality, and often the location itself inspires the entire idea.



Keep your first ideas very minimal. Instead of trying to build a full concept, start with one clear idea: a simple pose, a mood, or a single emotion. This makes it much easier to focus on execution rather than being overwhelmed.

These two self-portraits were created while I was traveling through Iceland. I didn't arrive with a detailed concept, elaborate props, or a costume. I simply packed a beige bodysuit, explored the landscape, and let the environment inspire the final image. The black sand beach scene inspired me to become a mermaid washed ashore, while the moss-covered lava fields inspired me to become nature myself, transforming hair into a river. Sometimes the best approach isn't to force a complicated concept, but to let the location guide your imagination.



Make your workflow easy. Use a tripod, a stack of books, or any stable surface. Use a remote control or connect your camera to your phone through an app so you can move between the camera and your position without stress. The easier your setup is, the more you can focus on creativity.

Take your time and shoot a lot. You'll rarely get the shot in the first few frames, so give yourself permission to experiment, adjust, and repeat without pressure. Pay attention to how small changes in posture, angle, or expression affect the final image.

HOW TO REMOTELY CONTROL YOUR CAMERA

- Timer + burst mode
- Remote shutter (wired or wireless)
- Camera app on your phone
- Ask someone to help



HOW TO REMOTELY CONTROL YOUR CAMERA

- **Timer + burst mode** – This is the most basic option. You set a 2, 5, or 10-second timer, press the shutter, and quickly get into position. If your camera has burst or continuous shooting, use it so you get multiple frames instead of just one moment.
- **Remote shutter (wired or wireless)** – A small remote lets you trigger the camera whenever you want. This gives you much more flexibility because you can time your expression and movement instead of rushing. I actually used this method for a long time with my older camera before switching to a newer model.
- **Camera app on your phone** – Many modern cameras connect to a phone app, letting you see a live preview and control the shutter remotely. This is especially helpful for checking composition and focus before you commit to a shot. This is the method I personally use now. I usually work with a tripod and connect my camera to an app on my phone. I love it because I can not only release the shutter, but also adjust settings and see a live preview of the image before I take it. It makes the whole process much more intuitive and flexible.
- **Ask someone to help** – If you have a friend around, they can simply press the shutter for you. It's the least technical option and can make the process feel more collaborative and relaxed. When I travel, I often don't even use a tripod. I ask my husband to help me instead. What I usually do is take a test shot first, he acts as my subject so I can check composition, angle, and settings. Then I hand him the camera and ask him to replicate the same framing with me in the shot. It's a simple workflow, but it works incredibly well.