On finding freedom within structure



Artist Alberto Aguilar discusses not making a syllabus, the importance of shared moments, and manifesting your own miracles.

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As told to Caitlin McCann, 2766 words.

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Are you able to tap into your inner child in a conscious, intentional way or do you feel like it comes naturally?

Both. For instance, I teach a class called Infinite Pocket Studio. The idea is that you don't need materials. You have an infinite source of inspiration and ideas to draw from. It's all at hand if you open up to the idea that it's there.

I knew at the beginning of the class that some amazing things were going to happen, but it's weird because in a way, I had to let go of the conventions of what happens in a class. The first thing I had to get rid of was the syllabus. Sometimes I'll make a syllabus and just plug everything in and do it for the requirement. But for this class… First of all, I didn't want to make it. Second of all, I knew that making it would create restraints that I didn't want for the class. So that was a conscious effort to destroy a certain structure that would inhibit this sense of play.

It's funny how in order to destroy one thing, you have to destroy the other. It makes you wonder, "What is art? What defines art? How is art supposed to look?" Your work is constantly prompting these questions and then blurring the lines between them.

It's funny because I'm turning in an application right now for something. They want to see [material] stuff. Sometimes it's hard for me to find things that feel like artworks. Of course, there's always a little doubt that seeps in like, "Wait, what have you done these past years? You have nothing concrete to show for it." I have to accept that that's what it is. I make this immaterial work and sometimes it produces something material.

This need, this feeling, that we need to produce something material is similar to this need for a syllabus. Sometimes the students will go crazy if you don't follow the syllabus or if you haven't clearly marked what's going to happen on the syllabus. They think they need that in order to navigate the world. For me, getting rid of that is an act of liberation. If they learn to navigate art or class or life without [a syllabus], then they're really learning something. They're learning that we can create those structures within our lives rather than following it on a piece of paper.

And within themselves.

Finding it within themselves and on their own terms because that's the other thing I'm talking about--destroying structure. But I use structure and systems all the time within my own work. I'm always using a self-imposed structure.

It's like finding freedom *within* structure. It's like scaffolding, there's still enough space to build whatever you want around it. I think structure and limitations can be inspiring. I started doing this series of 222 word essays, and at first I was like, "I don't know how I'm going to do this," because I like to just dump everything onto a page but really the best part is when I'm working between 219 and 225 words, and I'm like, "What's got to go? How can I say this better?" That's when the most creative stuff starts to reveal itself.

I love that editing process because you think you have it. You think that the thing is speaking very clearly and if you get rid of anything, it's going to fall apart. But then you start to get rid of the stuff that's unnecessary and it actually communicates more clearly. That's the same thing with this recording. What won't be necessary in this conversation? What's the setting up of an idea versus the realized idea?

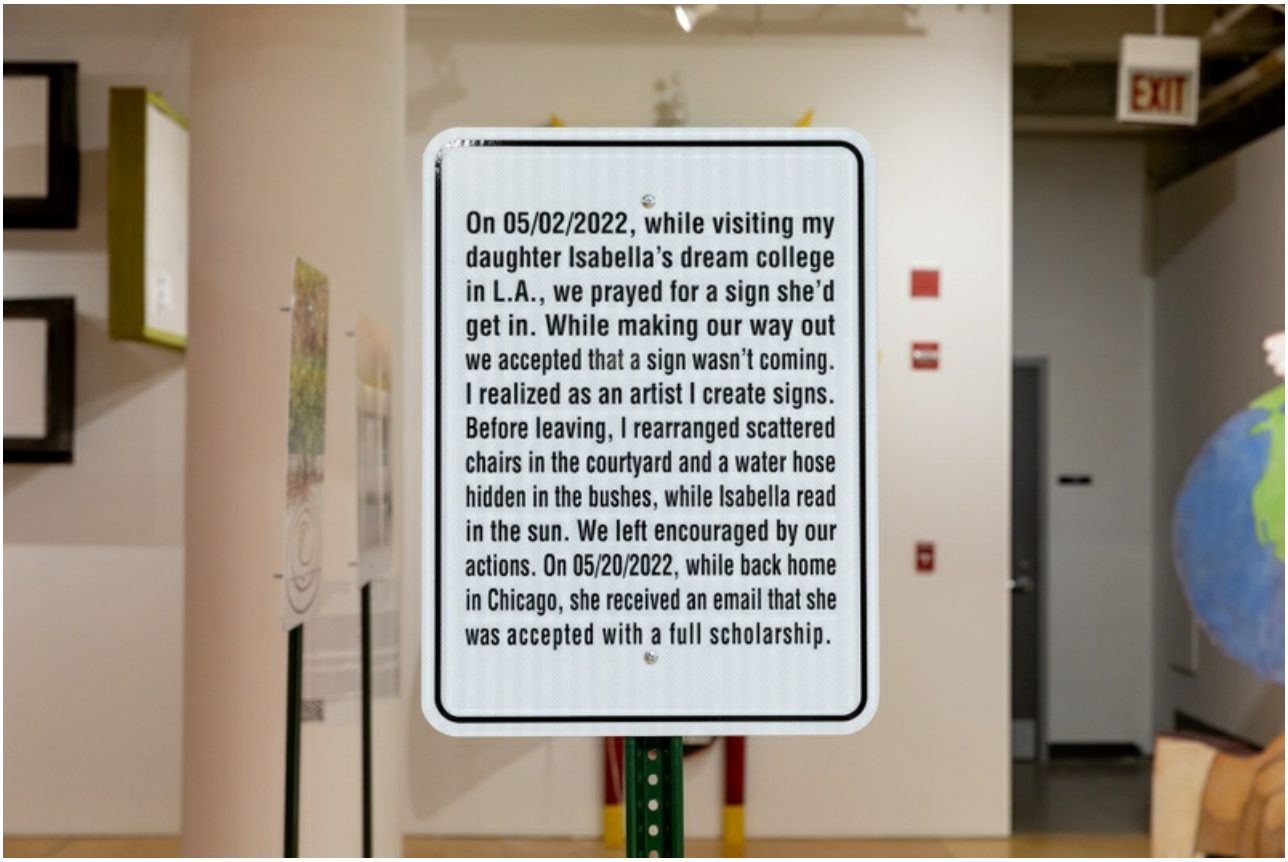
Do you go into projects with ideas or do you go into it thinking the work will reveal the idea to you?

It always reveals something. That's the most exciting part about it. If you go in knowing exactly what you're going to make, there's no fun in that. I'm very much into, "How is the making of this thing going to change me? And what's the surprise going to be?"

Currently, I'm in this show called *Contemporary Ex-Votos*. Ex-votos are these things that started in colonial times in Mexico. They would make paintings on tin to give thanks to a specific saint or to god for hearing a prayer and making a miracle happen. Then they would nail up these paintings in the church, which have the miracle story and words of thanks written on them.



La Manifestación del Milagro de Isabella María Aguilar (In three Parts) , from *Contemporary Ex-Votos*



La Manifestación del Milagro de Isabella María Aguilar (Part one) , from *Contemporary Ex-Votos*

This is the show with the signs, right?

Yes. So they made me give them a proposal of what I would do for this show, and one of the ideas was of these photos that I shot at Occidental College where my daughter currently goes. The story is, she applied to transfer to Occidental [from Pepperdine] but she wasn't accepted. It was midway through the semester, so she reapplied for the new academic year. When I went to pick her up from Pepperdine to come back to Chicago, we went to visit Occidental's campus, and she asked me if I could pray that she got into the school. So I prayed she'd get in and that god would give us a sign before we left.

We were walking around the campus and I just knew that there wasn't going to be a sign. But I saw these chairs that were scattered in the courtyard, and I was like, "Wait a second. I make signs." I organize things as a way of creating a language that speaks to people and then I photograph them. I was like, "Why am I waiting around for a sign when I could just make a sign?" So I arranged these chairs, and I did this thing where I leaned them against each other. Then I found this hose in the bushes and I pulled it out and formed it into a spiral. Both of these became photographs, and my daughter was reading in the sun while I was doing this. You know how when you take action, there's a warmth you feel, like your creative energy is flowing?

Totally.

So I felt really good after I created those signs and photographed them and later I posted them on social media. But I never did anything else with them.

When we got home, we found out she got accepted with a full scholarship. So when I thought about [the photos] for the show, I thought about them in terms of language, of retelling this miracle story, but also having these images represent this moment with a little bit of humor that I manifested the moment.

You created your own moment. It’s like creating your own fate.

And there’s some truth to it, even if it’s just going from feeling discouraged and sad to feeling warm and having a creative flow. You could sit around and do nothing, or you can do something and make yourself feel better, clearer.

[The gallery] ended up wanting the photos as the work, but I didn’t know how I was going to present them. Was I going to print them and hang them on the walls? Was I going to write text underneath the photos?

One day, when I was walking the dog, I was looking at the street signs. They’re metal, so it made sense in relation to the ex-votos. It also made sense in relation to the story, this idea of sign making. So I asked the sign painter [I work with] if they use this material, and they said yes. They actually get the metal and the posts from the City of Chicago. So I had the photos and the story printed as metal signs.



Common Ground, 2023, a performance / graduate advising session where Pablo Lazala Ruiz and I dug holes that custom fit our bodies at Compound Yellow (Chicago)

I love that what it eventually came down to was presenting the piece as literal signs.

Yeah. Then the gallery asked me to build the stands to hold up the signs. I made this drawing of a stand using two by fours that the metal post would connect to. I sent it to [my daughter] Madeleine because she's a builder. I said, "Will this work?" She said, "Yes, it'll work. You just need to get some sandbags to hold it down." And I was like, "Do I really need sandbags?" But the more I thought about it, the more I thought the sandbags would make it even more interesting, because then you bring another material in. So I actually went around the city and took abandoned sandbags.

The materials revealed themselves to you as you needed them. The sandbags are also a nice touch because you can contextualize the signs out into the world, not just limit them to existing in the gallery.

It makes them more like pedestrian objects, right? That's what I thought too. I'm very interested in developing an idea through consulting other people. It's not just me that comes up with these ideas. It's a collective approach to get to an idea.



Finished Painting, 2006

Yeah, these works aren't made in isolation. Something I love about your work is how much synchronicity there is between your practice, teaching, and home life and the way they all inform each other.

For me, teaching is the answer. You know how you were talking about how with the jobs you have you have to separate yourself from them to go into your creative self? With teaching, I don't have to do that. It's also the way that I teach that allows it to happen. I don't teach as an authority figure. I don't do the same thing semester to semester. It's like making an artwork. I have no idea what's going to happen during the semester but it's going to be explosive. It runs in tandem with my studio practice rather than opposed to it. It doesn't take

me out of the studio, but is actually a part of it.

Has it always been like this?

No, it wasn't always like that. I think it was slowly revealed to me. It started as guilt for not being in the studio. Early on I had to try to find a full-time job and I couldn't spend as much time in the studio. After I finally got my first full-time job, I bought a house, and it was the convenience of it that made me want to document the chores that I was doing in the house as artwork.

I showed this video in class once about Mierle Ukeles Laderman. She was talking about having a child. She was changing the child's diaper and she was removed from her creative practice but she realized that this could be the work. It's like the thing that Duchamp did, taking something and saying it could be artwork. But I think she took it even further in saying, "I have to be a mother and I have to do this dirty work and I can complain about it or I could just say, 'This is the artwork.'" I took on that role myself and started documenting cutting the grass, painting the garage door, [doing] all these things as artwork. It was liberating. Still, in doing that, I didn't feel like I reached the point [I'm at now]. I was still tied to certain things that held me back from fully seeing or understanding this vision.



04.09.2020 (Quarantine Regimen), *2020, Aligned oranges

Yeah, you don't just tear down the structure of everything you knew all at once. You do it in intervals. That's something I've been thinking about for the last couple months. Instead of being like, "I have to set this amount of time each day to make art," I've wondered, what if I just lived my life and let certain creative things seep

through the cracks of whatever I do on a daily basis? What are the things that are already there?

You're definitely describing an approach that I also like making available to people. You're already doing all these things that could inform and be incorporated into your creative practice, yet you want to separate them. In certain cases, it can create conflict. It depends on if that's the thing you want.

I also think about the word "generative" a lot. To create a practice that's generative, to do things that will generate more things, not objects, but more ideas and more conversations. I've been teaching for a long time, that's the other thing. There's a connection that I have with a lot of my students that never breaks. It's amazing, actually. Sometimes former students will invite me to do something and I try never to say no.

There's a fearlessness to that too, being so open-minded to possibility and the unknown.

I think everyone has access to it. Maybe it's harder for some people. I think it's something that could be put into practice.

Using curiosity as a compass.

Yeah. But also being fearless and taking risks is something that you could practice and get better at. If we believe that in taking that risk, it will generate something new and take you to new places versus thinking that the risk will make you lose money or break your leg.

It's funny you're talking about generating things and generating things within those things that are generated because this circles back to your artist statement where you say, "My work about the sharing of a moment in time." I think some of what we're talking about here is the element of giving up control. Sometimes people get really wrapped up with the idea of controlling how people are going to view their work but that doesn't seem to bother you.

One way that I overcome that, because I do think about saying the wrong thing or offending people, is by being factual. I use this method of being factual and letting the facts be poetic to let people formulate their own thoughts towards something versus me telling people how things should be interpreted.

That leaves a lot of room for the viewer to have their own experience with it.

For sure. And that's the thing that you're pointing out in my statement of having a shared moment versus giving people my moment. It was funny when I was realizing that on the walk, that I'm walking but you're reading me talk about my walk. So in a sense, you're having your own journey by reading it. Turning it back on the viewer is a way to have a shared moment.

Alberto Aguilar Recommends

Places across the U.S. where I've had amazing encounters and transformative experiences:

Arcosanti is an experimental desert town in Arizona near Phoenix designed by Paolo Soleri. One morning I woke up there and saw that most amazing sunrise that looked like a holy language in the sky.

Galloping Ghost is an arcade in Brookfield, an obscure suburb of Chicago, where you can play every video game that ever existed unlimited for a single price. It's like endurance art if you stay there from open until close.

Every time I'm in Houston I visit **the Rothko Chapel**. The last time I went, I was jogging with my daughter and son and we went into the chapel midway through our run. I was in a different state of mind which allowed me to experience it anew.

Traveling on Amtrak. If you ever get your hands on a cheap sleeper car, take it. All food is included and sometimes they pair you with strangers in the dining car. I like hanging out in the observation car and going back to my room once I'm ready to be alone. I've used my time on the train as a self-imposed artist residency.

I’ve taken up **Racquetball at the local YMCA**. It’s a fast exchange with someone, like improvisation.

Name

Alberto Aguilar

Vocation

visual artist

Madeleine Aguilar