

# On realizing a hidden dream



Artist and concept store curator Cecilia "CC" Doan discusses relying on her community, navigating the logistics of running a small business, and the Kyoto coffee shop that was her original inspiration.

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As told to Angelica Olstad, 1791 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Curation](#), [Beginnings](#), [Money](#), [Day jobs](#), [Family](#), [Collaboration](#), [Process](#), [Identity](#).

**You used to work as a brand marketer and creative strategist, and now run a store, Two Two, that champions emerging designers and artists. Two Two has received a lot of buzz for being an artist-first community and for curating a robust calendar of community programming. How did you go about creating a path outside the established model for a retail space? How did the idea form?**

I knew I wanted to have a store since high school. It took years, through exposure to different things—travel and cultural experiences—for it all to come together and actually be a store that made sense for me... It was always a hidden dream. Having immigrant parents, they want you to reach the upper echelons of whatever it is that you are pursuing—especially science and math. I kept it close to my heart and did small iterations of it throughout my life: I worked in retail, small shops, and boutiques, gathering snippets of what I liked. I loved thrifting, making my own clothes, and the DIY/punk mentality.

I worked in creative agencies for a decade. The agency environment still had a rebellious spirit because you needed to come up with unconventional creative ideas on a dime. You're pitching, selling ideas, studying emerging trends, and collaborating with creative people to bring visions to life. It almost felt like I went through business school or creative management school, covering marketing, creativity, PR, production, and even the legal aspects of media distribution. I was able to utilize those skills for Two Two, working with emerging designers and artists. Doing brand marketing and creative strategy allowed me to create Two Two seamlessly. All those skills turned on, and I was finally able to use them in a way that felt meaningful to me.

Right before I moved to the Bay, I went to this coffee shop in Kyoto. I just stumbled upon it. It was almost as if it was ripped out of a dream of mine and placed in front of me. It was a coffee shop but it sold little trinkets and goods from these local artisans. It was tiny, the size of my kitchen. I remember sitting down with my journal and writing, "One day I'm going to have a shop that feels like this." I think setting that intention made it feel more real, like I *have* to do this. I just didn't think that it was going to happen during the pandemic. I thought it would be under different circumstances.

**Was it the pandemic that served as an incubator period for you? Is that the time you spent crafting a business plan and concept for the store?**

During the pandemic and around the time we were coming out of being at home, there was this sense of, "What does community mean? How do we gather? What does it mean to be out in the world again? What is my identity and what am I putting forth now?" We couldn't act like things were back to normal again. That also created this pressure point where [I thought], "If I'm going to make something, it needs to feel like people can gather and reconnect with each other." That was helpful.

**What was the process of building out Two Two? Do you have any advice for other artists and creatives looking to build a business without relying on funding? How did you find integrity and authenticity in building the brand?**

Like any project from the agency world, you start with mapping out a brand foundation. That includes a bit of market research and understanding the climate and trends. Then you build out your brand deck. I knew that everything needed to ladder up to this vision and mission of the brand. I built in this sense of a DIY spirit, because from a resource standpoint, I wasn't going to be able to build a brand that was sleek, polished, all minimal and high-end, as that would require a type of precision I would need to outsource. I built into the brand the sensibility that we would be able to do it ourselves. I called up different collaborators. A design studio helped me typeset the logo, and another friend designed the entire brand system with a student of hers. It was really fun to workshop and create this foundation with my friends and creative collaborators, who were able to put their own spirit into it.

Then there was the aspect of building out the actual space, which was built around this tagline I have: "Where Artists Play." It wasn't quite just design for design's sake but about the mastery or the experimentation of making something. I wanted it to be a place where people could riff and experiment and get feedback from other people. That aspect was used to reach out to our initial designers and artists because we didn't have a physical extension yet. Luckily my background really came in handy, because I don't think a lot of people would be able to come up with something like that without having to hire their own design firm. It was the first time I did something for myself and not necessarily another client. It felt pure.

I started out operating online for a few months, and I was telling everyone, "We're going to have a physical space. We're going to have a physical space," without knowing when that would be. And then I came across a listing that was hidden under another listing on Redfin, which was 900 square feet, and thought, "This needs to be the space." I did this pop-up and a new customer had come in. When I learned that he was an architecture student, I thought, "Maybe I should hit this person up," even though I'd never met them before. [I asked] him and his business partner, Katia... It was their first project right after graduating, so they said yes. I let them run with it and build ways in which we could engage and interact [as a] gallery, shop, and community space.

**How do you curate your artists and community offerings?**

It's like a visualization of a map of the Two Two universe. I have to see how everyone plays together within a physical space—how we can create harmony with all of the designers, and how they can elevate each other. There's also observing who our clients are over time. I don't know if it's because I'm a Vietnamese American, Asian American person, but we do have quite a lot of Asian clientele. And it's not like I ever put myself at the forefront of the brand, either. I don't know how it happened, but it just did. I think people identify if they see themselves reflected. We're in Oakland, where there's a strong [mission of] supporting and uplifting diversity and respecting the culture and the history. Oakland is a very creative town, and there's a bit more of an underground feel and a revolutionary mindset, which differs from being in San Francisco proper. I would be dealing with different variables if I was in the city.

What's interesting is I didn't really feel like I had community until I opened up the shop. I lived in San Francisco, I lived in the Peninsula, in the South Bay, then I moved to Oakland during the pandemic. I literally gave myself a deadline of when I was going to leave because I did not feel super inspired or connected to what my life was like out here. I felt very isolated, and it wasn't until I opened up the shop that I felt everything converge. People saw me for me, and then it went from there.

**How do you balance your creative practice with running a business? How do you avoid burnout?**

The reality of running a small business is that you learn about the government and these entities that are meant to regulate all of that. They're not really watching out for small businesses. All the time, I think about how my parents had small businesses, [and so did] my neighbors and every Viet person in the community. I speak fluent English; I was raised here. And I'm still navigating the legal system and taxes and operational work as if it's a foreign language to me. It raises the question, "How can you be an intersectional minority trying to make a living in America within a system without protection?" You could do everything and somehow things can fall

through the cracks. I still have to make sure that I'm abiding by laws and I'm paying taxes and vendors on time.

Burnout for me is tied to that. After a full day of creativity and community building, I go home and deal with logistics. It brings up the question, "How do you run a business with integrity and with a moral compass? How do you make it not just about making as much money as possible, but giving opportunity to those in community with you?" Two Two is fashion-forward; as part of that, I constantly think about consumerism and sustainability. There isn't a shortage of creatives working in textiles and fashion, so I hope we can continue to innovate while being better to the world.

I definitely feel like my personal life—in terms of my health or my wellness—falls to the wayside, because I'm either so gung ho about an idea that I want to see it through, or I'm making sure that everyone else is taken care of but me. We've been open for two years, so I'm hoping that as time goes by, those things start to shift and change a little bit and I can focus more on my own mental and physical state. But sometimes it's good being a little crazy. It's the conviction that carries me through. I work from that place of, "If you build it, they will come."

**Cecilia "CC" Doan recommends:**

Traveler's Notebook journal

"Goals of Life" by V. Vale

New Wave, a documentary film on Vietnamese Americans in kind of a cultural limbo in the 80s and a genre of music that broke through the mundane and the foreign for them

It's just a place in my memory now, but Swiss Coffee and Plants was a cafe along the Philosopher's Walk in Kyoto. There, on solo travel, was where I first set the intention to open a space of my own.

We Margiela, a documentary on the creative process, philosophy and history of the designer and fashion house as told by those who worked with Martin

Name

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Vocation

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