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As told to Carolyn Bernucca, 2386 words.

Tags: Art, Photography, Inspiration, Beginnings, Process, Promotion, Mentorship.

On the thrill of chasing the perfect moment

Artist and photographer Driely S. discusses self-acceptance, the things that stay with us, and breathing new life into traditional processes. **What path did you take to become an artist?**

My parents had a movie rental store in the living room of our house, in a slum in Brazil. For as long as I can remember, I wanted to direct and make movies, so I moved to New York thinking I could be a nanny and go to college. When I got here, I didn't speak English and I couldn't afford college. I did eight months of high school in Long Island while cleaning houses and working overnights at Target, and I spent all my free periods in my school's darkroom. I had a wonderful teacher who would Google Translate things for me. She gave me film, paper, and a camera from Goodwill.

In my free time, I would take the train into Manhattan and shoot the crusty punks, Tompkins Square Park, the kids I was baby-sitting, whatever I could. I realized that even though my English wasn't very good, I could talk through my photos. When Instagram became a thing, I started posting my photos, and people responded to them. Eventually, Vox hired me as their first ever staff photographer. I also cold emailed brands to ask if I could shoot for them. I met a guy at a fashion show who noticed that I was the first to arrive and the last to leave; he said he had a client who would really like me. The client turned out to be Kanye West. From then on, my life was never the same. I feel very lucky—when you're an immigrant, you get used to the idea that nothing is promised to you.



How do you hold onto your vision while working for other people?

The work I've always wanted to make was never aligned with the things I was getting paid to do, though I've tried to sneak in things that to me felt a little more artistic. That commercial work paid my bills, though, and it gave me confidence. Because of that, today, I have the creative freedom to do whatever I want, and the people who do come to me are specifically asking for the weird, artsy fartsy things. That feels great, but it took a long time to get here.

I had to be delusional to a certain extent, because people just didn't get it, and still don't. I've lost count of how many times I've gone into an agency with my portfolio: a box full of glass, burnt Polaroids, photos with bacteria and crystals growing out of them. The agencies are like, "What is this? We can't sell this." For so long, I was trying to fit within an industry that didn't understand or accept what I was doing. In reality, maybe I just didn't belong in that industry. It took all of my 20s to learn that maybe all along all I wanted to do was my own thing. I've gotten to a point where outside validation isn't worth anything. The artists I most admire were so ahead of their time. It wasn't until much later in their lives—or even after they died—that they got any kind of recognition.

How did you learn to assign a monetary value to your work?

One of the hardest things to learn as an artist is how to charge people for things that to you are priceless. At first, when I did get paid, it was very low, and my peers were very territorial. Their attitude was, "You're my competition. Why would I tell you my rates?" Today, when people ask me what I charge certain clients, I give them the full breakdown, because for a long time, I thought, "If I just work hard enough, I'll be rewarded fairly." But people will not give you the things you want if you don't ask for them. I find that my male peers have no problem asking for what they want, so I try to remember that if they feel comfortable asking, then I should, too. I've also learned how to walk away, and say, "This is how much my time and my work are worth. If you cannot afford it at the moment, that's okay."



What is your relationship to digital spaces?

The Internet was very formative for me. It was like my little diary—"These are the things I'm into, the things I'm learning, the movies I'm watching." It was very one-on-one. Today, the advent of followers has made people so scared to do or say the wrong thing, which has made for a very boring Internet. Everyone is always proudly presenting something, but you don't get to see the messy parts of how they got there.

I was offline for four years, and nobody knew what I was working on. So many of those things are still little flames to me, and I don't need anything interfering with that fire. For me, the reward of the work is knowing within myself that I got the end result I was aiming at. If I choose to share it, that's because I'm being generous, but I don't owe anyone that. But I don't know, sometimes I also think I shouldn't just keep [my art] for myself, because maybe some other girl in a slum in Brazil needs it.

How do you find an audience for your work?

If you're communicating something that is sincere to yourself, [an audience] shouldn't even be your concern. Your audience is the audience of yourself, is an audience of one. The minute you start trying to please everybody else, you're going to displease yourself, and that is a slippery slope. If you're being true to yourself, you will always find an audience—even if it's not today, or tomorrow, or 10 years from now, or 10 years after you die. It's not for any of us to know. What's important is that the work is made.

What do you do for yourself to ensure that you can show up and stay present for the work?

I used to really romanticize the idea of a tortured artist: "I'm in bed, I'm depressed. I want to die, and that's how I'm going to get inspired." I also confused obsession with work ethic, with dedication to my craft. But I've learned that I actually need to be in contact with the outside world, and to move my body. So on an ideal day, I'll wake up, do some capoeira, then walk around for a bit and shoot. My daily routine consists of about three to four hours of hyperfocus on my art. Anything more than that is not necessary—the quality decreases and I burn myself out. So even if I feel like I'm in a groove, if I'm reaching that four-hour mark, I try my best to step away. Art is not just what we're doing in the darkroom, or in the studio. It's how we live our lives—the music we're listening to, the people we're hanging out with, the way we walk down the street, the things we see, the challenges we face. All of these things are part of the creative process. If we don't take the time to explore them, we won't make anything worthwhile.



How do you know when you've got "the shot"?

The photos I take of my own life are so mundane. I took them because I wanted to remember what the light looked like in this specific apartment when I was 35 years old and I lived by myself and the wind was blowing through my windows at this perfect hour, and I wanted to capture that feeling. Maybe there's nothing special about that photo to anybody else, but I will know it when I see it. The search, the chase, for that feeling, is what keeps me going.

There is a very beautiful photo, I actually have it printed in my darkroom, from Duane Michals. To me, it's the greatest photo ever taken. It's a black and white photo of a couple in bed, and there's a caption: "This photograph is my proof. There was that afternoon, when things were still good between us, and she embraced me, and we were so happy. It did happen. She did love me, look, see for yourself!" So much of photography comes back to that: wanting to document something for the sake of memory, because you're afraid it's going to run away from you, or you're going to forget.

What impact does community have on your work?

[The artist] Roberto Campadello lived very close to me in Brazil. By the time I met him, the photos he was doing weren't super fancy—he was just trying to pay the bills. But during the dictatorship, he had this project where he'd shoot photos and print them on a giant piece of glass. You could light them with a candle, and each side of the glass would have a photo of a different person. The other day at a record shop, I found *The Game of Changes*, which he released as an interactive version of the project, with a mirror, candles, and a soundtrack by Persona. I started crying, because it looks like the work I do now. I even found the business card he gave me when I was a kid, when he was just an old man who lived down the street, who gave me books and talked to me about art and philosophy and anthropology.

I've had agencies ask me why I want to shoot on glass, and I'm like, "Why not? Why do you need an explanation?" I'd never made the connection that maybe I wanted to because this seed was planted in my brain as a kid—[Campadello] even let me borrow the big piece of glass for my very first high school project in Brazil. I had completely forgotten this experience, yet he made such a significant impact on my life and my work. I think that's why community and mentorship are so valuable; you never know what will stay with you. People are always in my darkroom, and I'm always learning from them. In opening my door for other people, I've also gotten more comfortable reaching out to my own heroes to ask for their mentorship. I would like to think that I have something to offer them, too, just like the kids in my darkroom.

What have you learned about yourself through doing this work?

Pretty much everybody along the way has told me not to do this, that this wasn't a good idea, that I'll never make a career or money out of it. But I kept wanting to come back to it, and so I just learned to listen to myself. I'm becoming more in tune with my own desires, needs, and artistic curiosities and interests. I've learned that I'm always going to be this stubborn, weird person who likes the things that I like. We learn to accept who we are by doing the work that we are called to do, by cracking open the door to ourselves.



What are the rewards of your creative practice?

For a very long time in photography, things have felt stagnant—there hasn't been much technical progress in the medium since digital photography. But there is a whole universe of processes waiting to be implemented in modern ways. Right now, I'm obsessed with the idea of visualizing sound, and making photos where I can actually see the music of the artist I'm shooting. So I've been doing all of these tests using different 19th century processes, where I play music in the darkroom and try to have that sound visually appear in the image. If we don't have a new batch of people wanting to learn or specialize in or advance these processes, they will vanish—not for lack of chemistry, not for lack of materials, but for lack of interest. That's why I do the commercial bullshit, so I can pay to learn these processes and keep them alive. Reinventing a process like that makes me so excited, so horny—figuring something out that hasn't been done yet, that a lot of people aren't even trying.

So many big questions get answered through the work. When Elijah Muhammad asked James Baldwin what his religion was, [Baldwin] said: "I'm a writer." I think that's such a beautiful, perfect answer. Art is capable of salvation, of hope, of all the spiritual things that we have assigned to a god. At the end of the day, it is up to artists. We're the most sensitive beings. We feel everything so deeply, and we're going to warn the rest of the world of the dangers, and share the universal experiences of heartbreak and pain and suffering and beauty and joy. I might not believe in God, but I believe in some kind of cosmic thing. Nobody knows why we're here, why we exist, what comes after this. But if you make work that's good enough, you'll live long after you go, and inspire people to pave a path the way you did.

Driely S. recommends:

Gold by Alabaster dePlume: Hit play while you're still in bed. Don't get up to brush your teeth until "Fucking Let Them" starts playing.

The films of Roy Andersson: I wholeheartedly believe society is a more tolerable place just from Andersson sharing his art with us.

Jonathan Richman as a moral compass: Someone who has never lost his sense of dignity and has managed to pave a path entirely his own, using sincerity as a weapon.

Tom Zé's Todos Os Olhos, on vinyl: Poetry of the highest caliber. If there was ever a fire in my crib and I could only rescue one item, I would rush to save my first pressing copy.

The Dogme 95 Manifesto: Ideas are cheap, execution is expensive. If people want to say something of value, they have to put themselves on the line.

Name

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Vocation

artist, photographer

Fact

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