On changing all the time

Artist Saif Azzuz discusses his California arts community, his lifelong interest in stories, and going down rabbit holes.

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As told to Cat Woods, 1695 words.

Tags: Art, Family, Identity, Education, Success, Focus.

Let’s go back to the beginning. Where did you grow up, and how did you experience the land around you as a child? Were you encouraged to be outdoors?

Yeah. I grew up in Santa Rosa. Well, I was born in Eureka, California, and I grew up in Santa Rosa, California, and then spent a lot of my summers in Weitchpec, California. And I would say I was very encouraged to be outside, whether it be exploring the land or just playing with neighbors.

I think maybe you take playing outside for granted, until you see kids staring into a screen.

I think my kids do a good job of getting out a lot, but it is a much different time than it was back then.

How did you learn about the stories and traditions of your ancestors? Was that through verbal storytelling, written words, music, school? Were you always open to hearing those stories, or did you sort of rebel against that?

I’ve always been interested in hearing stories from people. On my mom’s side, on the Yurok side, there wasn’t a written language, so everything is generally passed down through oral histories and a lot of time spent with elders, just listening and helping. My dad’s from Libya and I have never gone to Libya, so I always found myself interested in hearing his stories of what Libya was like, or his interests. I’ve always valued story, and it’s been around for most of my life.

You strike me as a very curious sort of person. I’m surprised that you haven’t been to Libya.

I’m surprised as well. It didn’t line up, and then, since the Arab Spring, it’s been harder to go there. But most of my family is there.



According to Google, Saif is a masculine Arabic name, meaning "sword, blade, or protector." Does that reflect in your life, do you think?

Well, I'll say Google was accurate and Saif does mean sword. That's a good question. I don't know if I've thought of that. As a parent, I think I'm definitely thinking about my children and their wellbeing. As a partner, I'm hoping to be as equitable as I can. And then in community, I try to both uphold my own values and make sure I'm not harming other things.

Are politics inherent when it comes to thinking about Indigenous lands, traditions, beliefs, and the rights of Indigenous peoples in America? Do you ever feel hopeless about the direction of environmental policies and impact?

I don't know if I would pick the term "political," but I definitely feel like advocating and caring for the land is kind of inherent to all peoples, or should be. And then, again, as a parent, I think if I was maybe just accounting for myself, I would lean towards being more nihilist. But as a parent, I'm hoping to be optimistic that there's a better future that we're leaving behind for them. It's not always pointing that way, but I think that my intentions are that—or I hope that that happens for them.

Tell me about your time at California College of the Arts. Were there other students or particular teachers who shaped your approach to making art?

I had already completed my associate's degree, so when I went to California College of the Arts, I was just doing studio practice. It was maybe the first time I'd been around just a bunch of artists making work, and I very much

learned from different teachers and students. It’s interesting to be in community trying to figure out how you want to make art.

I don’t know that I left school knowing how I wanted to make art or what I felt like my voice as an artist was… I mean, I’m still trying to figure it out maybe. Maybe you never figure it out, or maybe you do, but I’m still working towards that all the time, as we change as people.

Is that something where being around other artists is helpful or not helpful? In terms of identifying ways that other people work that you want to or don’t want to emulate.

I kind of go back and forth with that. I think sometimes it’s helpful to have other people’s input, but I think that art is so subjective that it’s also nice to just go down the rabbit hole of whatever your interests are, and see what comes out from there.

Maybe it’s helpful to have other people who are already immersed in the art world give you input, but I would also say that making art is a practice that you can do alone and you can push it in any way you want and then maybe trying to participate in the art world is a slightly different thing.



What do you still want to achieve professionally?

Within the art sphere that I operate in, I just really enjoy research as a part of the practice. Within research, there’s a lot of room for thinking about new materials and new bodies of work and just enjoy working through

those things as they come.

Your work is exhibiting around the US, and now in the Middle East. Was there a point in your life and career where you felt like things were really taking off and it wasn't a struggle anymore?

I'm really grateful for the opportunity to show in many different places. Being an artist is a very precarious career. There's no guarantees, and things ebb and flow all the time. But I'm enjoying getting to focus on the things I'm interested in and to be present with my studio practice and my family. I'm also getting to research different areas as I'm working towards shows.

Sorry, I don't want to mess up the flow, I'm curious to hear your thoughts on being a writer and an artist and how it feels to you as a career.

Honestly, it feels like a constant struggle, but then again, I'm a freelancer and I think there's absolutely no security in that, which I discover daily.

I was listening to an interview with the musician Ella Langley, and the interviewer had asked her something about how it felt to be [so succesful] because she's currently number one in the country charts and the overall billboard charts, which is pretty incredible, especially for a female country artist. And she sort of began by naming all of the difficulties about it and how people encroached on her space, and she really just wanted to be left alone a lot of the time. And then she said, "But actually, I get to do what I love every single day, and not everyone does, and I don't take that for granted, so I try to find the joy in it." I'm definitely paraphrasing that.

I was listening to it in bed at night, and I sort of went, "Yeah, ultimately, I don't work for someone else, and things are on my terms." So there's a battle between it being fantastic that I get to name my own terms, and this is what I do, but also it's a battle every day to justify to an editor and sometimes changing rosters of editors why they should pay you to do something.

Absolutely. I appreciate you sharing.

I appreciate you asking. So are there sacrifices that you've had to make to fulfill your creative life? Maybe it's really long hours or time alone, and maybe you don't consider that a sacrifice, but are there sacrifices?

I am grateful that I get to, at this point in my life, do something that I really care about and really interests me and I feel like there's so many different ways to make, and I'm fortunate to be able to explore all of those things right now. I don't know. I think we all make sacrifices living in late stage capitalism. In that regard, the same sacrifices many people have to make.

There's value in being able to do things on your own terms. Something I very much value is getting to spend time with my wife and children and definitely try to schedule that into my time .

Is your wife in the creative field as well? Does she understand what the demands are?

My wife, Lulu, does many different things. She's very creative and makes work as well. Tomorrow I'm going to leave on a trip and be gone for a few days, and I guess the sacrifice there is that I'm not able to be here to help with the routine and be with the kids—but I'm also able to spend more time with them than I did when I was working 40-plus hours a week. And I'm still doing that, but maybe in a different way, where I can be flexible and do things at different times to make it work.

Tell me about the California art communities. Do you have friends and fellow artists who make up a close circle, or is it more solitary?

My studio is in San Francisco, so I would say my art community is largely the Bay Area. My experience is that

it’s pretty supportive. I have a lot of friends that are artists and makers and we see each other casually, and we see each other at shows, and I would say it’s a very supportive space. Maybe it’s not as easy to have a fine art career here, but I would say that there’s a lot of people that really care about making and are always finding ways to make things work and be together and share things.

Saif Azzuz recommends:

Movie: *Smoke Signals*

Book: I’m currently reading *We Are Dancing for You* by Cutcha Risling Baldy

Song: Céline Dessberg’s “Chintamani” (via Eric Booker)

Park: anywhere with my family

Food: Libyan dish rishtet-keskas

Name
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Vocation
artist