

On how failure is fluid



Artists and chefs Hannah Black and Carla Perez-Gallardo on the ongoing process of collaboration, breaking down binaries, and being playful while taking what you do seriously.

January 13, 2021 -

As told to Annie Bielski, 3286 words.

Tags: Food, Art, Collaboration, Process, Business, Multi-tasking, Beginnings, Failure.

Your creative work revolves around your restaurant Lil' Deb's Oasis. What has the journey been like from studying art to eventually working with food as your primary medium?

Hannah Black: I can definitely say that it was a long path to food as my medium. I studied painting because that's what I always did. Once I got to art school, I fell in love with my community and wanted to be around people. There was always someone to talk to or riff with or share an idea with. Once school ended I realized I didn't get excited going and sitting alone in my studio. I really liked working around and with other people. I was also wanting to push beyond just one sensory experience. Food, then ultimately a restaurant space, touches every single point of your senses. I think that's really exciting—from the music, to the smells, to the tastes, to the tactile and visual elements. Most importantly, [a restaurant space] can affect people who maybe are just coming for food, and they don't really know. I feel like the audience is wider in a restaurant space.

Carla Perez-Gallardo: I always knew I was an artist, but never really felt like I could express myself while I was trying out different mediums in art school. I was drawn to trying to self-express through mark making, but it always felt not enough, or insufficient, or like my message couldn't come across. It always felt stuck inside of the medium or something. It wasn't until I started exploring performance and installation, where it was so much more about layering different forms of expression on top of each other in order to arrive at some sort of message, that I started to feel like there was potential. Food is also that. In restaurants specifically, because there's conceiving, there's actual language that you're playing with, there's the visual, and the sonic—all of those things feel like they have so much space to breathe. I think especially in the space that we've made, it was so much about letting ourselves have a voice that hadn't felt possible in other spaces. I think the points of connection are definitely there between painting and installation or performance and restaurants. My path to arriving there was definitely one of, *the medium doesn't hold what I want it to hold for me*.

How do you work through challenges as they come up in your collaboration?

CP-G: It's been a growing evolution. We used to work together, really guiding everything from start to finish holding hands. That's had to change as the restaurant has grown, but there are still elements of that. I did improv growing up, so "yes, and..." is uncomfortable familiar territory, one that I think is really valuable and hard. It's hard to be in a place of "yes, and..." all the time. I think our nature is often to try to resist or close off to things, especially if they aren't born from you, but saying "yes, and..." is a really healthy framework for collaboration. It's something that I've gotten better at in working collaboratively with Hannah and with everyone at the space, because so much of the energy is about sharing ideas. In an effort to be Covid-friendly when we pivoted from indoor dining to outdoor dining, Lil' Deb's Oasis turned into Fuego 69, which was an outdoor woodfire-grilled hippie pescatarian concept. When we tried to move back inside for indoor dining it turned into Club 69, and we made a plywood wall around our bar and cut windows in it. The founding concepts for

that were glory holes, medieval castles, and sex dungeons. It all stemmed from, "Why can't we just have wine windows like in medieval times?" and Hannah and [manager, partner, and wine guy] Wheeler thought, "yes, and..." and a whole idea was born, you know?

HB: We both have the capacity to work on menus on our own, but I feel the best ones are when we actually sit down and question something that someone else brought up, and just think, "I don't know, this doesn't feel quite right or succinct, or there's something off about it." Then sometimes we have to knock things down entirely to build them back up together. I think that's when the most interesting things come out.

CP-G: Because we are so often collaborating, it's become easier to be like "I don't like this idea because..." and then that actually leads to a better idea, rather than it feeling like a dead end somewhere. Sometimes [working] alone feels harder with how to get an idea to move from point A to point B or even recognize that it needs to move. I think the space of closeness is an important one in being critical of each other and of our own ideas and knowing how to not let them rest 'til they're ready to rest. That said, we have plenty of half-formed ideas that also get somewhere and flail around.

What's your relationship to play?

HB: Play is so important. You have to block off a criticality of yourself and just be free when you're playing, and I think that allows room for some of the best ideas to come forth. It's just taking a moment and focusing on letting ideas flow, playing with the material.

CP-G: I think the best kind of play is improvised, when you aren't really structuring it or have an end goal in mind and it just kind of is moving and flowing. I think the way that we've kept our innocence is through play. We've always talked about this fine line between being serious and not serious, and the ways that the world looks at us, I think, is often through a confused lens. They don't know quite how to take us because we don't land somewhere. I feel like so many people are looking for something to land in a serious place or a place of irony or somewhere that feels distinct, and I think so much of our playfulness blurs the lines constantly and that feels really important.

HB: This is a playful place from the moment you walk in, it's perhaps a little overwhelming and in your face. To Carla's point, we also want to be respected for what we're creating and be taken seriously. It's a fine line with not taking ourselves too seriously, while also being serious about what we're doing.

How does duality play out in your work together?

CP-G: Duality is an interesting word, and I immediately think of binary-ness, and just am wondering where those things connect, or how they are different from each other. I feel like ultimately there is duality, but I also think the restaurant itself is so much more about multiplicity.

HB: We try really hard to keep those boundaries fluid, the boundaries between front of house and back of house, the boundaries between me and Carla as a creative think tank and everyone else around us, so it's not so divided that way.

CP-G: I feel like the restaurant's like a giant Venn diagram. In fifth grade in Waldorf you learn geometry, and the reason why they teach you geometry at around that age, 12 or so, is because in that developmental stage you're learning to identify yourself in connection to the world around you. The drawing of geometry is so much about these forms overlapping and expanding and being repeated patterns of themselves, but in an infinite way. So in Waldorf world, maybe the first shape you start with represents the self, and all the other shapes represent the universe and the infinite. I think about that in terms of the way I want to think about the restaurant, which is that it starts with a simple shape or an inward moment, but it has the potential to expand infinitely, or it has all of these points of overlap, and all of these dots that represent different people and different instances and different ideas. We want the experience to be like a universe in which there's multiple voices and plurality, spinning around interconnectedly.

HB: But the duality word isn't wrong, because there is a lot of that in this industry, in this business, in this world. We try to consciously be aware of that and also break that down. Sometimes that's not that easy to do.

What have been the most valuable resources to you?

CP-G: Community, hands down, there's no way we'd be where we are without a million other people.

HB: They encourage us and push us forward.

CP-G: And they'll literally just show up to make things happen. I think that one of the coolest expressions of this [collaboration] is that it started from us being like "We have an idea," but in order to get from the idea to the reality or the manifestation of the idea, it has involved so many hands in so many places and so many people really showing up to make it physically possible.

HB: Our original intention in opening it was that it wouldn't just be a restaurant, it would be a community space, and our vision was to create this platform that we could collaborate and bring in many people that we were excited to work with. Hudson has such a beautiful creative community, so it was pretty easy to draw upon those resources. I think that because of that, there's a lot of people who feel at home here. They feel a part of this family and the restaurant, even if they don't work here, they feel safe here, comfortable here, they feel like it's their space, and I think that's really important.

CP-G: It was the intention and there are days where I feel really proud and I understand that there's a deep function of community around us. There are also times when I feel like we failed, and times that I wish there was more room for community within the space of the restaurant industry. I think that that's a really hard balance, and one that I've felt consistently impacted by, the pull of the industry standard or profitability and capitalism and the way that that really interferes with community in the true sense. When we opened we definitely had a lot of other goals for what the space could look like and how it could be used and what kind of activities could happen here, but then you get so caught up in the maintenance of the everyday and making ends meet and the bottom line and all of these things that never once in concepting the restaurant or imagining my life would I have built into my language about what I wanted to be oriented around. I don't identify as someone who cares about the bottom line, but in becoming a business owner, not just an artist, and [thinking about] the ways in which being an artist is also having a business, those things feel in conflict sometimes. Sometimes I wish I could step back and be like, "What would it be like if we just served soup and salad and had art shows?"

HB: It's definitely a fine line juggling what you know sells, what makes money, how much you can charge for something and what you feel good about doing. You have to make sacrifices, where maybe we'll have some conceptual idea about some meal, but then sometimes people are just coming here, again, to eat, or they don't really...

CP-G: They don't really want to fuck with our ideas.

How do you think about failure?

HB: I don't know if failure is something that I think about that much or dwell on. I think I maybe have an optimistic outlook on most things, and it's like, if the business fails, I don't think that we've failed as business owners. When you are negatively affecting other people or if we let our community down, or we let our families down or our friends down—that, to me, is failure. Everything else is just hopefully, in the grand story of things, a mistake that leads to a learning process. The word "failure" feels final. I think that's maybe why I just struggle with that idea or concept. Right now we're in a hard point with our business, and it's like "What happens if we can't make it through this winter?" Which is a reality that we're grappling with. Are we failures? Did we fail in this school of business that we're in? I think it would be sad, it would be hard, but I think that we've created something that we can grow from.

CP-G: I think my relationship to failure is more internal. I more often feel like I've failed myself. Sometimes that's relational—sometimes I think I've failed myself and that relates to how I haven't met someone's needs. I

also relate to what Hannah is saying, in that I don't want to sit there and be like, "I have failed" and just stew and wallow in it, but rather look around and be like, "How did I get here? Why is this a failure and what can I learn from it?" and rise up again. Over the last two years especially, we've had a lot of moments with our staff in particular where we were like, "Well, we let them down in these ways, they clearly are feeling disappointed or frustrated. What have we failed to communicate or what have we not seen that led to an unmet need?" I think failure is fluid and is often read as an ending or the arrival, or something is failing and then you start over. I feel like failure for us is more about moving through something, and not the endpoint.

How are you doing in the midst of so much uncertainty?

CP-G: It's been a rough road, especially in the last couple of months, but I will say that uncertainty doesn't feel unfamiliar. As a restaurant we have really cornered uncertainty. From the beginning, I feel like there was a lot of doubt from the outside. There was a ton of support when we opened, but also some, "What the hell are you thinking?" and [people naming] all of these arbitrary reasons for why we could or might fail. I think we have felt certain in the space of others' uncertainty that our way could work.

HB: We've had a few road bumps along the way. This isn't the worst situation that we've been in financially. We had a lot of bold, blind faith that in hindsight could easily boil down to some naiveté. I feel like we've faced a lot of moments of uncertainty, but I don't know if necessarily we have a lot of uncertainty within us, or we wouldn't be where we are.

CP-G: Financially there was definitely naiveté in being like, "Whatever, we'll open and it doesn't matter if we have no money," and in so many ways it worked but it also meant that we had to stop several times to be like, "How long can we do it like this? Do we actually need more money?" Money and certainty are related, too, if uncertainty relates to insecurity and money relates to security and all those things are connected in capitalism. I think our deepest moments of uncertainty have revolved less around our own motivation or our own clarity of what we want to be doing versus circumstantial uncertainty around money or Covid. The pandemic has definitely been the most uncertain time I've experienced as an adult. There's a constant sense of "What's next?" but there is no one that can tell you, and your own compass doesn't matter anymore. I think that that's been the most destabilizing thing. Even if I have a sense of clarity around myself or my actions or my means or my desires, they don't have a lot of room right now to move and manifest.

HB: It's exhausting, because we've tried really hard to overcome what's going on [with the pandemic], pivot, have a new idea, have fun, and play. It feels almost like year one again, but we're older and more tired.

What would you offer to younger artists or your younger selves?

CP-G: I think so much about being a young person is self-doubt and wondering and anticipation for what will be. When I think back and imagine all the places that I've been in my life, though I have been someone who has been fairly centered in myself, of course there have been through-lines of doubt about how to be my best self or what my version of being myself even looks. Trust feels so central to just letting yourself become. When I look back there was a certain level of trust I had to have in not trying to fit in, I think because of the way I was always like, "Yeah, I'm a weirdo, yeah, I'm an artist." Like I said, I could never make a mark that felt true to me, and then doubt comes in that's like, "Well, if you can't express yourself, will you ever be what you want to be?" I let myself just meander and try all the things and and cook and then not cook and then be an artist and then not be an artist. I don't know how much trust I had in the process in those moments, but I think what I'm getting at is trust more.

HB: I do think when you're younger the desire for self-definition is more important, especially when you're in high school and you don't have a choice of where you are. I feel like I had a similar experience where I just didn't feel like I fit in, was uncomfortable in general, and then therefore self-defined myself as an artsy weirdo and excluded myself from other people. I had this thought of, "Before you're going to judge me, I'm going to judge you, and the line is drawn." Now looking back, everyone is so involved in their own shit that it doesn't really matter. I wish I had a little less self-judgment at that point.

CP-G: Also what comes up for me is the idea of arriving. I think as a young person you're always looking to arrive somewhere, you're looking to arrive at adulthood or arrive at being a teenager, arrive at self-ness, or some identity. You're just always arriving and never arriving and that's something I feel pretty solid in right now. I think I'm much more aware that we're always evolving, and in that sense we're always on the path to somewhere and probably will never get there, or will have moments of having been there and then moments of moving through and looking back.

Hannah Black and Carla Perez-Gallardo Recommend:

Chinese Protest Recipes by [@thegodofcooking](#)

Raw honey + crushed aspirin face masks (introduced to us by our friend Kelly Crimmins :) helps subdue puffiness, a necessary tool these days!

Trying to find pleasure in even the smallest of gestures: i.e. repairing a torn shirt or taking a bath in the afternoon.

Literally please read your own tarot when you need some guidance, just pull a card or 3! this never fails to center you when you're feeling lost.

Spending all day cooking a meal for someone you love and doing the dishes as you go along.

Name

Lil' Deb's Oasis (Hannah Black & Carla Perez-Gallardo)

Vocation

Artists and chefs

□

Angelina Dreem