

On repetition as revelation



Cartoonist Conor Stechschulte discusses bringing what you don't know to a form, demystifying the life of an artist, and approaching money as an occult object.

February 11, 2025 -

As told to Caitlin McCann, 2709 words.

Tags: [Comics](#), [Education](#), [Money](#), [Day jobs](#), [Inspiration](#).

What role does repetition play in your work and practice?

It's so deeply ingrained in my life and my taste. All the music that I'm most fond of is extremely repetitive. [Lungfish](#) is my favorite band. They're like one riff per song, maybe with some variation once in a while. I love Krautrock, you get that motorik beat and you're like, "Okay, here we are," and then all this weird stuff can happen on top of it. Did I show you this book [[Christmas in Prison](#)] that I made when I was in grad school?

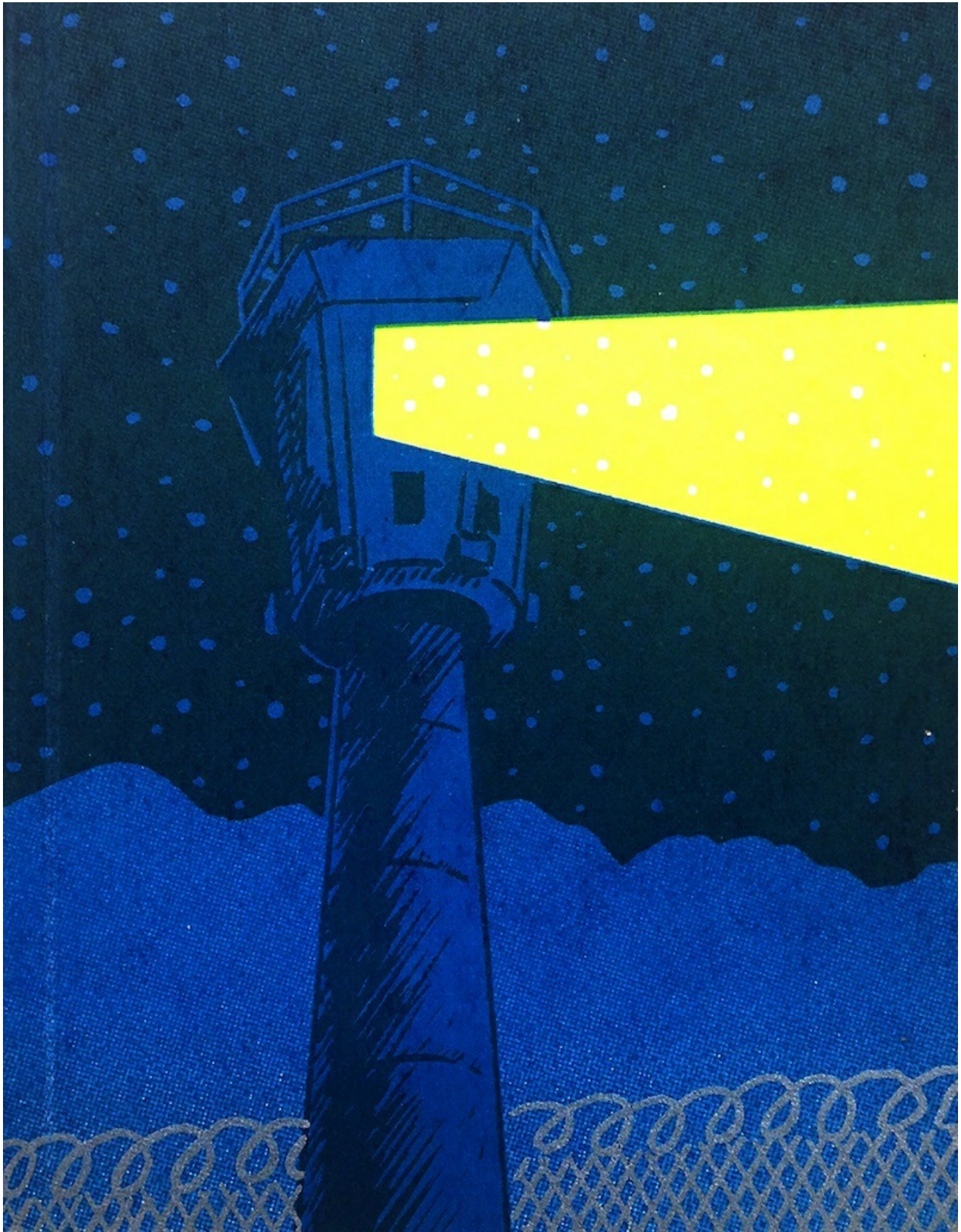
Yeah, I've seen it.

When I made it, I was thinking about repetition as a fundamental idea to my practice. That's why there's the image of the chain link fence with the barbed wire on top. It's this idea of the really rigid structure grid and this looping-free thing and how it has the twin qualities of being this beautiful thing, but it's also a boundary or a limit. It's confining, but it also defines a territory. When repetition is working for me, it's like a simplification or a limitation. You do it and then you do it again, and then you do it again, and then you do it again. Then in that, you can make small changes or the small decisions start to become the work.

Right. Repetition is revealing when the thing you're repeating becomes familiar and fully integrated into your life. Then your subconscious can emerge and reveal more to you about the thing you're making.

Exactly. I was also thinking about trance states. Meditation coming from repetitive chanting and things like that. Even when you tune into what you already repeatedly do, like breathing and how when you're really focused on that, it grounds and centers you.

There's a scholar, [Ramzi Fawaz](#), who writes about comics. He came to SAIC when I was a grad student. He compared the process of making comics to being... I'm maybe paraphrasing this poorly, but to being a queer gesture because it's repetition with a difference. You have to repeat something within a frame to know that it's next in the sequence, but in order to move forward, there has to be a difference for there to be any movement. In the same way that drag is a repetition of femininity with the difference of perhaps the gender or the heightening or the campiness. Or the way that a gesture that takes a more traditional view of reality and twists it. If you really want to see action happen on a page, the best thing to do is to have a regular grid and keep the same framing, same size of a figure. The more you repeat, the more visible the differences are.



Christmas in Prison, cover, screen print, 2016

How else do you think repetition relates conceptually to print as a medium? I'm reminded of the Johanna Drucker

essays you always share with your classes. Can you talk about them?

In *The Mechanical Work of Art and the Age of Electronic Reproduction* [Drucker] defines the terms to discuss offset based artwork; so, defining what the offset printer is and how it functions. *The Myth of the Democratic Multiple* tracks the hopeful trajectory of artist books since the '60s up until... I think it was written in 1998. So, it's 30 years since the opening of Printed Matter and the publishing of *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* [by Ed Ruscha]. The vision was to publish these books in huge numbers and put them on newsstands the same way there's paperback books and to make them really accessible. She defines how that failed, but it still informs a lot of artist's practices and the hope for that distribution. Both of those angles that Drucker is talking about get to that idea of demystification.

The word *utilitarian* just popped into my head too.

That's why offset printing is really interesting. It's an uncomfortable art form for the art world because it's an industrial art form. It's still being used for industrial production. It's not like stone lithography or something that was an industrial process and has retired to the realm of art. Screen printing still straddles that line. I think offset is even more interesting because it has to deal with having hundreds of something, instead of a low number like art collectors might be used to.

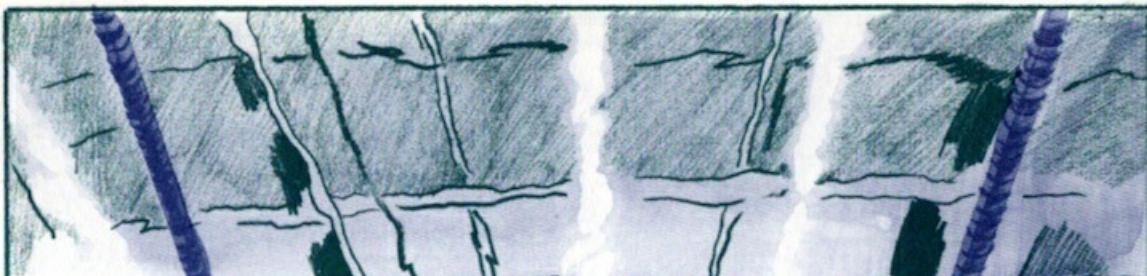
Yeah that exclusivity is lost but with accessibility in mind, making it available to more people rather than just people who are privileged enough to see it.

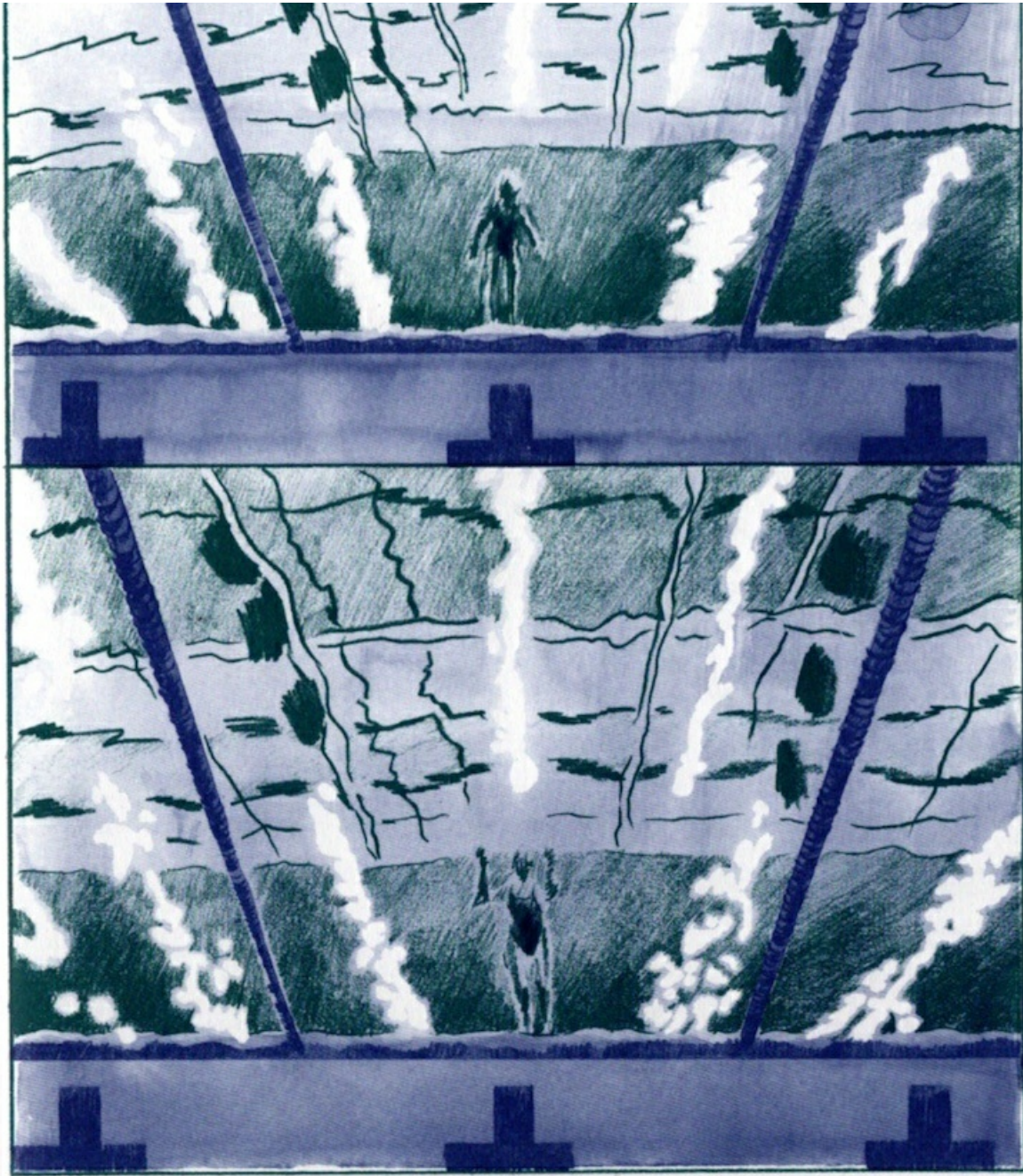
Yeah. That was something that Chris Ware said when I was TA-ing for him. In one of his talks, he was like, "Would you rather make one thing and sell it for a million dollars or make a million things and sell them for a dollar?"

That's a great question. There's a fine line between making something accessible and commodifying it because capitalism is so deeply ingrained in everything we do. Like how do you make your work accessible without compromising your creative integrity?

Yeah. How do you make sure that is actually encoded in the artwork and is not something that's going to get overwhelmed by how it's being sold? It's so hard to actually answer that. I've not been in the position of having something sell wildly crazily well. There's a lot of different ways you can think about the economics of your work and where money comes in. Where do you allow it in? Where do you want it to sit? How do you want to spend your time?

I think about the nuts and bolts economic decisions I've had to make in my life. I remember having this moment of stocking cheese at Whole Foods and leaving my drawing table to go do that and being like, "I think I might be better at drawing comics than I am at stocking cheese. I should rearrange my life, so that's what I'm doing most of the time." That was my epiphanic moment that led me to grad school and teaching. There were compromises along the way, and now being full-time at the school, I'm giving a lot more time to this institution, whose mission I believe in, but there's also a lot of things that are not great about it. Everybody gets a little dirty to get their money but it's about trying to stay grounded with how you most want to spend your time.





149

Ultrasound, pg. 149, offset print from graphite original, 2022

Yeah, which makes you ask yourself, "What is most important?" I'm glad you brought up stocking cheese because that's why the word *demytification* was written in my outline for this conversation. I was thinking about how on the back of *Ultrasound*, you listed all the day jobs you had over the decade you spent working on it, until it whittled down to basically just teaching and storyboarding. It demystified this fantasy image of an artist whose only job is to make art.

I was thinking about how when you are a young cartoonist and you get a big book by somebody, you're like, "Oh, wow, this is all this person does for sure." All that information is usually missing, unless you pick it up in interviews. I was always desperate to know how people are surviving.

I go to comic shows or to art book fairs and I see there's some artists that make the calculation of like, "Okay, I can only do this, but I have to be making this kind of work." I've always been searching for the right balance of being able to sit down and make my own decisions about what I'm making. Early on, it was being a museum guard or cutting cheese at a supermarket, so I could go home and just be like, "Okay, the comics get to do whatever they want."

You'd rather have the freedom to do what you want with the comics rather than having to just do comics. That also demystifies the illusion of one answer solving all your problems.

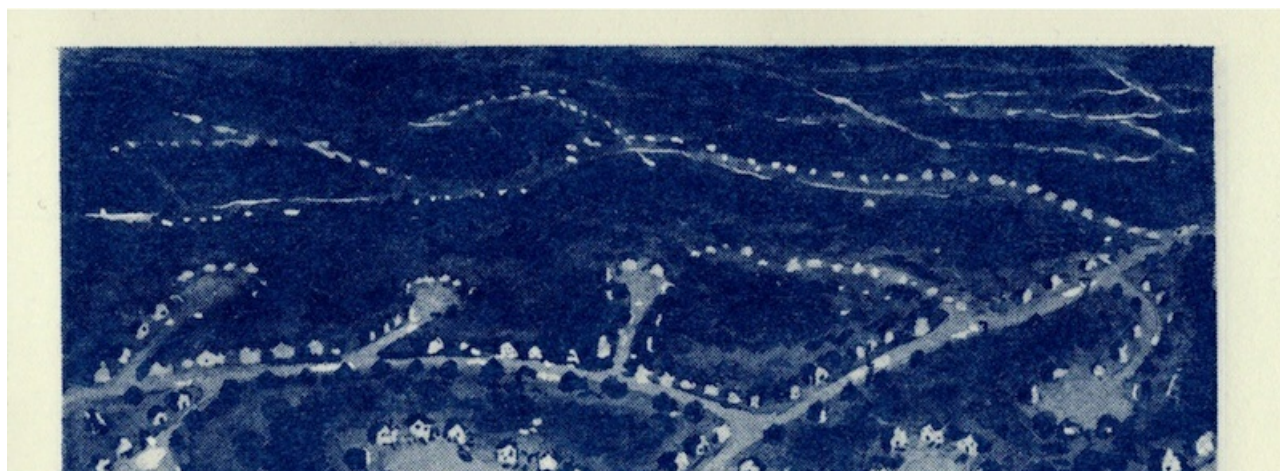
I was also thinking about teaching at an art school and the weird, funny, unseen messages that people receive about how art is made or how it's supposed to be made. People are really trying to find their one thing. Now we've looped around to being on the negative side of repetition. People start to say, "Yeah, do this again and again," and point out the repeatability of an artwork, but students jump to that too fast sometimes. How they define what their thing is, what their motif, what their subject matter is, is often too narrow. They'll make a really good painting be like, "I have to make a blue painting that's this size." It is like, "No, no. It was something that was deep in you that came out, so just trust what's deep in you." Making decisions about what you're making externally rather than internally might be the difference between the positive side of repeating things in art versus the negative side.

That reminds me of something Jesse Ball said to me about how the best thing you can do is be an amateur.

My wife loves this John Baldessari quote, where he is like, "To be an artist is to be a professional dilettante, perpetual amateur."

Yeah but it's harder. It's harder to package or wrap your head around someone that is so expansive because of all these variations of themselves. You can't put your finger on them, which dodges the urge that capitalism creates to want to be one thing. What parts of your practice have to do with being an amateur?

I was just talking to a friend's class yesterday. The students were making comics for their thesis project, but they hadn't made comics before. It got me in a really interesting frame of mind because I feel like I'm used to talking to folks who made a lot or at least a few comics. People were asking, "How do you start doing this?" or "I don't know how to draw backgrounds," and I was just like, "Draw it however you can. Be the amateur you are." There was a lot of me being like, "It's awesome that you don't know." There's something so beautiful about having that inbuilt limitation to your skill set because you go all the way up to that and then it can become a really beautiful, unique style. There's that quote, "Style is all the things you get wrong."





Vacuum, pg.1, risograph print from watercolor original, 2024

There's freedom in what you don't know. We're back at trying to repeat something internally versus externally. I think at least one answer to that is just forever maintaining a level of curiosity. With amateurism comes curiosity because-

There's always more to learn.

Exactly.

To quote other beautiful minds from SAIC, Matthew Goulish says, "Your misunderstanding of a medium or a form might

be your gift to that form." What I was trying to say to those young cartoonists is, what you can't do, what you don't know, that is what you can bring. That's something special. The other thing [Goulish] would say is, "Write from what you know, into what you don't know."

Oh, that is wise. It also contradicts a lot of what's taught in academic institutional settings now. I went into grad school thinking it would be more like a bunch of weirdos getting together to make and talk about art but there were a lot of times when it just felt like "professionalizing." As someone with a DIY background and ethos, I struggled to feel like I belonged in that environment, until I met you and saw that it was possible to carve out a space in that.

Yeah, literally everybody who goes through undergrad has to take a professional practices class. It makes sense because [college] degrees are getting more and more expensive. For what? What do you get? Where do you go?

My mom always asks me that. She's like, "You have a Masters. Why are you still working at a bar?"

On the negative side, maybe that's the scam. But on the other side, art school should be weird and wrong and not fit a professional mold. But what do you do when being a weirdo costs \$60,000 a year?

How did you justify it for yourself when you were in grad school?

I did it in a couple different ways. One way was thinking about money as this magical force. It's like this occult force that we orient ourselves to and it's this weird representation of energy. I was like, "Okay, this sacrifice of this huge chunk of money means that now I'm a serious artist. This is a ceremony that I'm doing for two years of learning and meeting people and doing these beautiful things." It also comes back to intention. I was very clear about what I wanted out of it. I wanted to be able to teach. I wanted to be able to support my practice and have a job that used the skills that I had developed in art school. Grad school allowed me to do that. So, I believe in that, but you do have to approach it in this magical way. It's not like being a doctor. My dad is very fond of saying, "You know what they call the person who graduates last in their medical school?"

What?

Doctor.

That's true [laughs].

You make it through medical school and you're a fucking doctor and there's a system where they assign you to a residency, and then you can be a doctor. But if you're going into art school like, "I'll go to this school and they'll sort out who I am and where I'm going," you will get lost. I can understand why somebody who goes through that leaves more confused than when they went in and feels like it was a scam. It's like a tool you have to pick up and use.

Part of being an artist is making a lot of sacrifices to do certain things that are hard to justify in the moment and following your own curiosity of what you don't know in order for it to unlock things.

What keeps you questioning and making things and being curious about your own thoughts? I'm preparing a bunch of first year grad students for their first crit week, and I'm like, "It might be crazy. It might be a lot." You get so many other people's opinions in your brain but if you try to follow them all, you'll get totally lost. But in being totally lost, then the only thing that's left to guide you is what's inside of you. It forces you into that position. Otherwise, you might be chasing one person or another's idea of who you're supposed to be, instead of your own curiosity.

Totally. I've been trying to unpack this idea of feeling lost and repetition's role in it. Every time I regain my sense of direction, it's always because I looked back and rediscovered the thing I've always circled back to.

The patterns and the order only emerge behind you. I think it's Joseph Campbell who said, "If you know what path you're on, you're not on your own path. You're on somebody else's that has made it through." The path is only ever clear behind you or the pattern or the shape of it. It's not going to be marked. You can only have a trajectory.

Connor Stechschulte recommends:

Pebbles, ongoing comic series by Molly Colleen O'Connell

Shell Collection by Ron Regé Jr.

Noel Freibert's publishing and distribution project "Toy Box Coffin"

"Lift You" by Moin and Sophia Al-Maria

"Sex War" by Lungfish (the electric ACR 1999 version, not the acoustic Necrophones version!)

Name

Conor Stechschulte

Vocation

cartoonist, comic book author

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