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As told to Isabel Slone, 2068 words.

Tags: Comedy, Art, Writing, Money, Mental health, Beginnings, Success, Day jobs.

On being patient

Writer, comedian, actor, and art critic Christina Catherine Martinez discusses the false dichotomy of artist and critic, resisting outside influence, building a cohesive schedule, and embracing one's inner clown.

In 2020, you were featured on the *Vulture's* list of "Comedians You Should and Will Know." How did receiving that recognition affect your relationship to your own creative practice?

In the immediate, it was just a huge vote of confidence. I know what I'm doing and I know it's a little bit strange and different, so it made me realize that I'm on the right track. A lot of artists talk about this idea that "the work has to be enough." I truly believe that, but also writing and performing are so contingent on having an audience. I think I've gotten to a place, especially with writing, that I know I don't have any control over who is going to see my work or how many people are going to connect with it. I've started to accept that I won't ever arrive at a point of feeling like "I've made it." Instead of waiting for a magic wand that changes everything, I just need to make my practice as sustainable as possible.

It's funny, I was on two lists in 2020. The first was *TimeOut LA's* list of Comics to Watch, which came out at the very beginning of the year. I was like, 'Here I am, this is going to be my year!' Then the lockdown happened. By the time the *Vulture* list came out in October, I was just scrambling and surviving, and not really thinking about my career. I had spent so much of 2020 making so much stupid content on my phone and doing Zoom shows out of boredom and desperation and loneliness. Weirdly, I think the isolation actually helped my career. After the list came out, I immediately got so many emails from managers and industry people. That's how I met my manager. Ultimately, it changed my relationship to my practice because it made me feel like, "I can do this. I can do it all."

In what way do you think the isolation helped your career?

I think there was a lot of stuff I had unconsciously repressed that started to come out. What initially attracted me to being a standup comedian was that it is such a free, solitary, open form of expression. All of the weird videos I was doing, making funny voices or dancing in my apartment, were the result of being alone. My work started to come more from within rather than reacting to an audience. It cracked me open. I unlocked a different place where my work comes from and it was really generative. I was able to clear away ideas from the outside of what I wanted my comedy to look like, and pay more attention to what was coming from inside. I worry a lot about the spiritual health of the planet, the effects of late capitalism on my psyche, the sustainability of art as a practice inside the context of the art world, which is a really corrupt social and financial system. But I also like farts, making funny voices and dancing around being an idiot. Those are the things turning around inside me.

In addition to being a comedian you're also a writer, and art critic. How do all of these different skill sets inform one another?

The role of artist and critic are not in opposition with each other. People are always like, "How can you be an art critic and a comedian?" It's actually not that hard. It's about recognizing when those different parts of myself are helpful and when they aren't. I built my career writing about painting and sculpture, so going off about painting can feel like a release or a break from being an artist myself. It's also helped me to recognize when my critic self isn't helping me to create. If I'm trying to think of a new bit, I can't bring my inner critic to it. There are a lot of times where an image or an impulse comes up, and I can't get it out of my head, so I have to try it out. It's only afterwards that I can really detach and think about why something did or didn't work. My work as an artist has also made me realize how much a

critic brings to the work that maybe isn't even there. I have this really dumb bit that involves me singing and pouring ketchup all over my face and I've gotten DMs from people who are like, 'I love the way you're queering condiments.'" One one level that's none of my business and their reading is probably valid. But it's made me think about how much I am doing the same thing when I critique things in the art world. A lot of the time, I just go on stage and fart around and see what happens.

Is it ever difficult to balance on a personal level?

This is maybe very Freudian, but the more you try to repress something, the more it comes out in ways that are outside your control. I think a lot of my anxiety and self-esteem issues were about me just not accepting who I really am. I've always wanted to be a comedian or an actor, that's what I used to dream about as a kid. Then I spent ten years trying to be a serious intellectual, which I also am. I like reading theory for fun. But I was neglecting a really huge part of myself, which is my clown, my idiot, my inner child. I've accepted these are both real parts of myself. Now I focus less on explicitly trying to jam every part of me into a single project and instead let those different parts come out more organically. When I started doing stand up comedy, I had this chip on my shoulder. My goal was to be a "smart comedian." It wasn't until I started taking clown classes that I encountered this idea of the idiot, which is when I realized I had been repressing a lot. I had a teacher who said, "Your intellect is killing your clown." It's been helpful to realize that it goes both ways and there are so many aspects of my clown that are helpful to my intellect.

How does the need for financial security affect your practice?

People always ask how I'm doing, and I am so much more honest these days. Creatively, spiritually, professionally, I'm great, but financially, like shit. I'm getting so much work and so many cool opportunities and it's just not liquidating yet. I'm trying to be patient. In the immediate, I'm trying to take care of my basic needs, which is getting paid work. and taking on other work that's not super glamorous like copywriting or copy editing. The past year has been so difficult. I was like, "I need a job." I had a day job for 10 years. That's how I built my writing practice and my comedy before this. I'm at the point where I know I'm good at what I do. As a professional, I need to get over the idea that somehow my creative practice is separate or necessary from making money.

I also know it's totally possible. Comedians in the US are one of the most fluid cultural figures. If you're a standup comedian, you can be an actor, an author, a producer, host a podcast, tour a show. I know that there are a lot of outlets for what I want to do. I've joked before that the fastest way for me to get a book deal is to become a comedian. I remember going into Barnes and Noble and seeing that Tina Fey has a memoir, Amy Poehler has a memoir, Tiffany Haddish has a memoir. At some point it seems like if you get famous enough and you're a comedian, they just give you a book deal.

Are there any daily rituals you participate in that help the work to flow?

I've started meditating in the mornings. In order to balance all the different types of work I do, I've had to become extremely aware of my body and where my mental and emotional energy is at almost every hour of the day. I'm working on a new book and have set up a ritual where I write 500 words a day, Monday through Friday. It's actually been really great, I don't normally work like that. I make coffee first thing in the morning and then set aside this time to write. But often something comes up and I'll get distracted. If I try to set aside a day that's just for writing, I might get a last-minute audition and have to drive to Santa Monica or rearrange my living room to do a self-tape. That really throws things off balance. It might only take me an hour to get a self-tape done, but I'm a little bit drained afterwards and it takes a lot to get back into the space of writing. I do a clown show every Wednesday afternoon in the park, which is so physical and exhausting that even though it's over by 1:30 or 2pm, I'm pretty much useless for the rest of the day. Just becoming aware of how tasks I do affect my emotional and physical energy has helped me make better use of my time. I'm constantly Tetris-ing my schedule. Every night, I look at what I have to do the following day and make up a schedule in my head based on that.

Christina Catherine Martinez Recommends:

Several Short Sentences on Writing by Verlyn Klinkenborg: There are a lot of good books on writing but this one is criminally underrated. Klinkenborg is an editor from a bygone era, and I don't mean that as the kind of shallow compliment you find in cranky profiles of elder media figures and The Way Things Used To Be. I mean he cares about words to a rare degree. This book is about sentences: the base unit of what we create as writers. It strikes a good balance between the craft and psychology of writing. There's no homework. It's clippy and fun to read. If you feel like trash because you failed to get through The Artists Way for the fifth time, read this. Take it easy.

Scriptnotes ep 403: How to Write a Movie: Screenwriting is hard. It's equal parts math and feelings. A lot of screenwriting classes focus on structure, to the detriment of the lightning-in-the-heart moment that made you want to write a script in the first place. This talk is about the emotional undertow of structure and it's helpful to remember when you're caught up in dumb shit like "oh no I forgot to end act II on page whats-it with a punchline referencing whose-his-face!" Céline Sciamma is taking apart dramatic structure from the ground up, including the idea of conflict itself, and her movies are patently good. It's worth learning why movies and TV are built the way they are. You can use that knowledge to invent new languages.

Sitting under a tree and breathing: a doctor told me to do this.

Stretching: I thought exercise would make me a better clown and a better actor, and it has, but only if I

make time to stretch. If you go to an hour-long exercise class and they do a b.s. three-minute cooldown that's not enough. Stretch, goddamnit. I try to stretch for at least fifteen minutes after a show or workout, or before bed, otherwise I'm tight and sore and cranky. I've become one of those "my body is my instrument" people and I don't care how insufferable that sounds because it's mf-ing true. Stretching clears the mind and will make you a better writer as well.

Figure out how to love yourself: Whether it's through counseling, spiritual practice, a twelve-step program, baking little cookies and showing your ass out the car window, doesn't matter. Harvesting self-worth and consolation from a higher source allows the work to be whatever it needs to be—not what the small and tender parts of you are comfortable with it being. I'm using the second-person here but I'm really talking to myself. I love you Christina.

Name

Christina Catherine Martinez

Vocation

writer, actor, art critic, comedian

Fact

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