

On challenging yourself in your work



Artist Heather Benjamin discusses the importance of homemade zines, why she continues to switch up her process, the complications of running your own business, and why art school wasn't useful.

March 16, 2021 - [Heather Benjamin](#) is an artist who lives and works in Providence, Rhode Island. She's been self-publishing zines and books of her drawings since 2008. Her first full-length book, *Sad Sex*, collects the first 10 issues of her self-published zine of the same name, and was published by Desert Island in 2012. Her second book, *Exorcise Boo*, is a collection of 70 drawings, published by A Bolha Editora in Brazil in 2013. *Romantic Story* is a self-published collection of drawings released in 2015 at the opening of her solo exhibition, *Hard Feeling Girl*, at STREAM Gallery in Brooklyn. In 2016, Sacred Bones released *Captive Mother*, a 16.5" x 11.5" newspaper of recent works by Benjamin, comprised of 19 brush and ink drawings made in 2015 and 2016. Here, she discusses the importance of homemade zines, why she continues to switch up her process, the complications of running your own business, and why art school wasn't useful.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3015 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Education](#).

Punk rock, and the community around it, is instrumental to what you do.

As far back as I can remember, the majority of my practice has felt connected to a community outside of art school or academia. I made artwork through high school, but when I started making it more for myself and less for art class was when I started making fliers for punk shows, while growing up in New Jersey. Getting my foothold in underground DIY culture was how I started feeling like my practice was a big part of my life and my personality.

I was already involved in that world when I went to RISD—some people would maybe say to a fault. I don't have any regrets. I couldn't deal with the curriculum at RISD. My freshman year I was miserable. I hardly made work for my classes. I was just making drawings for myself and making fliers for shows back home and coming down to New York to go to shows. I ended up dropping out because that was what I wanted to be doing, not being in art school.

Was there anything you took away from your time in art school?

I don't think I got anything out of it, aside from having something to rebel against, which is not worth the price point or time commitment. Maybe as I get older I'll be able to look back and say, "Oh actually, this part of me came from that experience." But more than anything, I wasn't ready to be in school, so I didn't absorb any information from it. I was cutting classes constantly. School is about being ready to be there, and wanting to be there, otherwise it's useless.



I'm curious about the importance of zines, as far as getting your art out into the world.

I first started making zines of my drawings because I loved the idea of using the format of cheaply printed, handmade booklets to be able to disseminate my work to people. Scanning photocopies to make zines for free was awesome; even paying full price for photocopies was usually cheap enough to make large editions of my zines, which at first were mostly one-page foldouts. I wanted to give them to as many people as possible, leave stacks of them places, in art book stores or otherwise, so I could try and reach a large audience.

When I was 18, and I first started doing that, it was the only way I had to reach an audience. Social media wasn't playing the same role for artists as it does now. I have a wider audience now than I did then, and I have other ways of disseminating my work that doesn't necessitate leaving stacks of zines in arbitrary places, but I still love to do that.

I feel the same way now as I did then: zines are the best way to be able to show your work to a lot of people and let them be able to take a physical piece of it with them that they can revisit on their own time or gift it to somebody else. It can be a really personal and private experience to spend time alone with a booklet after you take it home, or it can be this awesome social experience where it's cheap and everyone gets one and people can talk about them together and share them with each other and trade.

Even now that I'm carrying around this little camera on my iPhone, and I can take pictures of my drawings and post them immediately and have them be seen by tons of random people on the internet, I prefer the tactile version of disseminating my work.

Zines are the best way to do that. The cheaper and smaller, the better. When I'm tabling at a book fair or something, and someone picks up a zine I made and I can tell it's resonating with them, I can afford to give it to them for free, because I only spent like \$1 making each copy. It isn't a huge investment for me to hand them out. It doesn't break the bank, and it allows me to give people pieces of my work, which hopefully feels special to them. Even when I'm not giving them out, I can afford to price them so low that they're accessible to anyone, which is more than you can say for so many other aspects of engaging with art.

Not a lot of people can afford to buy artwork they love, myself included, but almost anyone can rationalize buying a \$2 or \$5 zine. You can take a piece of it home with you that way and feel like you're engaging with it on a level that you may not be able to engage with other formats or art.





How have you used social media to get your art out there and to sell things you create?

It's crazy how useful Instagram has been to me. I love and hate that. I'm glad it's been the kind of tool that it's been for me, especially over the last couple of years that I've lived up in Providence, because I'm pretty isolated. Sometimes I feel like I'm making my work in a vacuum up here. When I lived in New York I could go to openings and be around tons of people and feel stimulated—a lot of the time overstimulated, which is one of the reasons why I ended up running away. Now I feel secluded in my practice and isolated. Having something like Instagram and being able to put my work out there and get a reaction from a large group of people is not something I'm getting in real life right now. I'm not in school anymore, so I don't have critics, and I'm not in a big city, so I'm not showing or going to shows nearly as much as I'd like to.

That's the platform where I get to do that, which is great, because I need that, but also it's probably not enough. I kind of hate it, because it's not like it's designed specifically for that. There's many other aspects of social media and Instagram that I dislike, and I fundamentally don't like being on my phone all the time. That said, I make an okay supplemental income off of my web store, and it's literally all through Instagram. If Instagram was gone, I don't know if my practice would be sustainable.



A tricky thing about Instagram, is that the comments seem to all be positive.

They're not weighing in in a constructively critical way like something I would get from peers in real life, or like a critic at school, or a studio visit, things that would actually be truly meaningful to me. It really is all positive affirmations, which is great, but is also pretty unrealistic and doesn't promote growth. It feeds into the social media cycle of liking content and ego boosts, which is not exactly what I'm interested in doing with my work or how I'm interested in feeling my work. Even though I want to share my work with people, and I obviously like getting a positive reaction, it's not like the end goal is getting as many people to respond to it positively as possible. That feels empty. But that's what ends up happening if that's the only platform you're using to share your work, which is where I'm at right now.

Has it gotten to the point where running an online business takes up the time that you would normally spend making the work and being creative?

I'm actively struggling with it right now. I feel lucky that when I put out a new drawing or a new product—a lot of the time I get so many orders that it's like hours and hours of my time compiling them and packaging them. It feels lucky to me that I can make money off of that instead of having to work as many hours at a day job.

At the same time, I feel almost more resentful sitting in my studio for hours folding paper and sealing envelopes. I'm in the room where I want to be working on a painting or challenging myself creatively, but instead I'm doing administrative work. I do feel like during periods of crunch time, when I'm working on a new book or working on a show, I need to get better about shutting my store down. It's not a balance I can strike unless I have someone helping me, like unless I have an intern or something doing it. I don't think I can continue to juggle both by myself that much longer.

A brick and mortar store closes at a certain time, and you can go home, but the internet doesn't stop.

I'm bad enough at time management to begin with. It's not hard for me to make the time to get in the studio and do my work, because I want to do that. I really just resent packaging orders. Every couple weeks, it's the same cycle where orders come in sporadically—they'll come in the middle of the night, they'll come in the middle of the day, and I'm like, "Okay, well I just have to choose a random time where I'm going to make this arbitrary cutoff point where I decide to package all the orders up until this time." I'll wait too long and then people have late orders, and I'm responding to all these angry emails.

I do have originals for sale in my store, and every once in awhile somebody will buy one. I'm out walking my dog, and then I check my phone and it's like, "Now my rent's paid for the next two months." It's hard to give that up.



If you start working on something and realize it's not what you want it to be, is it hard for you to scrap it?

I scrap things all the time. A lot of the time when I'm working on a piece, I can tell in the first few hours if it's working. A lot of the time I'll scrap it two or three times, but I do keep trying to draw the same thing. I won't usually scrap the concept or the idea, but I will scrap the execution of it a bunch of times before I feel like I got off on the right foot. It's smooth sailing from there.

For a long time I penciled everything before I inked it in like a traditional cartoonist, comic-book style. I penciled things out on Bristol board, or on other paper where I could erase

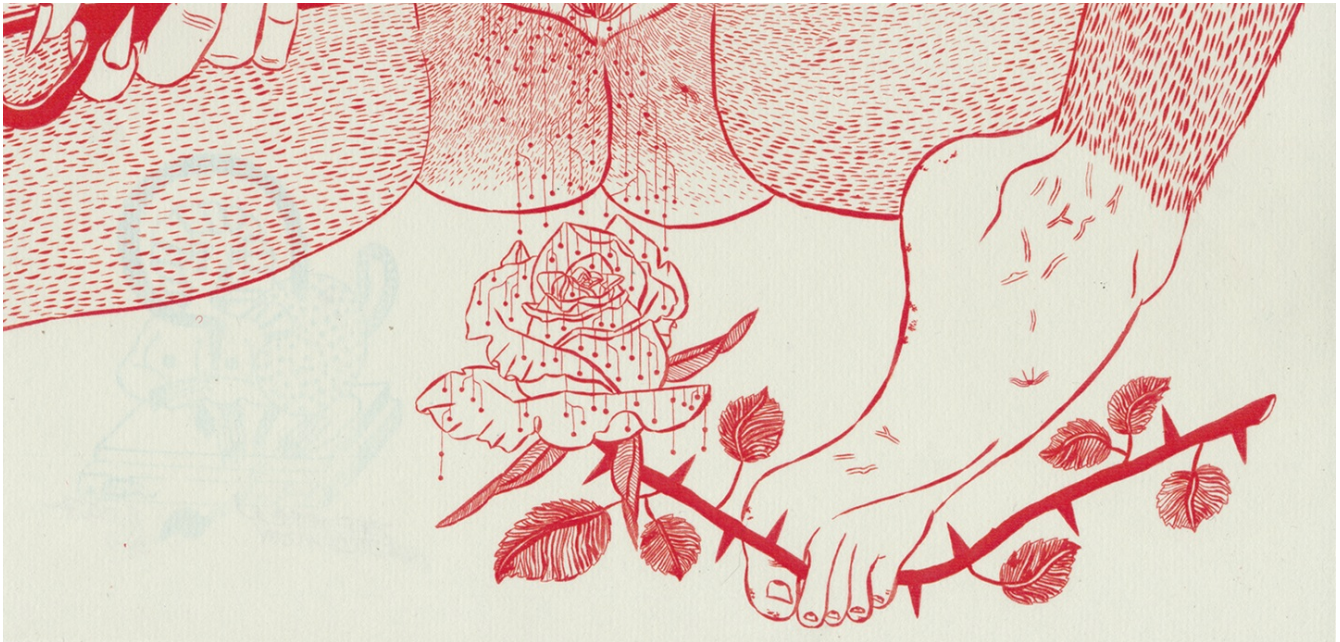
the lines later, and then I would ink over the lines and then erase. I also never used brushes. I always used pens or pencils.

Over the last couple of years I wanted to start working bigger and more painterly. I wanted to retrain myself to not be able to keep going back and re-penciling things and making things perfect before I ink them. I taught myself how to use a brush and started going straight to ink on everything—I would do a sketch and do a study on a different piece of paper, and then work straight from that onto a larger piece of paper with a brush.

I changed my approach because I was bored of how things were looking. I felt like I'd worked myself into a corner. I wanted to work on different kinds of paper, and to work with colors. If I have a pencil line and then I'm going over that with a colored ink you can still see the pencil line. I also wanted to start working bigger. Meticulously penciling things in with a mechanical pencil is not conducive to working with anything larger than 11 x 17.

I'm working more slowly now. When I would pencil things I could just go in and was basically tracing the lines and it was really fast. Now it's painstakingly slow, but that feels better and more cathartic. I spend 24/7 with my brain going a mile a minute, and me working more slowly is me retraining myself to think more slowly or in a more deliberate way. I feel less scattered and psycho and chaotic.





You return to the female body from different directions in your work. Do you ever find yourself wanting to branch into other subject matter, or is there enough to explore that you can keep finding inspiration?

I ricochet back and forth between those two feelings, because my default is definitely drawing women. If I look back on my body of work, it seems like every two years or so something changes in my trajectory, in what I find myself feeling like making work about, or what just ends up on the paper. I definitely go through periods where I feel like I'm rehashing the same subject matter. Sometimes I feel self-conscious about that and wish I had something else I was as fixated on so my body of work felt less homogenous, but on the flip-side I'm like, "This is clearly what I care deeply about making work about."

Coming up with something inorganically would be inauthentic to myself as a person and as an artist. The woman I'm always drawing is a complicated, loaded symbol for a lot of things I'm thinking about. She's the easiest vehicle for me to convey those things because she's autobiographical, because she's all-encompassing, and because she can serve as a way to express other ideas I'm interested in.

A couple years ago I was dealing so much with resentment and jealousy, and that's why those images started happening for me. Now I'm at this point in my life where I feel like I worked through a lot of that, and I don't necessarily feel as run-up about it anymore. When I start drawing it, I'm like, "Why am I still drawing this? Like get out of here!" There's obviously still residue.

I'm starting to feel a little bit backed into a corner recently. Instead of flipping out on myself, I'm starting to work on much larger paintings on canvas and moving into using acrylic paint and not exclusively working on paper. That's enough of a challenge for me. It's so exciting and interesting to me to be thinking differently about fields of color and composition and process, that it's distracting me from worrying so much about her.

Do you get creative blocks?

I do get creative blocks. When I get into zones where I start second-guessing my subject matter. When I'm on the end of the spectrum where I'm like, "Oh my god, this is so repetitive and I'm sick of this lady's face." At times I get so frustrated with myself and with her for that reason. The best thing for me to do at those times is not to rebel against the subject matter. When I'm being too hard on myself, I need to accept that there's more I have to say, visually, about the things I've been working through for a long time.

Something I started noticing that can work for me when I start feeling blocked up is to rest with the subject matter-like, be ok with the subject matter, but experiment in the execution of it. She'll still be the star of the show for me, but instead of working the same sides with the same ink on the same paper, I'll try to work a lot bigger with a pastel. I do things that are different as far as mark-making and color and composition and I don't worry so much about her not being a part of it. She's the central figure of my work. I don't think I should be so angry that she keeps showing up. I have such a fraught relationship with this woman because it's like a never ending self-portrait. It ends up reflecting a lot of the dichotomous feelings I have within myself, with my own self-esteem and my own issues.

Do you feel like a successful artist?

I feel successful in that I've set out ways to challenge myself with my art making, and I've been able to meet those personal challenges-like moving into working with a brush, or moving into being a little bit more large-scale. I've accomplished these goals I've set, privately in my practice, and that feels good.

As far as professionally successful from a third-party point of view? I have a lot of goals professionally that I'm still working towards, so in that sense I don't feel like a totally actualized successful artist. I want to make enormous paintings and have a solo show of them. I have big professional goals that I am slowly working towards, but I haven't gotten there yet.

I would hold back from calling myself "a successful artist" in any sense other than thinking that I'm proud of myself for the fact that I have a good work ethic, I like hard work, I spend a lot of time in my studio, I make a lot of different things, and I learn from my mistakes. In all those senses, I feel happy with myself and in my practice.



5 records I've been listening to a lot lately by Heather Benjamin:

love unlimited - from a girl's point of view we give to you
 robert wyatt - rock bottom
 foxy brown - ill na na
 lata mangeskar - the legend
 bruce haack - captain entropy

Name

Heather Benjamin

Vocation

Artist

Fact

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