

# On letting the work reveal itself to you



Perfumer Courtney Rafuse discusses why the fear of failure is motivating, being self-taught, and how art criticism is about connection

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As told to Hannah Ziegler, 2676 words.

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**You're self-taught. I'm wondering how the process of teaching yourself informed the way you work and approach collaboration?**

I think because I taught myself, it really did create a structure of non-structure, so that helps in collaborative work because it seems like everything comes together pretty naturally. I've worked on projects for people that I've never met before, who hadn't even really smelled my work, but had read about it and got a good sense of me from how I've written about my perfume.

**Being self-taught requires so much discipline and motivation, and I'm curious how you conjured that and how you maintain it as a business owner now.**

I think more than determination and motivation, having a real and very deeply embedded interest in it is probably the biggest point. This is the gift that keeps giving because I am never not learning something new. In perfumery, there's all these cool new molecules that come out and then you want to learn about those... It's an endless snowball of possibilities.

There is a lot of monotony to owning a business, obviously, and it's not my favorite thing in the world, but I think because I have that excitement to fall back on every day, it kind of keeps the spark alive.

**Did you ever have a mentor?**

No. I read a lot and I took a few classes for chemical safety, but there was no real mentor. For a long time, I had this almost detrimental, autodidactic approach where I didn't want to even smell other perfumes and I didn't want to really engage with the conversation around perfume at all. I still don't really, but I'm learning more and more that it's being a bit social media adverse. But for a really long time I was going in on my own and finding what worked for me.

Eventually, I realized that there was a huge community in this that was very much beginning to grow after I started in a major way, and then I got more into it. I started meeting people through work. Customers would message me and want to talk, and I would hang out with them sometimes and become friends with them and learn so much about their relationship to it. I started becoming more engaged in that way. Now I have a very big interest in most other perfumes. I love to smell them. I love to think about how they were made. The interest came after I started more so, which I think was really helpful for me developing my own footing.

**Scent has really bloomed in a big way over the last few years, and I imagine that it's a lot easier to engage**

**with the industry and other fragrances when you already have established your own creative vision. Do you feel like you ever still struggle with any comparison?**

It is crazy to see how many brands have come up in just the last few years alone. A friend of mine and I were on the phone a few weeks ago talking about this. When you own a business, and this has been my sole income for a few years now, and that's wonderful, but then comes the fear of, oh, that's going to get taken away from me. Or how long is this sustainable? I don't do any PR or anything like that, and I feel like I should probably start now, I guess. But at the same time, we were kind of batting back and forth just our anxieties about it and joking about how when we started becoming more popular, there's articles being like, "Oh, this is the new guard of the perfumery. It used to be these old guys in France and now it's these cool young women."

And we were joking about how we're the old new guard already, which sounds like a bit bloated in a way, but it's true. I'm not going to change anything about how I do what I do because it's been working and it continues to work. We will see in a few years or maybe even a few months, just how things shift and change, but I'm not married to owning a retail company at all. I always want to make perfume. That's something that I'd never want to stop doing, but I'm open to the coming shifts as they come.

**As long as Fragrantica exists, people are going to be interested.**

Exactly.

**I read something where you said you like making challenging scents, and I was wondering if you always set out to make scents that might not be super palatable to people.**

I think that people like to be challenged, and I think that the interest in niche perfumery is a lot [about] the artists behind it and a lot, obviously, [about] the fragrance itself. In terms of my scents, I don't necessarily see them as challenging so much anymore. They are, and I understand that's how people read them. I remember, speaking of Fragrantica, reading a review for Heliotrope Milkbath, which has truly some of my favorite reviews for any of my scents because it's so polarizing. This one person was like, "I don't understand why the perfumer chose to put a civet note into this perfume. It would be so beautiful without that. I don't know why they want people to hate the perfume," or just something along those lines, which I thought was very funny.

Clearly there's a lot of people that do really like it and it works for them, and they're not running around smelling like cat piss. What's challenging for some might not be for others, but I feel like no matter what, you have to have a prominent or near prominent note of disgust for anything to be worthwhile. Otherwise, it just smells kind of boring.

**I'm curious about experimenting with fragrances and your relationship to failure. Making a fragrance seems like so much trial and error, and you have a very specific vision.**

My relationship to failure is something that's ongoing and unraveling all the time. I think with this practice specifically, you actually cannot be hinged to expectation or outcome. If you do that, you're not going to make anything good, frankly. Usually work reveals itself to you as you're doing it or something bigger is revealed through it.

I feel like failure shows up in anxiety before something happens, more so than after or during. It's the part you need to peddle through, to get to the other part, which is finishing a project or releasing a project, which is obviously when all of those feelings come up really big. You're like, oh, nobody's going to care about this now. And then that's not the case and that's just not how it works. That's part of the motivation to do anything, is the prospect of failure, obviously. Because if you're going into something being like, oh, what if this flops? What if no one likes it? What if any possible negative outcome happens and then you do it and nothing bad happens and you just get to keep going?

Without the fear, you wouldn't have that nice little running start right after. Or you finished something that

you've been working on for a long time or trying to work out for a long time, and then it's over and you did it and you feel exhausted and you're like, God, I don't want to do that again a while. But then immediately you're like, oh, I exist in the prospect of failure and that's how all of this works.

**I'd also like to think that feeling anxious or scared is a sign of really deep care for the work you're doing. And I feel like if people don't feel that, it must mean there's a really big disconnect between you and what you're working on.**

That's totally true. If you're not completely terrified of what you're doing, then you're doing the wrong thing.

**If you care a lot, then you're going to want it to be good. I also wanted to know how you strike a balance between making work for yourself and making work for an audience. And if when you're making perfumes nowadays, you have a demographic in mind, or if it's still really just, 'this is what I want to make and hopefully people like it.'**

Definitely the latter, and I feel like my intuition has served me really well so far, and I kind of don't want to move out of working in any other way. I get that satisfaction of the rigidity of something through contract work. And that also teaches me so much about my practice too, because I'll be making something and I'll be like, well, normally I would go 10 times further with this, but maybe I should just stop here and see what that's like. So it's kind of given me almost back of my head, pretend you're working for a client and just build it slowly as opposed to just going all the way right away and then not being able to really pull out where you went wrong necessarily.

**Do you have any definitive markers of success?**

In how quickly things grew, it kind of made it hard to stop and go wow, but really I think I've been like this my whole life. I think there's maybe a bit of a survival mindset that is in there, but it's more like when something good happens, it's like, okay, now what? Instead of like, oh, let's take a moment with that and celebrate. The last perfume I released was the first time I had an event for my perfume outside of with Marissa [Zappas] when we did Gumamina. We had a party for that.

Marissa is really good at that, and she does parties for all of them, and I think that's so smart, and it's because both times that I've done it's felt so good and it was a lot of work and a lot of energy, but it's exciting and it almost feels like a real birth as opposed to just me sitting in my lab and sending out an email one day. It does feel really good to have that sort of ritual around it, and I feel like I really want to lean into that more. People want celebration. That's why even if you don't celebrate any of the holidays in December, it's like you still like the feeling of it because it feels communal, it feels there's just a grander sense of community that's unfortunately born from what it is, and I feel like I need to apply that to my own work big time.

**On the topic of community building, I was wondering what your creative community looks like at the moment.**

I think it's still evolving. I mean, when I started, I didn't really know where to find access to other people doing it so much as on Instagram and we would follow each other but not really talk. But then eventually it's like conversations started. That's how me and Marissa became friends.

I feel like it's such a warm community and such a welcoming community, and it's such a curious community. I love that when my customers email me, they address me by my name and I receive emails from them just asking about an order or something or just sending me a nice email about something I made, and they just sound like my friend emailing me.

**What's your general relationship to social media and digital platforms?**

I don't love doing social media. I don't like most things about it, honestly. I don't feel, it doesn't actually

help me feel very connected to people so much. A lot of the time it makes me feel a little bit further away from them, and so I know that obviously I have to have some sort of social media output, internet presence, and I do have one, but I've really slowed down on it in the last year or so and it feels like it hasn't affected my business.

I think criticism is sort of going to be something that either dies off in a way or is recreated because I feel like it's sort of lost its way. We used to rely so heavily on art criticism to really even be able to understand our own feelings around things. I feel like criticism is too widely available now that it's kind of lost its meaning in a way. That said, with perfume criticism or reviews, I feel like my personal take on it is that it's ... It's only based in community building. That's all that it is. One thing everybody knows about perfume is that one perfume does not smell the same to anybody. It just doesn't. But everyone can see what they want in a painting.

But perfume... it's truly up to the wearer. I find that part of it to be the most beautiful thing, is that they're all talking about it in this way, and then they find an understanding with each other or someone says something and then they can pick something new out, which is the point of criticism in a lot of ways. I don't take anything personally. If a lot of people were saying the same thing about one scent, I guess maybe I would take that to heart a little bit, but I don't know how that would change my process really.

Another favorite review on Fragrantica for Heliotrope Milkbath was someone just logged on and sat down and wrote, "I would be embarrassed to smell like this in public." And that's the review. That's just as valuable as the other, long-winded beautiful ones of how it reminds them of a loved one or any number of sexual experiences. It's all valuable and it's all interesting.

**What inspires you in general in your day-to-day life? Because perfume is so sensory. Is it a lot of, I don't know, experiences, like the things you're seeing out in the world, or is it more like reading, watching movies?**

A lot of the time it is reading and watching movies that will drag up feelings in me, but it is very much like most of my creative processes from a emotional and very personal place.. A lot of the time I have a ton of bottles of modifications and trial stuff that I've done just to be like, oh, what would this color smell like? Or what would this scene from this Fassbender movie smell like? But for anything that I've actually released and felt connected to, enough to really make it a whole, has been purely personal and emotional, less situational or visual.

**You mentioned Marissa and Gumamina. I'm wondering what that process of collaborating with her made you feel in terms of how you approach your work now, if it changed it at all or taught you anything new?**

It's taught us both a lot. We can look over each other's formulas now and again and just be like, "Oh, maybe try this." There's a trust that gets built into that, and that's really special. We learned how to assert ourselves better through each other. It's only been really good for me, and I know for her too. We're going to be doing something next year, which is probably one of the more insane projects I've ever worked on, but we're going to learn a lot from that too.

**Courtney Rafuse recommends:**

Taking a bath > Taking a walk (especially if you live in a city)

Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*

Active reminding that creativity is driven by desire, not discipline

Rilkes' *Letters to a Young Poet*

Making sculptures out of aluminium foil

Name

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Vocation  
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