

# On the power of staying present



Photographer Kane Ocean discusses trusting your instincts, the art of preparation, and knowing when to pivot.

May 22, 2024 -

As told to Sophy Drouin, 2725 words.

Tags: [Photography](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Beginnings](#), [Money](#), [Success](#), [Mental health](#).



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**When you were ten years old, your mom signed you up for photography classes. When did it click for you that you wanted to be a photographer?**

Watching the pictures appear in the dark room was really crazy, but I became especially mind blown when I saw photography I really liked. The first time I saw Richard Avadon's work, David Sims, the first old issue of *Dazed* I held-I remember looking at those and being like, *what the hell*. I always liked aesthetics-how clothes looked-and then the ability to create characters. I loved movies. So movies, Avadon, [David] Sims, Jeurgan [Teller] and the works I saw in 2000's issues of *Dazed* created an intersection that made me pursue the medium of photography.

I was passionate about music, too, maybe even a little bit more into music than photography around fourteen, fifteen, but I didn't meet anyone who was a rockstar or successful musician. I got very lucky when my mom happened to meet a really successful photographer. I didn't choose photography just because I could make money at it, but this was the first example of someone making a living out of one of the things that I loved, at a time when I was really stressed about making a living because my family didn't have a lot, and I was like, *I don't want to do this again*.

The people in my immediate environment were like, "You know how many people want to be a rockstar?" all the time. And I understand where that comes from if you're talking to a kid and you're trying not to give them delusional ideas. So I don't resent them, I guess I kind of see it as fate guiding me towards photography and I feel really fortunate. I'm still so in love with photography after all this time.

**How does your passion for music influence and inspire your photography?**

I'm really instinctual. So I sometimes have a difficult time understanding where inspirations begin and end. I think there is an inherent overlap in what I'm interested in-music, skateboarding, fashion, film-and they're all bridges that allow me to express myself and connect with people who might not necessarily be interested in fashion, for example, but find an access point to it through music, or vice versa.

**You support yourself with your art, which is something a lot of artists aspire to. Can you tell me the best and worst part about it?**

The best part-when things are going really well-is freedom. When I was more in the developmental stage, a lot of the process felt like building confidence in my instincts. And when it's working for long enough, suddenly it flips and your instincts become the constant that you rely on most. So that's really liberating. I finally got over the imposter syndrome of "Can I do this?" Now, the best thing is to move forward with a few trusted collaborators and have faith. You're basically trusting yourself for a living, which is pretty exciting. But on the flipside, a lot of the time, what I'm doing is still a job, and so I'm constantly having to negotiate. I really care about my work, and sometimes there are such big teams at play that it's tough to hold on to the vision.





Do you have a tough time switching hats from business to artist?

Yeah, yeah. I basically have removed myself completely from business. It really gets in the way for me of the creative stuff. I used to try to do friends' brands projects myself because I knew they might be offended if I

sent them to my agent. But I realized I can't do it [that way], I find the creative process too personal, and I want to do my best to the full amount each time so I need someone in between to basically create options for the person who's commissioning me so that the project is clear. If they're not presented with options, I'm just gonna go all the way every time and issues might arise from that disconnect. I need that person to mediate, and having older friends in similar positions has helped normalize it for me. Once we get to work after that, it's always the best.

**What would you tell artists early in their career about learning to say yes and no?**

I know it came off as arrogance or delusion to my mom. I would tell her when I would say no to things early on, and she'd be like, "You have no business saying no..." I was really, really broke. But I always had a sense of what I was interested in. I knew that if I took on something that I didn't resonate with or think was actually good, then it wouldn't turn out, and it would be out there in the world with my name on it.

**It might hurt more in the long run than benefit in the short run?**

Totally. I was already dealing with trying to make it in Montreal when I didn't really speak French very well—that was already a hurdle that slowed my trajectory—and I was being really picky about what I was doing, so it definitely made things take longer. But I think, in the long run, it was probably worth it because even if it may have felt slow, I think what an artist does and puts out into the world is important.

To be clear, I definitely took a lot of paid work that didn't necessarily speak to me, but I compartmentalized those projects as less my own expression, and more of a technical exercise which also funded my life. I would pick projects I knew wouldn't be super public facing for me. So, if it was something I knew would involve my own creative expression, I would be especially selective. And then if there was a big institution that just needed me to be a cog in it, then I would do less inspiring jobs. Protect your artistic integrity, but most people have to earn a living, so sometimes we make concessions. Ultimately I'm very grateful for even those less fun jobs because without them I wouldn't be here now.

**You're predominantly a fashion photographer, but would you enjoy doing more personal projects again like your book, WAYN?**

I do want to make more books. I'm working on one now, actually. Making WAYN was a really cool process. I like it when an artist builds a world or an experience—whether it's a collection, a film, a party, a book. I love going into people's worlds for a set amount of time. So it was really fun to create an experience—as abstract as it might have been—it was fun to provide something that was exactly, specifically how I wanted, and then to release that into the world and let people interpret it in their own way.



We both grew up in Canada, with the American Dream within reach. Moving from Vancouver to Montreal to New York, have you had to adjust your expectations and dreams, or have those stayed consistent throughout?

When I was young, in high school, I had these grandiose things I wanted. I remember thinking, going to a wealthier friend's house with a big pool and fancy cars, I was like, "oh, I want that: the pool, the house, the Ferrari." As

I began to own things I always wanted, I would say I've definitely adjusted what I value and will provide a happy life. I have a lifestyle in mind that is definitely comfortable, I still have expensive taste, but I don't want a Ferrari. [laughs]

Getting to New York has been both humbling and revitalizing at the same time. I'm into manifesting and putting dreams out there, but I don't do it in a three year plan, five years, etc. It's more just dreams, and more specific to people I would love to work with rather than the time in which it needs to happen.

When things would get stressful, and tight, and difficult, I would become paralyzed and anxious and start spiraling. I'd worry that things wouldn't be ok. With time and experience, when there's stillness and there's nothing coming at me, that's the time to be grateful and shoot personal work, and to reach out to people I'm inspired by who I want to work with.

**What's your relationship with failure?**

I used to be so worried about not getting a job or a response, I really took it personally. It's just been a practice of changing my perspective on it. What helps is the busier you become, you realize how not personal everything is. There can be a variety of reasons another person is chosen for a job, and I've forgotten to respond to emails from people I didn't dislike at all. Once you realize that—that they might have wanted to reach out but got pulled away—it's freeing. I've gotten messages back five months later from people who got caught up and forgot to reply.

Failure wise, my nightmare would be not understanding what someone wanted and not delivering work we both loved. Some people might be easier to work with than me in terms of going with the flow, but [through learning from miscommunications,] I've become very particular about making sure we know what we're doing: I ask a lot of questions before the shoot so that all the collaborators are, as much as possible, in alignment on the desired outcome of the project.

**You were doing really well in Montreal. What pushed you to take this leap to New York?**

I deeply appreciate Vancouver and Montreal for being my homes. Many people in Montreal embraced me, and I really grew into my own there. I miss a lot of people, and they're both important to me. But I've always wanted to create the best work possible—the access to clothes, talent, and collaborators in New York, Paris, and London was always a dream. I was planning to move before COVID and it just didn't happen. It was a mix of luck, instinct, and fate. The pandemic gave me two more years to keep working really hard in Montreal and do the best I could. And now that I've gotten here, even though I'm essentially starting over, I think a lot of those projects that I did the last while are the reason I'm getting a lot of the meetings. I am very grateful.

**I'm glad you mentioned luck and timing, because your ethos about being in the present and focusing on your art and what you can do moment to moment is so important in times when something like COVID happens that is very destabilizing. If you'd set hard deadlines to move for example, it could have felt like an unmanageable blow.**

As an artist, so much of what makes you good is adapting and evolving. Take a piece of bad news, process it, let it pass, and then pivot.

**How do you deal with fear or resistance coming up in your practice?**

Fear always happens before something is in front of me. Anxiety is fear of the unknown but when you're present—I've noticed it with athletes. They're one person outside, but on the field, they are in the zone. For me, once we're on set, beyond the beginning jitters, I lock in.

I deal with fear by preparing. That's the only way. Feedback I get from collaborators afterwards is they appreciate how thorough we are. We really cover everything about what could happen in the day, we try to know every answer and then once we have that plan, we're ready to adapt or throw it away when people have—often great—



ideas in the moment. Everyone has a different process and there's no right or wrong way to do it. For me, the more we prepare, the freer we can be on the day because we really understand where we're going. I do all the preparation so that I can feel as free as I can when we're working.





**Do you have a piece of advice that you received that sticks out for you? Has a piece of advice stuck out to you in your career, one that you received or one you would give to aspiring photographers?**

I know for a fact that people are better at interpreting advice than me because they did a lot better than me at school [laughs].

When I was 16 I wrote a message to [the photographer] Josh Olins and he replied. That meant a lot to me. I'll paraphrase, but some of the advice I remember being helpful was: it could be a good idea to assist photographers you respect. It's a good way to learn the technical side, and ultimately a way to meet established industry people who's assistants will likely become the people you end up working with. He suggested learning about clothing/fashion, and encouraged me to try making something simple but strong, as opposed to aiming for something really complex right away. His final advice was to simply take a lot of photos, all the time.

I'm also obsessed with interviews with artists I like. I love learning about people's experiences. I think I learn more through examples of humans being alive and how they've operated and grown and evolved over long periods of time, so that's my go to.

I've learned that not zooming out too far is really important. In any of these paths, when you try to see the whole picture and examine what you do in the context of everything from far away, with preconceived notions about it, it can be paralyzing.

Sometimes, the best way to proceed is just to write down a couple things you think would be interesting to explore and then just start doing it. Whether that's helping at a junior level in a field you want to work in, or doing a simpler version of something bigger that you want to do. And early on try not to be too precious. I think we really develop through playing. There are very few examples of highly successful people who knew all along exactly how they were going to get there-unless they were dealing with a unique level of nepotism.

Also, comparing is really bad. Just stick to your gut and what you actually care about, that's my advice.

**So how does it feel to have made the move to New York?**

I've never been so inspired. I love this city, and it means a lot how welcoming people have been. Not to get it twisted though: there is a lot of pressure, and I have a lot to prove to myself, and a lot of room to grow and develop. But I'm really excited. About all of it.

**Kane Ocean Recommends:**

*Notes and to-do lists saved my life*

Richard Avedon: Darkness and Light: I think it's on youtube. I don't know if it directly influenced my approach to photography, but it's one of my fav documentaries ever. Avedon has been criticized for his sometimes cruel portrayal of his subjects, but I remember being inspired by his sense of curiosity. I still don't understand how anybody could have made such a beautiful body of work.

Talk to people you don't know, make some friends

Book stores: Some of my favorites are High Valley, Karma, Dashwood, and Harper's in NYC, Soop Soop in Toronto, Yvon Lambert and OFR in Paris, Claire de Rouen, Donlon, November, and Photo Books Cafe in London, Do you read me?! in Berlin, and Dessin, Tsite, Super Labo, and Cow in Japan. There are many more I don't know or are forgetting, but the good ones feel like someone's own world

At the end of the day, it's not that serious. If you aim to be good to people when you can be, it makes life more fun

Name

Kane Ocean

Vocation  
photographer

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