On how everything is connected

Portrait artist and filmmaker Catalina Kulczar discusses staying connected with past collaborators, time management, her ongoing work with David Byrne, and the value of swimming.

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As told to Miriam Garcia, 1789 words.

Tags: Photography, Film, Mental health, Collaboration, Time management.

Do you remember the first time you realized that you wanted to be an artist and work with images?

I do actually. I grew up in Caracas, Venezuela, and there was this band called Flans. They had a song called "Te Conocí en un Bazar" that I loved so much. I remember at lunchtime in the schoolyard I would plan out in my mind what this music video was like. I had pictured the whole thing in my mind—I could see the shopping aisles, what the store looked like, and I could see the girls doing a choreographed dance. I wanted to create and direct that music video.

What's your process for taking portraits?

I think the essence of portraiture photography, is capturing someone's soul, it's connecting with them. To achieve this I do a lot of pre-production work. The first thing I like to do is give those whom I photograph some homework. I ask them five questions and I encourage them to answer them ahead of time so I can have more information when I come on set. Some of the questions include "If you had a superpower, what would it be?," or "What song is currently spinning in your head?," "What makes you happy?," "What do you do when you're not working?"

Depending on how much they answer, I extract information that will help me further connect on set, and I will also curate a playlist that they'll enjoy the moment they walk into my studio. I do as much research on each person I photograph as I can, looking through articles, interviews, photographs, and videos of them in the past. This is how I already feel connected to them because I have done so much work beforehand, so the photoshoot becomes this intimate connection. It's like the icing on the top of all the work that I've done leading up to that moment.

Is there anything in particular that you're looking for in your portraits?

Absolutely. What I'm looking for is a genuine connection, regardless if it is a commercial job or it's a personal project. It is all in the eyes, and once I know that I have the image, it feels amazing—and they can certainly tell by my expression that we got it.

You have collaborated with David Byrne on multiple projects. How did this collaboration start?

It's all connected in a beautiful way. I stopped believing in coincidences when I moved to New York because every person that has touched my life has opened a door to something else, David Byrne is one of them. He came into my life because 11 years ago, I produced and filmed a concert documentary called *La Casa del Ritmo*, about Los Amigos

Invisibles, a band from Venezuela who at that time were celebrating their 20 years anniversary.

David discovered Los Amigos Invisibles, so for the documentary, we had to tell that story, and who better to tell that story than David Byrne himself. We interviewed him, and after that, we started a professional relationship.

A year later, David hired me to do his press photography. He liked my work back then, and so whenever there were photography needs he would call me. He was doing a record with St. Vincent a few years later called *Love This Giant*, and he commissioned me to create the inside album art.

Most recently, I was at King's Theater where he was performing his *American Utopia* shows, and I spent two shows pretty much carte blanche. I could photograph the show from anywhere in the space—from backstage to the rafters—and one of those images ended up being the centerfold for the *American Utopia* vinyl record and CD.

What is good advice to cultivate your professional network?

Keep in contact with people even when the job is done, and nurture those relationships. Send them a quick hi, let them know what you're up to, and ask how they are doing. Be kind and open to meeting people.

You run your studio, and I guess you have to be in charge of admin tasks like paying the rent, taxes, and other bills. But you also have to work on your creative projects. How do you balance both work areas?

I've been managing my projects and running the studio for so long that it's second nature. Time management is everything. There are blocks of times, like Monday mornings, where I always do a lot of admin work (bills, QuickBooks, invoices). On Fridays, I look at the following week's schedule to organize work and childcare, and the rest of the time I have meetings, work on projects, read, go for walks or swim. The goal is to have a studio manager that will take care of all of the admin work in our studio, but until then, I will be in charge.

What's your relationship with social media? Because it seems that if you are a photographer, you definitely have to be on Instagram, right? Do you feel like it's part of your job to take care of that part?

I have a love/hate relationship with social media. On one hand, you want to be present, you want to be showing work, you want people to see your name come up as they scroll. However, there are times where I just wish I had a flip phone, so you could just make a call and be done and go back to focusing on your work. All in all, social media is part of my marketing plan—a way to stay on radars and share your work. As someone who creates visuals, Instagram is a tool that is there for the taking.

Is there a photography project that you have always wanted to develop but this has not been possible because of different circumstances?

In 2009 right before I moved to New York, I started a project called "Let Love Reign." It's a photography project for marriage equality. This was Prop8 was heating up in California. I was upset because I felt it was unfair that my male partner and I had equal rights in marriage but two people of the same gender did not. How terribly unfair, I thought—how can you deny that love is love and that two people, regardless of gender, should have the same rights in marriage?

I became a marriage equality advocate and Let Love Reign started by photographing a couple that I admired very much, Tim and Ron, who at that point had been together for 20 years, running a shop in Charlotte for about 15 years. For the project, I ended interviewing and making portraits of 50 same-sex couples all over the United States.

I've always dreamed of this book to be like Andrew Zuckerman's *Wisdom*. A big, beautiful, black and white portrait coffee table book with their inspiring, heartbreaking stories of love, of coming out, of being welcomed, of being shunned by their families.

For the past five years, I have tried to get this book published but have not been successful yet. This was the only crowdfunding of three campaigns where I did not reach the goal. Two separate publishers offered to make the Let Love Reign book—they each asked me to fork out $20K to print the book, and honestly, I do not want to go that route. I am researching and trying to self-publish Let Love Reign in the near future.

You did not attend photography or film school. You are self-taught. Was there a moment or event that reassured you that you were on the right path?

Yes. 2012, when I first made portraits of David Byrne. We had been in New York for nearly two years, and I had a solid crew. It was a seamless production and a seminal moment in my career. There wasn't any doubt beforehand but once I had that experience under my belt, I thought "Okay, I got this. Absolutely, I've got this."

You love swimming and you recently started swimming on the beaches of New York, even during the winter. What is appealing about swimming in freezing water?

I'm so glad you asked because swimming is one of my passions. Creating imagery, traveling, and swimming are my top three. I have been swimming before I was walking, I have been doing this longer than I have done anything else in my life. In New York, swimming has always been challenging because of the seasons, pools aren't always nearby, some of them are but they're always crowded, others are cost-prohibitive and because of all these reasons, I have not been swimming as often as previously in other cities I've lived in.

Through serendipitous meetings with people, I ended up doing a relay from the North Fork in New York up to Connecticut. One of the swimmers from this relay emailed me a few months later saying, "Hey, we're going to buy wetsuits so we can swim in the winter—do you want to join us?"

This was at the end of November and I thought this was the craziest idea and said absolutely….Two to three days a week, I get up at 5:00 am. I make my tea, I make a smoothie, I put on my wetsuit and swim in Brighton Beach with my swimming pod.

The water temperature was as low as 28 degrees back in February and when I swim, there's no pandemic. When I swim, I meditate. When I swim, I let my mind go. I am so happy that I discovered this group of people. I have felt so much gratitude for this pod that I am working on a short documentary about these pandemic swims. This pod and this pandemic swimming have changed me.

In what ways?

Swimming basically revived a part of my soul that was missing for a very long time, even before the pandemic. Having the peace of mind that on any given day I know that I can get in the water and swim with someone is priceless. Knowing that I can swim again has brought back peace and sanity. It's also allowed my mind to wander again and to be creative. I feel that the pandemic has taken a lot away from a lot of people, but I feel incredibly lucky because the pandemic has given me this pod of swimmers, and I don't take that lightly. People have noticed a change in me. I'm happier.

Catalina Kulczar Recommends:

open water swimming

The Little Prince by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

traveling

picnics with friends

hugs

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Vocation

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