

On what it means to be a working artist



Visual artist and gallerist Ryan Wallace discusses what it means to be a working artist

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As told to Resham Mantri, 2746 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Curation](#), [Process](#), [Independence](#), [Success](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Beginnings](#), [Business](#).

What draws you to the materials you use for your art?

I can never tell how intentional my use of materials is. First and foremost, I come at things from an understanding of painting. I could always paint better than I could draw; it was just something I had a knack for. But then with painting, there's only a certain number of surfaces you have, and having these other materials come into play in the studio pushes me out of my tendencies.

I like things that you really have to stand in front of to actually experience. An image of my work does not look anything like what it actually is, and my materials help that physical interaction with the work, which I think is interesting. Everything is so fast now. My life is hectic, and standing in front of a painting sometimes feels like the only thing that requires me to slow down.

Also, I like things to look a little fucked. Rather than, "Oh, that's really pretty." It's who I am and what I grew up into.



Installation view: 56 Henry, New York, NY, 2016

What did you grow up appreciating?

Skateboarding, punk rock, graffiti, snowboarding. I always loved the skate-art crossover world, but as a maker, it never made sense to me. The aesthetic of all those guys—like with Beautiful Losers—I love all that work. There was a point in time when, because I studied illustration, I was making work that was kind of within that aesthetic. But it didn't feel honest. The rattiness of the materials I use now just make sense to me.

I wanted to talk about the business of selling your own art and, with your gallery, selling other people's art. Maybe we can start with things you know now about the business of selling your own work?

I actually don't sell my own work. Part of the reason that I studied illustration was I believed it was more of a meritocracy than the fine art world. But really, selling work is all about personal relationships, and your peer group. It's about just being around, and going to peoples' shows, and going to galleries. I tell people, since I do run the gallery, if you show support for someone's thing, they'll want to reciprocate that. Whereas if you're just always like, "Hey, give me a show, I'm the best," that's kind of off-putting.

It's hard. I think there's a common misconception (since I do run the gallery) that I have some insight into what makes selling easier, or what makes your work more saleable. But running a gallery has really taught me that there is no way to predict when commerce will intercept. There's a tipping point for a creative person in any industry, like when you get name recognition. But really, what I look for to show—and what I look for to make—is just something that's totally unique. That isn't necessarily a good strategy for sales, because people like stuff that looks like other stuff. I can get real cynical about how the art world trends, and about collector buying habits, but I've pretty much found that if you just do your own thing, it kind of works out.

So, stay true to your own work.

Yeah, and approach it as a marathon, not a sprint. Attention brings money really quickly, but people also move on just as quickly. There are exceptions to that, 100%. I went to school with a couple of people that got that lottery ticket in the beginning, and while they might be fine forever, there are 100 other people who were right there at the same time who are now just gone. I tell other artists, as long as you're continuously getting shows and putting work out there, that's almost more important than making sales. Because eventually, the

sales will happen.

The other thing that's healthy about that outlook is that you kind of can't lose it. If it all comes at you when you're 50 or 60, then you can say, "Oh, there's no reason my painting shouldn't be \$40,000. I've been making art for 25 years and showing for 25 years." When you are 25 years old and your work costs \$25,000 and people your own age can't afford that, then what happens?

I imagine that socializing as part of the gallery process is also good for seeing what's happening out there, for your own work.

Yeah, it's energizing for sure. While my wires do get crossed, the gallery has served that role for me as an artist because I never really liked networking. That's the thing that gets weird about it. Are you there to show support, or are you there to network for yourself at someone else's opening? If it's the latter, that sucks. So for me, I was able to remove myself from talking about myself, because I have to go out and do these things on behalf of the artists I work with. As a result, that gets me out there more.



Installation View: Romer Young Gallery, San Francisco, CA, 2017

What inspired you to start your own gallery?

It was kind of an accident. I always curated shows. I was in this transitional period of trying to do illustration and studio work, and it was a time when the internet was being used more socially. All this stuff happened for me in California, just from meeting people online. So, as a way to reciprocate those opportunities, I started trying to do things on the east coast. I enjoyed the social aspect of it. I enjoyed looking at artworks next to each other in a different way for an exhibition.

I never thought I'd have a gallery. Running a gallery and being an artist in NYC is a whole different thing than what I wound up doing. Now I'm often in Long Island, where my wife Casey works, and our friend Hilary Shaffner lives here in the summer. I just found myself out there, and discovered that there's money, as well as an arts community, because it's a satellite to NYC. We saw an opportunity to show our peer group. We totally didn't know anything about how the business operates, but we were like, "Well, if people here like buying art, maybe they would like this, or this." So we pulled a small amount of money together and got a six-month lease. We were like, "I bet we can make this money back." And we did. Then that led to another show, and it just snowballed, really.

As a gallery co-owner, what sort of art do you respond to? Is there anything that ties together the artists that you work with?

There really isn't. It started with a peer group, and it organically grew out of that. I like a lot of different things, but yeah, I do have to love it for it to get in the door. Then maybe we consider if there's a chance to sell it. We do want to sell things, but I'm never like, "Oh, I know this person's popular. Let's see if we can get a show with them."

As the gallery has evolved, I've been able to do shows with people that I looked up to, who used to be total strangers. By doing it for a long time, they kind of came into the orbit of the gallery one way or another. That made it easier to reach out to them, without it being a total cold call.



Installation View: Susan Inglett Gallery, New York, NY 2016

I'm thinking about what you said about running a gallery being a nice counterpoint to making your own art. Maybe the appeal of doing a gallery is you're out of your own head a little bit.

Running the gallery does have a psychological benefit. I can get so caught up in myself and in my work, when every opportunity that comes along feels like it has weight to it. Even if I get a Times review and everything sells, it never feels like enough. But because of the gallery and its schedule, I'm immediately thrust outside of myself. I will work, work, work in the studio, I'll put a show up, and then I'll be on to something at the gallery that doesn't allow me to wallow in myself, or in my own success or failure. That feels healthy.

Running a gallery does get me to the point where I don't feel like I'm in the studio enough. But I'll get to a breaking point, so that when I do get in there, it's really productive. I get nervous every time I go in, because I have to get my sea legs real quick. But for example, right now I'm in a really good place in the studio because I've wanted to be in there for so long.

Running a gallery is relevant to having a studio practice in the way that maybe teaching would be. Or, I used to have a job as a graphic designer for a huge Fortune 500 company, and that was soul-sucking, but paid. I'm very much pro-job. I think it's really good to take the pressure off of studio stuff, and it's a nice balance to have found something that feels creative, and feels like I'm contributing to the community.

Jobs where you're put into a subservient role is a drag for an artist, when you know that you're at whatever level, and some collector is treating you like a fucking jackass. It can make you sour on the whole art scene. I've been fortunate to have jobs either totally removed from the art world, or in this [gallery] role, which feels like I'm contributing to the art world in another way.

The downside of running the gallery is that I have to run a business, which is intense. There's no safety net. Whether it's 20 different artists work or my own work, there's still only one art market. When I worked for Nickelodeon Magazine, it was nice to be like, "Well, nothing's selling. At least SpongeBob is paying the bills."

Is the goal to live off your work?

That was my youthful goal. That specific goal is so prioritized by young people. There's this idea of, "I just want to be able to not have a job and live off my work." But that mindset can be detrimental to your work, you know? That's why having a job can be helpful. You don't want to be scrambling to get some anointed status of "artist living off their work." It also depends on the kind of work that you make.

There's some lingering sense that when you have a job, you're not a real artist.

That's a bullshit stigma. Most artists are never going to have access to the commercial market that someone like Christopher Wool is in, but that doesn't mean that they're less important. The willy-nilly factors that go into market-making are so unrelated to the quality of the art. I don't know. Earning a living solely through your art is just a false marker.

Having a job is absolutely ok. Having lived off my work for a while, I'm now at a point where I just can't get a stable job without something really suffering. So for me, the gallery is my day job, but that's just as hard as making it as an artist. So right now, that three-day-a-week job with a 40K sounds pretty amazing. It would just physically be impossible for me to have the time for that.



Installation View: ICA at MECA, Portland, ME, 2018

Plus, you have two kids. I'm interested in the way people's work perspectives change when they have kids. A lot of people talk about how it focuses their time in a really productive way. How has having kids affected your work?

Having kids is super disruptive for workflow. There's no way around that. The first thing that happened was when my wife was pregnant with our first son, I lost the job I'd had for 10 years, which was three days a week with a 401K and all that. It was so freaky and scary at the time, but it was like, "Well, do I want to go get another dickhead job like this, or do I want to try and do what I want to do?"

From a conservative Connecticut upbringing perspective, going it on my own was the irresponsible route. But it was like, "Okay, I have these unemployment benefits for a little while. Why don't I see what I can do?" That was definitely a decision come to by knowing a child was coming, because I was thinking about what my lifestyle would teach this new person about the world. "Oh, dad does what he wants to do every day. That's cool. I can do what I want to do every day." Or, "dad goes and pushes SpongeBob around on the computer and curses his life everyday, so I guess I have to get a job in middle management."

In terms of time management, it's like everything is moment to moment. Except for when there're big deadlines approaching, I never know what I'm going to be doing every day. It's like, "do I have the kids today?" Yes or no. Then it's like, "do I have to answer emails, do I have to go to the studio?" It's totally chaotic.

Where do you find you work best? Do you have a studio here in New York, and also in Long Island?

I have a studio here, and I'm really lucky that some collectors have this property next door to their house, and they let me work there for now. I don't know about the "best" place to work. It's just different in each place. I really like working out in Long Island with the barn door open. It's pretty luxurious. But there's also a manicness to the studio here in New York, and that's helpful, too. But yeah, not in a romantic notion. It's not like the energy of the street pours into the canvas, or anything.

I was reading somewhere about this writer who needed to get out of the city to really work. She just needed to have the time away from all these competing social or other interests.

I totally understand that. I'm kind of a robot in those things, though. The big difference between the two studios is completely practical. I had an idea for these sculptures that I couldn't do here, because my studio's not that big and I can't make a total mess. Out there, I can fucking trash the place and it doesn't matter, because it's a barn that's going to get torn down. I'm also more likely to make 10-foot paintings out there than in my New York studio, because here, I can't get them down the stairwell. It's things like that. I just look for opportunities that I can't exploit elsewhere, and run with them.



Installation View: ICA at MECA, Portland, ME, 2018

Do you have any other things that help you when you get creatively stuck?

Just leave. If it's not working, you can't force it. That's really hard to do, but even last night, I wanted to go back to the studio because I had a lot of stuff that needed to get done. But I was like, "You know what? I'm just going to sit here and watch snowboarding, get in bed, and get up early. I will probably be more productive tomorrow than if I go back now and just try and plow through." So, yeah. Just leave.

Ryan Wallace recommends:

Unwound - [Leaves Turn Inside You](#)

Max Ernst, [La famille nombreuse](#) (The Numerous Family), 1927

Werner Herzog, [Cave of Forgotten Dreams](#)

Howard Zinn, [A People's History of the United States](#)

[This American Life](#)

Name

Ryan Wallace

Vocation

Visual Artist



