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As told to Ann-Derrick Gaillot, 2816 words.

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On checking in with yourself

Tattoo artist Jalen Frizzell discusses the importance of setting boundaries, centering Black people in her practice, what she learned about herself by starting her own business, leaving space for play, and remembering to prioritize mental health.

How do you get in the zone to draw versus to tattoo someone?

Right now I am really trying to draw less for tattoos. Tattooing requires a certain amount of refinement. To get myself in the drawing zone, I've been trying to do a daily practice of just drawing while I journal without expectation of the outcome. I find that really freeing and it also adds to my flow when I'm drawing for a tattoo. Just allowing yourself that space to play almost allows yourself the space to be serious and concentrated, letting both sides of yourself live that way.

Honestly, at this point in time, it takes me a very long time to prepare for a tattoo. I think that's because I lack a bit of consistency when it comes to my own personal care. [I] eat a good breakfast. I show my designs the day of, but I make sure to have a very, very thorough consult.

Sometimes people make fun of me, being like, "Your consults are so long." We would be sitting down for like 45 minutes, discussing this and that, looking up photos. I try and have a clear as possible consult so that it does give me that ability to just be more self-assured in the drawing and tattooing process.

You were mentioning that you were experiencing burnout recently. How did you get to that point and how have you been coping with it?

It has been such a fucking long time coming. Like when I reflect on it, it literally was coming from elementary school. I think one of the earliest symptoms of my racial trauma was probably not being diagnosed with ADD as a child. There's already the biases when it comes to femmes and girls with ADD, but then you add Blackness on top of that and you're just the disruptive kid that talks too much. And you're high-functioning in other realms, but then none of your assignments can get in on time. If I had strategies for getting shit done [back then], I think I would have been better at this point.

I don't even think I realized that I was an anxious person [before]. I was just like, "Why do all my clients have to wait two hours before their appointment because I've been spending five hours redrawing their drawing over and over again?" [That realization] came after a few radical shifts. I quit the white-owned shop that I was working at. Then COVID happened and I finally got to truly be my own boss. I finally got to dictate my own schedule and choose my projects.

I was in walk-in shops my whole career. I didn't really have the space, with my undiagnosed ADD, to really sit down and focus on what I wanted to make in tattoos. Also the lane of tattooing that I'm in, it's super high demanding of production. Producing work, doing walk-ins, having a lot of drawing homework after tattooing all day. It just became a balancing act. I inevitably crumbled. Everything plays into it,

including being in a white-dominated industry, continuing those microaggressions, continuing the racial trauma.

All of these things coming together made me realize how weak of a foundation I had and it just erupted. Experiencing burnout forced me to be like, "Okay, one client a day." It is egotistical to be like, "I am a fast tatter, fast tats, as many tats as possible, done clean, done solid, come to me, I can bang them out" versus really acknowledging the ritual of it and giving yourself space to be a human and eat breakfast, do some meditation before you go to work.

Now I'm just taking a step back with this beautiful time that we've been given under very unfortunate circumstances. I am able to work on the technique as well as work on what I want to do rather than just waiting for someone to be like, "I want a snake," "I want a sacred heart." Without those systemic confines, it gives you the opportunity to make your own boundaries with who you are as an artist and what you can really give and what you're willing to accept.

What do those boundaries look like for you?

I think I'm still learning what that means. [I'm] learning about vicarious trauma through an artist named Tamara Santibanez. There's a lot of vicarious trauma that happens in tattooing. It's a really painful process. It's a really emotional process. People get tattoos for all kinds of reasons, to express themselves, to feel autonomy, to pay homage. And some of those stories, while they are beautiful, I don't know if a tattoo artist can carry them. I think before I just wanted to be an open container for anyone's story. At the same time, while vulnerability is so appreciated, some things need to be directed through the right channels so that it can be properly held.

I think setting boundaries around certain sharing [is important] and establishing the tone beforehand. Going into a tattoo and being like, "I might not be speaking as much during the process but I'd love to talk more after." Because even as tattooers we might not be well enough to be an open container for someone else's pain that day.

Even small things like boundaries around access. There's a lot of people trying to contact you often and I think having a preliminary write-up being like, "This is my process of booking. This is what you can expect to hear back from me." Establishing all those boundaries helps manage your client's expectations and creates just an easier flow all around.

How do you navigate promoting your work and your business?

It feels weird for sure. The branch of tattooing that I incubated in a bit, especially as a femme, if you show yourself, if you show your body or you show who you are, [it's assumed] instead of just being good at tattooing you're just getting clients because of how you appear. It's quickly becoming a dead ideology.

Navigating self-promotion is definitely a challenge because it forces you to be a part of social media, which is slowly becoming more of a tool for corporations and governments. I have been learning the importance of showing myself. I've been learning the importance of how much the body of the person who is giving you a tattoo actually matters to all of your clients, especially if you're not white, not skinny, not cis. Also, for promotion, I've just learning from other people as well. I have some of my homies who know how to structure schedules, schedule a flash day. I've been trying to take cues from that.

What's great about tattoos is once you start tapping into the clientele that you naturally really align with, your tattoos start promoting themselves. Just being genuine, dedicating yourself to your art practice, eventually, your community will come. A few years ago, I drew a few Black women tattoos and I was scared, "No one is going to want this." Now I have a community around me who supports me, I support them, and in that, there's also mutual promotion. If I share a tattoo now, I have other Black tattooers celebrating me and being like, "That's what's up."

Your style focuses on imagery of Black people, especially Black women. How did you come to your style?

I still am developing my style. Especially because I want to do all kinds of tats. I'll do water color. I'll do realistic in my best ability. That kind of stuff. It's funny because I have people who will be like, "Your style is so unique" but I didn't think I had a style. Apparently I do. It's so funny how you perceive yourself versus how other people perceive you.

I think [it was] just influences as a child and searching for Black representation that already existed. A big key of life in general right now is to look to precedents that already existed and use the success of precedents. When I started looking for technically beautifully done depictions of Black people, I was finding depictions in some Renaissance art, which is funny. The absence of it in Renaissance art is what even made me look for it. Then I found it and it made me go off being like, "Wow. This style looks amazing." The commentary of Euro-centric, Renaissance, colonial art being Black washed, I love.

The other thing was you would see them in hand painted movie posters from the '70s, one of the only places you can see a beautiful painting of Black people. Also, anime. Anime depicts people so beautifully. I think what I'm trying to lead towards is efficiently evoking a detailed image and I'd say anime slays that. You want to see different ways of doing Black hair? *The Boondocks* got it.

That and then learning more from tattooers around me. My best friend, Erica Cyr, she's been encouraging me from the get go when I was about to quit [a shop where] I had all these racist white people making Hitler

jokes in front of me and my clients and shit. She was getting really into tattooing and I was always majorly vibing off of what she was doing and discovering tattooers that straight up are anime freaks themselves and they love to tattoo anime. I looked up to them a lot. Olivia Olivier, she tattoos in San Francisco and she was one of the first people that I saw trying to depict women of color in a traditional way. She was one of my biggest inspirations. I would say all of those influences brought me to this place, mixed with wanting to depict hieroglyphs modern day.

What does exploring an idea or an initial inspiration look like for you?

I feel like right now we're developing a Black vocabulary in tattooing, a Black almost picture-based language for what we can use in tattooing to represent Black people.

A lot of my ideas derive from that energy of being like, "I see white people getting hammers. A Black person could get a hammer." How do we take that and flip it on its back? I try to lean into the experience of being a Black person. I'm a mixed person, but my body is the body of a light-skinned Black person, so acknowledging that privilege and experience.

Things like... I want to make new patron saints. Maybe I'm speaking it too soon, but I've been thinking about patience and what patience is. What kind of patience does a Black child have when we, out of necessity, have to be patient while we're sitting in our auntie's lap getting our hair detangled and brushed for hours? Who is the symbol of patience beyond the Black child? Revisiting those things, and connecting these shared experiences really inspired me to create a new vocabulary and try and create new symbolism.

That's something that's even inherent in Blackness. I'm not a hotep because I'm here for the queers. In ancient Egypt, hieroglyphs were a combination of language, science, philosophy, spirituality, art, poetry, all of that. I guess I'm trying to bring that to tattooing and just making those connections through talking about shared experiences, consuming media, and really allowing myself the space to be like get a little freaky, get a little poetic on Black experiences.

What does editing look like for you?

One thing that I do is I look in the mirror. We're going back into mirrors again. This is just a little hack trick thing, but if you ever aren't sure about what is going on with your drawing, you can look in the mirror, or you can flip it backwards if it's on tracing paper, and it gives you a lot of perspective as to what's wrong with it.

[In] my editing process, my ADD comes up hardcore because I pretty much have 20 unfinished drawings that I forget about and they'll never get finished. A lot of my process is not very streamlined right now too because I don't use an iPad to draw. It involves a lot of tracing paper. You'll do your initial drawing, go on top of tracing paper, do an addition with shading and stuff. That's pretty much my editing process right now.

What have been the most important resources for you as you learn to navigate ADD and your work?

With ADD, and I think a lot of people get this way, once you start something you can get so enthralled in it that you can be working on it for hours without noticing your personal physical needs like, "I have to pee. I have to shower. I'm hungry." That might not even show up for you.

Learning about Qigong, which is ancient Chinese medicine, has been huge in helping me. There's even been concepts that I've been learning through exploring Chinese medicine where it's like, "Okay, you're going to work for an hour. That means you take a break. You rest for 20 minutes and then you revisit your work", which has been so helpful.

Also somatics. Just knowing how your body feels. It sounds a little bit ridiculous because we should just know how our body feels, but in those moments where you are working... When I do a drawing, I can see when I'm frustrated versus when I'm chilling and flowing. You can see it in the lines and the pencil that I'm frustrated with myself and the drawing. Noticing, "Okay, I'm getting frustrated right now. Maybe I need to take a break, breathe some air, get a drink of water" is really helpful.

What's something you wish someone had told you when you first started making art?

Everything is a practice. Play is even a practice. It's hard because we all have to do what we need to survive. I think the most valuable suggestions that I'm even trying to apply to my art practice is start big, start with shapes. I'm coming from a place where I'm trying to become technically better at drawing, at rendering. That's my skill.

Always go big before anything. I find a lot of times in art, we like to go for the juicy little details. In a face, you'll start drawing the eyes first but really there's so much to map out first. Keep revisiting those key basics. To the day that you pass on, if you're a true master, you're going to be going back being like, "How do I draw a sphere?"

Also, just that it's not necessarily about the outcome. Social media has affected our values in a lot of ways. A lot of times, I'm trying to get out of the mentality that I'm making artwork to post online. A lot of times, too, when I was starting out, I would want to be very repetitious. I would work on one piece for a few hours when really if I had just been like, "That's not working" and throw it away and start the same

piece over again, it gains so much more growth.

I would tell my [past] self, too, to not get so stressed out, to enjoy the process, have fun rather than just be like, "I fucking suck." That's a part of the burnout. I'd been shaming myself into getting better and it's like when does that ever work on anyone?

What does your internal monologue sound like now instead of beating yourself up?

Well, now I'm a little freak when it comes to meditation. I'm trying to go hang out in other realms. I've been trying to visualize that I'm actually hanging out with myself sometimes, visualize that I'm a separate person and we're having a dialogue. Now I try and start my day by looking in the mirror and asking, "How are you today?" I have a little convo, checking in with how [I'm] actually feeling: "How are you feeling? Does this feel good right now? Do you need to take a break?" I'm just trying to have a kinder internal dialogue where it's like, "This is not the end of the world, boo boo. This is just your gift that you're playing in and honing."

Jalen Frizzell Recommends:

Online community: Ethels Club (free online healing community for BIPOC folks).

Online meeting place: Sunday Survivor Series (free online healing community for Black folks only).

Person: Alice Coltrane - (Jazz Harpist and Black spiritualist that embodied the Black experience through ancient musical practices) highly recommend her 1971 Journey in Satchidananda!

Book: My Grandmother's Hands (book on racialized trauma)

Person: @gfx_prints (Anthropologist/Ecologist/Educator)

Name

Jalen Frizzell

Vocation

Tattoo artist

Fact

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1