On embracing the unknown



Visual artist Brian Jungen discusses how catastrophe sharpens focus, finding the perfect idea, and the artistic benefits of limitation

July 4, 2025 -

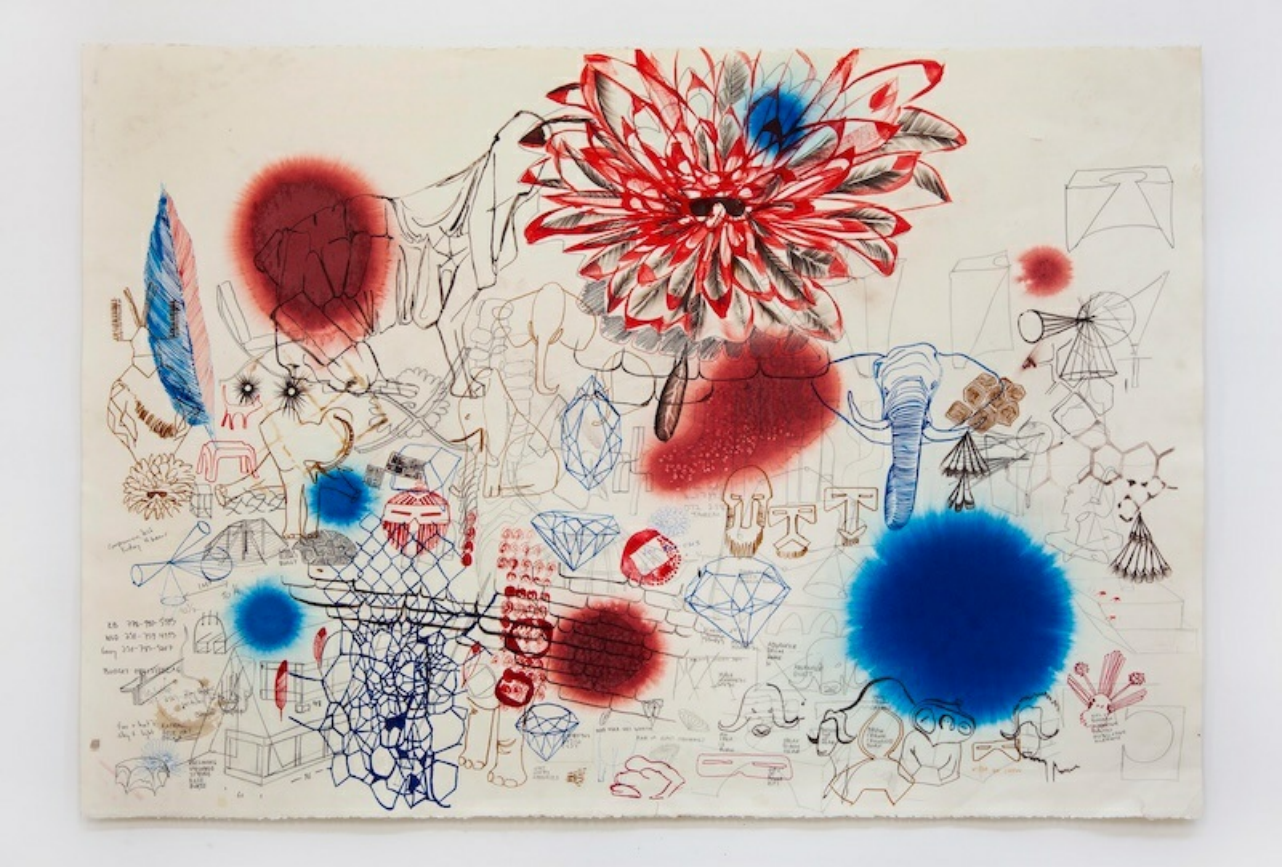
As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3480 words.

Tags: Art, Performance, Beginnings, Success, Adversity, Process, Multi-tasking.

You work across a different mediums with a number of different approaches. When you have an idea, how do you know which way to take it? Is it something where the idea comes first, or do you see an object and you want to transform it? I'm curious how you go about making the spark of an idea into a work of art.

Well, I think the idea is the easy part. I come up with ideas daily, but really it depends on where the destination is, if it's for an exhibition or if it's just for my own investigation. And if I have the space and time to develop an idea, I guess. For years I had a very big studio, when I was ranching, I had basically two studios. One was just a workshop, so that afforded me a lot of space and I was able to try out a lot of things there.

Sometimes I get invited for thematic exhibitions. I did that a lot when I was young and getting started in my art career. I just dove into these things and I would work with the curator and curatorial team on their theme and try to come up with work around it. I don't really do that anymore because I've never really enjoyed that. A lot of times for that I would make the work on-site. So that's a young man's game. It's stressful, but it's exciting, too, because it's very immediate.



We met through *Compound*. a project we did together at Matthew Barney's studio. From my understanding, you had an idea, but in order to make this happen, you needed the space to bring it to fruition.

Yeah.

The piece involved shooting hundreds of arrows into a full-sized play piano. This is not a thing that takes up a small amount of space.

Right. And I don't have a studio right now, I haven't had a studio since my ranch burned down. I've been living in a cabin in Northern BC [British Columbia] where I grew up. I enjoy archery, but there's no real indoor place for me to actually use that skill to make art with it. There's archery ranges here, but I can't just go and set up a bunch of furniture in there, fire into it.

I did the first archery stuff at the Walla Walla Foundry while I was working with them to develop the first of this archery work for Prospect in New Orleans [in 2024]. That was the start of it. Then Matthew came to visit BC last year. I showed him the work I was doing at the Foundry. He thought it was great, so I suggested that maybe this should be something that's live. He really liked that. But he comes from a performance and art video background.

That was new for me. I've never been part of a performance or done live performance like that before. So it was exciting and it was a great way to meet you, but I didn't know if a lot of it would work. Although it can be very scary, having that unknown is also very exciting.





I remember when Matthew and I first started doing those events fifteen years ago or so, one thing he told me was that he liked that you could fail with live performance. He was saying to me that, with film, everything could be edited and it could appear perfect. Doing something live, though, meant that it might not always work. You're operating without a safety net.

One of the early pieces in the studio involved trying to get a bull to mount a car, and the bull just wouldn't do it. Everyone's watching, and it failed—but even though it didn't work, the people in the space were still so engaged by this performance. Plus, they didn't know what the plan was, and it definitely succeeded on another level.

I come from an agriculture background, so I know that bulls are very difficult to work with. It's more human in a way, it's more real because it's live and there's small mistakes.

I was working with a bunch of archers I'd never met before and there were some issues with some of the arrows because they're all handmade and the archers had never really fired arrows like that before, so there was a bit of a learning curve for them to figure it out while it's happening live. We had a loose script that started to go out the window pretty quickly—you just have to think on your feet. Even though it was scary at the time, it worked out. But even if it didn't work out, like you say, it's pretty cool seeing the audience react to just the environment. I never had people watching me in my studio, so it was unusual in some ways. We were very much in a workspace.



That’s something funny. [My son] Jake [who who was in the performance] was saying, “Man, people really like watching me and analyzing what I was doing.” I said, “Well I think part of it is, it’s just an unfamiliar space for them,” and they’re watching a kid shoot clay pigeons into a wall. Even if they don’t know what it means, they’re like, “All right, this is interesting. We left work and now we’re here.” It feels like they’re in this magic space, something different.

Since the ranch burned down and moved into the cabin, has it been harder to make work? Do you have ideas that you can’t do at this point in the smaller space? Has it changed the way you’re thinking of making art?

The first little while I was just dealing with practical things, insurance claims and whatnot. And then I realized I needed a bit of a sabbatical from my art practice, so I took time out. I got recruited to be on the volunteer fire department here, which I was very reluctant to do at first. Eventually I agreed to go and it was very therapeutic, actually.

That took my interest in a very different direction. It’s very different from anything I’ve done before. And it really gave me a sense of community involvement but also this appreciation for the elements of water and fire. That’s all you’re really doing, is putting out fires. That occupied a lot of my time because really this is a very small cabin and I had to refocus how I wanted to make art after having a very big ranch and a huge studio. My footprint became way smaller. When you lose a lot of stuff to catastrophe like that, including artwork and all of your archive, you have to look at it as a rebirth to keep going.

So I thought, “What could I do here?”

I was doing a little bit of drawing and I took on some public art projects, then just turned my attention to thinking about where I wanted to relocate to and what studio set up I'd like to have in the future. I am largely a studio-based artist, I would like to have a studio again. It was really great to see how Matthew works and see his space, but I'm a country guy at heart.


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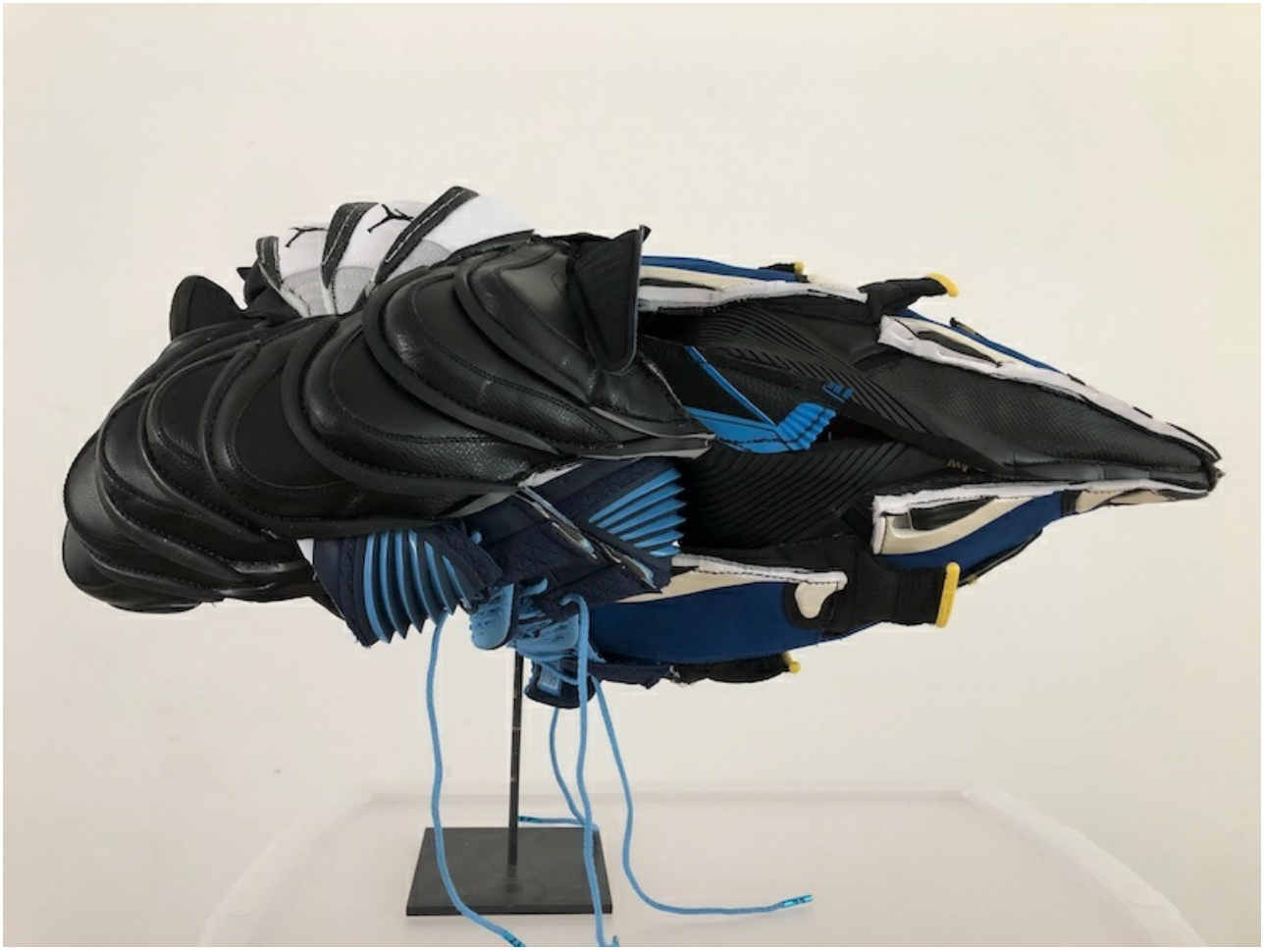
Was it therapeutic learning how to put out fires after you lost so many things due to fire?

Yeah, just learning about hydraulics and how fires behave and differences between wild land fires and structural fires, and also the chain of command and systems… It's so different from anything art related. There's people that I would never necessarily hang out with who I'm working with. So we may disagree on things politically, or whatever, but we're all working together for the community and I think that's very important.

We also respond to traffic accidents and stuff, too. It's hard work and I have immense respect for people who choose this as a career. I just volunteer.

I'm not sure if something I'm going to continue with, because it's a very small community here, and there's very basic training to get people involved. Which is what I've done. Anything that's beyond that you have to really get involved in terms of going in more of a career direction.

I'm also not sure I want to have a giant place anymore. Especially the way the climate is going, it's just becoming drier and drier. Having to worry about fires every summer, especially out west and north, it's not necessarily something I enjoy.



You've done drawings and other more traditional work. How did you move into using objects and mass-produced things, transforming them and shifting them around?

Growing up and in art school and even after art school, I mainly was interested in drawing and painting. I never really started making objects until I did a residency at the Banff Center, in Alberta in 1998. I was also in New York City that summer. I went to a Nike Town store and I saw all their Air Jordan shoes that they had in vitrines and museum-like displays.





That’s where I noticed a resemblance to Northwest Coast indigenous art. So that’s where all that started. I

decided to buy some for my residency at the Banff Center and I cut them up and pinned them together and took photographs of them. I thought that the final work would actually just be a photograph. I did that the first week and there were six more weeks to go in the residency. So I decided to take them apart properly and reassemble them. I got way more of a charge out of doing that than I did with just making an image of the work. That was very important to me, not even necessarily the object itself, but what happened to my thinking in terms of moving away from 2D and going into more of a 3D direction.

Then I stopped drawing for a while. I was making objects and became much more known as a sculptor. Like I was saying earlier, I started getting invited to do these site-specific projects where I would make everything else, like all the whale skeleton I made with the stacking chairs, those were all made for exhibitions on location because those chairs you could buy anywhere. It was really something I could make universally. I like making objects more than drawing images.





How many ideas do you come up with that just don’t turn into anything? Do you abandon ideas or do you try to

follow through and make them happen?

You kind of archive them. I've talked with musician friends about this, too, who they know might be strumming a song or tune or something that they like, but it never goes anywhere. But they remember it, they remember a part of it. I think with me it's very similar. I look at something, I see something in the world… a lot of the times I'll see some things that are broken and then they're liberated from their use.

You usually see people throw them out or try to fix them. I find it fascinating when I see things that aren't being used for what they're supposed to be. I'm more interested in how things don't work than how they're supposed to work. I'll see stuff that might spark me to investigate that material or look at how these two things aren't working and how they might go together with something else.

Sometimes different things in my life come into play with that. Whether it be my interest in modernism, or my background as an indigenous person, or my life in agriculture. I'm not always coming at it from the same place. Now because I hang out with all these firefighters, there's things I see in that realm that I find very fascinating. Or stuff that I learned when I was doing a lot of irrigation when I was ranching.

What is success to you? It feels like a project is successful if you get that charge you'd mentioned and follow the idea through to completion. Is success, at all, you make something and someone buys it?

Maybe if I feel like I've reached some closure with the material. I try not to look at the commercial side of art production. I've never really been entirely comfortable with that world. I'm very truant in the commercial art world, but I'm tangled up in it, it pays the bills. But I don't like being put in a position where I'm having to make art to pay bills. I try to keep my interests very wide so I'm not doing the same thing over and over and over again. But no, if I've resolved a use for a material, then I feel like that's success.

I tried making other things with the white plastic stacking chairs I wasn't entirely satisfied with. I made these really odd, very '60s geodesic domes with them at first. And it was fun at the time, but it wasn't until I developed a use for them as whale bones that I felt like that was more the direction that they belong. But again, having a studio is very important for making objects.



Do you ever work on multiple projects at the same time?

I love working on multiple things at the same time. That's my favorite way of working, where there's no real destination for the object. Because I was ranching and funding this ranch from a lot of art production, I thought when I moved to the ranch that it would be more freeing, but it was the opposite. I wound up making a lot of stuff that was just going immediately out to the commercial art world. It was my other work that was more investigative, and experimental, that was getting smaller and smaller.

Actually one of the last things I did at the ranch before the fire was start on the archery stuff. I set up a course inside the studio and was shooting arrows into pieces of furniture that I had leftover from this giant bronze piece I'd made. That was several months before the fire.

I'm probably going to have a new studio within the next several months back down in southern BC just lining all that up now. I'm really excited.



Have you been storing up ideas for when you get into this new space? It’s going to be like when they have a bucking bronco behind the gate and the cowboy opens up the gate and it just runs out the chute and into the ring…

I’m going to be running faster. I have notebooks and I write things down, but I edit them fairly regularly. So we’ll see. I do like to have some structure with things in terms of whether it be a material that I’m interested

in that has some limitations that I have to work with, that I find a good challenge. What I find most difficult is when I’m given complete freedom of things or when I have to build something from scratch. I can’t just take clay and make something. I find it boring. I need some challenge or limitations added to it to make it more of a challenge, let’s say.

Do you get creative blocks, or because you’re doing enough stuff, can you move on from one thing to the next if something’s not working?

You can move on, or if something gets overworked and you can put it down, cover it up, or something, and then come back to it and take it back to a place where you were still excited about it. I’m excited about having that opportunity again. I’m probably going to buy some land, but I don’t want to have agriculture be such a huge part of my life. As much as I believe in agriculture—and I think it’s very important that people know how to grow their own food—it’s another thing to take it on as another business and try do that at the same time as having an art career. I would not recommend it.



I get that. It wasn’t your decision, but you’ve had to whittle everything down to the barest essentials. Has this

intense scaling back been at all helpful?

I think so. There's expansion and contraction in everyone's life. I went through this quite big period of expansion and then now it's reducing that. It's also been good for me to move back north where I grew up. Initially I bought this place before the fire as a summer place, and I never intended to live here year round. Because it's very small, it changed my thinking in terms of what I wanted to do. I spend a lot of time out in the bush, too. I like being out on the land, so it's very important to me. I'm alone a lot and I've always been comfortable with that, even as a kid. So when I lived at the ranch, that was during Covid and I didn't even really notice that there was a pandemic because I was already living way out there and it wasn't that much of a change for me.

Artists and creative people spend a lot of time in our heads, so we drop out of the physical world in a lot of ways. I think that's why I really enjoyed the fire department because it's the complete opposite of that. All your attention is out in front of you. You have to deal with the crisis.

So, in a way, it was a really good exercise for me, because it pulled me out of my head. As an artist in the world today, especially with things like Instagram, the idea of self-promotion is becoming so dominant and it's changing the way we interact with our own art. For artists who are more introverted, or their process is more about thought, that place of having to promote yourself on social media is daunting.

I've enjoyed this bit of a sabbatical. One year turned into four, but a lot of that was because I had been looking for the right space to relocate to, and I did start working again last year, technically. It was nice to get invited to the Prospect in New Orleans because I hadn't made work for an art Biennale in years. It was nice to get back in the saddle there.

Brian Jungen recommends:

I shut my cell phone off most of the time, I recommend everyone reading this do the same.

I live near three large hydro electric dams. Sometimes I go visit them to hear the sound of the electrical energy produced there as I feel like it is the closest I can get to any sense of the force of the creation of the universe that exists on our planet.

I have been living at this northern BC lake next to the Rockies the past four years. It has been good as it got me back into lake fishing and making new fishing friends. Northern Pike is plentiful in the lake but I never thought it was particularly tasty until a friend showed me how to simmer it in 7up soda and then toss the pieces in melted butter. He called this dish "poor mans lobster" which I don't quite agree with, as it is not too similar to lobster but it certainly was an improvement on the previous Pike meals I have had.

Volunteer in your community. It will help you keep that cell phone shut off and you will get to know your fellow citizens in ways that a cell phone will never offer.

A Chinookan prayer: "May all I say and all I think, be in harmony with thee, God within me, God beyond me, maker of the trees."

Name
Brian Jungen

Vocation
visual artist