On moving into alignment



Visual artist Clips Split discusses making art in sobriety, balancing intention with curiosity, and the value of critique.

July 7, 2026 -

As told to Carolyn Bernucca, 1902 words.

Tags: Art, Collaboration, Process, Success, Beginnings.

When did you realize you would become an artist?

I was always doing artistic things—dressing crazy, doing skits with my sister—but not knowing what that meant for my life. I don't think I ever knew you could just be an artist. I went to performing arts high school; I wanted to get to New York and thought that was the way to do it. I felt connected to acting, but I didn't feel connected to myself when I was doing it. I got into photography because I was following this girl on Instagram and I thought she had a cool eye. My grandfather was a photographer, so I had my parents check the basement for any old cameras of his. When I saw the photos from my first roll, I thought, "Oh, this makes sense for me." I felt aligned. I submitted to *Rookie Mag*, too, and that gave me the confidence I needed to continue. Looking back, I can see that my vision was always there.

How has your understanding of "being an artist" evolved?

In elementary school, I won $25 for drawing a city skyline, and I was so excited because I loved money. And I got into acting because I had a lot of emotions *and* it seemed like a good way to make money. My understanding now of an artist is… broke. [*laughs*]

Being an artist is so much bigger than the word. I asked one of my clients if he was an artist, and he was baffled because he'd already told me he was a nurse. We got to talking and it turns out he used to be a documentary filmmaker but it wasn't paying the bills, so he stopped. I think an artist is someone who just does it, even when it's bleak and there's no money. It's just something that has to come out of you.



How did your experience of being an artist change when you got sober?

I always thought the things I was doing pre-sobriety—partying, having a lot of sex—were what gave my life meaning. I thought that lifestyle made me interesting, but truthfully I wasn't able to connect in a real way. I could see external parts of my life that I loved in the images I'd created, but I couldn't really love what was inside of me. Getting sober has made me realize that it's okay for my life to be a little quieter; I don't have to try to make a story happen. I can live in the mundane and be interested in that. I still live in New York and I'm still a sex worker, but the things that were interesting to me then as an artist are so uninteresting to me now.

What do you wish someone had told you when you started making art?

I wish my parents or someone had told me that there are other options besides school. I tried to transfer to SVA but I couldn't afford it, and thank God, because I think it would have changed my work so much. Everything happened the way it was meant to, but I wish I'd had people supporting the dream, to help with my self-esteem.





What is your relationship to feedback?

I took a class last year and a big takeaway was, “Divorce yourself from the work.” My work is so personal, so about my life, and I tend to use that as an armor against feedback. It’s been such a slow burn for me to

participate in critiques, but feedback has opened up my work in ways I couldn't imagine on my own. I've made this very distinct voice for myself, and I know exactly what I'm doing with a camera, so now I'm open to hearing other people's opinions on my work. It's actually a gift. Receiving more critique has allowed me to not be so sensitive about how people view my work, because I know how I view my work. I want other people to be able to step into my art, so I need to make space for that. Sometimes I'll call someone and cry about it, but then I continue to show up. As scared as I am in those moments, the work has always gotten better.

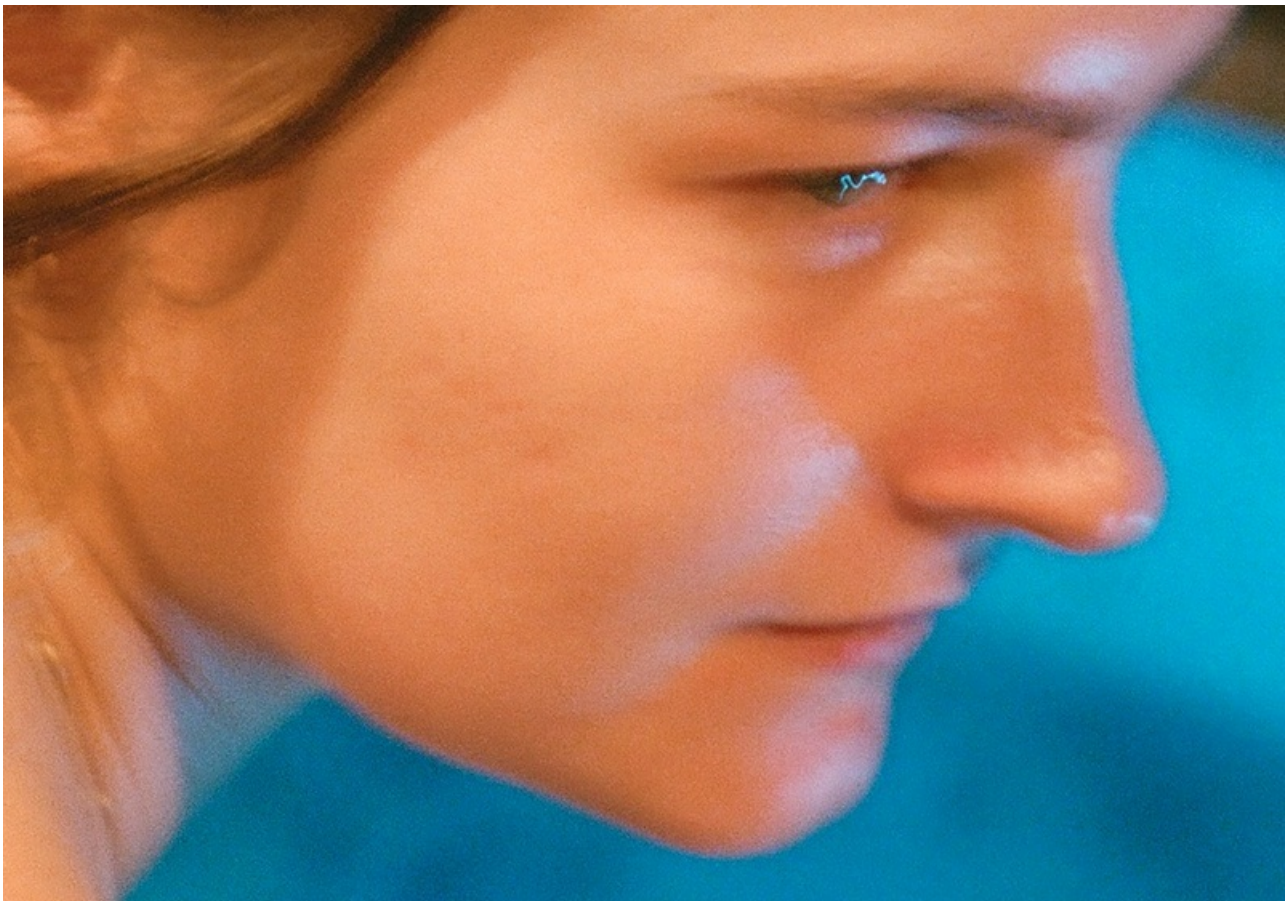
When and how did you start doing commercial work?

People say you can either be a commercial photographer or a fine art photographer, with no in-between. Before I started doing commercial work, I was scared of it. I thought it would lessen my fine art, that it would cut me off from my own work. It took me eight years to build the confidence to start doing commercial work. Ultimately, photography feels easy for me, and I want to be able to make money doing something that doesn't take all of the energy out of me.

Does making art take energy out of you?

Commercial work takes energy out of me, but my personal work does not. It's always been the thing that gives me energy, that I turn to when I'm feeling insecure, or when I feel like my life is not worth living or not big enough. I have a whole archive, and when I look at those moments, even though they're up close and devoid of context, I think, "Okay, this meant something to me at some point."

While I love my work and what I've created, it can't be my lifeblood. I have this gift and I hope that I get to do it forever, but what if one day I couldn't? I'm not "a photographer"—I'm just Clips. My photos, my money—this is not where my worth comes from, or what makes my life complete. Realizing that has taken the pressure off and made my work better.





How do you deal with burnout? Do you take breaks?

It’s been a long time since I haven’t had a camera on me. It’s compulsive. I drop off film minimum once a week. There was a time when I wasn’t shooting a lot, because I wasn’t using the proper tool. Then my mentor told me I needed to invest in my tools, so I bought an $800 point-and-shoot, which is crazy, because they break. But now I never get burnt out on shooting my own work. I only feel “burnt out” when I’m future tripping, thinking about what’s next, what I “need” to be doing. I get burnt out on the fantasy of what my career will become. Showing my work in any capacity outside of Instagram gets me back on my path, into alignment with the present, with how I feel in the moment when I am shooting.

What is your relationship to digital spaces and social media?

I used to be very unhinged on the internet. I’ve been sharing my work on social media from the beginning, first on Tumblr, then on Instagram. The images I’d post were artistic in their own way, but I was leaning into being perceived on the internet as like, hot and on the scene, and photography took a backseat. I was still making images, but I was obsessed with the fact that no one was talking about me as an artist or a photographer. No one is talking about that now either, but I’ve experienced a shift within myself. I’ve started taking myself more seriously. Right now, my Instagram is reserved for my photography. At the same time, I’ve gotten really rigid, and I do want to change that. I can be serious about my work and less serious about posting. I’m a freak, and for me, Instagram is a good place to let that freak flag fly, to release this tenseness and be more free. Every time I post I’m like, “This is a fucking nightmare, no one cares, I’m just posting into the void.” But when I step

outside myself for five seconds and have a real conversation with someone, that feeling disappears, and I’m able to remember that Instagram is just an archive and a living resume.





How do you feed your curiosity? How do you nourish your creativity?

I’m most curious when I’m in a meditative state. Right now I feel blocks around the things I want to do, so I keep asking God to allow me to dream. My dining room table broke recently, so I put a carpet down in that spot and I’ve been trying to lay on the ground and lean into childhood memories, on a mission to be less judgmental and more curious.

I nourish myself by going to the movies. It’s the whole thing: going to this third space, this liminal space, especially in the dead of summer, New York, 2 p.m., Lincoln Center or wherever. It’s otherworldly, even though I’m just watching something. I love the experience of leaving my home to sit in the dark with a bunch of strangers, consumed by color and sound. It fuels me.

What are your most valuable resources as an artist?

For a while, I didn’t think looking at other people’s work was important. I had a mentor who was appalled by my lack of photographer knowledge, and he was right—it was such a snobby way to go through the world. Now I can see how my work has come from elsewhere, even if it wasn’t intentional. Photography is a ladder: someone makes a step and then I get to create, because of what came before me. I can’t be so isolated and think I’m so different. So collecting images and knowing other photographers is super important, plus always having my camera on me. Pushing myself to ask people for a photo if I want it and giving up judgment of what I want to shoot. I’m intentional, but I need that freedom from my inner critic. I try to have a new favorite photo every week, which keeps me looking for the good.



What are the rewards of your creative practice?

My work has given me a purpose in this world. I know exactly where my voice belongs. If I have nothing, I have that. Maybe it won't bring me anywhere, but I'm just so happy to have found it early in life and leaned into it. It's taught me to listen to this instinct I have to keep going, even if I have no money and no one screaming, "You're the best!" This need to keep moving and pushing, that perseverance, is a gift. Photographing my entire life—it never ends, and that can be hard. How do I make a book if it's an ongoing project? But it's helpful for me to know that it doesn't have to end. It doesn't have to be a complete work. It can always just be happening.

Clips Split recommends:

Tru Fru Frozen Fresh Strawberries

Congee from Oh Dumplings

The album *Sweet Like Everything* by Auwbe and Glitter of the Harvest

Mt. Everest Deli & Grocery

$600 Tom Ford sunglasses

Name
Clips Split

Vocation
visual artist