On trusting your senses



Painter Vinna Begin discusses leaning away from logic toward intuition, practicing kindness by saying yes to oneself, and cultivating stillness through patience and trust.

November 29, 2023 -

As told to Jancie Creaney, 1761 words.

Tags: Art, Process, Mental health, Inspiration, Focus.

Do you take extended breaks from painting?

I maintain a loose daily ritual and the deal that I have with myself is as soon as I get up I make coffee and then I have to go upstairs, which is my studio at home, to do automatic drawings. So, in general, almost every day I am doing something.

Would you consider automatic drawings to be experimentation or play?

I think automatic drawing is showing up, showing up and then doing the drawing that I'm intuitively working on. What I mean by that is there is no plan whatsoever. It's whatever comes out. I am always telling myself that it takes a while for an artist to be making work that looks or sounds like themself. It might take a while. I feel like that is the way to getting to know myself.

So that's what I mean by automatic drawing. It's like, "Hey, oh, you're coming out with this, nice to meet you." I'm seeing stuff that I haven't met before. There are a lot of surprises.

But I probably have one or two days when I don't go upstairs much. Usually that's related to sleeping. If I don't actually sleep enough, I can be a little moody, and then that day can be ruined. Those are my breaks.



First Day, pigment and acrylic on canvas, 24 x 24 inches

In an artist statement you said you start each work with a color or gesture, continuing with unmediated responses to each action until a sense of balance is achieved. I wonder if you could talk about what that sense of balance feels like.

I think balance has a wide meaning to it. Because I don't think of balance only formally or visually, but also balance psychologically and emotionally. I feel like this is it. The whole one color leading to another color, or one form leading to another form, to me, it comes back to the whole automatic drawing thing. Basically, my practice is a belief in working intuitively. Color speaking to another color is a very intuitive process.

In a sense my whole background in design and photography probably helped with that. Starting the day with painting as a practice, my goal is to be comfortable enough to work without thinking. So I'm kind of muting that judgment of, "This is not good, this is not harmonious." One day I just feel like intuitively, this is it.

I find that that is another intelligence. It’s not the one we know by thinking about it. It’s more like sensing it. The more I do this, the more I let my senses guide me in making work rather than, “Hey, that blue is not supposed to go there” or something like that, the more often, at the end, when it’s almost done or I feel like there is nothing else to add or nothing else to talk about in the painting—”Hey, what’s up with you?”—the more I start to see its balance. But the whole process, the whole adding one thing that leads to another thing is so not using the exact brain as we know it or using logical thinking at all. Feeling maybe, but sensing mostly.

I imagine that it takes a lot of practice to get to a point where you are trusting the senses and not being impeded by doubt; “Is this the right color? Is this the right form? Is this the correct next step?” How do you think you found that groove and how do you sustain it?

When I was little, I played the guitar. I think it’s muscle memory in a sense. You cannot shortcut doing painting without actually showing up to do the painting. You cannot just think about it. You cannot just plan it, and then come up with the painting that works…What works for me is this: You have to be doing it to actually find what it is for you. There is no shortcut. You have to walk the walk, you have to draw the drawing. Is that it? Something like that. And then, intuitively, you know yourself more.

But this is what’s so interesting or what keeps me doing what I’m doing: I feel like there is always an element of surprise every single time, because, coming back to the whole intuitive working, actually you don’t know exactly. Just because you’re working on it intuitively doesn’t mean you know who you are and what you’re going to make. Just because you have muscle memory doesn’t mean you’re going to know who you’re going to meet. What I mean is the artwork. You’re kind of meeting them for the first time every time. So it’s meeting different facets of you in the drawing. That is what gets me excited.

And then I feel like the good works of mine are the ones that I’m excited about. That’s why I feel like the process is showing up, and not planning ahead much, and then trusting. The trust comes by time. It’s a kindness, too, to yourself. You have to be kind, not judge yourself much. It’s just like, that is a part of you. You are a natural being. One day, in the summer, I saw flowers, just flower. Why can’t I just do that? I know how that sounds… But in artmaking, I’m allowed to do that.



Vinna Begin installation view

You saw a flower and thought, “Why can’t I do that?”

Why can’t I just… Be.

What would you say keeps you going or keeps you trying? It must be found somewhere in this experience of being surprised by who or what you meet. Would you say that surprise is what brings you back?

Surprise is probably one thing. But in terms of the viewers, I’m on Instagram, and some people say nice words. They say the work is calming. The work gives them positive vibes.

It’s weird… It’s not totally like I’m making this for myself only. I feel like if I can actually do something that also, in this tiny little way, makes people happy or peaceful, I like that. I think the surprises are a little gift for me. I’m bored easily. I get to have fun.

I feel like it’s interesting how some forms and colors can psychologically affect me and others as human. When I am done with a work and I’m stepping back, I’m like, “Huh, yeah, that is actually giving me a little smile or making me happy or something.” There is a psychological effect that I feel like is interesting to explore.

And there is some mysterious thing in making an artwork. You don’t know where it came from. My sister asked, “How do you find ideas and everything?” And I told her, “I don’t know, I’m just kind of lending my hands, and then it does by itself.” And she’s like, “Whoa, that’s scary. It’s like you’re being possessed or something?” It’s not like that at all.

Again, you’re allowing it. Not saying, “No, no, no. Not this.” It’s a lot of yes. How’s that? I think during the process, when I’m doing it, me and my materials, it’s a lot of yes. Why? Because “no” is so distracting. “No” is super like, “Oh, stop. Bad. Stop. Bad. Stop. No, no, no, no.” It’s that.

“Yes” is really kindness. “Yes” is kind. I am not forcing myself to say “yes,” but I’m following the yes. Whenever I’m making a gesture or a brushstroke or choosing colors or forms, when I like it, I say, “Yes, Vinna. Keep going. Yes, Vinna.” That is kind. That is a yes.



Vinna Begin installation view

Because no is paralyzing. Where do you go from no?

You're stuck.

I was thinking too about what you said, how one color speaks to the next color, or one form speaks to the next form or gesture, because there is so much attention given to the transitions. From one color to the next, there's a moment when a decision has to be made, where you say yes.

I think in my process, I close the gap between one color to another color in terms of thinking about it too much. The more you're closing the gap timewise or not going to the thinking mode, just sensing, you keep on the sensing mode, you're going to the next one in a snap. But then, like I said, it comes after several, maybe hundreds of drawings later, that you start to be comfortable with that. You know what I mean? Closing the gap, not going to the thinking part of the brain, is actually helpful.

What I found is the materials I have, if those can be an extension of my being, that is my goal. I feel like when I'm doing something that is not coming naturally, I'm forcing or struggling, I'm staying away from it…I want it to be super synced up, I want it to come naturally, just like that, in a snap. That is sort of my intention, to do something naturally me.

To become adept at closing the gap takes patience and time. I think you said in an interview that you strive to "create a sense of peace and meditation" in your work. I am so fascinated by the ability to go from one to the next. Because there is a void-feeling to traverse.

I feel like the stillness is what I'm searching for. I think the whole thing that I do is actually almost…When I say I meet the work finally, like, "Oh, wow. You're just born," or in a snap, it's just there, it's actually that sense of stillness that is born. The noise, be it the people in the café, or the cars, everything, that is sort of distilled or quieted down to the painting. I guess the gap being closed down is when you're really still, or when I'm really still in my work, it's possible to close the gap.

Vinna Begin Recommends:

Freeplaying

Talking Heads' *Stop Making Sense* documentary

Listening to bird sounds

The Flavor Thesaurus: A Compendium of Pairings, Recipes and Ideas for the Creative Cook

Meditation Cushion (I work on the floor)

Name
Vinna Begin

Vocation
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