

On prioritizing what makes you happy

Artist and designer Maisie Broome discusses finding freedom in your process, how she was influenced by an intense upbringing, focusing on joy, and learning to ask for help.

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As told to René Kladzyk, 2654 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Design](#), [Business](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Identity](#).

Some of the readers of The Creative Independent might not be familiar with the techniques you use to create garments and objects. I was hoping you could start by telling me a bit about the things you make and how you make them.

It is kind of a complicated process with many steps. But basically, I mix a viscous water solution that I'm able to float paint on top of. Then I mix all of my paints to lighten them a little bit and help with their spreadability. Then I take that paint and I apply it to the surface of this buoyant liquid. Then I manipulate the paint to create patterns and imagery. Then I can take paper or wood or fabric, and lay it on top of the surface of the water and it transfers onto whatever material I'm printing. I take that material and turn it into all sorts of products and designs and artworks, from wearable clothing to home goods to prints on paper. My whole practice, pretty much, is rooted in that certain technique.

How did you arrive at that method?

I originally studied sculpture, but I've always made my own clothing and I've always manipulated clothes and done tie-dyeing or applique or...

Are you self-taught with sewing?

Totally self-taught, but I've always been really into clothing as a form of self-expression, and cutting things up from the thrift store and putting things back together. I was on this deep exploration of textile techniques and I tried marbling, I just fell in love with it. Because it's so fluid and you don't have that much control. So, it feels like this really nice push and pull of you manipulating it, and it sort of pushing back. It's very freeing in that way.

I think I'd been looking for a technique that was freeing for me, because I was always living in these tiny, tricky little spaces and making work that felt really constricted and small, like tiny drawings. To be able to feel really open and expressive with the material that I couldn't control too much was this 'aha!' moment for me.

What parts of your upbringing or your early adulthood do you think were key in preparing you to do the things you're doing now?

This is a funny question, because I had a pretty intense upbringing and have an extremely high level of endurance

because of it. So, I think that has helped me be very committed and really work hard. Also, not having a lot of support or money or anything. It's like, "I am doing this and no one else is going to do this for me, so I have to just make this work on my own."

But I also grew up with creative parents and we lived completely off the grid in rural Maine and we would just make everything. My parents' approach to life was like, "We can make whatever we need." They didn't want to rely on anyone or anything. So, there was no electricity, no running water, build your own shelter, grow your own food, make your own clothes, that kind of mentality. I think that also has its pros and cons. But being raised with the idea that you can make something from nothing, and you can make something beautiful out of something hard or ugly or raw, is something that just continues to inspire me. It keeps me going to this day and I'm very grateful for that part of my childhood, for sure.

In terms of running your business and making the work that you make, what are some of the things you feel like you've had to unlearn from whatever you were taught in school or from family?

I think, connecting to what I just said, [the idea that] you can do anything. Unlearning that and actually asking for help with things that don't come naturally to you has been something I've really struggled with. I'm getting so much better at reaching out and saying, "Actually, this would be more efficient if I reach out to someone who's really good at this and ask for help and bring them in." That has been a pivotal change in my practice.

Would you mind giving a specific example of a time you've done that?

I had my friend Jackie come in and help organize my studio, because I am extremely messy and disorganized. She loves organizing spaces and is so thoughtful and enjoys that. That was absolutely a game-changer. I had my friend Ariel help me—she just got a master's in graphic design and helped me with website rebranding stuff. I am very analog, I'll be there getting so frustrated and irritated. Then I'm like, "This doesn't need to be what I'm putting energy into." She needed the work and is really good at it. Then I just had all that space in my mind free up for other work. Even having my friend Perry who works with me part-time, having her come in and help me do shipping and stuff. I don't need to be doing everything.

Reminding yourself that things can get done if you don't touch every single thing.

Yes. And it's okay. And it doesn't mean that I'm incapable or whatever. The myth of the one woman show, that's based in ego and it's unrealistic. I think growing up being so enduring and doing so much on my own made me feel like that was part of my identity. Then, as an artist and a business owner, wanting to uphold that in some way, because that's how I felt proud, and needing to really shift that narrative, because it was actually stopping me from growing.

What does success look like to you now?

This is a question I ask myself a lot, actually, because I've grown up with this narrative that I'm going to be the one to make it. One of the first people to go to school in my family or have a career that's actually with my creative work. This idea of "making it" is just so abstract. Have I made it because I have my own studio? And I'm selling work and I'm making a living just on my work, is that making it? Or can you ever make it, really? I don't know. It's just like, what is success really? For me, I think it's being happy and fulfilled, and it's not about money or space or acknowledgement. So, I think my goal when I will feel successful is when I've tamed my mind to a point where I'm not being bogged down with other little mental distractions or where I feel secure in myself.

Something that I think we maybe have in common to some degree is from existing in kind of a chaotic environment in early life, we're maybe too comfortable with chaos sometimes. But I think it's really interesting to talk about chaos and control in how it relates to creative work. I wonder if you could share a little bit of your thoughts on the utility of chaos or the pitfalls of it.

Yeah. My process is extremely messy and I get paint on everything and water all over the floor. I love being able

to create in a space of chaos, because I think it has energy and electricity and there's no part of your brain that's like, 'Oh, careful!' You're just going for it and you're able to get in the flow and let go. That's when I make my best work, when I access the flow, which is my favorite state of being.

It's like a form of surrender.

Completely. I mean, it's kind of like a disassociation also. It's like therapy. You're floating and it's just pouring through you and you're not overthinking it. I think it really helps me to be in a chaotic, messy environment, because I'm not worried about anything. It's okay to get super messy.

Do you have any rules that you've made for yourself as a creative person or as a business owner?

Yes. In the last year and a half, I have been really trying to be disciplined and have a good work-life balance, because I'm a total night owl and I would be coming to the studio and I would forget to eat, I would forget to drink water, I would be here till 3:00 AM. I wasn't making time for anything else in my life. So consumed by my work, to the point of severe burnout, which is super real. I went through that and it was really hard to bounce back from and I never want to go there again.

Now I try to do nine to five, and I try not to work weekends and I try to always have snacks here. Getting my dog, Wanda, has been really helpful, because she reminds me to take breaks and go for walks. My boyfriend is like, 'I'm picking you up at 5:00 and you're coming home with me. You can go out, do whatever, see your friends, whatever, but you're done at 5:00.'

When you are working how do you approach structuring your time?

I try to get here early and have some quiet time to look at books or write ideas down, and get myself centered and organized, so I'm coming into the day with calm energy instead of feeling frantic. I often feel like I never have enough time. Trying to create a calm start to the day, where I'm not entering the work in frantic energy has been helpful.

But I still work in a very abstract way and I still jump from one thing to the next. I am trying to have more of a structured day, where I have a task and I try to complete it and not get too distracted. I hide my phone when I come to the studio. I put it somewhere that I can't reach, take my ladder and put it up there [points to a high shelf] and then move the ladder. Because I do not want to waste my time. If I'm only here from nine to five, I need to make the most of this day. I can't spend an hour on Instagram.

So, part of work-life balance is being very protective of your work time.

That is so true. I am so protective. I am like a mother lion when it comes to my studio practice, extremely protective. That can be tricky with friendships or wanting to go visit super old friends. But I really do think that I am where I'm at now because I've been so committed and I've been prioritizing my work above anything else really in my life. I think it pays off when you really commit.

Can you talk about some of your priorities as a business owner, or some of the challenges you've had in how to structure this as a viable business?

As someone that studied fine art and conceptual sculpture, and then wanted to make a living off my creative work for a long time, I felt guilt and shame around making functional objects, because it wasn't living in the fine art world. It took me a long time to let go of these rules of what deserves this sort of a claim and what doesn't.

I think the more potential I saw in creating a living for myself with my work, and the more joy that I saw people having by being able to wear my work, those divisions started fading away more. But that has definitely been something I used to struggle with and a boundary that I still want to work on smudging out. I want these things to be able to coexist and I'm really excited that I'm making more work that lives on a wall. That feels exciting

to me. I would love to have a show of my prints, but I'm also excited by having wearables coexist in that space.

This is something that I think a lot of small businesses toeing the line of art and design are confronted by, because there's such a division still between those spaces. But it's exciting to be existing on the edge of both. I feel like I'm inspired by the potential that can come out of merging them.

Can we talk a little bit about the way you use color and what sort of feelings you hope people have when they wear or experience the things you make?

It's funny because I feel like I've been saying for a number of years now, "I'm going to do a tan and ochre collection." I really want to try that and I just can't. I am just obsessed and in love with color, I love all color. It makes me feel excited and happy. I love combining tons of colors. It feels energetic and alive. I think if there's one thing I'm trying to bring is fun and confidence, because they're really bold and bright, the things that I make.

There's also a childlike sort of thing going on, because they're like how a child would just throw every color on the page. I love that feeling of being really free with it. I think that there's just energy that happens with bright colors and colors mixing. There's that kind of optical illusion that happens with certain colors and you put them next to each other. And also nature is full of neon color. I want to draw from the extreme and extroverted and eccentric parts of nature that are just like, "What is this crazy frog that is covered in neon dots or this wild flower that's blooming out of a cactus." That's the feeling that I'm trying to evoke.

Yeah, my suspicion is that you make a lot of people really happy when they wear your stuff, because how can you be a grouch and wear a smiley face with heart cheeks in ten shades of neon?

Even when I'm approaching a trickier emotion, with the mixed emotion faces that I do, I'm injecting humor into it, because it's done with super bright colors and it gets goofy. I think that feels really therapeutic to me. It's like you can be sad, but there's still this feeling of joy lurking within it. Or saying it's okay to have these feelings, but also here's something that's going to make you feel happy.

What advice would you give to other artists on how to have more joy in their lives?

I think I would say, make a list of things that make you happy and prioritize those. Try to make time to prioritize them. If you feel nourished by going into nature, try to make time to do that once a week or once a month. And be kind to yourself. And find time to play. And nourish your inner creative child, because I think that's where the source is for all of us. If that child is being neglected, then it's harder to access joy. So, play.

Maisie Broome Recommends:

Adopting a pet (I found Wanda through True North Rescue, they bring animals up from Texas)

Digging for gems at Record Archive in Rochester, NY. One of the largest used record stores in the country.

Remote camping at Putnam Pond (rent a canoe and paddle to island campsites, pack light)

Always go for a swim when you get the chance, no matter how chilly it is.

Invest in systems that help organize your practice, from studio space or flat files to asking for help. Whatever you can do to make accessing your creative flow easier is always worth the investment.

Name

Maisie Broome

Vocation

artist and designer

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