

On holding yourself to a higher standard



Artist and filmmaker Cristine Brache discusses not selling yourself short, maintaining urgency, and the challenge of becoming a full-time artist.

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As told to Elle Nash, 3398 words.

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You recently published your second book of poetry, *Goodnight Sweet Thing*, and you're known as a visual artist and filmmaker, too. At what point did you feel it was necessary to move between these different disciplines?

Well, I've always written poetry. I remember we first started studying poetry, in fifth grade, just Shel Silverstein and Robert Frost type stuff. We would have to write a lot of poems, and people liked my poems so much they would let me read them during the class, and I really enjoyed that. They were pretty silly poems, but ever since then, I didn't really stop writing poetry. I didn't really start taking it that seriously until I was 17, that was the first time I was trying to get published.

I was very solitary, I had a best friend and she was also writing poems in high school, so I could only talk to her about it. I saw the Basquiat movie, the Julian Schnabel one, and I saw René Ricard's character in it, and I was drawn to him because I was like, "Oh, he's Puerto Rican," and I'm Puerto Rican, and I hadn't really seen anybody who was cool and Puerto Rican, into the things that I was into, that was also Puerto Rican. I looked him up and I found his book of poems, *God with Revolver*, which is my favorite book of poems. Most formative, for sure. His writing really influenced me, because I didn't know that poems could be like that before I had been exposed to him. Very confessional and candid and like a knife being stuck into you.

I finally got published when I was 24 or something. I have a lot of poems from that time. A lot of the ones that I think are good enough are in the first book, which is the second half of [*Goodnight Sweet Thing*], that just spans a decade. I was being extremely picky.

To answer your question, though, when I was in high school, I was in TV production and had a crush on this punk kid who introduced me to Miranda July and David Lynch. I really wanted to impress him, and he used to stay after school and use the analog video editors to make video art. I was like, "Well, I guess I have to make a cool video, too." I didn't really think about it as video art then, but it totally is, and I was just making weird videos to impress him.

Because he was obsessed with *The Wizard of Oz*, I gave him this aluminum foil Tin Man that I made, and I put it in a Barbie box and painted it all and I made it look like it was prepackaged. I remember his impression of that. I didn't really think about it as, "Oh, this is a sculpture," or something, but I remember he was just so impressed by it. I guess he was the first person that really made me see myself as an artist. Seeing his response to it is what really made me feel like it was something that I really wanted to do. I think that experience was really formative, and he's like a brother to me now.

What is your way into a poem? Does it start for you with a specific idea or an image, or is it something that's

kind of more malleable and amorphous, and is it similar with other mediums you work in?

They're kind of different for me. With poetry, I would say it's both. It depends on the poem. Sometimes I write a poem just for the sake of exercising the experience of writing a poem, which can be very playful and malleable, and I don't usually know where that's going to go. It's just kind of a lot of word games, or language play, or just thinking about how the words connect. Also, there's a natural impulsive intuitiveness to it. I would say most times I'm writing to document a feeling that I'm having, and I see them more like emotional pictures or something, of experiences that I'm having that I can't really articulate or document in any other way, because I think those kinds of feelings are very fleeting, and I think that poetry is really good to capture fleeting emotion.

Earlier, when you were talking about how some of the poems that you didn't put in your first book of poems, you were being really picky about it. What is it about looking at those that makes you say, "This is not something that I want," or, "This is not up to my standard"?

I definitely have really high standards for what I reveal to the world, because I don't want to embarrass myself, and I don't like wasting people's time. I feel like poetry in particular skirts a fine line between being really profound and beautiful, and being extremely corny and contrite. I'm always super mindful of that distinction.

I think poetry is definitely so vulnerable to me because it's extremely personal, and it's kind of the only space I give myself to be very direct and unapologetic. I feel like with my artwork, even if it has probably accents of that, it's very mediated, just the very nature of it, the way that I'm presenting it.

Even if not all the poems are about me or about anybody, it's very confessional. It's funny because I looked back, I found the drive with all the really old poems, and I found all these ones that I'd never published, and I was like, "These are good." I feel like it's almost like, with the distance, I feel so removed from myself from over 10 years ago that I could look at it with more clarity. Whereas before, I don't really know what that inhibition is, that kind of self-censorship feeling. Maybe I feel more sure of myself now that I have a lot more public validation.

In terms of reflecting on the totality of your career in arts, what is one thing that you wish you'd known when you were first starting out? Do you ever look back and say, "Maybe I should have done something differently?"

It's funny because I was having a conversation about this with somebody the other day, and it's a very dialectical thing. On one hand, choosing to be an artist, and I wasn't the kind of artist that was like, "Oh, I want to do graphic design part-time or get a part-time job." I was just like, "I'm all in." I was a waitress. I'd done a lot of really random jobs, and the benefit of that is that I had preserved my own energy and my own time. But on paper, it was harmful in terms financial security. It's really just a question of financial security versus your psychic security, because of the time you afford yourself, or being on your own schedule. My energy gets really easily polluted by my environment, and if I'm in an environment that is really in opposition to myself for a very long time, it's very hard for me to feel like I have the mental space to be where I need to be, to be creative in a way that is realistic.

My energy levels are so sensitive. I guess you can have a lot of critical acclaim, and it doesn't mean that you're going to have financial security. That's all I need to say. It's a very practical thing, but especially now, more than ever, the way social media has engineered this massive machine where we all have our own channels and we're all kind of competing for attention to have the most visibility, and if you have the most visibility, then you have the most chances of having financial security, I think that's what [people expect] the end result [to] feel like. After a certain point, you have a moment where you look back and you're like, "Was it all worth it?"

I have asked myself that a lot lately, as I'm getting older, but for me, it was worth it. I wouldn't be who I am. Material things aside, I feel very complete as a person, mentally, and I feel very happy with my internal space, and I think that's just a trade-off. It's what I need.

There's a poem in *Goodnight Sweet Thing* titled "Change My Money with Your Life." I'm thinking of the lines: "making cheap outfits yet again / poverty solutions." How do artists, especially young artists, rectify that anxiety between needing to just make money and have our basic needs met, and also then time to create, while trying to build that career? Is it just trying to say yes to every opportunity that you can? Is it a mindset?

I think it depends on how young we're talking. You do have to be careful about what context you place yourself in. I think when you're really young, it's normal to make a lot of mistakes or make decisions that you'll regret later, maybe be embarrassed of. I certainly have had to learn a lot. More than anything, I think you just have to have the drive. If you don't have the drive and the will, this kind of urgency to express, then I think it'll be very difficult, and maybe directionless, too. You have to have a strong drive in order to get anywhere with any creative field of this nature, like writing, when you're the sole author, and it's not a kind of commercial job. There's a lot of loneliness in it, you're doing it alone for so long, and you might always do it alone, and you just don't know. It's just probably one of the few jobs where you could work your ass off and do everything right, and there's no promise that anything's going to come of it.

If we were doctors, or, I don't know, if we were in some corporate structure or something, there would be upward mobility that was very clear and delineated, for the most part. I know there's issues with that too, but at least you would get a paycheck, I guess.

Do you ever hit a point where that urgency has ever gone away, and you've had to figure out how to get it back?

After I accomplished a certain number of things, I felt more subdued in my urgency, because I think before, it was like, I had to prove to myself that my work was worthwhile or that people could connect with what I'm doing, but I have enough proof to know that people like what I do and that people do connect with it. Now, I still have compulsions to create things, and I could do so much more if I had more resources. Because I have had so much experience with various types of ways of presenting my work and working with other people, I feel like probably this next decade would be the best for me creatively, and that would just depend on—I mean, with or without this—but if I do get more financial investment to make things, I know that I could do stuff that's really brilliant. I'll just have to wait and see.

What is day-to-day life for you as a full-time artist?

Well, out of a lot of chaos, I have managed to create a very structured way of working for myself. That was not natural. It took many years for me to get to the place where I could organize my schedule. I like to start my day with exercise. I like to go to the gym, and then I like to go to the studio. Because I have different mediums, it depends on what the deadlines are like, what the priority is, and if I don't have any pressing deadlines, then it's what's most compelling to me personally. I juggle the filmmaking stuff, art stuff, and then the poetry. Poetry is more... I see poetry more as a hobby, if that makes sense, because it's kind of like the performance art of literature. Only people who really like it do it. Anybody who writes poetry is because they're a real poet, I think, and I think that's very beautiful, because you don't have to censor yourself to kind of cater to any commercial needs. You can just let it be.

Is there anything that has surprised you about the business side of having to be an artist, even with poetry?

I have a lot of feelings about it. I mean, the artist has to do everything. They have to be their own administrator, manager, at least until you can afford to hire somebody to do it for you. We have to wear so many hats throughout different phases of creative production. I feel like it would be very helpful if professors could have space to talk about the business of art in school. I don't know how it is now, but when I was at school, it was kind of a taboo thing to talk about the practicalities of this profession, and I think I just felt so blind when I graduated from my bachelor's. I had no idea how to make anything feasibly within the economy of art. It was only self-taught, really.

What would you say is the most useful thing that you've had to teach yourself about that process?

Don't expect anybody to do anything for you, advocate for yourself and don't low-ball yourself. I think a lot of

times, artists and writers are put in a position to be grateful for any attention, because we've been vying so hard for attention for so many years. In the beginning, at least, I felt like it was like, "Oh my gosh, they want to do this thing." You don't think to yourself, "Oh, let me just ask for proper compensation." With poetry, too, it's the same, even having to... I know with bigger book deals, it's not like this, but with smaller presses, you can get fairer royalties, 50/50, after production or whatever, of the cost. It's very reasonable, but that seems like a hard thing to ask for, too.

I think a lot of people take the work for granted in terms of financial compensation. I can only speak for myself, but it felt like, "I'm going to get in trouble if I ask for it." There were so many years of me selling myself short, but now I'm very clear about that, and I think creating a very practical way for you to get compensated fairly that fits for you, you'd be surprised. Most times you can get it.

How did you learn to make this shift?

Well, I think it's just, maybe it was catastrophizing, thinking that, oh, if I ask for something, the other person's going to be so insanely reactive that they're going to want to rupture all ties or something, which is insane. That's never happened to me. Really, the worst thing they can say is no, and that's how I operate now. It's good to exercise even thinking about what that looks like for you. What does fair compensation look like for you? Because, I felt like for a long time, I was just waiting for somebody to tell me, to be like, "Oh, this is what we give you." If you just learn how to negotiate, you usually can get a little bit more, or everything that you wanted, and very rarely is it a hard no. Then, if it's a hard no, you can decide if it's worth any of it.

In terms of when you are working on a poem or a project or a film and it's there, you've done it, how do you know when that feels ready?

It's very personal. I generally don't show work until it's done unless I want feedback, but each process is different. Filmmaking is very communal, and it's very collaborative, so it's very natural to share multiple drafts and stuff of scripts and things with your producers or trusted people. With art, sometimes I'll ask my husband. We share a studio and he's an artist, too, and so we talk about that. I'll ask him for feedback sometimes, but for the most part, I feel like I know when it's done. It's when I feel like, as I try to put myself in the position of the audience, and if I were to look at it, how would I assess it? I'm very strict, I have very definitive things that I look for that I find make me feel that it's complete, it's my own inner critic. Satisfying my own inner critic. When my inner critic is satisfied, then I feel like the work is done.

Are you willing to share some of your very strict rules that you have?

Don't be lame, don't be corny. The craft has to be there. I feel like I'm just such a craft snob. I just don't respect people that don't... I mean, whatever, it's your thing if you don't care about it, but it's like, if you know about it, you know it when you see it. Also, every masterpiece has incorporated so much craft into it, and there's no way that you can do it without thinking about it. Very rare, I think. I definitely have my own checklist across painting, film, poetry. Like, is it clean? Everything absolutely has to be there. If there's anything that doesn't have to be there, it doesn't belong there. Making sure that it's well-made on top of everything. Don't sell yourself short. This is your product. This is what you're giving to the world. There's nothing worse than wasting a person's time. People who spend time reading a book or watching a movie or going out of their way to go to a museum or art show to see something, why would you waste their time, but also waste your own time? Why would you waste your own time to not ask yourself these questions? It's just, I'm a very rigorous person, I guess is what I want to say, and I expect this of other people, and I expect it of myself, so I'm not lax with myself, because when it's there, it's there.

It's about being hard on yourself, but in the right way, right?

Yeah, because you don't want to be hard enough that you don't do anything. It's really having the kind of distance where you can really be clear. Don't have a big ego, because if you have a big ego, you're setting yourself up for a lot of failure. I don't think things should feel too easy. Sometimes things are easy and they're flowing, but I mean, there's so much that we digest culturally and in media, visually, words. We consume

so much, so you want to be able to distill or separate the stuff that your brain is just processing from what your actual expression is, versus repeating another expression. Or maybe this expression feels normal because of our societal roles or something, but you don't realize that your expression is hurtful to other people, because you're not thinking about your societal role. It's hard to articulate. I've never really had to think about it in this way, but I just expect the same for myself as what I expect from the things that I love most, that I feel are really moving, strong works, and that's what I aspire to do, is to make really strong, moving works. I see it as an Olympian challenge.

Cristine Brache Recommends:

The books: *God With Revolver* by René Ricard, *Making Of* by Mara Mckevitt, and *The Kiss* by Kathryn Harrison.

The film, *Funeral Parade of Roses* (1969) by Toshio Matsumoto.

Weegee's 1940s photo series of New York City's moviegoers entitled, *Movie Theaters* and Kohei Yushiyuki's 1970s photo series, *The Park*.

The song "*Cowboys and Angels*" by George Michael.

Name

Cristine Brache

Vocation

artist and filmmaker

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