On starting with belief

Multidisciplinary Artist Glenn Kaino discusses compound bodies of work, staggering projects, and art as a generous space.

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As told to Reina Bonta, 1734 words.

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As a multidisciplinary artist who spends a lot of time in imagined spaces, what draws you to documentary, which is so deeply rooted in reality?

I don’t consider myself a documentarian, so to speak. For me, all of my projects begin without form as ideas in search of form. I have always thought that art is the space for which we can attack and begin to understand some of the most difficult questions in the world. I think of art as a space of inquiry, a space of slippage and imagination, a generous space that is not bound by conventional business logic. A good return on investment in making art is: did you imagine a better world? In the space of art making and protected presentation where you’re not bound by the market in different ways, you get to think deeply and rigorously about very challenging issues. When I say “artwork,” for me, it’s a body of work. I rarely have ever said the word “piece.” I’ve never made an art piece. My artworks are corpuses. They’re large bodies of activity of different forms and conversations. Sometimes, when we in the studio come up with an important idea that needs a bigger audience, I think about the best ways to bring those ideas to the public. Filmmaking happens to be a very powerful art form of the moment in regards to how media channels work. In that respect, documentary filmmaking is an instrument in the array of tools that I use to express my ideas.

Do you ever feel the urge to escape to a certain art form when one particular form is occupying too much creative energy?

My practice spans conventional art making, sculpture, ephemeral, performance–you name it–in technology and media. But I always say that technology projects are usually “hurry, hurry, hurry,” media projects are “hurry up and wait,” and art world projects are “wait, wait, wait.” There’s an emotional currency that I always try to stagger in those works. People say, “It’s almost like you have three or four careers.” I do. I just layer them. I respect mastery and I respect excellence. I make it a big part of my practice as well. When I’m locked in, I’m locked in. When I first started making work, the vulnerability of being an artist was very challenging. I don’t think the general population understands how scary it is for any creator to put something out into the world. I was trying to solve for that bundle of emotional nerves post-show. I was like, “Okay, even if they hate that, I’m working on the next one.”

How do the various creative communities that you’re a part of differ from each other? What kind of creative energy are you most drawn to in collaborators?

I’d say my entry point into the different spheres of collaboration that I participate in are mostly through my collaborations with individuals of high caliber. It’s artist-driven, not industry-driven. I gravitate towards working with people across industries that happen to be masters in their field. I am drawn to practitioners who think the same way I do–not just about the world, but about our respective utility and the concepts of how we shape our engagement with our fields. Most of the people who I work with are “‘yes’ in the ‘no’ world” people.

My whole studio's constantly kitbashing and putting things together that don't normally have a chance to meet. I like to challenge most of these collaborators of mine with the idea that, under the rubric of art, we can take everything that they know, slip it with some postmodern thinking, and present to the world something that might force them to reconsider what they thought they knew.

I remember being present during a panel of yours at Sundance a few years ago. You mentioned that, in the world of visual art, because it's so subjective, you must be completely convinced of the power of your work. How does that principle relate to art on the whole?

Years ago, I took upon the study of magic as a way of thinking about systems of belief. In our first lesson, a magician held a coin in front of his face. He grabbed it with the other hand, blew on it, and it vanished into thin air. It was beautiful. It just melted away. He handed me the coin and said, "Learn how to hold this and pick it up 1,000 times tonight. Come back tomorrow and I'll teach you how to vanish it." I'm like, "This is amazing. This is like Karate Kid. I'm doing this." He said, "Glenn, when you vanish that coin in front of an audience, you have to believe that it's dissolving into thin air. Because if you don't believe, no one standing in front of you is going to believe." What a powerful thing for me as an artist. Really, that set me off. Prior to that, I was conceptual and poetic in terms of understanding the slippages of my practice, but I was analytical in my thinking.

Filmmaking is the same. First of all, filmmaking is art. It all starts with the belief that the subject matter that you are spending all of your time, money that you don't have, resources, and energy on is important for people to hear and see. You can't make a successful documentary and not actually believe that you're changing the world. You might not change the world. Very few people do. But you have to believe you're going to because no one is going to watch a film that the filmmaker doesn't think is going to change the world. You can feel it.

Many people describe film as being an amalgamation of many other art forms. Others describe it as something that's completely singular and unique because when you group all of these things together, it becomes a form on its own. Where do you fall?

I fall into the camp of intention. Every film I have made, every film that I'm working on now, and every film that I will make, start with an intention. If you had told me when I was eight years old learning about Dr. Martin Luther Jr., that at some point in my life, I, a little Japanese boy whose parents were in the projects, was going to write a chapter of Martin Luther King's legacy with his daughter that no one's ever known about, I'd be like, "You're crazy." But that's what we did. The intention of the film was to connect Dr. King's story and this untold wrinkle to a younger audience who would've otherwise understood Dr. King to be a black and white grainy film civil rights hero. So, form has less to do with it than intention.

How do you feel like art makes the political accessible?

I think that all art and everything we do is political. Every decision we make is political; it's either a perpetuation of something or vocalization about something that affects all of us. I had a troubled childhood. I was kicked out of five high schools and I didn't have the smoothest early education. At some point, I was working with Oprah Winfrey. She said, "How have you been kicked out of five high schools, and now you're sitting here working with me?" The reason why I got into so much trouble as a young person was because I didn't feel seen. I didn't feel seen through the media. I didn't feel seen in my family. I didn't feel seen with my school group and friends. In order to rectify that, the only thing I knew how to do was act out.

I now have an ability to break down really political issues in ways that people could care about. I know what it feels like to be uneducated, see something and not understand it, and have an ill reaction that is uninformed. Art can be empathy machines if crafted in the right way. They don't need to understand the whole thing. But are they going to feel it? Are they going to access it? Can it speak to my old neighborhood, but also the most intellectual writers?

***The Creative Independent* spoke with you back in 2017. Now, almost a decade later, what are the key parts of your creative process that have evolved since then?**

My studio and my practice is compound. Everything grows upon and builds upon the skillset and the relationships from every project we've ever done. What is hopefully going to continue is the people who see my work. It just reaffirms the credibility, belief system, and authenticity of what we're trying to accomplish. We wear it on our sleeve, and it's our calling card. For all the projects that we have coming up next, hopefully that just continues to evolve in positive ways.

Glenn Kaino recommends:

Isaac Bryan - Isaac Bryan is a member of the State Assembly, and is the future. He's a man with a vision of community and a voice of clarity that I know will become one of the key voices of tomorrow

A Good Day Will Come by Amir Zargara - This meant a lot to me when I first heard of it months ago, and has particular significance now.

Anything from Yuka Honda - Yuka had a band I loved called Cibo Matto and is now making new music and sonic artworks, and we're cooking up a new project together so I get to listen to her work often, but people should check out

Advances in Origami by Robert Lang - Robert and I have collaborated on many artworks and as I think about the rupture of cultural lineage that Japanese Americans experienced during WW2, origami is one of the art forms that endured and that I grew up proud to have in my cultural history.

Valley of Shadows - My drive time is crime podcast time, and Valley of Shadows has it all, outlaw bikers, bad cops, and LA.

The Michael Latt Legacy Fund - Michael was a dear friend, studio partner, and hero to me and dozens of other creatives, that was taken from us too soon.

Name
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Vocation
filmmaker, artist