

# On sharing your power



Artist, writer, and poet Diamond Stingily on finding a routine that works for you, not getting caught up in other people's opinions, making your own work on your own terms, and lifting other people up whenever you can.

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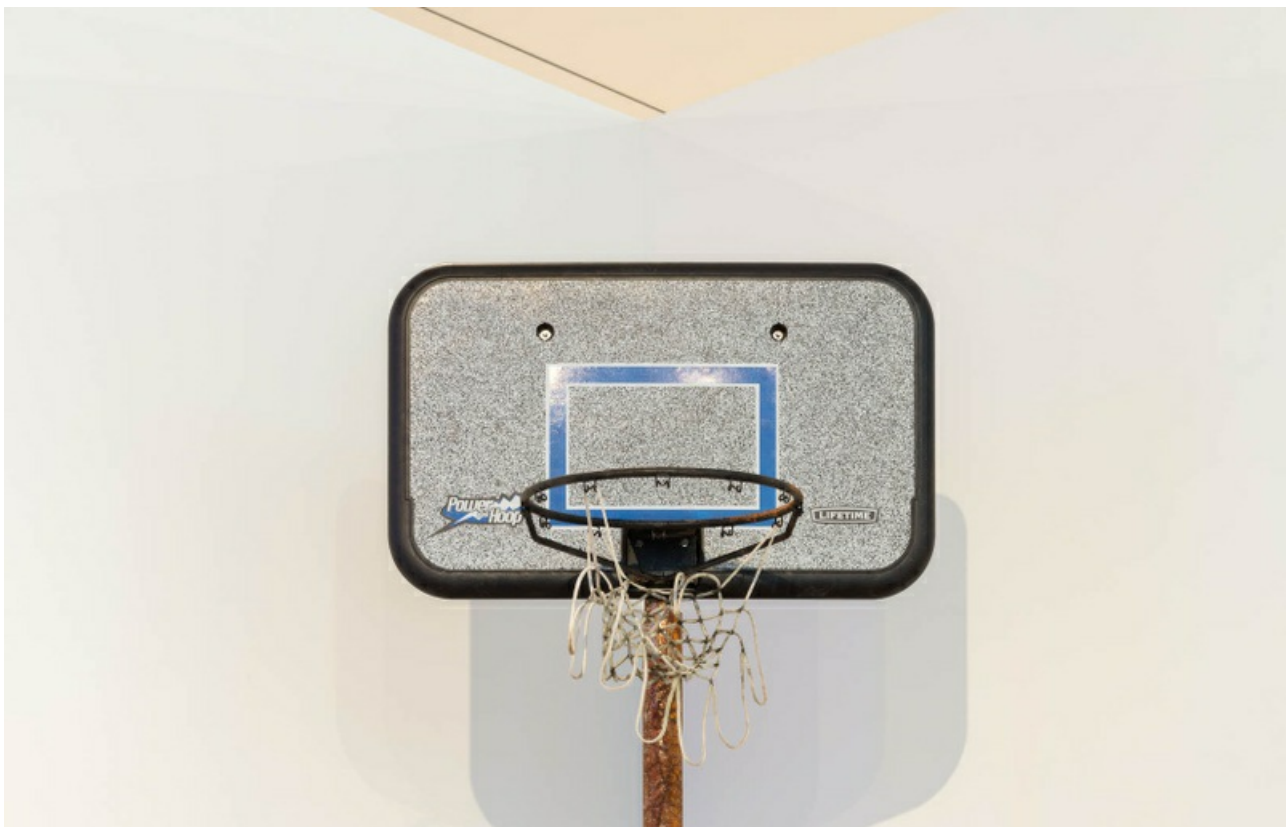
As told to Annie Bielski, 2706 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Writing](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#), [Money](#), [Beginnings](#), [Mentorship](#).

## How do you decide if something is a good idea?

I try to imagine it in a space or on the street. If it can look good on the street as well as in an institutional space or something, then I'm like, "Oh, that's cool."

In my [Romeoville Driveway piece](#), the basketball hoop, that was on the cover of [Q32c](#) with Gucci [Mane], I was walking down the street and I saw basically the same basketball hoop at a block party. I was like, "It looks good at the block party. It looks good at the ICA [Miami]."





*Romeoville Driveway*, Courtesy the Artist and Queer Thoughts, NY.

I usually ask a friend who I know is cool and who I admire, if they think it's cool, and if can they imagine it. You don't know if it's going to be cool or not until you make it. But sometimes, there've been ideas that I had, and I'm like, "Oh, that would be cool." And then the more I think about it, I'm like, "Oh, that's corny." You just got to think about it some more, give it a few days.

I was going to put a bow on top of the bricks at the New Museum for E.L.G., and I'm so happy I didn't put a bow on that shit. But at first it was a bow on top of it, but it was too cutesy. And that's not my style. My style isn't to be cute—it's to be kind of gothic. So girl, I had to call them ASAP and say, "Take the bow off. Take it off." Because it would have changed the whole feel of the piece. I also think when [people] write about me, they want to go straight to girlhood and blackness, because I'm a black woman. But having that bow on there, I was like, "They're really going to be like, 'channeling girlhood,' like oh, boo." I didn't want that.

**Is routine important to you?**

Yeah, sometimes. I notice when I fall off, though. It's good for me to have a routine because I think someone like me actually is kind of anxious. Waking up in the morning, stretching, not checking my phone, reading. Going to the gym helps me a lot. And I'm not a gym rat like I used to be. I'm more like a gym mole.

People have said that my routines are strange, which they are. It's just like, I'm the type of person to go to the same restaurant for 20 years and get the same thing, and stop going if they tell me my order. I feel that way now about the cafe I go to. My friend Noelle was like, "This is a very Diamond Stingily problem. Only you would be like, 'Oh, the girl made my oat milk latte before I could say I wanted an oat milk latte, so that freaked me out, so I'm going to stop going there for a while,'" which—I haven't been there in two weeks.

**What's that about, agency?**

It makes me feel sad when people know my routine too well, because it's like, "Damn, I go there *that* much?" I go there that much by myself that you've drawn a conclusion about me or something. Do you know what I mean? If I go somewhere every day at like 9 AM and then they're like, "Oh, she comes in every day by herself at 9 AM. She gets this drink. She does that," then it's a routine and, I don't know, it's like, aw, that's kind of sad to me.

**I know what you mean. We project stories onto other people, and they can almost become characters.**

Exactly. And I always feel like I'm in a movie. So I guess that's me, like, "Oh, you're fucking up my plot. I got to give you a plot twist."

**You've been a subject in other artists' work, notably the video of Martine Syms, Terence Nance's Random Acts of Flyness, and as a model in shows. How have these experiences informed your work?**

I think Martine has informed my work, even though we're two very different artists, because she taught me that you have to be a little organized. She also taught me how to not let nobody fuck with your shit, and to speak up for yourself. And she taught me how to stand your ground in a graceful way, because she's just like, "I'm going to just be in the studio. I'll just take all that bullshit into the studio and work on stuff." I feel like I learned that from her, not really feeding into this art world drama, and to just focus on what you need to focus on. She doesn't let anything get in her way. And I've always known that about her. I got to basically live with her for two weeks while filming Notes on Gesture and really saw how she worked. She taught me that if you believe in yourself, you really got to give it 100% and go for it. She taught me how to be even more dedicated to your craft, if that's what you're going to claim.



installation view, *Death*, Courtesy the Artist and Queer Thoughts, NY.

Terence Nance—that was such a fun experience. [Nuotama Bodomu](#), she directed me, and Terence Nance directed a little bit, too. But if it wasn't for Nuotama, I wouldn't have probably even gone to that casting, she's the one that told me to go. I feel like acting is a part of my craft, but it's not like I went to a school for acting or anything like that, or I participated in any plays in high school. But it was fun, and it was a really great opportunity.

#### **What about writing and directing your own video work?**

I like directing because, as the director, it really is your vision of how you imagine a story. Everything is shot on a shitty phone. I've never had a super-duper nice phone. I used to make these short films as a kid, and I always used a very cheap, inexpensive camera. So why stop now? That's kind of my aesthetic at this point. I love the way that looks.

I directed the [Balenciaga Winter 2018 video](#) with my family, and it was based off of home videos that I actually used to make with my siblings. Byron, my oldest brother, was never in any of my home videos that I made, and it wasn't because I don't love my brother, it's just because he had a car, and he was never home. But we were all really young. I had to be around 12 or 14 when I was making these home videos, and they were basically of my siblings walking or doing waltzes. They were very weird videos. Even when I was staying on the West Side of Chicago, in my early twenties, I would make videos with me putting on a face mask, and my grandma Estelle asleep behind me. Whoever stole my goddamn phone probably saw the weirdest shit. It was like, "What is this girl on?" Because they got some bangers and some classics on that phone.

But yeah, I would do a lot of weird stuff. With one video, my brother was like, "What the fuck are you doing?" I had on a face mask and I was eating Doritos, holding a portrait of black Jesus while my brother's asleep in the back with the TV on, watching a Western. I liked making weird stuff like that, mundane stuff that kind of doesn't make sense, but it does make sense, and there's some type of tenderness in it because obviously you can tell

that's my little brother asleep in the back. It's in modern-day time, but we're literally watching a show from the '40s, so obviously we're out at our grandma's house.

I feel like my aesthetic now is very "little girl who grew up around old people." My house was built in the '60s or '70s, and I think that aesthetic kind of shaped me—the interior of the house still had a '90s aesthetic to it at the same time though, because of the furniture. My house was always nostalgic, like it was from another time. My neighborhood kind of looked like *The Brady Bunch* a little bit, because it was all these retro-looking houses. I think it had a lot of history with migration. First it was a white neighborhood, and then it became a black neighborhood, due to certain economic changes in Chicago. I think that shaped me whether I wanted it to or not, because there was something very Hairspray about my house. It was very John Waters-energy-happening where I was growing up.

**Can you talk about community-based projects and creating your own opportunities and opportunities for others? I'm thinking specifically of Sparkle Nation Book Club, which you started with artists/writers Precious Okoyomon and Gabrielle Rucker, and the Diamond Stingily Show on Know Wave.**

I believe in community a lot, so if someone asked me if there were any artists they should be looking at, the first people I go to are my friends. I think if you have the platform and the resources and the accessibility to help anybody out, it should be people that you want to see succeed along with you. Naomi Campbell said that a queen cannot reign forever, and I totally think that's true. You have to share your power. You have to be okay with not being in power at a certain point.







*Cephalaphore*, 2019. Courtesy the Artist and Queer Thoughts, NY.

You have to take initiative if you want certain things to get done. I wanted to start a book club, but I knew I couldn't do that on my own. And, thankfully, I met Gabrielle, and Gabrielle is 10 times more organized than I am, and she has made it the book club that it is now. And I've also formed a strong and healthy relationship with Gabrielle at the same time. And the same with Precious. It's just coming up with ideas, helping with where we're going to host the book club, all these little things that people don't even think about when they're trying to start stuff. I also think a lot of times people have these ideas of what they want to do, but they don't know how to execute it, or they want to take all the credit for something when it shouldn't be about that. It shouldn't be credit or having your hands in too many things. And that's why it's important that, if you are going to be a multitasking person, you have people that are willing to help, that are on the same page.

I like talk radio, but I wanted to hear more literary stuff on the radio. And so, that's how the Diamond Stingily Show got started. It was because I have a few followers on Instagram that also know that I'm a writer, and I'm constantly looking for writers and, I don't know, I'm all about giving people a platform to speak their peace or whatever.

**Does anyone who submits get on the show?**

Yeah. That's why a lot of times these shows were like five hours long, because I was like, "Anybody could be on my show. Anybody could be on the show." And I was talking a lot on the show. So, oh my god, that shit would last forever. There was no real time limit on the Know Wave show. To be real, with the *Diamond Stingily Show*, sometimes it was like, "Damn, ain't nobody really submit this time," because it was every two weeks. I was going to ask my friends that were writers, too, because sometimes you've got to ask people, because people are either too shy or they don't know what you want. A lot of times I was just like, "Do you want to submit to the show?" And my friends would be surprised, like, "Oh, I thought you wouldn't want someone like me," or like, "Oh, I thought you didn't like noise music," but I do like noise music. That was just an example.

### **What advice would you give to younger artists?**

If you really believe in yourself, listen to those who you truly respect and who actually want to see you flourish, because that criticism is good for you. So if it's someone that you admire, respect, and who actually wants to see you succeed, listen to them, and take that, and learn from it. You have to believe in yourself. If I told Martine an idea, if I was working on something and Martine wasn't feeling it, then I can take that critique and I can maybe learn from it. Maybe I won't totally change my idea, but I'll listen to what she has to say, and take that in, you know? But if it's someone that I know that don't fuck with me to begin with, and never did like my work from the jump, of course I'm not going to listen to them.

Figure out your resources. If you want to be a writer, read. If you want to oil paint, then find some oil painters that you admire, and study them. Study those painters. Go to lectures when you can. We grew up when the internet just was starting to really pop, but now, the resources you can find online are kind of crazy. I think that was my thing, I just was like, "Okay, I want to be a writer." So I started hanging around people who wrote, and then we all figured it out together.

### **What are the main challenges of being an artist, and what are the joys?**

The challenges of being an artist are prioritizing, confidence, and minding your business. For real, because I think even now with social media, people get caught up being like, "Well, why did they win that fellowship?" And it's shit they didn't even apply for that they're mad they didn't get. Or you see that somebody is on some magazine cover or in a magazine, and you're feeling some type of way that that's not you. So I think it's just having confidence within yourself and knowing your time will come, or just being satisfied with your own work.

The joys—it's kind of liberating for me to be making a living, as of right now, not having a 9-to-5. And I say as of right now, because I'm so tired of people being in my bag, trying to figure out how much money I'm making because I'm a full-time artist. I make enough right now to survive, to say I'm a full-time artist, but it's not like I got Blue Ivy money, you know? I got enough to pay my rent and pay my bills on time and maybe get a cute dress and an iced coffee. I ain't got enough to be buying people dinner and shit, but I pay my phone bill on time every month. So that's where I'm at. I think the triumph is just being satisfied and being able to say that I work for myself right now, but we'll see. I'm not going to play, it feels good that I'm getting a bit of recognition for my work. That's nice. I'm not gonna sit up here and tell no lies, I think that's cool. But I'm humble about it. I'm not out here stuntin'.



*E.L.G.* Courtesy the Artist and Queer Thoughts, NY.

**Diamond Stingily Recommends:**

Bunny Jr. Tapes

BLAIR

Ask the Eight Ball

Cookie Monster

Dictionary.com

Name

Diamond Stingily

Vocation

Artist, Writer, Poet

□

Celeste Sloman for the New York Times