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On creating what's missing

Artist Neesh Chaudhary discusses working and collaborating across disciplines, getting too busy to care about imposter syndrome, and making what you want to see in the world.

There are so many different aspects to your creative practice, but I want to start by focusing on your artmaking. When did you first realize that you're an artist?

My "imposter syndrome" lasted longer than it should have when it came to actually calling myself an artist, but I've always known. I mean, I've been getting in trouble for drawing on things since I was in the second grade. I started introducing myself as an artist when I found that I was choosing art over other things in my life—like when I skipped classes to teach myself Photoshop and that kind of thing. I realized how important artmaking was to me when it became my top priority.

What was your experience like with imposter syndrome? How did you break through it?

I got thicker skin when I graduated college and started trying to freelance. It was hard to reach out to people initially, and especially hard to attach value to my art. Eventually, I started receiving positive feedback, clients returned again and again, and I saw other small indicators of success, which boosted my confidence. The feeling of being an imposter faded away gradually, mainly because I didn't have time for it anymore. I was too busy making things, and finding my way through life.

How do you start a project?

Most of my projects start with strong feelings of disappointment or angst, in one way or another, even if it doesn't appear that way in the end result. For my last project, I got really angry about something and immediately started writing—which is unusual because I'm not really a writer. I use my journal only two or three times a year, at most. But when a strong feeling hits, I follow the impulse to write. The projects develop from what I see written on the page.

How do you nourish your creative side when you aren't working?

By doing nothing. I have found that when I'm constantly thinking about creative projects, I'll eventually hit a wall where I'm like, "Oh my god, I'm so exhausted from thinking." I have to free myself from that cycle—and do nothing. I need to zone out, away from the project, and live my life. An idea eventually crawls back and finds its way to me, but it usually returns with a new perspective or angle. I like to ebb and flow between total absorption in an idea and completely ignoring it.

Is there a habit that you try to fight against and how do you do it?

I procrastinate. I have always been able to work very fast, which is one reason why I'm able to practice multiple disciplines: I can switch contexts very easily, and work across a few different projects in a day. When I was building my career and realized I could complete projects quickly at a very high quality, I would procrastinate in order to buy extra time. Now, I try to be more intentional. I don't just want to complete projects so that I can cross them off my to-do list; I want to create things that will really resonate and matter to people. As I've grown as an artist and become better at my craft, I've realized that even though I can complete something quickly, there's always an opportunity to refine an idea further. I get mad at myself when I procrastinate now because I know that I could spend that time dreaming up better ideas. Aside from that, I definitely procrastinate when it comes to administrative tasks because they don't interest me as much. I know they're necessary in order to sustain a creative practice, but I'm

at the stage where I should pass it off to an accountant who might actually enjoy that type of work.

Do you see common themes between the commercial projects you take on, and your creative practice? How do you decide when an opportunity is "the right fit" for you?

I noticed some themes emerging recently. I've been doing my commercial design practice for over a decade now, and working hard at mastering my craft. I have the technical ability to create pretty much anything, which means that I can be particular about prioritizing projects that reflect my personal values. It's not just about trying to improve my skills or build my portfolio anymore; it's about knowing how powerful my energy is and using it in ways that will make a meaningful difference. When I'm approached with commercial projects, I have a checklist now, where I ask myself: Will this project create more opportunities for creative people? Is it useful? Will its impact be long-lasting?

This year was the first time that I started to say "no" to projects, and it's been amazing. I've found that the work is so much better when I'm personally invested in a project, because I'm not constrained and can put my full force behind it. It doesn't matter whether it's photography, design, or product. The choice to prioritize my values has been a really significant, positive shift.

Do you ever abandon a project?

I used to be scared to leave a project unfinished because everything felt so precious. I had a hard time believing in myself enough to know that I would come back to it. Now, I "abandon" projects all the time. For example, I was playing around with datamoshing in After Effects, and experimenting with merging multiple videos. I was obsessed with this tool for about two months, and then abruptly stopped and didn't touch it again for a couple of years. Recently, I started a new project and thought, "Oh, I know exactly what would be perfect for this: a datamosh." I had no idea or purpose for how to use it when I was first exploring the tool, and was just in experimentation mode—but then found a perfect implementation years later. I love moving multiple experiments forward and letting some of them drop off naturally, because it helps me create my own research library to inspire future projects. It's like exploring a stock website for images, or looking up articles, except that all of the references exist on my own hard drive. I can always go back through those half-baked studies and see if they prompt new concepts or projects.

You're one of seven cofounders of Public Assembly DAO, where the tagline is: *Create What's Missing*. What does that phrase mean to you?

It's purposefully broad because we want to inspire action. Most of us are builders, but that doesn't mean that you need technical knowledge to create a solution. It's inspiring to remind people that if they have an idea, or see an opportunity to do something better, they have the ability to do it.

We want people to be able to fill their own gaps, and to create the systems that will best serve them and their communities. "Create what's missing" is a call to do more than just consume, but actually participate in the world. It's also a call to imagine what could be possible, even if it doesn't exist yet. If what's missing is imagination, we can provide resources that will help people dream bigger—and then actually build it. It's like public goods on acid.

I'm imagining someone reading this piece, thinking there was a typo above when we mentioned there are seven co-founders of Public Assembly. How does that work in a practical sense? For example, if there's a contentious moment, how do you handle that?

The seven of us initiated the organization, but we're also active members and participants just like everyone else in the network. We have a tacit understanding that we can pick up any projects or roles we want, and we try to keep it as fluid as possible. If I choose to make videos because that's what feels important, nobody would stop me. It's one of the best parts of being a DAO, while one of the most challenging parts is coordination.

We've always put an emphasis on working async instead of scheduling recurring meetings, which is more of an experiment than anything. Since none of us want to be called "founders" or operate as managers, we sometimes have a product team of seven people with no product manager. At first it could be chaotic trying to figure all of that out, while working async, and not entirely understanding each others' communication styles. There were moments when it felt extremely hard. We used direct messages on Slack, Twitter, and sent group texts at first, but then we decided we wanted to be more transparent and move all of our communication into external channels. Most DAOs are creating Discords, but we decided to go another way and create a Discourse forum so we could have slower, more thoughtful communication that wouldn't need to be moderated by a community manager. It allowed us to expand our group while still remaining headless, without a managerial body, and to find other like-minded people who wanted to experiment and explore similar ideas.

In the interest of being more action-oriented, we also spend a lot more time on GitHub. GitHub has project management tools which are usually only used by developer teams, but we're using them for other processes, too. For example, I put in pull requests for design changes which is something that most designers wouldn't really think about, but it's made our processes more direct.

When it comes to disagreements, we talk it out. There are so many tools that can be used for voting but we would rather get on a call with all seven of us and hear everyone out. The calls range from quick 15-minute check-ins to two hours of conversation where we make sure that everyone has a chance to express themselves and be heard. I've never worked with a group that makes such a point to include every person's

voice. We don't have as many disagreements or miscommunications now because we took the time to learn about and understand each other in a pretty deep way from the beginning. It's interesting. It's not typical.

Now that you've experienced building as a collective, would you do it again? Is there anything you wish you would've done differently or known before you started?

The whole purpose of Public Assembly was to be an experiment, but I couldn't help envisioning certain outcomes. The specific and outsized expectations that I had limited my experience at first, and I had to learn to let go and let it happen. Would I do it all again? In a heartbeat, for sure. I've never had an experience like this before and it's opened my eyes to so many new ways of working. The group members all have very different ways of thinking, which has given me an opportunity to immerse myself in other people's viewpoints, in a deep way, constantly, for long periods of time. It's changed and expanded my perspective. The entire group is so smart; we're constantly learning, listening, and reading, and sharing resources. If I didn't have the community aspect of building collaboratively with these six other founders, it wouldn't have been the same and I wouldn't have evolved as much as I have in this process.

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1