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As told to René Kladzyk, 2566 words.

Tags: Art, Business, Process, Identity.

On not being afraid to embrace your true interests

Artists Wretched Flowers discuss collaborating with nature, creating your own path, and running a business as an art experiment.

Your work seems very place-specific to me, because it involves harvesting and foraging plants from your home. Can you begin by describing this place, painting a picture of where your work gets made?

Loney Abrams: Sure. It's changed a lot throughout our practice. Wretched Flowers began when we were living in Brooklyn, so the whole inspiration for it was through going for walks around our studio, which was in East New York. Walking around and noticing how much biodiversity was literally growing through the cracks of the sidewalk, that's where it really started. But we moved from New York to Connecticut in March 2020. Now, where we work is completely different. What used to be an exhilarating, if not also illegal experience (foraging) in New York, whereas here, there's no risk at all. It's only ever very peaceful, very tranquil, almost meditative.

Johnny Stanish: Well, the risk now is we're getting into more poisonous situations - different risks. Poison ivy, ticks, it's become a different thing that we have to look out for with foraging.

Loney: So we're just deep, thick in brush. There's one place in particular that is mostly a hunting area. It's called a Multiple Use Area, which basically just means hunters can go there. But they periodically mow down this meadow, which makes it prime grassland for wildlife. It's just tons of wildflowers, tons of everything that we're interested in. So we'll go there. And it's very beautiful. We bring our dog. She runs around.

Johnny: It's almost like if you could picture Duck Hunter on Nintendo, where there's the fields and the birds fly out. It's sort of like that.

Working as a team, are there specific roles that each of you take on in the project or is there a lot of overlap? Can you tell me a bit about how your collaborative process works?

Johnny: Yeah. So it took us a little while because collaboration is a very learned experience. It isn't something that's easy just to jump into. It took us years to figure out our visual language. But once we did figure it out, we always recommend, when you're doing a collaboration, lay out what you're not good at and lay out what you are good at. And then use that collaboration to pull from everyone's strengths. And so, Loney does a lot more of the deep dive research-based, more of the writing on our Instagram, and I take over the production side of things and maybe think about creating new objects or things like that. And then we meet in the middle and just rip it out.

Loney: Yeah, all the ideas, like all the planning and conceptualizing is a conversation, and then, [Johnny is] in the studio more. I'm more foraging and writing, but there is a lot of overlap.

Are you a couple?

Loney: Yeah, we're married.

Do you have advice for collaborating with your romantic partner or your spouse?

Johnny: I think one of the important things that we've learned is that it's important to take the time not always collaborating and not always making art and just maybe work on our own separate endeavors that aren't collaborative, that just are maybe for our mental health or something like that.

Loney: That's a really good one. I think it's really easy when you're working together and living together and creating together, your identities become dangerously close together. And so, having another creative outlet that is completely independent, like we both make music completely independently just for ourselves, not for anybody else. Having things that are completely separate is crucial so that you can still go back to your own creative self and find some difference at some point.

Are there any specific ways that you think working on Wretched Flowers has changed you as a person, like your sense of self or identity?

Johnny: I think one thing that it's made me personally do is stop caring about the art world as much. It's made me be able to walk out the back door of the art world and just leave it behind and just focus on Wretched and focus on making things that are more accessible for everyone to participate in, and look at making art in a whole different way than we were before.

Did both of you have a strong sense of native plants before starting to do Wretched flowers?

Loney: No.

Because I would imagine it would change your way of looking at space if you develop this acuity toward foraging.

Johnny: Yeah, we almost literally tripped over a watermelon growing in a parking lot in Brooklyn. And it was one of those things that opened our eyes up to be like, 'Oh shit, there's way more interesting things that are just happening around us. And we're so focused just being in this studio, concentrating on one thing, that we just forgot that both of us love nature.' I grew up on a ranch in Montana and [Loney] grew up going to farms and just loving that kind of thing. I hate to say, we tripped and fell and we're like, 'oh, whoa, what the hell we've been doing just thinking about these stupid objects when plants are just so interesting and so cool?' We could never make something as interesting as that. So why not collaborate with nature instead of trying to push it away from us?

Loney: Yeah, there's something called plant blindness, which is basically, we evolved to be able to scan our horizon really quickly and isolate moments of danger, like if there's a lion running at us to eat us or whatever it is, our brains evolved to quickly gloss over plants. And so, it's very easy to just look at the landscape and just be like, 'oh, plants.'

Johnny: Just blur.

Loney: But I think once we started this project and started foraging and just going out and starting to identify different plants, an entire new world opened up to us because that blindness started to disappear. And we were able to really see our environment made up of many, many layers of species living together. Being able to see ecological systems has been really beneficial, not just in having a richer experience of our physical environment. But also, in learning ecology, you also learn how to see society as part of that ecology and understand that everything is a system, everything operates within a structure. There are no single individual bad apples, or good apples that are creating change. It's communities, whether it's communities of Queen Anne's Lace that are competing with chicory that are collaborating with-

Johnny: -what's going on underground.

Loney: -with mycelium under the soil versus whether it's-

Johnny: -an invasive rosebush trying to take over.

Loney: So I think just having that perspective of, we are part of ecology, we are collaborators with our own environment, and taking that into our foraging practice too, and saying, 'okay, it's not just about cutting flowers and taking things home.

Johnny: -take, take, take.

Loney: It's about looking at this community of species: how are we actors within this living community of plants and animals, and how do our actions contribute to their wellbeing or not? More specifically, we'll often target invasive species before they go to seed so that their removal actually helps their little ecosystem, or we'll harvest native beneficial plants after they've reproduced and gone to seed so that we're not inhibiting their spread, things like that.

Do you both believe in plant sentience?

Loney: I think a trap that a lot of people fall into is trying to anthropomorphize other species. When we think of intelligence, we think of our own intelligence and we try to look for clues in other species to be like, 'that looks like us. Therefore, it's intelligent.'

Johnny: [Plants have] a different type of intelligence that we don't really understand.

Loney: Since we moved here, we went from having the norm of a 9 to 5 kind of work schedule, weekends mean Saturday/Sunday, seven days in a week. And now we're on a different kind of time scale that depends much more on weather, much more on what the plants are doing, and what the deer are doing and what all of these other species are doing, where they are in their life cycles, where they are in the season, what's happening with the weather. And that structures our daily activities.

And so, in that way, there is always a give and take. It's not a communication where I'm like, 'Hey, little plant. How was your night last night? Did you get a good night's rest?' It's more like, 'Oh, okay, you're now at this stage of growth. This is what you might need from me.' It's more of that kind of conversation, but I do think that plants are able to have their own ways of feeling and thinking and understanding and knowing.

Johnny: It's just different.

Loney: Yeah, it's just different than we can know. And so, I think they can be sentient. It's just, we need a new vocabulary for it, I think.

What are some of the challenges of having a project like this that exists in a lot of different worlds - because you're in the art world, doing installations, but then you're in event design and weddings and you're also selling commercial objects. How is it to run a business that's navigating all these different spheres?

Loney: Honestly, it makes no sense in business terms. I think what we're realizing is that the business was an art experiment to start with, to see if we could just do what we were doing as artists, but find a new model where we weren't relying on galleries and very wealthy collectors as our only way of supporting ourselves, which also limited who are audience and participants and collectors could be. So we wanted to expand it and make it much more accessible to people.. But I understand now why businesses are so niche. They only sell razors, right? They're just really good at making razor blades. But for us, first and foremost, we're artists. And not only are we artists, we're artists that get kind of bored easily if we're doing the same thing over and over. So for us, it's just necessary that we have all of these different projects and directions because it's what keeps us excited and what keeps us having fresh ideas. But not every aspect is making money -

Johnny: -financially responsible.

Loney: Yeah. It's not really just a straightforward business in the sense that every action we take is towards the end of making profit. It's very far from that. But at the same time, I think it's helpful for us to talk about it as a business and also to destigmatize art being a business, because realistically, any artist that's trying to be an artist is a business. And I almost feel like it's taboo to talk about that sometimes or artists are looked down on for being-

Johnny: Business people.

But it also seems like there are some ways that you have an anticapitalist ethos baked into the project. I'm curious about the ethics of choosing to work with foraged materials and plant materials, it seems clear that's part of it when you talk about accessibility.

Johnny: Yeah. And I think also, the reason Wretched hasn't grown into a bigger capitalist business is, we want to make sure that our ethics are correct when we are hiring people to help us, they're getting paid reasonably and all those things. It's tricky.

Loney: Foraging allows us to not participate in the conventional flower industry, which is big agriculture. It's similar to our food. I think a lot of people already understand the benefits of organic produce versus conventional, or locally grown produce versus grown overseas, or small farms versus big Ag, things like that. So our way of sort of not participating in that and making sure that all of the plant material is hyper local, is seasonal, is grown without pesticides, and is sustainably harvested, is by foraging. Being really intentional with what we forage, not only with which species do we forage, but what part of their life cycles do we forage them in? And something that we appreciate too about foraging is it's not scalable in the sense that agriculture is. You cannot become a huge company when you're relying on foraging. You have to stay within the balance that your environment allows.

Johnny: And that's an anticapitalist approach. It's not being, 'I'm going to just suck all these resources and make as much money as possible.'

Loney: We're seeing what is available to us and making the best out of that, and not searching for anything outside those limitations.

What's a bit of advice that you wish you could tell your younger self?

Johnny: Art isn't that important. It's not changing the world.

Loney: Yeah. I would tell myself to really pursue my interests, even if I didn't think they fit in with the kind of story I was telling about myself. I always thought of myself as an artsy person, but I majored in sociology and environmental science in undergrad and felt like that was at odds with the lifestyle that I wanted for myself. And so, I kind of pursued my life as an artist and then, only much later on, realized that I could combine all of these interests into art.

I think a lot of people when they're starting off as artists, they only really think of more of the formal aspects of making art. Any interest that you have, even if it's binge watching reality TV, that can become fodder for a really interesting art practice if you allow yourself to fully get nerdy about why you're interested in the things you're interested in and how to use your art to make those things interesting to other people.

And then also, I think with what Johnny was saying is, art's not that important. So many artists have an impulse to make art because they're creative and they want to create. And your next step is, oh, then I want to be a professional artist in the art world, without fully understanding what the art world is. Most people finally get to the realization that the art world is, in a lot of ways, very toxic, very unjust, not conducive to actual creativity fundamentally. And then, it's almost too late. You're in too deep. So I don't know how to turn that into advice exactly other than to say, just because you like making art and are creative, there may be ways to utilize that creativity that doesn't involve entering the art world.

Wretched Flowers Recommend:

"Castles of Clay" (1978) documentary by directed Joan and Alan Root and narrated by Orson Welles.

The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins (2015) book by Anna Tsing

Sinkhole Compilation video on Youtube

Medieval Herbal Manuscripts

"The Private Life of Plants" (1995) BBC tv show by David Attenborough

Name

Wretched Flowers (collaborative project of Loney Abrams and Johnny Stanish)

Vocation

dead bouquet and event designers, mixed media artists

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