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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2028 words.

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On turning your hobby into a business

Ceramicist Sonia Rose McCall discusses what happens when your creative practice blossoms into a career, tips for staying inspired and not drowning in work, and why her ceramics resonate with people.

How did you start Rose Grown?

I started Rose Grown the summer after I graduated from college. I studied industrial design and worked at the campus craft center, where I taught myself how to throw on the wheel. I got really into pottery the last semester of college, and spent all my free time at the craft center. For my last project of senior design studio, I created a slip-cast fragrance diffuser and sold them at the end of the year showcase in the college of design. They sold out and I got a bunch of inquiries for how to buy more.

I didn't have a job lined up after graduating, so I just kept hanging around the craft center working on my own projects. I intended to take that summer to work on my design portfolio and apply to jobs, but I ended up spending every day making pots and working on my own stuff. I met the owner of a local boutique, Young Blood, a few weeks after I graduated and ended up showing her a picture of my fragrance diffuser and some tiny planters, which I called "Bitty Pots" and had just started making. She placed an order then and there, and I had my first stockist. She really helped guide me early on about tips to managing wholesale accounts.

I made an Instagram account and started getting inquiries from other shops who had seen my work on Young Blood's account. By the end of the year I had done my first few craft shows and was selling at five or six stores, and it has just kept rolling from there.



Why do you think Rose Grown took off?

I think starting out selling in shops initially helped grow my following as they would send customers my way. People have an emotional reaction with my work that I didn't expect. When I was selling the Bitty Pots at markets people would freak out because they were so tiny, and literally almost everyone that would

walk past my booth would smile. I think with Goddessware, my customers (about 95% women) intimately connect with the pieces; they see their boobs on a cup and it resonates.

Each piece is unique and women can personally relate to the forms and they feel this community with other customers. People will tag their friends and say "I'm the one on the left," referencing a mug I made. I've seen conversations pop up between followers in my comments section like, "this is me after breastfeeding!" I've also received emails from women describing how they struggled with their breasts all their life and my work somehow makes them feel better about their bodies. It's amazing and rewarding.

When you started this, did you know how to run a business, or was it more trial and error? Were there any big missteps you made, or did it run pretty smoothly?

I had no idea how to run a business, but it's been pretty smooth. I had some great guidance from shop owners and other artists early on. I was also really lucky that the first shop I started stocking set my pricing for me, because at that point, I didn't really know. I had read some basic pricing formulas online, but I had no real sense of the market and I didn't put enough value on my time. Back then, I was working in a shared studio space and had very little overhead. So I would've charged probably half of what she charged in the shop.



Now that the business has grown, are you still making everything yourself? Or do you have a staff making things? Is it one of those things where now that you're running it, you have less time to do the creative side of things? Or are you able to find a balance?

Currently the creative side has been on the backburner—I've been in full production mode for the past couple months and will be for a bit longer. Throughout the year I try to dedicate a day every week to working on new things, but around the holidays it gets crazy and people really want gifts. My focus after the holidays is to dedicate a couple months purely to designing and prototyping.

Since I've started slipcasting, I've been able to delegate tasks more easily. Over the past year, I hired two assistants who combined work about 20 hours a week for me, which has been amazing. I've been working on creating systems so that the business can run more organically without me having to be physically present 100% of the time. There are certain tasks that are easy to hand off, and others that have been harder to give up control of. But I'm realizing for me to have more creative time doing what I want to, I need more help with things like emails and customer support. That stuff is so draining to me.

Now that you established the brand and people know the kind of things you make, do you ever feel hemmed in or pigeonholed? Like, maybe you want to expand what you do and try to make different kinds of things?

I go back and forth on that. Sometimes I feel restricted by my current line—like, a few weeks ago I posted a photo of a carved pipe I had made in my [Instagram] story and someone replied, "Put tits on it and I'll buy it." That kinda sucks. Most of the time, though, I feel like I'm just riding a wave and the next thing will happen naturally and I don't need to worry about it too much. I'm constantly working on new stuff behind-the-scenes.



Have you ever thought about opening a brick-and-mortar store? Or does it make things easier and less expensive to do business through the web?

I'm not at all interested in opening a storefront. I think it would take so much time away from making and designing. The website has been working great for me so far.

The artist Heather Benjamin talked to me about how as her work became more popular, and she started selling things on Instagram and in her shop, it was great, but it was also one of these things where she would leave her house and see orders coming in and be like, "Oh god, I have to fulfill these orders." It becomes this thing where you get married to the output and the work you're making. How do you find ways to be productive without burning out?

I've changed my mindset about that recently. I used to have anxiety surrounding fulfilling orders: If I would get an order, I would rush to fulfill it and then beat myself up about it if it took longer than I told the customer it would take. Or if something went wrong with a shipment, I would get very upset about it. I had some scary health issues recently which were aggravated by stress, and I realized it's not worth my wellbeing to worry over stupid shit like a pot breaking in shipment.

This fall I went on my first vacation since starting Rose Grown, and I realized how amazing it is to take time off. My studio is my favorite place to be, but I was spending all day everyday there with hardly a day off. This year I changed my business approach so that I no longer take pre-orders or wholesale. I only put pieces on the site that I have in stock, so I no longer feel a constant pressure that I need to fill an order.



I make lists each evening of the tasks I want to accomplish the next day. If I feel stuck or uninspired, there's always tasks on my list that I can attend to so I feel productive. I've also realized it's ok to have unproductive days. If I'm really not feeling it in the studio, I'll leave for a walk or just go home or to a movie or something. I think productive procrastination helps a lot with burnout too. If I'm really not feeling the task in front of me, I'll clean the studio (I love mopping the floors) or take some photos for Instagram.

During the day, do you find ways to work in meditation or yoga, or just moments to reflect or to relax a bit? Or is it more just like, all right we're here and we're working, just getting this stuff out there?

I'm lucky in that my work can be meditative, especially if I'm doing a repetitive task where I can get into a flow state, like when I'm throwing lots of pots or sponging greenware. My boyfriend, Will, is a yoga instructor and he's all about practical workouts. I don't like the gym, so I try to incorporate yoga and exercise throughout my day, because it is physical job. I try to be very conscious of my movements when I'm lifting molds and loading a kiln. I'll do squats as I'm pouring out slip or pressing bags of clay over my head, things like that.

I love my little breaks throughout the day. I drink a lot of tea. I'm usually reading a few books at a time. There are six other artists in my studio, so if we're in the kitchen together there's always time to chat.

Are there some things that you wish you knew when you first started?

Don't sweat the small stuff. Ask for help when you need it. Talk to others who have more experience in your field. There are lots of free or cheap workshops and classes around Atlanta and online.

I went to a few workshops hosted by an organization called Root City Market. They would have mixers where you could meet up with other creative people who are trying to sell handmade stuff, and meeting people in a similar boat, so try to do that. When I first started out, I was selling out a lot of markets and that was really helpful to see the consumer and see their response in real time. I kind of miss that, because I don't do market so much anymore, but that was definitely helpful.



How do you nurture your creative side when you're not working? What are some ways you keep your mind moving outside of your normal output?

I take really long walks. I sew. I make clothes. I used to be more into that kind of stuff. I've always been crafty. I've just gotten back into embroidery a little bit. I like to forage around my neighborhood and around the city for flowers. All said, though, ceramics is my main thing. I'll also do ceramic side projects that are not at all for Rose Grown; they're just for fun.

Have you ever had a personal project that you didn't intend to be for Rose Grown, and it became that? Or something where you announced it on Rose Grown and then it ended up being something that just didn't work?

I did a series of sgraffito pots that I intended to sell through Rose Grown, but I realized it wasn't a fun process making them. Physically, it hurt to make them, so I knew it wasn't an option to produce those. And, well, the goddess pots started off like that. I wasn't intending for that to be my thing; it just kinda happened.

Have you ever been especially surprised by the success of anything you've made?

Yeah, the whole thing. That's how I feel about all of this. It's so crazy to me that I'm doing this for a living.

Comfy studio practice recommendations:

Hot mint tea

Arch support

Rosewater face mist

Dressing in layers

Breaks to breathe outside

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Fact



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