# On becoming comfortable with the idea of being an artist

Visual artist Emma Kohlmann on learning to accept her identity as an artist, balancing a day job with a creative practice, and what values can be learned from being a part of the DIY community.

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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2929 words.

Tags: Art, Process, Beginnings, First attempts.

**Did you ever expect to do art full-time? And, before you did, did you view yourself as an artist?**

I was always making things, but I never felt like it was a possibility for me to do it full-time. It's a hard choice to devote yourself to art, to take that leap.For me, this was during the past two years. During that time, I've been solely living off the work I make. It's given me more confidence to keep pursuing it. The more I was able to afford my studio, my rent, and my groceries, the more I was like, "I have to do more." I can't really say, "I can't do this or that" because if I'm going to devote myself to this, I have to go all in. So, usually what ends up happening for me is I overextend myself, where I think "I can't say 'no' to anything, I have to do everything." I challenge myself in that way.

In college I felt afraid to use the term "artist." I felt like everyone who was in my college, or who was my age in a liberal arts school, was calling themselves that. I felt like the term was used too liberally and that you should have to earn it. I still feel weird about saying that I'm an artist, just because people view it differently. They just assume that you're well off, or you're taken care of, and you don't actually have a job. For a while, when I was still working at a bakery and doing shows, I would just say "I'm a cashier," or something. So now it's different because it's like, "Yeah, I actually do this. This is what I'm doing." But I'm still getting used to it.
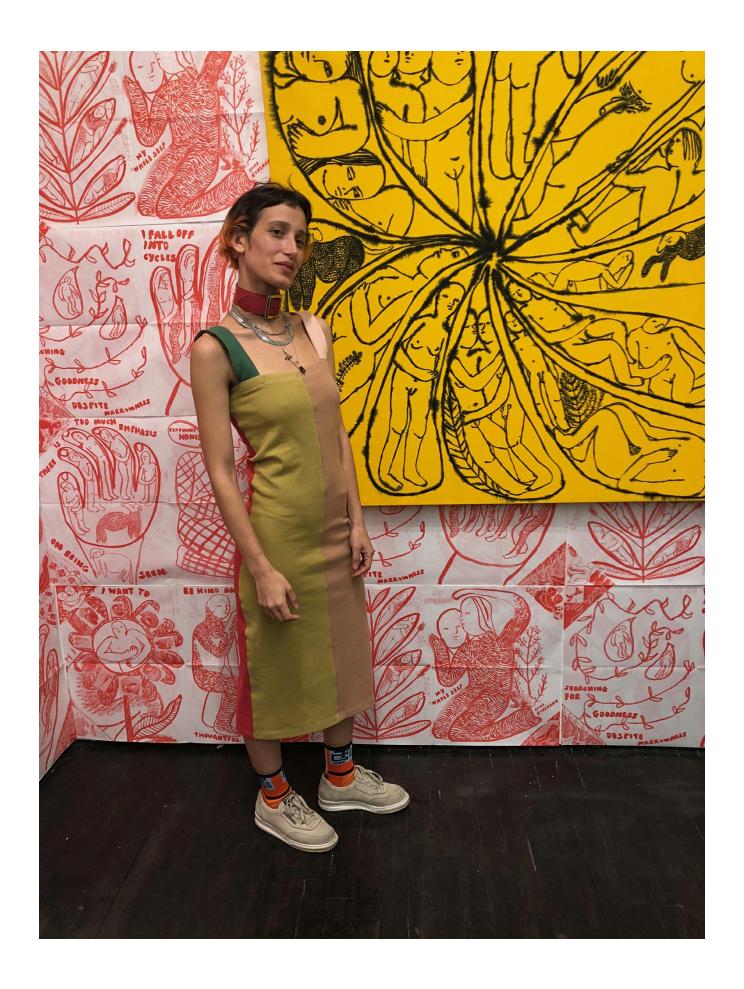


**So, when you decided you had to go for it, there was the sense of "I'm going to quit my day job and focus entirely on visual art?"**

It was gradual. I always supplemented my income with service-industry jobs. I was working at a bakery in Massachusetts for four or five years after college; it was amazing because they were super supportive of my work. I suggested to them, "I'll make the fliers if we have events," and "I'll help do some kind of creative aspect for the job." I think they were just excited that I was passionate about making art. Any time I had a show, or a book fair, I would be able to go to that and they would keep my job for me. I feel like this is a really rare thing. Usually people have to decide whether or not they want to stay in a service job or give up whatever work that they're doing in order to pursue the creative career they want.

I never really quit that job. I would do these shows, or do a show in a DIY space, and I would come back. I would pick up shifts because I would be afraid, "Maybe this is it. Maybe I won't do anything, or make any kind of money off my work." It was kind of an in-between space. Now I can't go back there. I have my own schedule now, where I wake up at seven, and I go to my studio, and I work until late in the evening. I have a full day there, so I don't do that other job anymore, which is kind of nice. It just always feels novel for me: "Oh, I don't have to go. I'm my own boss."

When I was working at the bakery, I would go to my studio before going to work. I didn't have a car, so I would either have to bike to work or hitchhike, or whatever I had to do to get there. Then I would work and come back. I always forced myself to have a schedule. I think that's the reason why I'm still doing what I'm doing. I'm pretty disciplined in the end. Even if I don't have a show coming up, I have to put hours into my work. I like doing that, because then, when I do have a show, I'm not rusty, I can just go from what I was making before onto the next thing.

**Discipline is the biggest thing. So many people have the ability, or the skills, or the ideas, to make something happen, but it's finding the focus to keep going. There are so many distractions, especially in the digital age.**

There's *so much more* distraction. I can feel myself becoming more distracted as the years go on. You're dealing with emails, or dealing with other things, and then for some reason you're suddenly on the internet. You can pick up your phone at any time.

When I was living in an even smaller town in Massachusetts, it was one of the first places where I had my own studio. I shared it with my friend. It was pre-iPhone and pre-Instagram, so there was just this totally different feel. It had this more earnest, "I'm working, I'm toiling in the dark" feeling. Like, "No one knows where I am or what I'm doing." Now I feel like everything is out in the open, like it's impossible to escape. I live in the middle of nowhere and I still know what's going on.

I was really lucky to be able to have this discipline. I pushed myself because no one else was going to do it for me. I had to set my own goals and make my personal bar higher every time I've worked on something, because I'm the only person that can understand or gauge it.



**Do you think it was helpful coming from a DIY and punk background, where there were already practical outlets for making work? You can create work alongside and within a community, so it becomes part of your everyday.**

Definitely. In Western Mass there was a punk-rock scene and a DIY scene, a noise scene. There were always people making stuff. A lot of it was music, and I felt more like, "I'm not that kind of person. I can't physically manifest all my creativity in that way." I would get annoyed because, even with these stupid fliers, it would all be male dominated. I'd be like, "Why can't I just make a flyer?" My boyfriend at the time was like, "You just should start making them." And I was like, "You know what? I'm just gonna do that." It was cool, too, because I would travel with them on tour, or I would go to, like, punk festivals in Austin. A way of me staying in contact with people was through zines. I would try to make a monthly zine where I would send it all to new friends I had just made, and just be like, "Hey, remember me?" Like, "Come visit me," or, "Be my friend, I'm lonely."

**When I was a teenager I did a zine. I lived in the Pine Barrens, in New Jersey, and it was my way to contact people outside of my 800-person town. A lot of those connections ended up being lifelong relationships that led to other opportunities, but that was never the plan. It happened in a natural way. With punk and DIY, you're making stuff all the time and learning how to do it better. You're creating opportunities for yourself, even if you're not thinking of it that way.**

Totally. It also made it more about being proactive; about being intentional about who you're meeting, and realizing that you can build these relationships. It can mean something. I also think getting stuff in the mail is so nice and personal. I feel like when I was really avidly making zines, I had this whole list of people because I was like, "Oh, I wanna make sure I get everyone." I did this one zine that was a Halloween zine, and I sent dried leaves to all my friends, in the package. I stuffed the whole package with dried leaves, and I

sent them to people in California and in the desert. Because I thought it would be so funny to get this taste of fall. Even though it was costing my whole paycheck, I was kind of like, "You know what? It's like a present in the middle of October."
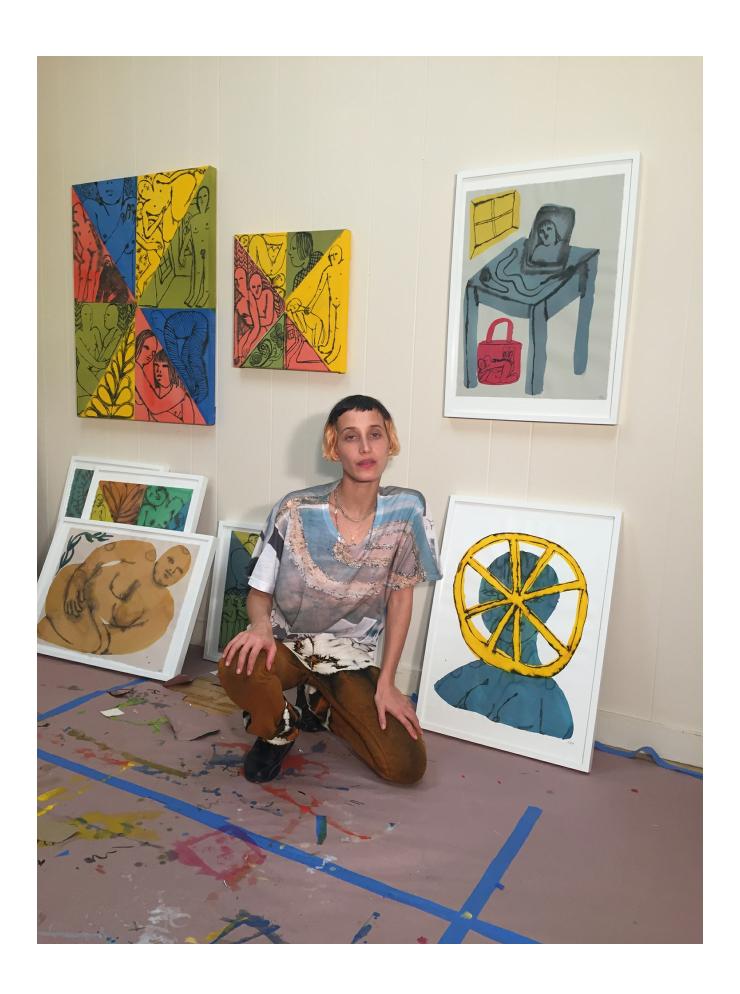


**How do you navigate the gallery system?**

I've always been super clueless. I feel like you have to be really strategic in some ways when it comes to that. I stayed in Western Mass, partly because I didn't want to move to New York and be another artist in New York struggling and working five jobs and not being able to afford a space to make work.

I also stayed in Western Mass partly because I didn't know what to do. I think that really helped, because I was able to sustain myself on the job that I had, and I didn't have to work full-time to be able to afford a studio, and be able to travel and meet people. I felt like that was very much a part of why I'm still able to sustain myself.

With the financial stuff, it ebbs and flows. This is something I've heard from older artists and more established artists, too—you might be doing really well one month, and the next month you can barely buy a burrito. It's really complicated, because I think that's why you're not just an artist, you have to be a teacher, or you have to work in design. You have to be multifaceted in this way. I think that's kind of important, too, because it's not just about being a creator.

As a creator, you can be really self-indulgent. I've definitely been like, "Well, am I giving enough back? Or am I using my platform for good?" There's so much bad, or there's so much erasure in this world. I would like to get to a place where I can do more about that.
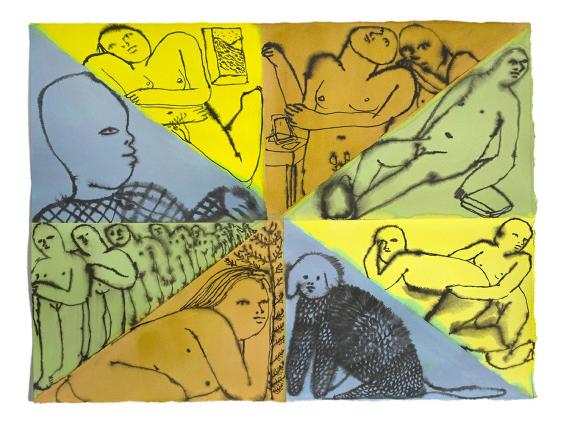
**You've managed to create a path slightly outside of the established system. I feel like a lot of that does go back to talking about DIY and punk. Do you feel like it was beneficial to do that, versus just going to art school and creating stuff within that kind of space, and coming out and being like, "Alright, I'm gonna get a gallery, and get a show?"**

I also felt like living in Western Mass and getting these shows in record stores, or doing things like… for example, My friend Jay started a gallery in a storage unit. It was really more about the community coming together and convening. I really never expected to get as far as I did, because I felt like, "Why is this so easy for me?" Like, "I enjoy this too much for it to be something I could monetize." But it became more of a serious thing when I was getting exposure in different spaces, and realizing, "Oh, I have to treat everything as an equal playing field." No matter where I'm showing, I'm going to give it my all. Because it shouldn't matter. I think a lot of what people talk about is that thing of, "Why would I show here? It's nowhere." I think there's a problem with that.

**When I <u>interviewed Liz Harris</u>, she said, "It's not luxurious to take care of your health, or to enjoy your work. That is a capitalist, patriarchal myth." I like that idea, too—that you actually can enjoy what you're doing. It's not a bad thing to be like, "Alright, I actually really enjoy this." And it feels natural. That can be good, and it is good.**

I think that's the crux of the whole thing. You should be enjoying it. You're making it because you like it. Not to say I like *everything* I make, but I just like making stuff. And being able to do that all the time is truly a blessing. The art world is something that I never really thought about. I was like, "I'm never gonna have access to this place." I didn't go to art school. I wasn't planning on this, but if my work makes people happy, then that feels successful to me. If people are enjoying it, or it brings them pleasure, then I feel like that's a success.
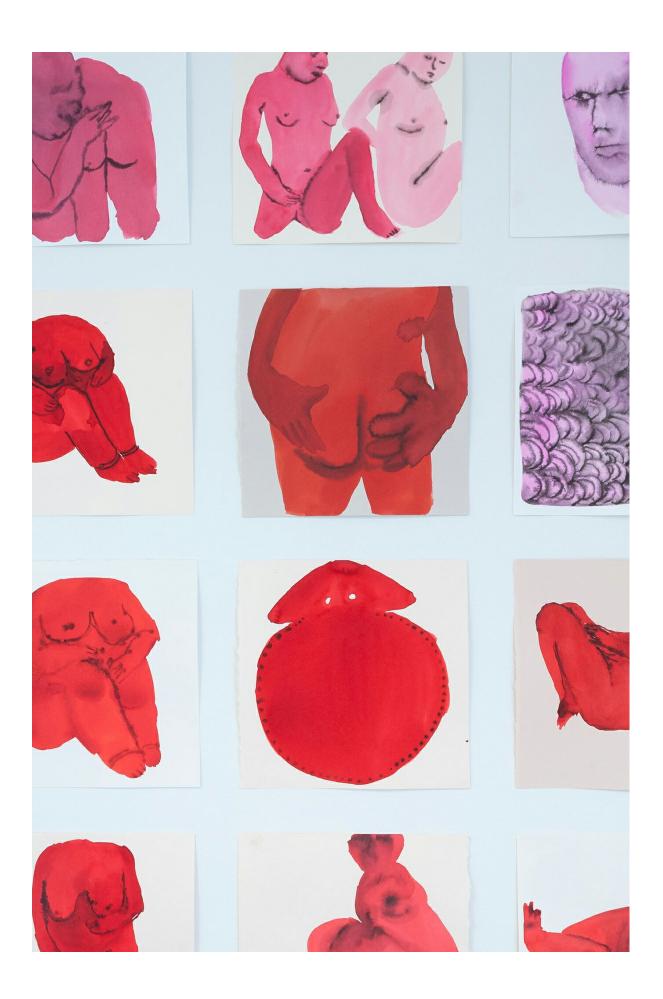


**When you're so busy, are you okay with just abandoning something? Or do you always try and salvage everything in some way?**

I've never really abandoned anything. I kind of just keep it all together, and try to work with it, and if it doesn't work I'll either discard it or put it in the back of my studio. With the works on paper, it's different because I have an understanding of how drawing on paper interacts with the sumi ink, and watercolor. I rarely ever throw it away. If it comes out weird or different, I'll try to see if it works within the overall scheme. If they're really off in some way, or if the proportions are wrong or not what I intended on doing and I hide that work from myself, I usually come back later and I see it differently.

I'm working on canvases right now; that's something I've been on and off trying to learn how to do myself, because I didn't take any painting classes in college. Well, I took watercolor classes in college, just as like, "I should try to do this," because I'd been doing it since I was a kid, and I thought I should get some kind of official lesson on, "This is how you do things."

I work in quantities, where I cut up all this paper and I try to make many things. For a show I did a couple months ago, I made 30 pieces a day. By the end of that, I had like 350 works. I just went through them all and cut some out, and kept some. I always like working that way, just so I have options. It's usually way too many options, but it's not like I'm showing everything.

Sometimes I don't edit at all. I keep it all together, or I'll compile it in a book. I like having the variations, because sometimes I draw the same thing five times and sometimes there are very subtle differences, which is funny, because I don't map it out beforehand. I freehand everything. For me, it's very intuitive. I don't decide that I'm doing something, I just think it and go right into it, and there's no planning. It kind of just depends on how I'm feeling, or how warmed up I am.

**Is it more stressful making works for galleries than for bands?**

When I would make show fliers, or album art, or t-shirts, there was still this same kind of block that I get. I feel like, especially if I'm making something for someone and they have a vision, I feel pressure. Whereas, if it's for myself, I can feel free of all that. It's actually the same with galleries. When you've reached a certain point where you're known for something, or known for the style that you create, people are expecting that. I think it gets really hard for emerging artists to decide to go in a totally different direction. Usually I would have way more fun making show fliers or something, fliers for the bakery, just because I can be as weird or as funny as I want to be. I Like trying to imagine what I could do to freak out people who were playing the show. Nothing offensive, but, you know, maybe something very feminine, like a very feminine flyer for a very hard punk band. That is hysterical to me.

**Do you ever sit down to work, and have a total block where you can't come up with anything?**

If I don't paint for a while that happens, but I just force myself to draw, even if I'm having a really hard time. I might be angry while I'm doing it, too. Usually, when I start working on stuff for a show that happens. I get overwhelmed; like, maybe I have a set of ideas, but my brain isn't communicating with my hand, and I feel totally detached in that way. I'm thinking these things, and nothing's coming out. But I force myself every time, especially if I'm on deadline. It feels stressful, but then, maybe after a couple weeks go by, I'm like, "Oh, it's okay now."

**Emma Kohlmann recommends:**

Yusef Lateef Eastern Sounds
Swimming in the river next to my studio
Avocado nori rolls at the coop
Flat files - slowly becoming organized with the help of my sister Charlotte
Sending postcards and reminding people you love them


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Vocation
Visual artist