

On being mindful of your needs



Artist Nic Annette Miller discusses taking stock of what you need to create, how to make use of the ideas you don't have time to fully realize, not getting stuck on schedules, and why art is a conversation.

April 29, 2021 - Nic Annette Miller is a multidisciplinary artist living in Brooklyn. Her personal and commercial work, which makes use of both analog and digital production, features woodblock printmaking, installation, and art direction of photography and video. Her recent personal project, [All I Can Do is What I Did](#), evolved into a [stop-motion video](#), [an essay](#) and has been installed in Salt Lake City, where she studied printmaking at graphic design at Utah State University. She's art directed for [Tattly](#) and Etsy. Here, she talks about taking stock of what you need to create, how to make use of the ideas you don't have time to fully realize, not getting stuck on schedules, and why art is a conversation.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2491 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#).

You've been candid about depression. Has talking and writing about it helped?

I realized talking and writing about my depression normalized it in my own mind. And that's all I needed. The fact that people started opening up to me, and we could bond over sorrow, showed me how important mental health is and that the stigma is holding back a lot of creative people. I wanted to be open about it and hopefully allow someone to feel safe talking about it, too.

Your work often focuses on birds, and you're fascinated by the way flocks of starlings, or a murmuration, move. It seems like a metaphor for your creative process.

It's strange and magical how the European Starlings move together. And not right, in a way. It's not what we think birds do. When hundreds form together, they're constantly moving and making these abstract smokey, monstrous shapes that you can just stare at, and think of nothing—which is a good goal.

I'd already been working with woodcuts of birds and using them as an emotional expression. When I was first thinking about making starlings, because I saw them outside my Brooklyn apartment every day, I was surprised to learn they did this flight phenomenon. They react to their seven nearest neighbors and that's how they don't collide in flight. While learning this, I thought about how some people are scared of birds, and so this [murmuration](#) could be horrific if it was happening right above you.



All I Can Do is What I Did (Murmurmotion), Relief, pigment dust, scroll saw cut out May 2016, Nic Annette Miller

The chaos of these birds is what my depression feels like. It wasn't my intent to create some form of art therapy; I definitely didn't know it would transform the way I think. I just started finding beauty in things that don't get enough attention.

Much of your work is based on nature. Do you ever want to leave New York?

All the time. I go upstate to the Adirondacks as much as possible. And since leaving a full-time job, I've traveled around the states and internationally quite a bit. It's been helpful to realize that leaving home is a good way for me to reboot, probably because I grew up in Utah and had easy access to the mountains and desert. Going forward, I'm trying to figure out how I can maintain travel and nature expeditions with an art practice. I've been applying for residencies, grants, or thinking of some sort of work exchange. I have a folder dedicated to rejection where these things have been going so far. I like looking at it every once in awhile, to remind myself how much I'm trying.

You do woodcuts, and need space to make them. When an artist's materials dictate their living situation, it makes it harder to say, "I'm picking up and going somewhere else."

It's a big reason why I'm still in New York. I have to consider space as I leave; I can't just travel and still keep up this art practice that involves particular equipment, tools, and plywood inventory. It's unfortunate that there's that consideration, but it's part of what I've created, so I have to make it work. When I was back in Utah once, a friend told me I was living her dream by being in New York and making art. It was a much needed slap in the face to wake me up and see that I really was living my dream. Since then, I've appreciated everything that allows me to do what I'm doing, and though studio spaces could always be bigger, brighter, and whatnot, I still have 160 square feet all to myself.

I also think there's something to taking time off from art, and being okay with not attaching myself to constantly working on this subject, style, and with these materials. I find you learn a lot with distance to anything.



Fishtallation, Relief, watercolor, scroll saw cut out, Brooklyn, NY, September 2014, Nic Annette Miller

You've spoken about people responding to your work in ways you hadn't expected, and how you can learn from that. I'm thinking about your "Fishtallation" project, which was meant to be about your vegetarianism, but people approached you saying things like: "This brings me back to this moment when I caught a fish in this pond with this family member." You make something, have an idea about what it means, then it's like, "Wait a second it means something else to other people."

That's the most interesting part of that project, I think. Not many people know this, but I ate a steak with a butcher last summer. I've been vegetarian for almost a decade now, and was hoping to talk about the fish industry, and if fish have feelings because that is somehow still a discussion. But talking to people, and listening to their memories these fish seemed to trigger, I realized I was focusing on death of animals over life in human moments-sharing an experience, opening up about the past or how you feel, over a meal. It made me realize I was maybe missing out on these connections by refusing so many meals, so I kept questioning my vegetarianism by asking anybody who would listen about it until one day a friend's husband who owns a butcher shop took me very seriously and offered to make me dinner. It was that care and meal that I needed to get the curiosity out of my system. I haven't eaten meat since and I don't plan on it, but I feel more emotionally prepared if I see an opportunity to enjoy a meal with someone.

I didn't realize I was responding to my artwork, but I think that's what's so interesting about installations, or any opportunity to have feedback-someone's actual interpretation of what they see outside of what you see. It's the process of making it that's telling me why I'm showing it and then there's the process of listening to people's responses that teach me even more about it. I think that's special-a genuine reaction-and to be able to be there at an opening and see people interact and engage.

I think what I'm doing is starting conversations. There are things I can't help but think about, and it's basically asking the community to help me figure it out, to evolve from this moment that I'm stuck in, I guess.

One of the things you brought up in an essay you wrote is the idea of trying to make it as an independent artist. Is that something that you've solved since the essay?

I don't know how to answer that. I've only just now solved the mentality, by making a list of principles of what I want my day to be like, what I want to be working on, and how I want to be spending time and money. Basically, what I'm realizing, is I'm practicing something that I want to be true, which is that "I'm going to be an independent artist." To do that, I have to be it. It's just a lot about understanding what that means to me.



Fishtallation, Relief, watercolor, scroll saw cut out, Brooklyn, NY, September 2014, Nic Annette Miller

Is success defined as being able to make your own schedule?

Maybe. With the murmuration project, I dedicated a lot of time to my mental health, to figuring out how my mind processes. Over New Year's I decided I was going to dedicate this year to my physical health in addition to the focus on my mental health. By doing that, I started understanding more about myself and my emotions, even when I digest food the best, which is not before 9 a.m. when I'm supposed to be at a job. So, I guess I'm learning about what my body needs and what my mind needs, and trying to curate my day around that.

That's what we should all be doing. Then, combining all of that with interests and curiosities. I'm still learning about art and how to price pieces, but I also take on jobs that afford me this ability and time. I do freelance still; so I'm not a full-time artist, but in a way I am because it's freelance work that affords me the time to be an artist.

On your website, the visitor can decide to view your fine art and your freelance work together or separate. Do you see those things as very different? Or when you do freelance work do you try to infuse your own approach, as if the project was your own?

The common thread I've found between the things I make is that something about it has to move me for me to do. If it's an art direction job, I have to like the company's mission or the storytelling of the content. I find I naturally have energy to take it on, which is important when it's not my own thing. I also don't show the other freelance work I pick up here and there that has nothing to do with my creative input, like window displays, which can involve painting, upholstery, or whatever. Once, I assisted at a kinetic sculpture company where I was just part of a production line of building motors. All of it motivates me and inspires me, because I'm learning something. Or I enjoy watching people working on their passion. I'm just trying to live a life where work can either inspire, teach, or let me simply be an admirer.

You seem to have achieved balance. How did you do that?

With the mindset of dedicating this year to my physical health, I joined the local YMCA and found water aerobics and volleyball to be amazing stress relievers. Also, I live close to a park that offers tai chi on Sundays. Master has invited people to be part of his practice during the week, and so I've taken him up on that. I think that's another form of taking your mind off things—you're so focused on your body movements that you shouldn't be thinking about anything else, or you're not doing the right pose. So just finding mental breaks in that way.

There are definitely days where I can't work out, don't eat on time, or nothing is going right at all. I'm trying to find the tools to adapt to frustrating moments where I feel stressed out because there is always going to be a hurdle. One giant, deep breath could make a difference to move forward.



All I Can Do is What I Did (Murmurmotion), Relief, pigment dust, scroll saw cut out May 2016, Nic Annette Miller

How do you deal with creative blocks?

What's best for me is to sit with the funk and be like, "Why is this so hard?" Or, "What's going on?" And try to assess if there's anything that I'm not initially aware of with all that I'm going through. Maybe I'm stressed about something else. Or maybe my curiosity is actually more on this other idea that's completely different, and maybe I just need to write it down just to move on from it. So rather than letting a schedule try to tell me what to do, I'm trying to check in with my mind and body more and see what's best for this moment in time for me.

Meditation gives your mind a breath of fresh air, but you don't necessarily need to sit still and close your eyes. Earlier, before you started recording, we talked about staring at beautiful bugs and noticing how their antennas move. That's a breath of fresh air for the mind, because you just relieved it from what it was brewing on or drowning in, maybe. Just look at something that has nothing to do with you, and something that you probably wouldn't have noticed—maybe would have just squashed. I think it's in that separation that you realize, "Oh, things are actually not that bad."

How did you personally realize, "Alright, it's time for me to leave my job and try to freelance and make a go of it?"

I don't think I have good advice here, because I was just so burnt out and numb that I quit without a backup plan. But I knew that I was at a place where I couldn't move forward mentally, emotionally, financially, and otherwise. And so it was really challenging and hard and what caused a heavy depression at that time. But I sat in it, and said no to a lot of jobs opportunities that I knew would add to the block of this energy that I lacked.

I was really scared and cried a ton. But because I've kept up an art practice since college, I had what I needed to be able to make something which turned into that [murmurmotion project](#). Over the course of a year that entailed making 700 birds (100 of 7 different wing orientations), a [stop-motion video](#), five installations of a still murmuration in flight in four different states. And so, now looking back, it was worth that risk. The word "worth" has changed its meaning for me, too. All I can say is that it worked for me, but I don't know if I can suggest anyone to follow suit.

What have you learned since leaving full-time work?

Something I realized recently: After quitting my job, I was too focused on job titles or what role I would be doing, what this would mean for my portfolio or resume, and I wasn't thinking about me. I've been reading a lot about ego and it's helped me understand what ego actually is: the balance of self-esteem and shame. I think I let shame—the fear of getting rejected—prevent me from applying to things I wanted to apply to or get to art making sooner. I also let self-esteem spiral in my mind regarding what I should go for and what does this say about me, or whatever. And I felt the clock was ticking as I was making these decisions. Now I think: none of it really matters.

Five things that have recently heightened each one of my senses by Nic Annette Miller:

[Listening](#) while making A Young Girl's Complaint.

The varietal meanings behind '[Touch](#)' in ASL.

Just a scent of lavender for dreams sake.

The taste of coconut with the right texture; liquid or shredded.

One day I will [see](#) a murmuration in real life.

Name

Nic Annette Miller

Vocation

Visual Artist

Fact

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