

On why it's never just you creating alone



Painter and musician Joanne Robertson discusses improvisation, collaboration, and building a lifelong artistic vocabulary.

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As told to Kenna McCafferty, 2490 words.

Tags: [Painting](#), [Art](#), [Music](#), [Process](#), [Mental health](#), [Collaboration](#).

You just got back from tour. How do you take care of yourself on the road?

The best thing you can do when you're touring is go for a walk because you're in a new place so you can go on some really long walks that you normally wouldn't go on. I try to eat healthy if I can. I don't really do any yoga because I haven't figured out how to take a mat with me. But how do I keep myself sane? I was touring when I was really young, I found that really hard and pretty much stopped. I would drink and sit in my room. It was all strange because you're meeting people you don't know every night and it gave me a bit of social anxiety.

I think smart people who I've toured with and learned from just don't interact too much. I just try to keep my energy focused on the moment of performance, where you're quite vulnerable. It's hard to give out loads more information about yourself after you've just given so much of yourself onstage. Maybe it's about not over-sharing my emotions.

Now I always tour with my partner Jasper, Kool Music. He kind of tour manages me and does all the admin stuff and then he often will play which is great because he just does total pure improvisation. That keeps me sane, watching him perform.

I actually had a dream about it last night. I was playing the [Alien Baby](#) stuff that I have written with Sidsel Meineche Hansen and we're working on a new record, but we just did it Guerilla Girl style and jumped on stage at this festival, and started playing.

I was playing super droney guitar and she was doing all this other stuff but she was in a totally different part of the space. So we weren't in the same space but the sound was all coming through these big speakers, but we couldn't really even hear. I was falling and strolling through a crowd and no one knew who I was and I was playing really cool guitar. It was very physical guitar. It was very emotional. It made me think about painting. Paintings are very intimate. I think the dream was very intimate. I'd like to try and recreate it.

What role does dreaming play in your work?

I think all my dreams are connected. Sometimes they're like discovery dreams or a query into my own practice or often it's also very embarrassing. I'll be naked in a room full of like '90s grungers. I had one like that the other day. It was really strange. There are some of those neurotic performance dreams. I sometimes think I get anxiety dreams about performance because it doesn't always feel authentic to repeat something that came from a very intimate place. I'm interested in that gap, and I think my dreams help me resolve that.

Is there anything you do before performing that anchors you?

Every venue is different, so it's hard to have a routine. I try not to go overboard. I was singing Joni Mitchell a lot on the last tour, the song "Blonde in the Bleachers" because I saw this [Stevie Nicks interview](#) where she said that's how she warms up her voice. I quite like her voice. It always sounds strong, she uses a lot of her core muscles. Or I'll sing Aretha Franklin a lot. I try to sing songs that have a really good range.

Can you tell me more about that gap between improvisation and performance?

When I started playing music I would just improvise and it was quite strange because it was so loose. It was quite folky, but just very, very loose structures. And that just became exhausting, because it wasn't free jazz, where you could just go off on any tangent. It was still trying to work within the form of a song. And that became quite tricky. Now, a lot of my recorded songs are from a semi-improvisational position but I try to play them exactly as they were. I do quite like being able to play exactly as it feels. But if you're doing it night after night it feels-what's the word-repetitive?

With this improvisatory thing I do it's not that I don't enjoy playing a song back, it's more-does it feel like what the original piece was? It's impossible to actually recreate an improvisation, I think, to do it with the same style of singing with all the intimacy and weird notes that you play randomly. And so a lot of my songs are in tunings that I can't really recreate.

So I had to figure out, "How do you give a performance and make people feel like they're not listening to something half as interesting?" I think you have to be authentically feeling things. So I access parts of my memory or my emotions. I think about people I love, or people I've lost, or people who are sick, or people wanting things. I just think about wanting good for people and for good things to happen in the world. I think less about myself when I'm playing live. It's an interesting moment. Because when I'm writing I'm very much thinking about myself and there are threads of the things I'm thinking of, like love-the chaos of relationships-but the live performance becomes more expansive. That's a way I access some kind of collective.

Do you get energetic feedback from your audiences?

Definitely. It always surprises me and makes me feel like crying in a way because it's so nice to see. I love it. I actually genuinely do. I know people get very lofty and say they love it, but I really mean it. I remember people and faces and I get a full feeling between certain people for sure, which is really nice. It's spiritual somehow.

You don't have to know someone to get that feeling. I have lived in the city a lot and it's the same. How do you interact with all the people there? You don't have to say hi to every single person to feel their presence. I think I feel that after a show. People feel really moved by all these songs that I never thought anyone would hear. It feels quite a priori. I didn't plan for it to move anyone. But I get different feedback, a lot of people say they don't understand the lyrics, which is funny because other people say they really do. It's interesting to see the types of people I'm meeting who get that feeling. They feel like artists to me too, even just by the way that they receive what I'm playing.

In an interview with [The Wire](#), you mentioned having an improvisational vocabulary. Could you tell me what it's made up of-I know your lyrics are up for interpretation but what kinds of words or sounds populate your vocabulary?

Well, it's mainly emotion. I read something last night that said [Rothko is only interested in basic human emotion](#). That really resonated with me, because I feel like that is where my energy comes from. I'm a bit wild, you know? It can be chaotic, but I'm interested in that, that's my base. From there I go into some visual spaces with my music.

I think a lot of my music comes from my painting and I draw very improvisationally. So I just draw and I paint

and that vocabulary often becomes very connected to nature. Nature is a really big word, it's something I've thought about related to feminism, but I often go into some kind of organic material. I'll talk about flowers or a stream or the sky. I like the outdoors and how it connects to human emotions, because I'm interested in wilderness, and wild-ness. I used to paint figures that would be me in these psychological spaces. That was quite wild. I think my teenage years are a really important part of my vocabulary because you're always the most anarchic at that time. That's a very political space. I think Mike Kelley talks about that in an interview. I keep the innocence of that.

So my vocabulary comes from the physical nature of the media, the imaginary, the process, and then the history. So you're not just making art in your own little black room. You're not just making it, you're invoking it. I also collaborate and that's part of my vocabulary, too.

Can you tell me about your collaborative practice?

I've always tried to collaborate, whether it succeeded or not. One of the first collaborations I did was with this twelve-year-old girl who lived next door to me in Blackpool when I was living there. Her dad was a total wreck. He was just wasted all the time, but we made this really amazing painting together on the grass on this piece of fabric. I just thought it was really interesting. I haven't collaborated on actual surfaces since then but I'll show alongside someone, or with my music I collaborate. The collaborators I work with professionally, and musically, are definitely chosen by me and I'm chosen by them for a specific reason.

What's that?

I think with the Dean Blunt stuff, we're quite similar. But then, say, with Oliver Coates, we're very different. So that's interesting. But the Dean stuff is just a very easy exchange in terms of trust. I think his style of playing just kind of compliments my style of singing and playing guitar. It's just very easy. I guess that that's the honest truth. And I think it's a very spiritual connection.

We definitely try to keep it private. You can't simplify it. It's one of those things I've been asked to speak about a lot and I can't simplify what it is. I think we do have a connection that's very—I don't know how to describe it. I think we both have developed our own vocabularies individually.

As a mother now, is there any element of collaboration or your practice that has changed?

I'm very much the same. I've noticed the love aspect, the connection to him is really amazing. But you really have to let the person be themselves, completely. And that's a really good lesson. If anything, it's taught me to be myself as much as possible to be a good mother. I think if you're around kids they can see really easily when you're not being authentic. So that's a really good lesson. You can't hide. In your tiredest, weakest moments of motherhood, you can still be beautiful.

But I guess I haven't had as much time so I haven't been as creative. I've made paintings and some music. I recorded a lot when I was pregnant actually. The whole Black Metal tape.

How do you nurture your creativity if you're not actively creating?

I have to paint because I have deadlines and stuff. I'm doing a lot of that and I am recording. I've had to find quick easy ways of recording. I've always recorded things on the fly. Doing a lot of domestic work is good for singing because you can just start singing in the kitchen. I've always sung around the house. You're always an artist. You're always creating in your head.

I read an interview where you said you're interested in "ugliness" that you like "letting it all hang out in a disgusting way." Can you tell me more about that?

Basically just allowing people to be vulnerable. To talk about sex—I grew up talking about sex because my dad was

an obstetrician and my mom was in the medical field. They just talked about the body, so when I went to art school I think people were shocked by how I could talk about sex. It wasn't just talking about sex, but your body, your sexuality.

I think when I was really young, when I was having early feminist thought, I was interested in not wanting to be traditionally beautiful to men, or to belong to them. I was having those thoughts quite early. I was cutting up my Barbies. You know, I had a shaved head as a teenager and was questioning those ideas of what it is to be beautiful and what's not beautiful-in dressing and appearance. And in my work, I was interested in revealing something more below the surface. Growing up in my generation it was like, "Let's let it all hang out. Let's see what it means. Let's try and write poems. Let's try and make drawings. Let's get trashed and see what it feels like."

I'm definitely not so professional. I just can't be. As I've aged, I've learned not to always make myself so vulnerable, because I don't think the world allows it. So I worry sometimes. I hope I'm still as naked as I once was, in a way I think I am.

But some people don't want that. I realize not everybody is the same, not everyone wants to be around me and that's cool. It's just coming to terms with that. Try to be confident with knowing that you're not going to please everyone in the room.

And do you feel happy and confident in that now?

Yeah. One of the main things in my life that was a shift for me was Jasper, Kool Music, my partner. We're so similar, so lateral thinking in our brains. We just have these weird conversations that don't make me feel as alone. And my friends, having really great friends that keep me sane, and trying to be a good friend to them. I'm also working with really good gallerists at the moment like Edouard Montassut, releasing music with really cool friends that just understand the work. That's really key. Just believe in your peer group, carry one another, and to not give up on the vocabulary we were talking about earlier.

As you get older it starts to swirl into one strange collaborative vocabulary. It's never just you doing it alone. I think that's why the work still resonates with people that are younger, because rather than having to contextualize it, it's more of a feeling. It's a collaborative collective energy. I think that's what makes me feel confident and happy, but, you know, I'm not confident and happy every single day just to be alive, my vibe is usually like, "How can I get to the studio right now? How can I record right now?"

Joanne Robertson Recommends:

Susan Sontag [Against Interpretation](#)

Samantha Power [Chasing The Flame](#)

John Coltrane ["Giant Steps"](#)

Kathy Acker [Blood and Guts in High School](#)

[Robert Lowell reads "Skunk Hour"](#)

[Name](#)

Joanne Robertson

[Vocation](#)

painter and musician

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