

On the importance of loving what you do



Painter Steve Keene discusses structuring your creativity, building community with your audience, and the process itself being the performance.

September 15, 2022 -

As told to Max Freedman, 2187 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Independence](#), [Process](#), [Production](#), [Beginnings](#).

I was half-expecting you to be calling in from your art space. I can't quite tell if that's where you are right now.

The whole place looks kind of like you're not supposed to live here, but this is where we live. My work area is in a cage a couple of feet away. It's a chain-link fence that's 12 by 24 feet. I line up enough boards that it's basically about four by 80 feet of workspace. This building, the whole place, used to be my studio. But we have two kids now, and every year, a little bit gets eaten away by the family.

How do you balance the line between family and personal time and your creative time?

I used to babysit the kids, and I used to give them something to do so I could do my stuff. But now everybody goes to school, and it's the best time of day when everybody leaves, so between 8:00 and 6:00, I do my stuff.

It sounds like you have a discipline around it, like you're almost treating it like a day job.

Oh, it is my day job. Ever since I was in fifth grade, I wanted to be an artist. I went to art school. I did everything right. Then you get out of art school, and you don't really know what to do with it, and you knock around for a bunch of years. I worked in restaurants, but I always worked during the day. Then it became this system of painting multiple pictures and treating it like a job, treating it like a craft, treating it like a nine-to-five.

I paint very quickly. It came about because if I started at 8:00 in the morning, I'd have to be done by 4:30 in the afternoon so I could go into the restaurant and wash dishes. Then I realized my paintings were better because of these limitations, this set of rules I put on them.

Your art space and practice are very specific, very tailored to the way you create. I'd love for you to talk more about the value of a dedicated, fully customized space and a set of rules for one's creative practice.

The first rule is you have to love what you do. You just have to be organized. In some ways, the way I feel about my work is that I've dumbed it down to make it better. I used to slavishly work hours over individual pictures and try to make a really good picture, and it was unsatisfying to me. Then, as soon as I started buying materials in bulk and treating it like I was at a bakery making bagels, or a potter making a hundred coffee mugs that day, then it just freed me up. I felt more creative. I felt more inspired. I felt more connected with a community.

I really enjoyed basically giving my art away, selling my paintings for \$5, \$10, \$2 sometimes, bringing them to rock shows when friends would do shows. If they were cheap, I wouldn't have to come home with them. I'd have money for the next day for materials.

But the space, it's just organization. Every two days, I work on 10 four-by-eight sheets of plywood cut up. If I cut them up real small, that's a few hundred paintings. If they're larger, it's around a hundred. But it's just treating it like a craft.

I was watching a video of you in your cage making versions of the same painting many times. I imagine that leads to imperfection and that not every painting will be exactly the same. Can you talk about the value of imperfection in your creative process?

I think of imperfection like a [Willem] de Kooning painting is imperfect. I want to set up systems that allow for spontaneity and surprises. Because if you do this as a job every day, you want to surprise yourself.

I don't change the way my paintings look because I have a specific audience that wants my paintings to look the way they look, so I don't try to evolve. I mean, my paintings do change just because I can't help it, just because I might be more energetic one day. But for me, the past 30 years, I've basically been making one painting. My performance of doing these paintings is the artwork, and everybody gets a residue of my 30 years. They get a chunk of me.

Whenever I show my work, I'm very into the installation of the work. I'm very into when people buy my work and it being fun, like you're at a really great yard sale and you can't believe how cheap everything is. It's as much part of the art as the paintings.

You're saying the audience is extremely important to what you do. Can you talk about that more?

When I started this, my wife and I used to be DJs at a college radio station in Charlottesville, WTJU, and I got to meet a lot of people that were really into music and starting bands. I was mystified about their bravery: "We'll get in a friend's car, we'll drive 300 miles, we'll bring a shoebox of CDs, and hopefully we can sell them." It's that spirit, that kind of performance that I strive for. It was a performance even before they were performing. That's important to me. A musician wants to please his audience. So as a painter, I want to please my audience.

You're hosting these events, you're having people come out, and most importantly, you're selling your paintings at super low prices. Why is accessibility—really no barrier to interacting with you and your art—so important to you?

I wanted to mimic the way some bands would encourage fans to tape their music to spread the word around, to make it accessible. To me, there was nothing more mysterious than making my work really accessible. People don't do that with painting. I thought, "Oh, I have nothing to gain by trying to go that regular route," so I just wanted to have fun with it. I'm very disciplined with my fun.

There comes a point where you have to decide how to let your art out into the world, how to make it be part of the world. Do you want to rely on others and hope that works, or do you want to have fun with it? People to this day are just like, "Why does he do that? Why does he give his art away?" I don't make much money at it, but I make enough to do this. I really love what I do.

I just thought it was kind of subversive how I did it. But also, I don't think it's cynical. I think it's very fun that kids can buy my art. Art history professors buy my art. My art's been used for album covers. I want it to be useful. I wanted it to be multipurpose. I want people to find as much meaning in it as they need, like a pamphlet, a fanzine, a book, a meal.

Maybe visually, my work doesn't look anything like it, but I've always been so moved by minimalist art, like Sol

LeWitt or Donald Judd, things that you could decide how much you wanted to see in it. If you want to give it time, you can see a lot into it. It's not like you can see a lot into my paintings, but my paintings have a backstory, knowing that this one guy made all these paintings, that they're kind of all over the world, and the "why does he do that?" thing. It's like indoor graffiti.

Between you having designed Pavement album covers and your series of famous album artwork interpretations, I'm curious how you look to one artform to inspire another.

Painting the albums started about 20 years ago when I would sell them at the WFMU record fairs in Manhattan. A lot of people knew who I was back then, but they still thought, "This is kind of crazy. This dude has 2,000 albums that he's painted."

I would grab all these albums out of cut-out bins. I don't necessarily paint the albums that I like. It's fun to paint albums people haven't heard. I paint a lot of accessible albums that people do want. But it was fun to paint out whole batches of albums from cut-out bins.

The albums, they're kind of like memorials. They're images from years ago. People don't even know what an album's cover is [now] because they get [music] online. I don't know if kids [now] know what the album covers look like. So they're kind of remembrances. They're markers of the past.

You seem as interested in the process as in the art itself. I'd love for you to talk about that more.

Well, I have these buckets of paint, and when I'm in front of 85 or 200 empty panels, it's exhilarating to start putting down the paint. I don't paint one picture at a time. I start with purple, purple, purple, blue, blue, blue, red, red, red, and I use one repetition brushstroke on all the panels. So they're started all at the same time, and they're finished all at the same time. It becomes a game. If you're in the zone, you're in a trance. It is a process. It is a performance. It is these repetitious motions that I do.

I don't know what the pictures look like when I'm working on them. I just know the individual strokes, and the strokes have a language. I don't reinvent how I apply paint. I don't try to innovate. I start off with big fat strokes and then get smaller and smaller. At the end, I write the words and sign it. Then at the end of the day, I'm like, "Oh, that one didn't work out," and "Oh, that one's great." But then two weeks later, I'll think the one that didn't work out looks great. So it's just that process. They kind of bloom in front of me.

With how prolific you are, do you ever come up on burnout? If so, how do you handle that?

No, because I actually feel needed. This year, they've been promoting the book, and I had so many orders that I had to stop my website taking orders for a couple of months so I can catch up. It's a weird thing to be so wanted. The things that I can't sell through the website because they're too large to send because it costs too much, I put up on eBay, because the prices are a little higher, and that goes well.

It's a neat feeling [to be needed]. I'm not putting down the art world, but there's a different kind of need. It's very satisfying, too, working with the gallery and having a gallery enjoy what you're doing and being able to make it successful, and for them to be able to sell it, which also helps their employees. That's a good feeling too. So it's not like one is better than the other. I just happen to work in this situation.

That was everything I wanted to ask, but if anything else came to mind as we spoke that you haven't yet gotten to say, go for it.

There are always worries. I want to be better than I was before. Sometimes, I'll look at something of mine on eBay that somebody is selling that's 25 years old, and I'm like, "Oh no, I wish I could paint as good now." Then I'll see something that I did two months ago on eBay, and it's like, "Well, that's okay." It's different, but it's okay. I like the new one, too. It's just different.

My parents always collected knick-knacks. My dad was a Civil War historian, and that was his hobby. The house was filled with Civil War relics. My mom collected china and stuff like that. The house was filled with American collectibles, collections of stuff. That's always been in the back of my mind. Now, I feel like I have made this thing that's an American collectible. I really enjoy that I made this thing that has a separate life, that people can find it, that it's not connected to me, and that they can trade it back and forth with their friends.

Steve Keene Recommends:

Watch old movies, they are better than new ones.

Collect old art books, fun to see how everything that's old is new again.

Try to listen to more classical music

Favorite art show that I have seen in the past few years was the Cezanne works on paper show at Moma

If you live near a museum, buy a membership so you can go a lot but you don't have to stay too long each time.

Name

Steve Keene

Vocation

painter

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Daniel Efram