

May 26, 2017 - Patricia Voulgaris is a photographer and visual artist who routinely shows her work in New York City. Her images often combine sculptural elements, found objects, and different facets of portraiture in ways that are both inventive and meticulous. Here she discusses her process, her approach to choosing materials, and why she converted her parents' attic into a functioning studio in order to focus solely on her work.



As told to T. Cole Rachel, 1973 words.

Tags: Art, Photography, Process, Adversity, Anxiety, Education, Focus.

Patricia Voulgaris on making the best of what you have

You make photographs that are often images of sculptures or installations that you've created in your studio. I've heard you referred to as both a photographer and simply as a visual artist. What do you make of that?

Is there a difference? I don't know. Sometimes I feel like I'm just a photographer and other times I feel like I'm an artist. I also dabble in other things but that work never really gets shown. Maybe it's best to call myself an artist who uses photography to express my ideas and thoughts. The only reason I haven't done more of the other stuff—sculptures, videos, performance stuff, other weird shit—is because it's just more expensive. In order to execute those bigger ideas it takes time and patience and money.

As someone who has a BFA in photography, how vital was that experience for you as a creator?

I don't regret going to school. I think it was 150% worth it. The connections I made, the people I met. Also, art making is about collaboration and community. I'll agree that it's not for everybody, but I found it to be really great. I learned so much, like things that I thought that I knew about but I really didn't. It's an education on how much you don't know. This is going to sound cliché but I went to school to find out who I was and what I liked. What did I want to say with my artwork? Why was I making art? What was the whole purpose to doing what I was doing? I think going to SVA [School of Visual Arts] kind of validated a lot of feelings that I was having. It's a giant investment. It's investing in yourself. It's also investing time in other people. I'm the type of person who loves collaborating and meeting new people and bouncing ideas off of people. I really needed it.



A lot of artists struggle with the business side of things—selling your work, getting representation, applying for grants, etc. Do you have to train yourself to be mindful of that side of things? It's the more tedious, less glamorous side of what it means to be a working artist.

Definitely. I mean I would love to live off of my work. That's the dream. It's definitely always in the back of my mind, but I like to think it's not something that has overtaken my thoughts in an unhealthy way or changed the work that I make. A lot of working artists are creating work purposely so that people will consume it. You know what I'm saying? There's this direct intent behind the work that's very commercial.

For better or worse, I'm never really making work with a commercial or business intention. I see my work going into galleries, so maybe that's the purposeful intention that I have, but it's never like I have a business model or something. I don't think art should work like that. Art shouldn't be a fucking business model. You should just be creating because you're hurt or you're happy or you have something to say. It should just be very genuine.

The reality is that you do have to put yourself out there. If you're really passionate about your work and you want people to see it, it's sort of like *that* is the job you do when you're done creating: Who can I approach with this work? Where do I want this to go? Once I'm done creating a body of work and I feel confident about it, then I'll think about who can I reach out to. Then it's on to the next thing. I drive myself crazy with that stuff.



What do you think of as being the most important resources for the kind of work that you do?

I'm just really interested in using materials that are super accessible, like wood and paper, mostly out of necessity. I use things that are cheap because I don't have any money to make art. That's just the reality. Money is a big factor for me. I stay home and save money and do my work. I walk my dog, then I come back home and do more work, which is kind of like a blessing and a curse at the same time.

I just have to use the tools around me in order to make what I want, which is also just what I'm used to. I was never in a position to order expensive props or buy a lot of stuff simply because I wanted to shoot it. Some artists have that luxury, but I never have. I've always been resourceful, buying something cheap and making something out of it. I think that's what has always been my strength-taking ordinary things and making them into something really extraordinary. That's what I'm personally interested in, finding something ordinary and building it up and making it look amazing. Like, who would've thought a piece of paper could do all the stuff that it has been doing for me? Anything I can get my hands on, I'll use. I pull stuff out of the garbage sometimes. Like, "Oh this is a great piece of wood. Let me cut it up and do something with it." That's how I operate.

It's great knowing that, especially considering how pristine and refined your images are. It's cool to know that they are made with mostly found materials.

That's how I was brought up. You just deal with what you have and make it work. It's weird because sometimes when I do get access to certain luxuries, I'm like, "What the fuck do I do with this?" There might be these amazing materials in front of me and I have no idea what to do with them because A, I can't destroy it or B, I can't cut it up. You know what I'm saying? It becomes this weird kind of psychological game. I finally have something nice but I don't want to touch it because I don't know what the fuck to do with it. Also, if I'm spending all this money to make something and it turns out like shit, then what was the point? Did it really even have a purpose to begin with? I don't know.

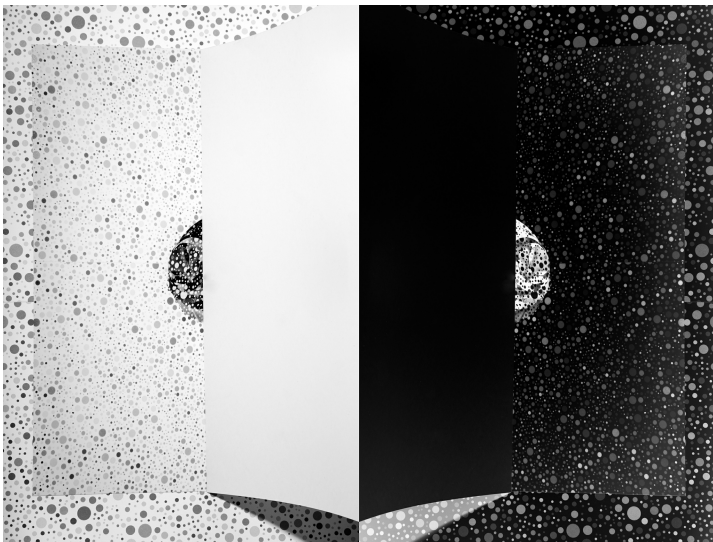


Do you find it hard to abandon things once you've started them?

I think because I'm hard on myself, I'll look at something and I know "Okay, this isn't right. I'm done." I'm really quick to be like, "I need to stop this. I need to start over." Why kill yourself trying to fix something when you can just start over and learn from your mistakes? I think a lot of my process is learning from my mistakes initially and then going back, maybe around three million times, and then being like, "Okay, try it again." If this still isn't working, I'm done with it. Let's start over. Let's try a new idea.

I don't really feel guilty for abandoning ideas. I think it's okay. If I can make something better, then start over. Let's shoot it again. Let's do it again. I do that a lot of with my self-portraiture. I'll go back maybe 50 or 60 times trying to make the image work. I'm shooting for two or three days just to make one fucking image. It sounds crazy but it's because I'm so determined to get that shot. I'm willing to sacrifice my time and really put in the effort to get it right. I'm very meticulous and I'm very hard on myself. I think it's good to be like that sometimes.

I will often make things and hold onto them, too. I'll tell myself that maybe I'll like it in two days. When two days pass and I still don't like it, I scrap it. It's definitely like fuel for me to keep going. Like, I really want to nail this idea. I really want to perfect it. I really want to say what I'm trying to say. Sometimes you kind of have to fight and pull through until you get it right. I think school helps you learn that as well. It makes you a better artist in the sense that it teaches you how to really focus and look at what you're doing and why you are doing it.



One thing that school provides is this accessible community of people to give you feedback. Do you find that you need to have that or that you had to create that community for yourself outside of an academic setting?

Absolutely. It's a shame because a lot of people that I graduated with now have full-time jobs and a lot of them don't really make art anymore. I've had to really seek out the people that are still making things and the people that are still interested in looking at work. It's hard, especially being in New York, because you're so busy just working to survive. Nobody has the luxury of time. No one can be like, "Let's all skip work this week and get together and make art!" I would love to move back into the city and start some sort of group or collective that could just meet all the time and do stuff like that.

A lot of people don't realize the power of people coming together and just discussing things. It's like, get off your phone and let's meet face to face and talk about stuff. There's so much power in group collaboration. I meet with a few women from Pratt and we share our work a couple of times a month. We usually meet up on a Saturday and use the time and space just to talk about things. Maybe it's not art, maybe it's about what's going on in the world but it's so important to have a conversation about the things that are going on around you. It's therapeutic. There's so much crazy shit going on in the world, it's kind of relaxing sometimes to look at each other's art and not think about everything else for a while.



The conversation among young artists is so often about the need for money and time, often the need for community gets overlooked.

Absolutely, I think it kind of gets lost. I understand we all need money but you also have to make sacrifices in order to make art. For example, I'm in actually Long Island right now living at home. My parents have an attic and I basically took it over and made it into my own little studio space. You think I want to be living at home? No, but I do because the work is so important to me and I believe in it and I believe someday maybe it will get me somewhere. I could live in Manhattan and spend every waking moment trying to make enough money to survive, or I could come here and do my work. Making art is a real sacrifice. I truly believe that if you want to make art, this is what you have to do. You have to sacrifice things, whether it's your time or your living space or your social life. It should be a really big commitment. It's a privilege too, I realize. I take it really seriously.

Patricia Voulgaris recommends:

John Waters commencement address - RISD 2015

Milk and Honey by Rupi Kaur

Erwin Wurm's exhibition at Lehmann Maupin Gallery

Suburban, photographs by Jimmy DeSana

Vagabond

Name

Patricia Voulgaris

Vocation

Photographer

Fact

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