On making things for your friends

Photographer and publisher JOERO (Joseph Rovegno) discusses teaching himself how to sew, finding new methods every time, and staying pure.

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As told to Madeline Howard, 1465 words.

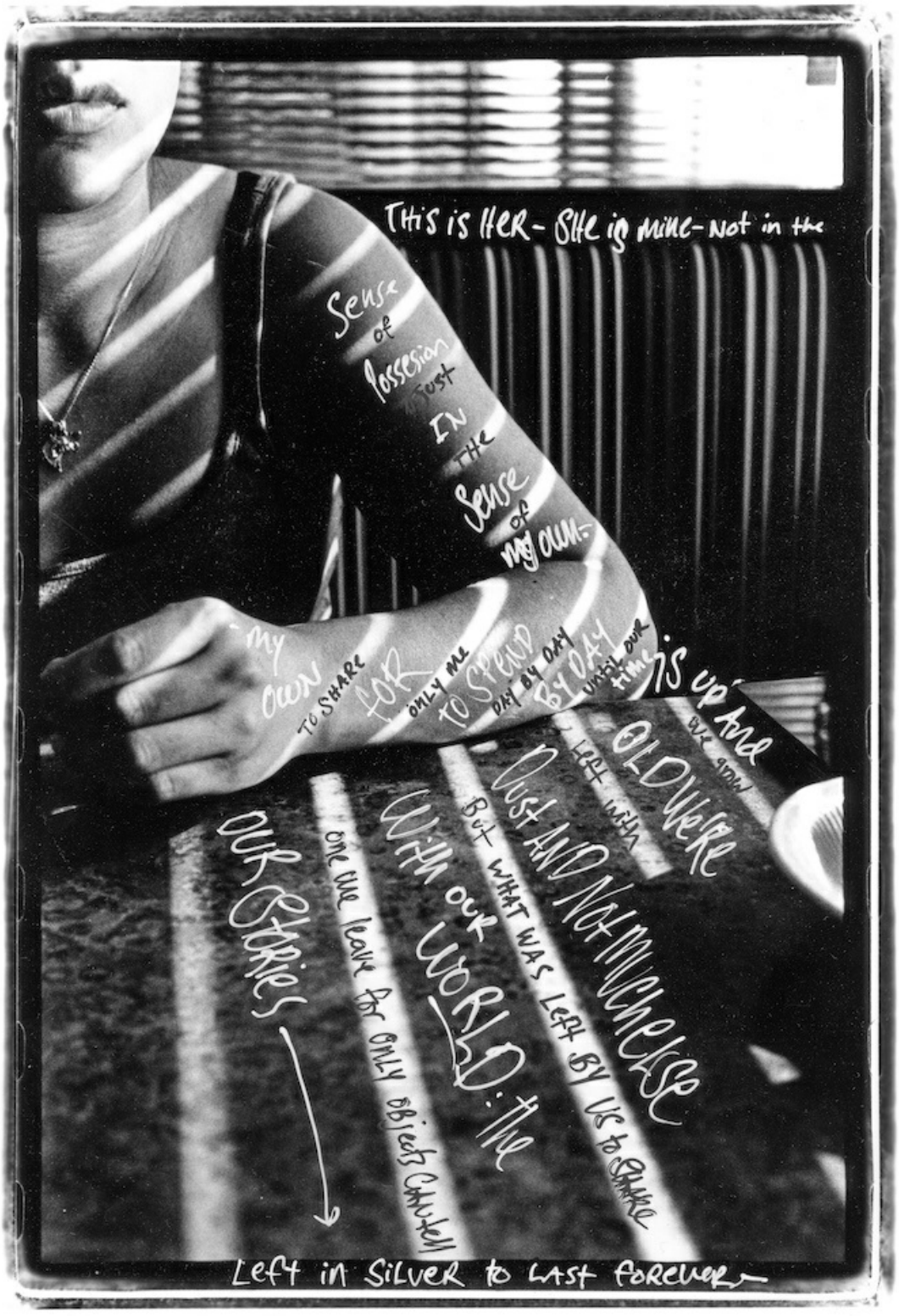
Tags: Art, Photography, Beginnings, Process, Promotion, Creative anxiety, Education, Independence.

Tell me about your artistic journey. How did you start photographing and making fine art?

I was younger, trying to figure out what to do with my life, and going to school for graphic design. I struggled, and during this era, I was getting into trouble. During a psychotic episode, I was afraid to go outside. But I

started taking photos obsessively. Not necessarily in a good way, but just obsessively. I got really involved in shooting film, but not developing it myself. Fast forward a bit, to around age 23—I began thinking more critically about taking photos, getting more serious.

I didn’t get an education in photography. I taught myself how to print in the darkroom, and at the same time I was learning how to sew. I set up a darkroom in my parents’ basement and I started doing it there. It was a really janky set up. I saw a picture of it the other day, and I can’t believe I made anything in that place. The trays were on a washing machine. Around that time is also when LAAMS started. I had worked with Scott Selvin and Stevie Baker for a few years prior, so we did it together. The shop was an opportunity to show what I’d been working on. I had experimented so much, and things began to click. I began to understand what worked and didn’t work, whereas in the beginning, I was just trying things out, seeing if I could make something at all.



How did you find your style? It's so easy for me to identify when something is a JOERO piece.

I wasn't searching for it. It was a result of the process that I was doing. The style of making pictures and collaging them together with sewing was a direct result of the limitations of my materials. I wanted to make

bigger pictures, so I tiled the paper together and began experimenting with ways to make my pieces larger with tape and thread. I was also learning how to sew books and zines, so it all went hand in hand.

I would say there was at least a few years, maybe more, of making pictures that were pretty generic overall. But once I started really doing it, then it happened naturally and relatively quickly, because it's a direct result of the process and the workflow. That said, I don't want my style to just be a cheat code. I could easily be like, "I'll just write on this picture, sew it together, and now it's a JOERO piece." I'm trying to think about it more critically.

If you're thinking more critically about what your work is saying, what *does* it mean to you? Not that art has to "say" anything, really.

I'm assisting this teacher at the International Center of Photography named Jim Megargee, who teaches black and

white darkroom classes. He's one of the greatest living master printers. He says, "There are a lot of people who have something good to say. But because they don't know their craft, what they're saying isn't clear. They don't have the vocabulary. And then there's people that are really good at the craft, who don't have anything interesting to say. You want to be somewhere in the middle." So I want my process and the form to compliment my message.

Tell me about your creative routine. How do you structure your creative output?

I wouldn't say that I have a particularly good routine, but it's about the regularness of doing it every day somehow, consistently, in whatever way makes sense to you.

There's two parts to my process. There's picture-taking, which I try to do every day. The second part is a completely different area of my brain. It's reflective, and I'm looking at photos I've already taken. For me, it's important to dedicate the time and the space to let something happen. I try to look at my pictures often and work on prints. Even when something good isn't happening, having the space, sitting down, and doing it is important. Then when you have an idea and need to act on it, there's less resistance.

What advice do you have for people who are starting to make art and are scared?

This is not for the faint of heart. You can't be a tourist. For someone to really make an impact, to make something worth saving and preserving when you're gone, you gotta be pure. The art has got to be what you're about. It takes a lot of courage. Make time for it every day when no one is watching, and no one cares. And that's the most beautiful time, because it's when you're experimenting freely and it doesn't matter.

The more you do, the more you're more self-critical. You want to outdo yourself. And then you have to have the bravery of putting yourself out there to show it and put it in the world. But there is no rush.

Are you nervous when you're showing people your art?

Usually there is enough time in between when I'm presenting something to the world and when I'm actually creating it and getting initial feedback. The self-questioning phase when you're like, "Is this good? Do you like this?" That's when only a trusted group of people, maybe one or two, are seeing the things as you make them. I try to really protect that phase. I don't want unsolicited advice, because then the art becomes something I don't want it to be.

How do you decide what you're going to write on your images?

It's completely performative. It's like a journal. I just write what's on my mind. And sometimes I'll make it really hard to read. I write things that I wouldn't say aloud.

How do you determine what's worthy of being photographed?

I try to view everything equally. It's complete instinct. If anything catches my attention, if I even thought to look at it, then it's worth photographing. It's different with a big camera, like my large-format camera. Everything is heavier and more expensive. I'm under a curtain, so I need to be methodical about what I'm shooting. It's slow and it takes mad time, but I follow the same instincts.

What's your relationship to social media? You post pretty sparingly, I'd say.

Content is soulless. It's noise that no one needs, noise that's meant to be consumed and then thrown away, with no lasting impact. I hate it. But sometimes, it's a necessary evil as an artist. For me, it's better to make something in real life and share that, rather than making "content."

What made you start LOOK Publishing? What's it like running your own small press?

LOOK Publishing is about making things that can exist in the world for myself, for my friends, and for people I admire. In making my own books, I learned how to lay out a book, print it, get resources, and execute a vision that felt like mine. It started with self-publishing my own stuff. I began to make small editions of 50 copies, maybe 100. Then other people I know wanted help making books. Since I already figured out how to do it myself, I was glad to help publish their ideas.

I run LOOK with Alex Barcenas. Primarily, we lean toward handmade books. We have a risograph printer, so usually some portion of an edition is risograph-printed. I want to help people that have never printed a book before, or publish projects where I know the person personally. I want to encourage them to put their work in the real world. Every time we make a new book we're like, "I'm never using that method again." We're folding and binding and sewing everything ourselves. It's good we're not trying to make a living off of making books, because we're able to work on only the projects we care about.

JOERO recommends:

Continuing Education at School of Visual Arts and the International Center of Photography

Robert Frank's *The Lines of My Hand*

The photographer Daidō Moriyama

Printed Matter's NY Art Book Fair

Going to LAAMS

Name

Joseph Rovegno

Vocation

photographer, publisher

self-portrait