

# On aligning your life with the things you find important



Poet and DIY gallerist Sommer Browning discusses the pressure to be everything, creating a daily schedule as a single parent, and building spaces for your work and the work of others.

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As told to Katy Henriksen, 2203 words.

Tags: [Comics](#), [Poetry](#), [Art](#), [Comedy](#), [Day jobs](#), [Beginnings](#), [Creative anxiety](#), [Focus](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Success](#).

## **When did creating things stick for you?**

I feel a little bit like a late bloomer in that regard. I wish I could just say, "Oh, you know, when I was a toddler, I built some amazing thing out of Legos," or something. But honestly, I took an intro creative writing class in college and I remember we had to write a poem or short prose piece from the perspective of an animal. I think I chose a snake. I talked about the snake swallowing some kind of road, and my teacher, the great Cathy Eisenhower, liked it. I was so overjoyed to be validated in that way. I just had this little inkling like, "Damn, maybe I can do this." It was pleasant to jump into that perspective and escape myself while writing. I started drawing comics as well and eventually found myself in poetry school and among tons of other language people—friends that I have to this day—and I think that's sort of how it all started. A little escapism, and a little validation.

## **We live in a society that totally undervalues creativity and making things. How are you able to create within a society where we're not really valued for creating art?**

I've never lived in Europe, where I think they do value art a little bit more. I've never lived in Asia, where there's just such a beautiful long tradition of poetry and poets where it's sort of intermingled with spirituality. None of that stuff exists in America. So I don't know how it feels to be valued. And so it's kind of hard to talk about.

I feel a pressure to be everything, always. I feel a pressure to have a successful career and make money and be a professional woman, I feel pressure to be of service to other humans. I feel a pressure to make a difference in the lives of the people around me, and a pressure to have it all—this womanly, stupid ideal of having it all—to raise a family and then also to make art and also take care of myself some miraculous way. And it's exciting. It's exhausting. I kind of rolled with it. I truly thought that I could do that, and that I was in such a privileged position that I had no excuse to not work hard in every single one of those realms and be perfect.

Now in my 40s, it's all crashing down around me and I am seeing the impossibility of it, the rat race mentality of it, and this idea of individualism above all else ethos that fueled the idea that a woman must do it all and have everything. I'm unpacking that a little bit and trying to reprioritize and recenter creation in art. It's also maybe a product of just getting older and closer to death—thinking about the fact that I only get this one life, what am I going to do with it? Work my ass off for the rest of my life and die? Or I can do things that support others—build space for others like with my gallery, or bring other people joy and connect people. Because those are truly my values. I just want to align my life again with things that I find important coming from my

experiences and external influences, of course, but also things that I hold dear inside of me.

When somebody says to me "I came to one of those Georgia shows and I met this person, and blink, we started dating, or we started collaborating," I'm just so thankful that I could have made a space for that. We're born kind of alone and die alone. I know that's a cliché, but in this life I think we're just asking to be seen and to see others, and for that connection. If I can do anything to foster that I feel really good.

**Tell me more about starting the art gallery Georgia in your garage.**

I started it in 2017. After my second book of poetry, I began moving more towards visual art. One of my greatest joys is to go to museums and look at art. If I could just surround myself with that, write about it, think about it, talk about it, that would be my perfect job. I was able to purchase a house that had a garage, and I was talking with my friend Noel Black, who's a great poet. I was like, "I just want to be around art all the time." He was like, "Why don't you start a gallery in your garage?" I was like, "What? You can do that?" So I looked around a little bit. There's several in LA as well as other spaces and attics and all sorts of strange DIY type situations all over the country. So I did it. And it felt so good. And it was so fun.

I've always hosted things, run reading series', put together events, in every city I've ever lived in as an adult. So I had the structure: who do you invite, how do you market this, how do you make a successful event. You need food, you need definitely more than one artist or performer, because they're going to invite their friends and you can get that cross-pollination going. That helped me be confident about entering that whole visual art world in Denver, which I didn't know too much about. The scenes here in Denver don't cross over. You go to a poetry reading, there's only poets. You go to an art opening, there's usually only artists there. Filmmakers, same thing. There's a few spaces that try to mingle that, like Counterpath and other DIY spots, but I didn't know too many visual artists at that time. So it was a little intimidating. I thought it could be a total flop.

I made sure that my first show was of Joshua Ware's work, who's a friend. And there was not too much at stake or riskiness there. It was all very let's see what happens and experimental. But, people came and they liked it. And I was happy to just add to that kind of alternative art space. Denver doesn't have too many spaces like that. I think we have a lot of creative, energetic people. But there's basically zero support from the city and the state for arts. So these places pop up and they're great. And then they fold really quickly, because, like you said, you know, your second question.

**How do you have enough energy to keep doing the gallery?**

I love it so much. I love having a space where there's no money involved. I mean, certainly, if someone wanted to buy something they could directly from the artist, but it's more of a space to take risks. I think that's an important step in artists' careers, just to be able to try something new and if it fails, it fails, and there's nothing detrimental that happens.

**Talk a little bit about your choice of becoming a librarian and how that potentially supports your artistic endeavors and how that's worked out for you.**

I'm a pretty practical person. I was raised by two civil servants, a school teacher, and a federal government employee, and I've had a job since I was 16. I knew that I had to do something for money and that I needed to be on my own and support myself. I had had library jobs, just shelving books at the local library and he loved it. I loved the atmosphere. I love the intellectual freedom that libraries hold dear. I love learning. I love knowledge. I love that idea of that equal playing field that libraries have where all are welcome.

It serves my artistic life, too. Because first of all, I can have access to all the knowledge I ever wanted, and all the books and materials that I desire, and I just love being that close to that. And it doesn't drain me in the way other academic jobs might drain me. So my artistic life—while I think it definitely intersects with librarianship in certain kinds of strange ways—they're separate enough, where I can have energy for both.

**I've been a single parent and you're currently a single parent. It's such a struggle to create under those circumstances. How do you carve out time to do creative projects?**

I try to live the life of a poet. When I look out the window, I'm looking for analogues to life's crazy, huge, difficult questions when I drive somewhere, when I sit or wait in line at the DMV. So even when I'm parenting, working or doing anything, I have this, I don't know, poetic structure that I'm categorizing everything with. That means I can scribble down a note in between things. I can write an art review. And, and that fuels a poem I might write a year or two later. It all works towards inspiration and gives me energy.

So I don't really have to switch gears that much. I definitely have to make time and I could be better at that. I let less important things crowd out my art—I think that's probably everybody's burden. I don't really need to worry about that stupid guy. I can let that go. And I can just work on drawing a comic or something. I became this person that wakes up at five in the morning. Ten years ago I would have laughed at that person. I get up really early to work. If I have 15 minutes between something I work on a poem or idea. I make tons of to-do lists and take notes constantly. I have all the doubts that we all go through, thinking things like *this isn't worth doing, no one's going to read this, no one's going to like this*. Perhaps that's true, but that's not really any of my business. I just want to do it.

**You're a poet, you draw comics, you run an art gallery. How do they all work together?**

When I'm drawing comics, a different part of my brain is activated, for sure, and I feel a certain kind of freedom. Five or 10 years ago, I got really into graphic novels, and I still love graphic novels so much. And after I read several of them, I realized I wasn't even looking at the pictures, I was just reading them. And I was like, "What is going on here?" "Why do I even like these?" I started to slow down and look at the pictures and take in the art and the way it was connected to the words. For me, there's a connection between text, language, and drawing and simultaneously there's zero connection. Somehow some other part of my brain is activated when I'm drawing my vulgar boobs or whatever.

I love writing jokes as well. So these comics are a bridge between maybe a poem and a joke, somehow linking those two things together. When I think of a situation or a notion, or an image or some kind of miraculous beauty that happened on a Tuesday at 4:30, they just fit it into one of those categories.

**Sommer Browning Recommends:**

*Interlibrary loan:* Your library will work hard to get you any book your heart and mind desires. My most recent request: [PIG 05049](#), a book by artist Christien Meindertsma in which she documents all the products made from a single pig.

*Common Tones: Selected Interviews with Artists and Musicians 1995-2020* by [Alan Licht](#) (Blank Forms Editions, 2021): Blank Forms is an incredible organization dedicated to supporting time-based art works in many, many ways from events to vinyl releases to publishing books. This is a collection of interviews conducted by the great musician Alan Licht with all sorts of geniuses. Currently reading the Milford Graves interview: "I want to get deep down inside and make sure we're in sync with how the body really vibrates."

*The Southwest:* Truth or Consequences. Marfa. Guadalupe Mountains National Park. Roswell. Taos. Trinidad. El Paso. Bisbee. Tonopah. Flaming Gorge. Wendover. Saguache. Del Norte.

*Inner Space:* Two months before the pandemic hit the States, I learned Transcendental Meditation. The first time I did it, the instructor left the room for what seemed like three hours but was only 15 minutes or so. While she was gone, I had some light panic. I got so far out in my mind that I thought I might get stuck there forever. The instructor assured me that would never happen. I haven't felt that way since. Consciousness is weird as hell.

*Children:* I wish for everyone that they have young people in their lives at some point. Kids model a way of being so many of us adults have obliterated from our lives. Their navigation of time, space, and emotion is exactly what we lack when we get wrapped up in the unending bullshit of modern civilization.

Name

Sommer Browning

Vocation

Poet, cartoonist, comedian, librarian

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Joshua Ware