On learning the things they don't teach you in school

Visual artist and designer Alexander Heir discusses how he parlayed his creative skills into a successful business, and why sometimes you've gotta fake it 'til you make it.

August 14, 2018 -

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2959 words.

Tags: <u>Art</u>, <u>Design</u>, <u>Production</u>, <u>Business</u>, <u>Education</u>, <u>Income</u>.

What was the genesis of what you think of as your professional career?

My father is a photographer. He's a painter now, actually, but growing up he was a photographer and that was his job. I grew up in museums and around art and was encouraged to be creative. So that was a pretty natural thing for me. From a young age I knew, and my parents knew, that I was gonna be creative to some degree.

I got into punk when I was around 12 or 13 years old. I started seeing all the punk art and t-shirts and all the DIY stuff around that scene. That's what really sparked my personal interest in stuff I wanted to make. I started screen printing and making t-shirts when I was still in high school, and by the time I graduated I was already working for myself printing t-shirts and stuff. Then I went to Pratt. From there, it kind of evolved into the brand it is now, which encompasses a lot of different things.

How was your experience at Pratt? Doing the kind of work that you were doing—working with all of this very punk-rock iconography—and coming from the sort of culture you were coming from, was that perceived as weird in an art school context?

Not really, because even though I didn't really know it at the time, I kinda lucked out. Pratt, and particularly the printmaking program that I was in, was full of punks

and DIY-minded people. I went to Pratt from '02 to '06, so especially at that time, you had people doing house shows and all that. It was actually very friendly for that kind of thing. The thing I didn't like about it was that I felt academically there was so much focus on very conceptual work, and that was held above everything else. I really wish that there had been more of an effort in art school to teach us craft-based things and more practical things, or to teach us about business. So many things just can't be taught to you in school—you really have to learn by going out and doing it.

I was 18 years old, just living on my own for the first time. My brain wasn't really ready to start thinking about the work I was gonna make in a real "big picture" kind of way. That took another five, 10 years of me just drawing and working on my own, figuring it out, which at the end of the day is really the *only* way you can figure it out, you know? There were actually some things that I felt like, "Oh whoa, this is something that I actually taught myself. I wish that we had learned this in school instead of talking about abstract expressionism for three semesters" or something.

A lot of artists have talked to me about the idea that they finished art school and really had no idea how to approach anything business-related.

Oh absolutely. I think from the point of view of the school, they just look at it as not their job. We're here to teach you about art, and about how to be in the world of art. We're just not a business school, that's something else. The attitude is like: If you can't afford to make work or figure it out, you're not gonna make it as an artist in the first place.

I remember telling someone there at the time that there needed to be class that was part of your base curriculum that was some sort of real-world "how to be an artist" class. Business stuff, and different ways artists have hustled to make a living. I was really lucky because I was already into screen printing and wanted to print t-shirts, and that just happened to be a thing I could live off of and hustle to make until I was able to have a little success from my own work.

Unless you happen to be rich or something, then you're kinda stuck figuring out how to make ends meet. Even now, the only people that I know that *really* make a living off of art are either tattoo artists or screen printers. And with those two jobs, it's not always about your own creative choices—you are largely working with images that other people have chosen, and just actualizing them. It's not necessarily your own art.

You do a variety of different kinds of visual art, as well as a successful clothing line. Did all of these things just evolve together organically?

On the one hand, it was organic and easy because I've been involved in music, through the punk scene, since I was 13 years old. And I grew up in Jersey. I already had this network. So once I started drawing, and after I did an album cover for someone, lots of other bands out there that knew me personally wanted to hit me up.

I talk about this with a lot of other artists in the scene, but we're so lucky to have this kind of underground network of people that support us. When you're younger, you don't realize that this is actually a huge thing that will continue to be this great resource for whatever you do next. You can really dig out your own world—be it music or art or whatever—that a lot of other people, who might not have these specific interests, would have a much harder time accessing. They might have a harder time connecting with each other or even finding their voice.

The challenge for me is that I mostly consider myself a natural designer. I think that's where my strength is. I'm good at problem solving and thinking about things, but as far as actual drawing is concerned, it took me a really long time to get my skills to where I wanted them to be. And even now I'm trying to get better. You're always pushing yourself.

Now I'm a little bit more confident in my draftsmanship skills, but that was never something that I felt I was really strong at. I wasn't sitting down and drawing these great things. It's more like I'm doing a sketch of the idea, then I'm lightboxing it 20 times to get it right and trying to figure out how to shade it and make it look good. There were a good five to 10 years spent just doing every flyer and commission that I could, sort of like putting myself through boot camp just trying to get my chops up.

It's cool to hear you talk about that—developing your skill set being an ongoing process that can go on forever.

Oh absolutely. Even the most masterful artists talk about that—growing and improving and trying to get better. There's no final, perfect state you ultimately reach—it's all your own path. But for me, there's the thing in my head and what I want it to look like, and then actually executing that on the page. It gets easier over time, but sometimes it also gets harder when you're trying new things. That was always one of the bigger challenges for me.

When you are doing commissioned work for someone and negotiating what they need from you, how do you strike a balance between making them happy but also pleasing yourself?

That is something I've been very conscious of when I take on work. I don't wanna just be the guy that draws skulls, you know? If I'm gonna draw a skull, it's gotta be interesting or new or done differently, and I think that's why people respond to my work. Even though a lot of the actual elements are repeated, I try and always present

new ways of thinking about it, whether that be in terms of the layout, the design, the subject matter, or the actual message of the work.

When I do a commission, sometimes they are very specific about *exactly* what they want, and then I can go ahead and be like, "Oh that's a great idea, I'm down," or maybe, "Oh this is not really my thing," or even, "I've already done that before." Sometimes they're just like, "Do whatever you want," which can be difficult or cool depending on if you have an idea or not, or how they respond.

The best clients are the ones that can give you a little direction and then let you just do your thing. When people want me to repeat the same thing I've done before, I will just be like, "Well I already did that kind of art for another band, so let's do something fresh and people will actually be more excited about it anyway."

Being able to advocate for yourself and your work is something that can be hard to do, especially early on in your career. Was that a skill you had to develop over time?

Thankfully I haven't had too many issues with people messing with the artwork or changing things without asking. Usually I turn something in and it's done, and there's not much room for them to fuck it up. But when you are younger and doing art for someone, you don't always know how things work. Maybe they pay you 200 bucks for something, but five years later they are still using that same image. You realize maybe you should have struck a better deal with them. That's all fine, but now I would make a different deal. Now it's like, this is the price for the illustration and you can use this for, say, 500 pieces. And then if you decide to make more, we renegotiate another fee.

Nowadays with bands, most of their money is coming from merch, which is fine, but you have to be smart about it. I'm not generally working with really huge bands, but for example—if you're charging someone 500 bucks for a design, but they are then making 20 grand off of it in merch sales, that's not really a good look for you, right? It's hard, because everybody is just trying to scrape by these days and make money however they can. But you have to respect your work and respect that it's special and is worth paying for. Lately I've been doing much less commission work, because I want to spend more time focusing on stuff for me, but also because I'm at this point where I don't wanna do anything unless I'm gonna put my all into it and make it the best thing I could possibly make. I can't do that unless I charge what it's worth.

Figuring out what your work and time are worth—especially when you're just starting out—can be really confusing.

Yeah. Sometimes I still have no idea what to actually charge someone for stuff.

How do you figure that out? Did you have people that you could ask for advice about that stuff? Or do you just wing it as you go?

Oh, it was a combo. Early on I had done a couple freelance illustrations for bigger shirt companies that had standard pricing, so I kind of used that as a guide as to what freelance people were getting paid. When you start out, you are doing things for dirt cheap because you're just excited to be working, but once you get a little clout and confidence you can ask for a little bit more. It's hard though. Even when I'm charging $500 for an illustration, when you break down the time I spent working on it, it's still probably less than minimum wage or something, you know? Even simple things can take a really long time to make.

How did your clothing line evolve? Did you start small?

Even before doing illustrations and stuff, clothing was the first thing I wanted to do. I wanted to make t-shirts. That always just excited me. When I was still at Pratt, I started using the facilities there and printing t-shirts. Then some friends and I went in together on a shirt press and taught ourselves how to use it. Then we started taking on freelance printing.

When I graduated, I was able to work for myself just printing stuff for other people. Then I started doing my own brand. I had no idea what I was doing. I knew how to print shirts. I knew how to make a website. And that was it. Over time, it grew, but early on I'd sort of spread the word by hooking up all the friends. My friends in bands would wear it out when they were touring. I started to get a little more attention from doing some band illustrations and stuff.

It was this very slow-growing thing, mostly because I had no idea what I was doing. To be honest, I still don't really know what I'm doing. Also, eventually there was Instagram and Tumblr and all that shit, where you could basically advertise for free. I would just make stuff and put it online and someone would blog it or repost it and more and more people would come to my site.

The first five years I did it, I would make new shirts every six months or so and keep everything updated and pretend like it was a real brand, even though I wasn't selling much of anything. It was just a straight up 'fake it 'til you make it' kind of vibe. Because I was printing all the shirts myself, I didn't have to invest in getting 50 shirts printed that I didn't know if I'd be able to sell. Instead, I could just make one, put it online, and if someone ordered one I'd print it up and send it to them. I still do that. All of the t-shirts are printed to order because I don't have the space to stock them. So I'll just make samples, post them online, and then when people order it, I'll just print it. Eventually I figured out how to source stuff and get production stuff made, but it was all just the trial and error of me doing it myself.

PORVENIR OSCURO
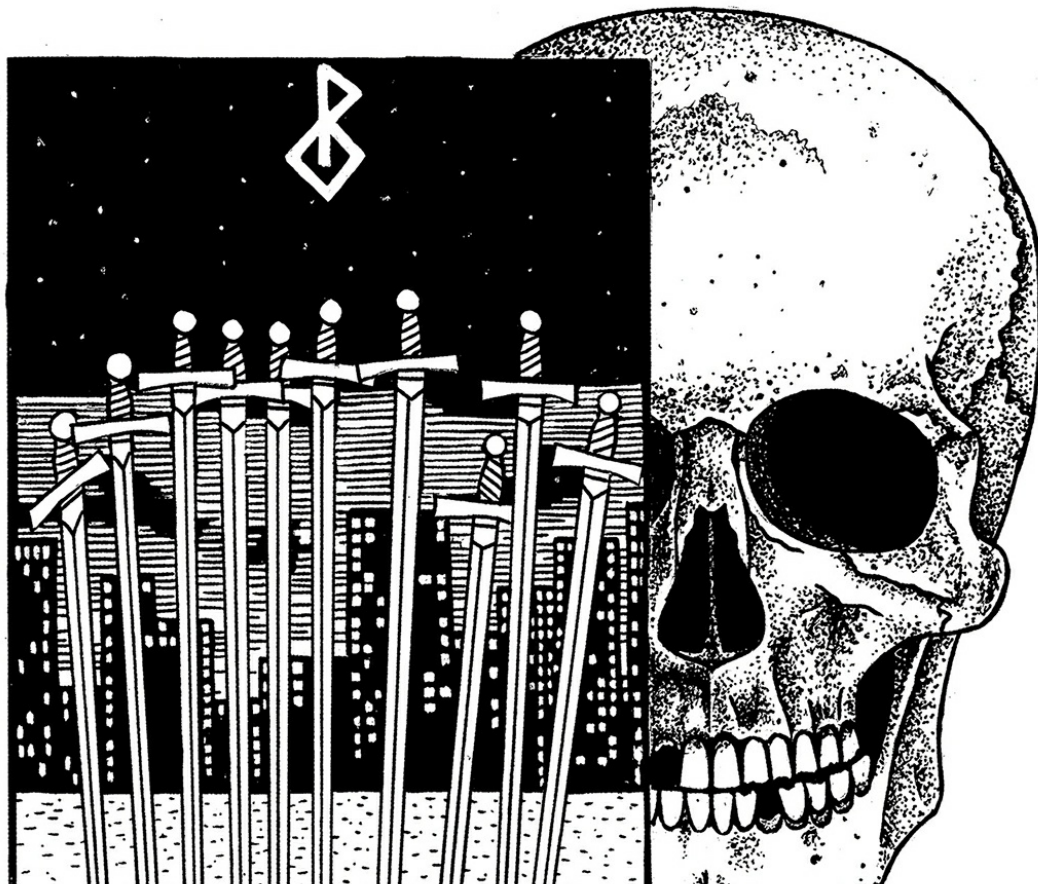
So, between making new things and also doing things like fulfilling orders, how do you organize your creative life?

Unless I'm out specifically doing something else, I'm *always* somewhat working. Even if I have friends over or I'm watching TV, I'll still be drawing or something. I think one of the reasons that I've been able to make a living off of my work—versus friends who are just as, if not more talented than me—is that I'm very organized.

So I've got my orders set up in files and I have my own little way of keeping track of everything. I'm pretty good at just naturally breaking my day up. Like, I'll start my day with answering emails and packing some orders, and then either I'm gonna go print in the studio or if I know I've got this deadline, I'll focus on that.

At this point I've got my own kind of chaotic way of making things happen. I know what needs to get done at different points. I definitely sometimes feel like a bit of a hermit as a result—being in the house for three straight days working. I mostly work out of my apartment. I have a studio I share with some other people where I screen print, but I do all my artwork and everything else at home, so it's easy to just stay inside and never leave.

Not a lot of people actually figure out a way to really make a living off their creativity. It's great that you have managed to do that.

I feel like I really just lucked out in the fact that I wanted to make t-shirts when I was young, and that's something that you can actually survive off of. If I had been like, "Oh, I wanna make pottery," or "I just wanna be a fine-art painter" or something, my trajectory would be a hell of a lot different.

And I'm not trying to slight pottery or painting. Painting is, obviously, something that I do and something I'd like to be recognized for just as much as the clothing and illustration stuff. But financially those are the things that pay my bills. It's just reality. I love making things. I love designing jackets and weird accessories and shit, that is one of my favorite things to do. At the same time, I have to pay attention to these other skill sets. I want to continue to draw and push myself to be a better visual artist. You just have to strike a balance between all of these things. You have to be mindful. I'm lucky that I'm at a place now where I can feel good about all of it.

Alexander Heir recommends:

Jess Poplawski (@empressprintingnyc)

G.I.S.M.

Dripperworld (@dripperworld)

Movie posters from Ghana

Gerald Donald

Name
Alexander Heir

Vocation
Visual artist, Designer, Musician

Olivia McCausland