

On navigating human truth



An interview with visual artist and writer Elise Peterson

May 9, 2018 -

As told to Uli Beutter Cohen, 2224 words.

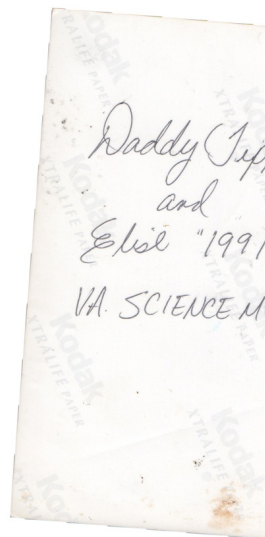
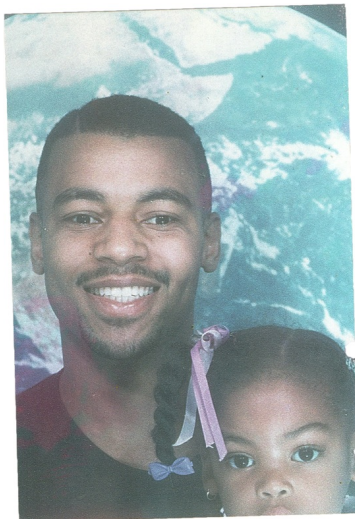
Tags: [Art](#), [Writing](#), [Focus](#), [Process](#), [Independence](#), [Success](#), [Identity](#), [Anxiety](#), [Mental health](#).

You're a person with a lot of creative layers. What connects the different things you do?

I was thinking about that recently: "What is the connective tissue in all the things I do?" I don't feel like a jack-of-all-trades and master-of-none. I explore different ways to tell stories—visually, on camera, and in written work. Storytelling connects it, that's my jam.

In your storytelling, are there certain themes or words that you're drawn to?

I'm really drawn to the more difficult parts of our stories that we like to avoid as humans. If I make art about it, it's going to force me to deal with it. Take my relationship with my biological father. We didn't have a relationship at all growing up. I avoided meeting him for 10 years, which blows my mind, and then communicated over the phone for 10 years, until he passed away. I went to his funeral and ended up making work about it and the conversations I had with people in his life. Learning about him and who he was outside of being my estranged father, that was the most recent big thing I had to level with, and art was the avenue to do that.



Collages by Elise Peterson

I had so much anxiety about going to Richmond to meet this part of my family that knew me but I did not know them. For me to "make it worth it," meaning to be emotionally vulnerable, I knew I was going to have to make something from it. There were just so many things I'd never seen. It was like my grandmother, who I had never met, knew. I went to her house and she had a grocery bag full of loose photos and said, "You can have all of these." So I used those photographs along with the audio I recorded to create [a video collage](#).

You have a Thug Life tattoo. Your son's middle name is Shakur. Is Tupac an inspiration for you? What does he signify for you?

Probably my romanticized, ideal version of a man—super masculine, alpha, and in charge, but also really intelligent, and soft, and kind, and empathetic, and thoughtful. Tupac was the first man I depicted in my collage series once I got to a certain aesthetic with the Matisse mashups. I remember feeling all this pressure about how to depict a black man. What a heavy thing to put on yourself. I really wanted to highlight his vulnerability, because the media didn't give him space to do that, and who he was as a multifaceted person.

There are certain expectations for a female artist, like "Is your work feminist?" "Are you making work about what's happening to women in the US or in the world?" "As a Black artist, are you making work about Black people and about the Black struggle?" People want you to fall in line. I don't want to do that anymore. I don't want to be in a group show, because it's women's history month and I'm a woman.



Photographed by Uli Beutter Cohen (left), Save Art Space (right)

What drives your work?

The truth is what drives me—the funny thing is that the truth changes often. I am constantly seeking and trying to be honest about what my truth is at the time. Even harder than that is accepting that other people's truths change, and being willing to accept that. The work I feel the most proud of are the video collages. Those aren't as much about me as just human experience and everyone's truth. Family truth is the hardest thing. I feel this sense of responsibility because I am the oldest of my siblings, I'm the first grandchild on my mother's side, and now I'm also a mother.

What human truths do you believe need to be in the spotlight right now and what do you think we can do without?

We can do without the dishonesty that happens because we feel like we have to portray ourselves a certain way, especially on

social media. That's something I grapple with. Social media is 100% a place of ego. It's like: "Look at my work. Look at my home. Look at my life. Look at my studio." A lot of that we can do without and it's hard for me to say that, because I make my living off it. There are times when I have bad days and I want to just talk about it, but no one wants to hear you complain. People would rather see nice things than hear about the honest truth. I think it's about finding the right platform for that.

More than anything, I hope that artists make less work about hashtags and less work for the sake of relevancy. My #blackfolk collage series did really well on the internet. It was easily digestible, sharp, to the point, and people got it. My video collage work doesn't get as many likes, but it's also not meant for internet consumption. It's to be experienced in a different way and that's the work I want to continue to make.

The art world isn't being challenged as much right now, specifically Black art, because we're at a place where we so want to support each other, that we don't know how to critique one another. Everything is celebrated. It would be nice for us to get to a place where we can look through a more critical lens and consider making art that won't do well on the internet. If we move away from wanting art to be understood and focus on being honest, then we'll get away from our hashtag art.

Your life just changed tremendously, you had a baby, how do you deal with a change in image?

I'm trying to figure it out. I think for me it's about leaning on my community and knowing when to take a break. I'm addicted to work and going full throttle. If you're going to thrive in New York, you're probably a person that needs action. People like that, we have a hard time knowing when to stop and sit down. When I first got here, I was like, "Can I afford to eat a slice of pizza, and also get on the train, and also make it to class?" Now it's more about the lifestyle I want to live. How do I sustain it? How do I create a tangible future for myself and my child? Those are bigger questions that make me have to consider more options. It's scary, because for any New Yorker to consider not being in New York it's like, "What? Is that a real possibility?" New York is a part of the image and part of the allure. "You're an artist that lives in New York, wow!" No one says, "You're an artist that lives in Silver Spring, Maryland? That's amazing! How do you do that?" No one gives a fuck. No one cares.



Photographs by Mara Hoffman

What gives you the most creative satisfaction, especially when there's pressure?

I don't think I've experienced that yet. Wait, I take that back. I did experience it. Some of the best times I had were last summer, being pregnant and alone in Canada at an artist residency in the middle of nowhere with cows, mountains, and rivers. Making my work was my only job. I got up, I rode my bike to my studio, and made work to the point where I was so into it, I would stay late. I was consumed by it. I had one thing to worry about. The task was to make work, complete it within a certain time frame, and share it with people. That was it. Talk to people, make art, present it at the end. And I was like, "Oh, I can totally do that."

Do you think having a beginning and an end point is important?

Yes, I'm results oriented. I need to know what I'm working towards and what the expectations are so that I can perform at my best. If it's too loose, then I'm too loose, and I usually just fade off. Sometimes I wish someone would just tell me what to

do, like at a job that I go to every day. But I've had a 9 to 5 and it was awful. It's definitely a the-grass-is-always-greener situation.

That's part of the artist mindset, that you're always looking for things that don't exist. It's maddening. But when you get to a place you didn't even expect to exist, it's the most satisfying, fulfilling feeling that I've had next to having a child. The work I made about my dad was in the thick of me being incredibly sick. It was my first trimester of pregnancy. I was throwing up every day, all day. I was on a deadline and I remember having a client emailing me saying, "Hey, we need this yesterday." I was up at 1am with a barf bag next to me, just sweating. No one cares that you're pregnant. They need the work. But I thrived off that and got it done.

Have you found something that helps you not get burned out?

Probably going away. Here in New York, you have to look good, be wonderful and fabulous, *and* be personable when people see you on the street. And your baby has to look good, too. It's the upkeep. The upkeep of a certain lifestyle, along with producing work, and doing emotional work. You have to give yourself pep talks every day and tell yourself you're great, everything's fine, this too shall pass. And when you're interacting with other people, you have to put all your stuff to the side, because people have an expectation of how you're supposed to show up. But just being fabulous, inside and out, is not real. It's not attainable and it's bizarre that we expect that of each other.



Photographs by Elise Peterson

What are the most valuable resources to you?

Time is the most valuable resource—having time to myself, having time to make work. It's something I didn't value as much before having a child. I have no idea when I will sleep eight hours straight again. I didn't even know that was a thing to consider or to be thankful for until I had a child. I don't even particularly have the time to make work just because physically, I hold my baby so much that my brain doesn't work. The first thing that goes when you are trying to adjust to a huge life transition as a creative person is your creativity. How can I possibly think outside of the realm of my own reality when I'm so deeply entrenched in it? I can't. I don't know what's happening in my dream world. I'm barely here.

You're a Scorpio woman and a water sign, how do you keep your cool when all of the things are happening at once?

Outwardly, I keep my cool. I think that's just naturally who I am. I don't want my struggle to be present in my person, although it can be present in my work. A lot of people are like, "Wow, you make it look so easy!" And I'm like, "Really? I don't consciously do that." My position is that when you're presented with something, you just have to do it well and to the best of your ability. That's how I approach motherhood, and most everything else. I don't know if it's always the best way, because I struggle silently.

Everybody's got a breaking point. That's when you get off the roller coaster for a while. For the past decade I have avoided getting off the roller coaster. I might stand on the platform for a little while, but then I get right back on. I don't leave the amusement park called New York City. But now my life is not so self-absorbed and I have someone else now to consider. I'm

like, "Oh, you should probably leave the amusement park for a second. Maybe a roller coaster is not the best place for a baby. Don't take him on your wild ride." I think I'm at the point where life is forcing me to take a second. And I am slowly, but surely, making peace with that.

What's a good piece of advice you can give to someone who's just getting on the roller coaster?

Embrace the transition. Embrace change. It's inevitable. Learn how to move like water.

Elise Peterson recommends:

Chocolate Oat Milk

The Book of Questions by Pablo Neruda

Silver nail polish

New Black Voices: An Anthology of Contemporary Afro-American Literature edited by Abraham Chapman

How We Do Both: Art and Motherhood by Michi Jigarjian and Qiana Mestrich

Donald Glover's show *Atlanta*

Name

Elise Peterson

Vocation

Artist, Storyteller, Cool Mom



Photo Credit: Maya Fuhr