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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3413 words.

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# On when your freelance gigs and creative vocation are almost the same

**An interview with visual artist Benjamin Kress**

**A lot of creative people have day jobs that have nothing at to do with their creative life, but you mostly do freelance work that's art-related, right?**

Yeah, the freelance I do is art-based. Sometimes I have to stop and remind myself that, I guess, I'm living the dream because the romantic childhood fantasy I always had growing up in Montana was, of course, to *only* be doing art all the time and making a living at it. There is something to be said for having some variety in what you do, but for the most part all of the freelance work that I do is art related. It's fabrication.

I work for a company called Hornet pretty frequently. They do stop motion animation. We build sets and puppets and characters and I also do prop-making for other commercial jobs. It has all evolved in a really organic way. I've been doing this kind of work for over a decade now. For the most part things just happened pretty naturally. One job would lead to another job or someone would call me up and be like, "Oh, I heard that you can make things out of paper or that you can do scenic painting or you can sculpt. Are you available?"

**That's one of the benefits of living in a city and being plugged in to an artistic community. It allows things like that to just sort of happen.**

It was definitely living in New York, as well as a chain of people and a chain of events, that lead me to doing the work that I do now. Oftentimes I'll be working with people who are interning or people who have studied the kind of work that I do. I think that people actually study animation now in a way that maybe it wasn't studied so much when I was younger. I happened to get into this kind of work-sculpture and animation and puppetry stuff—because while I was going to school in NYC I happened to get a job working for a particular artist. When that job came to an end, they told me, "Oh, you should call my friend Elise. She works at MTV on *Celebrity Deathmatch* and maybe she could get you a job there." So I did that, and that somehow led to a whole trajectory of freelance work that went on for the next couple of decades: animation-related work and commercial work and prop styling. Elise Ferguson who is a painter, was definitely a mentor in showing me how you could exist in the city and do your work and do freelance work and make it all come together.



Benjamin Kress, *Strange Muses III*, 2017, Oil on linen, 56x42 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Callicoon Fine Arts.

**Does that kind of freelance work typically come in waves, where you might be on a project for a couple of weeks or a couple of months and then it's over?**

It depends on the job. I've done so many different kinds of jobs. But the company Hornet that I mentioned, I would typically go there for a job and the job might be two days, it might be a month. It really depends. Other companies and clients, it really depends. Not every company has their own workspace. Sometimes they'll rent a workspace, sometimes they want you to do it in your own space. I've also done a pretty wide variety of things, ranging from medical illustration, back when that was more of a hand-done thing, to assisting artists with fabrication of their own work. That involved drawing, sculpture, painting, usually in their studios. Sometimes I would take piecework. At this point, I mainly do my own painting, and then the freelance stuff is pretty purely commercial, rather than assisting other artists.

**The general uncertainty of this kind of work can be maddening. Never knowing when your next job is going to come along, not knowing exactly when you're gonna be paid, or how much. It's a hustle you have to sort of get used to. It's not for everyone.**

I feel like I've built up a wall of denial over time where I'm just like, "Okay, it's worked out for this long. I'm just going to trust that it's going to keep on working." But I don't feel like I actually have the natural psychology that is geared to just go with the flow and accept uncertainty. I've had to condition myself to be OK with that.

**Having freelanced myself for many years, it's kind of like an emotional/psychological callus that you build up. You can't worry about it too much or you'd lose your mind, you'd never be happy.**

You just can't let your mind really go there too much or you'd collapse from anxiety. I want to shift to some other types of freelance stuff, but I probably won't get a regular day job anytime soon. I imagine the security and schedule of a day job might be a relief, but I wouldn't really know. With the kind of work that I do it's generally all or nothing. I'll just have weeks where I might design my own schedule when I'm in my studio, kind of float around and do what I want, and then it's just crazy weeks where it's 10-hour days, plus two hours of commuting seven days a week and exhaustively working to meet a deadline. All or nothing.



Benjamin Kress, *Untitled (Hybrid Face #2)*, 2017, Oil on linen, 10 x 8 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Callicoon Fine Arts.

**Are you able to maintain having a studio space that's separate from your living space, or is that important?**

Just recently I got a separate studio space. I've always chosen places to live where I could also work. I lived in a loft in Greenpoint for a number of years. It was a big chopped up space where we were all artists and we all had a room *and* a separate studio. Eventually I moved out to Bushwick and found a two bedroom apartment that I could afford. It was the same price as the Greenpoint space, and I just used one room, the master bedroom, as a studio for probably about a decade. Recently I was able to get a separate studio very close to my apartment, which has been good. I hadn't really pined for a separate space the way that some people do. I lived by myself and in a lot of ways it was very convenient, but then I got married and we're sharing the apartment. I realized that there are some benefits to a separate work space. I think psychologically it's good. It gives you that feeling of "I'm going to work now. I'm at work. I'm definitely at work. I'm not at home." Then also professionally it makes it a little bit easier if you're having studio visits. You don't necessarily have to invite somebody into your home in order to show them your work.

**You went to school in New York, right?**

I went to undergrad at the Cooper Union for painting and then got a Masters at Yale two years later for painting as well.

**Was your dream always to be in New York? Did that feel like a necessity in order to make it as an artist?**

It was all one big ball. I moved to New York when I was 18 definitely because I was interested in art, but I also just really wanted to live in New York. I grew up in Montana and I was reading magazines, which was kind of the only way to learn about what was happening elsewhere in the world. New York just seemed like the place where I needed to be. I definitely did want to go to art school, but going to art school was also a convenient reason for me to come here. I don't know if it was actually so specifically that I felt like I *had* to be in New York to be an artist, but now that I have been in New York for more than 20 years, I do realize that unless you're really at a certain level of accomplishment in your career, it is difficult to be in other places and make it work.



Benjamin Kress, *Cellophane Face*, 2017, Oil on linen, 16x20 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Callicoon Fine Arts.

**Because of things like studio visits? The proximity factor?**

I think it's sometimes surprising how human it still is—the way things happen in the art world—given how much access we all have through technology to everything that's happening everywhere. It is still important to meet people in person and have conversations. With almost anything in life, I think there is an organic trail of relationships that lead people to where they go and what they do. I think it would be really difficult to maintain those relationships without actually being here.

**How difficult do you find it to balance having a creative practice with the necessities for work practice?**

It's getting better as time goes on. I feel like I'm able to make what I want to make. I think all the pieces are there. It could certainly be more comfortable, but I feel like I am at a sweet spot in my life right now where it feels more balanced than it has at other points. There certainly have been times, like when I was right out of school, that it was harder—you don't have any money, you're trying to make stuff, you need to work, but how are you going to make your own work when you're making other people's work? It's a real conundrum. But I think accepting that, for me, I needed to do this freelance work and the way that it evolved and improved over time and eventually lead to a nicer situation, which where I am right now. I'm still freelancing and doing other work, but I have ample time to work on my own work. Sometimes I think it can be healthy to do freelance stuff just to not be in your own world all the time and to receive other influences.

**Do you have a pretty habitual way of working? Do you get up early and go to the studio?**

I wish I could say I was that kind of methodical workhorse, but I'm not. I do work hard and I do work a lot, but I think what drives me is more the fascination of making things and that I think about it a lot and I *want* to do it, rather than being that person who treats it as a job. But I think the older I've gotten, the more I do try to treat it as a job. I think it is true that you can't... What is the saying? You can't wait for the muse to contact you. You have to sit down and get to work and work whether the muse arrives or not. I do try to always be working on my own stuff.

I had a show that came down a few months ago, so right now I'm sort of in a certain phase where I haven't been in the studio so much, but I've been trying to do all the other things that you need to do periodically, like updating my website. Just boring stuff like office work. Simultaneously with the office work, I'm doing the part I really love, which is the kind of germinating period of thinking about what you're going to do next and thinking about possibilities and trying things out in your mind.



Benjamin Kress, *Strange Muses I*, 2017, Oil on linen, 56x42 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Callicoon Fine Arts.

**Painters will often talk about the cycle of work as it relates to shows—that they are always kind of working towards the next show, the next big thing, etc. Do you find yourself kind of getting caught up in those kind of creative cycles?**

Well, I actually feel like the time I have right now is incredibly valuable to me because I've just finished doing enough things to feel that I've got my work out there. I've been pretty active lately, so now I have a period of time where I don't have deadlines and that is really valuable because of the freedom. Within that cycle it can be hard to have your maximum creativity when you know that you have a deadline. Maybe I didn't give myself enough credit when you were asking me how much I have a schedule in the studio, because when I was preparing for the show, I did have a schedule in the studio and I was trying to work eight, ten, twelve hours every day. I had a deadline and I was working really hard.

There came a point in the creative process where I was just out of time to try things out or explore anymore and I just needed to complete the projects that I'd started. With the type of painting I do, especially these recent paintings, they are meticulous and representational and it just requires a lot of work. This period that I'm in right now is valuable because there is actually a space for play that there wouldn't be when I was in my "finishing" phase. I don't feel like I'm at a point in my career where there's this huge amount of pressure on me. I feel like I have space to decide when I want the next thing to be and what shape it will take.

For me, there's actually a certain amount of sadness involved in completing something, because you know that the possibility has gone and it is what it is and you have to accept that. I think the healthiest way to think about that is to just recognize that creative work isn't just one thing. It's the whole sequence of things that you do, and whatever sadness comes with completion or recognition that this will only ever be what it is now helps inform what you're going to do next.



Benjamin Kress, *Double LOLZ*, 2017, Oil on linen, 16 x 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Callicoon Fine Arts.

**Writers and journalists often lean heavily on their editors. Is there some corollary for that with painters? Do you have someone you depend on for feedback at crucial moments?**

Yeah. I think editors are important regardless of what creative discipline you're in. For me personally, my husband is a great editor with visual art, or when I need to write things. He's also very good at helping me clarify messages. I think when I was younger, I actually very much rejected the idea of editing. I went to art school, which is all about dialogue and people shaping each other's projects.

**Feedback loops.**

Yeah. I think I wanted to reject influence. I think in the last couple of years I've been more open to receiving people's feedback and accepting that other people might be able to see things that I can't see about what I'm doing because of my familiarity. Especially with this last show of paintings, I think I welcomed a lot more input than I have for quite some time. It was useful. It shaped the show. Now that that particular experience is done, I guess I'm actually in a phase where I don't want any feedback for a while. I don't want input on this formative germinating stage. I want almost no input whatsoever so that nothing dies too soon. There's a sweet spot for receiving input. You don't want to hear three weeks before the show opens that something's not working, but there is a sweet spot earlier during the creation process where editing and outside input is very important.

Editing is also another way of saying criticism. I suppose an editor for a novel might be literally cutting and adding words and being very much part of the building process. But in another way, an editor is a person you trust to give you criticism. I think some people are better at taking criticism and I hope I've gotten better at that as I've gotten older. Sometimes you just have to hear everything that everybody has to say and sometimes it can be painful when somebody's response is so different than your intention. But I think it's important to remember that there is a whole range of responses and you might as well find out before the thing is done.

**Are there things you wish you'd known as a young artist? Word of advice you'd offer for someone entering this world just out of art school?**

It's so dependent upon that person. It's really hard to give one-size-fits-all advice. I guess I'm trying to formulate how to say this without making it just sound like the sort of cliché, but you really just have to be true to yourself. Also, it is difficult to decide to live as an artist in New York and make work. There are support systems, but it's also difficult in many ways. I think being true to yourself also means having some kind of internal creative north star that you can return to and always find a way to nurture. When any other given part of your world collapses—as it is invariably going to span class="highlight-inverse">when you run out of money or when people don't like what you've done or whatnot—it's important to still have that totally interior private space, that part of yourself that just enjoys making things, that you can nurture by simply doing that thing you've always been doing.</span>



Benjamin Kress, *Strange Muses II*, 2017, Oil on linen, 56x42 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Callicoon Fine Arts.

Benjamin Kress recommends:

#### 5 Things from a Week in the City

The Metropolitan Museum of Art is my favorite place in New York City. I usually have a flimsy pretext for going but abandon it and see what calls out to me on that day. Recently I went to see an exhibition about how art was valued in the Renaissance. They had sort of funny wall plaques telling you how many cows or fractions of a cow something was worth in its day. To get there, I wandered through Medieval European art and photographed paintings where Jesus looks like a zombie.

While wandering, I listened to the Nightcore version of Lana Del Rey's song "Get Free" on repeat. If you're not familiar with Nightcore, it's a fad from, like, eight years ago where you increase the tempo and pitch of a song by about 20 percent. Most people find it intolerable, but I like to download YouTube Nightcore dance mixes and listen to them while I paint.

Moving from Medieval paintings to the Renaissance, I shifted my focus to decapitation with Solario's painting of Salome with the Head of Saint John the Baptist. I photographed it too. I'm collecting images of bodies that I might use as reference in future paintings. I'm hybridizing them using photo-morphing software and this decapitation scene might yield interesting results.

The next day, I picked up a copy of Monsieur de Bougrelon in the New Museum bookstore. It's a short, hallucinatory novel by the French Decadent author Jean Lorrain, published in 1897. Bougrelon is an elderly dandy who takes the narrator and reader on a tour of Amsterdam, musing on the pleasures of nostalgia, culture, and flesh. In a moment of synchronicity, Bougrelon describes the same decapitation painting I'd just photographed in a diatribe conflating lovers and works of art: "How the painted gazes of certain portraits cast spells on us!...it showed a courtesan with red hair, but red as only the Italians knew how to paint it...she carried—and with what a gesture!—a bloody head on a gilded silver dish...I wanted this head to be my own..."

Name

Benjamin Kress

Vocation

Painter, Sculptor


Fact







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