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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3905 words.

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# On staying positive and inspired

Visual artist Brandon Breaux discusses leaving an agency job to pursue his art full-time, collaborating with Chance the Rapper, and the questions you should ask yourself when you start something new.

I heard you talk on a podcast about how talent isn't always an assurance to making a living from your work. You can be an amazing painter, but may never find a gallery. With that in mind, when you started, you began working at a graphic design firm. It was a place where you could put your skills to use immediately, and get a paycheck. You ended up making your own work on the design side—the artwork for Chance the Rapper—and having success. Now, you're living off your art. It's often important to be practical and to jump right in.

A lot of our value in the world is dependent on what we have to offer to other people. Art isn't a necessity for people; it's very much a luxury. I think everything about the art world conveys that. Auctions, the whole thing. It's a very luxurious thing, and I don't necessarily think it should be. I think art should be people-period—because they're the ones that enjoy self-expression. But, in order to make it last and be as viable as it is, it has to operate in that luxurious space.



It's a huge jump between working on paintings in your studio, or working on paintings at home, and being accepted by the art world. That's a huge thing. It depends on relationships, and a lot of the time you, as an independent artist, don't have a say in it. I know a lot of really great illustrators, great artists, probably greater than a lot of people that are shown in museums, who work in the commercial world, and that's just how they have to make their living. Just because of how the different industries are set up.

For me, [design] was the most immediate thing I could do that has value to the people in the network that surrounds me. Because I think in life, and working within communities, it's very much about what you have to offer, what you can provide to the people closest to you, that matters. The people who you live with regularly. If you have something to offer for people that aren't in your network, you might not do so well.

So, for me, that's what I was reconciling. That's what I was really negotiating. I had to make those choices early in life. A lot of it was a fear of being broke. A fear from anxiety about poverty. I feel like for a lot of us, a lot of the people from where I'm from, that's definitely conveyed with the moves

they've made in life.

**You're very much associated with Chicago. How important is that for you? You were talking about working within your community and the community around you, and pulling inspiration from that community, versus going elsewhere and making work somewhere else.**

I think it's easy to want to do the L.A. thing. To go to these other attractive-looking places for what could potentially be more—but doesn't necessarily mean more. For me, it came with maturity. It's just an appreciation of the community that I'm in. That's invaluable. When you really give back or want to support where you come from, people will support you forever. As opposed to you going off to another place and really trying to find home and create a new home. I just try to build that up. I know there's a need from where I'm from.

When I was younger, all of the conversation about artists from Chicago who'd gotten famous had to do with them not coming back to Chicago. The whole thing was they went out and they did this thing and they didn't come back. As you start thinking about that, what does that do to a community?

I think, to make a difference, to make a different impact, you see the things that the people who came before you were doing, and you do the things that maybe they couldn't do or they didn't do. And I think that's another way that artists or a person chooses to make an impact, as well. I've taken on a lot of that in my work. Really speaking about Chicago, and being in Chicago, and not just talking about it from far away.

**The Chance artwork has become iconic, and it's everywhere. Sometimes when someone has an image that does get out there, people define them by that work. Do you feel like you're too defined by it? Are people like, "Hey, could you create this thing for me that's like that, too?"**

I got a lot of that in the beginning, but I'm so rebellious against it, or defiant. I never really walked that road for any amount of time. That's why I have a lot of different types of projects and why I do a lot of different types of things. I don't want my practice to be seen as just that. If I kept just doing the same thing, I wouldn't feel like I was growing. I've intentionally kept experimenting and taking risks that I didn't know would pay off, just so I didn't feel stagnant.



I get that that's how people relate to my work in a major way, but I didn't expect that to be as successful as it is. I didn't know that while I was doing the work, and I'm not sure I would have done anything different if I did, because it was a client of mine. It's a collaboration, but at the same time, that's a client, and I wanted to do what works best for that client. And it worked.

It was a little frustrating in the beginning; now that people see that I do all these things, it kind of confuses them. It also has helped them ultimately understand it, like, "You're good at a lot of stuff. And I didn't know that, but wow." You know what I mean? That's been my experience.

**How do you work differently for a client versus making something entirely for yourself?**

When I think about a project, it's more about, "Do I make this?" and "Why do I care about this?" I'm in a space where I have some input around how I approach things creatively. When you're working at agencies, you don't have much flexibility on that. If I'm doing this to represent myself, or if I'm doing this to

promote myself and this brand—because that’s what they wanna talk about and capitalize on, or at least deal with, in this relationship that we’re having—then it needs to tie back into something that I care about. It has to be something that is authentic for me.

I’ve been fortunate enough to be in that situation with a lot of the work I do. The first thing I ask is, “Why do I care about this?” or, “What part of myself, my history, or my identity can I investigate to explore why something like this would make sense?” I do that first. From there I start thinking about the creative approach or creative style. “How does this look different from everything else?” “How does this have its own identity?” Then, from there, I try to merge those two things and come up with something that I feel like I’d want to still see after a couple of years. That’s how I try to do all of these projects now.

**When you’re working with clients there are deadlines. With the work you’re doing, do you get creative blocks, or do you not have time for that? If you do, how do you get through something like that? A client says, “We want to get this thing designed” and you just can’t think of anything. Does that ever happen?**

There’s a good amount of momentum between projects. I worked in design for 10 years, so I don’t have time for writer’s block. I don’t have time for creative blocks. That’s my perspective on everything. When you’re working with a client and it’s not necessarily for yourself and it’s about a timeline, it’s about deadlines, and it’s a very structured process and you’ve followed that—especially if you’ve been let go at certain jobs because you *didn’t* follow that—you just kind of get over yourself. But, I dunno. And that’s maybe not the greatest thing to say, but I think that’s a responsibility to have, man. Just making sure that you’re not out of it all the time. Making sure that you can actually deliver.

And I try to follow that. I’m not staying up and drinking until 3 A.M. if I have things to do, you know what I mean? Straight up responsibility stuff, but I also need to make sure that I’m ingesting and digesting enough inspiration where I can keep going. Or that I’m finding inspiration in wherever I am in the world or have to be at the time, so I can use it to fuel my practice and fuel my creative work. I also try to accept that my goal is to do and offer the best I can at that moment. And, hopefully, that’s enough for me not to freak out and feel like, “Is this good enough?” Knowing that and living by that, hopefully that’s enough. I just try to source it. Keep sourcing it. I’ll sleep on it. Make it happen.



**You started a Field Trip project, too. Could you explain that a little bit? It’s where you help sponsor trips and take kids to different places, like a museum, or some other arts-related space.**

That’s me figuring out ways to contribute back to the community, and have that in some way woven into what I’m doing anyway. I’ve always had to do a lot of things at one time. I’ve always had to be a lot of different people at one time—go from designer, to artist, to this, this, or this. I do one thing in this space and another thing in this other space.

As I’m growing, I’m trying to be more responsible in how I open myself up to do projects. If I’m gonna do charity work, if I’m gonna do non-profit work, I want it to center around the arts in some way because that’s what I do. And I wanna figure out a way to expand on what I know while I’m doing what I’m doing. Those are the things I’m interested in.

I was at a museum last year and I saw a Murakami exhibit and I thought about it and I said, “I think as many kids as possible need to see this.” Because in 2007 I had to fly to L.A. to see Murakami’s exhibition

he did at MOCA, in Chicago. The time has changed, but things haven't necessarily changed. The people haven't necessarily changed. They don't have a different type of exposure. Chicago feels segregated. Those things happen, you know? It's the same thing as if it were to happen then. It can be here, in our city, but if people don't know about it and can't get to it, what difference does it make?

So, I started renting buses and taking kids to the museum to see the work. And it made sense to me, because I want to go to a museum any chance I get. I'm just trying to do things responsibly. If I'm in this world operating, and if it feeds multiple things in which I'm doing, I think it just makes sense. So that's why I was doing that, specifically. It is also an opportunity to interact with younger students and help develop the artistic community in Chicago.

**I met you in Tokyo last year, and at the time you mentioned an old teacher of yours being there, too.**

Yeah. I went to DePaul University. My professor from DePaul does a study abroad trip to Tokyo every year. It's about game development and art, basically. They visit a lot of artist's studios, museums, and places like that. He was my favorite professor in college. I think the most experienced professor. He was a knowledgeable art and design professor. I booked that trip because they were going to be out there at the same time and I wanted to connect with them and build with them.

**What is it about Tokyo that appeals to you? I know from following your Instagram that you've gone back a number of times.**

Tokyo was one of my first international traveling experiences. It was my first real big study-abroad experience. It was the first time I was in a foreign country alone. I went to study abroad in like 2005, and then I spent a couple days, five more days, in Tokyo after that. I ended up losing my credit card. I left it in Hiroshima, and it was just a mess, man. It was this crazy learning experience that was really impactful.

Being a person that makes things, it's easy to fall in love with a place like Japan, because of the attention they put towards making things and creating things. It's almost like a given. You see certain things as a kid, like anime, and as you start to investigate, you get into more of that. I was into fashion at the same time, too. It's one of the best places in the world for fashion, garments, design, attention to detail, care, and then also the story behind everything and the culture is very important. The process, the story, the why. Tokyo is amazing.

**You've talked about how, early on, you had a job that wasn't the most creatively fulfilling and you ended up getting let go because you weren't showing up. Often you have to go through those kind of jobs to get to the point where you can work on projects that are exciting. How long did it take you to get to the point where you were doing work you wanted to do?**

It's funny. I was always doing that kind of fashion stuff because I've been doing work for my friends. I started a clothing company a while ago. But, that was tough because not everybody's knocking down your door to buy it. You have to build recognition for what you're doing. Fashion is very much on trend. A lot of people other than you set the tone of what's going on in fashion, and that's not how I necessarily like to operate as a creator. So that was difficult, too.



But it was really managing the two of those: being able to hop out and do things that I really liked,

while also doing my job that was great. It allowed me to pay my bills and all of this stuff at the same time. I bounced between the two until I got to a point where the work that I was doing outside of the agency was higher profile than the work inside the agency.

There is only so much you can do. There's only so much creative freedom you have working in an agency, but I think what agencies teach you how to do is to be consistent. In order to survive in that kind of an environment, you really have to care about what you're doing. That's helpful when you're finding your own work, when you're out hunting on your own and doing your own thing. I got a lot of useful lessons out of being let go that time, or when I didn't hit the mark sometimes.

Eventually it just got to a point where the work that I was doing—work I would find through my network and my level of relationships—was just a lot more fulfilling and a lot more meaningful than anything I could do in the agency. So, yeah. The Chance work is a huge part of that, because it shined a light on a lot of my work and the things that I had been building over time. People wanted to pay attention to me because the profile of the work was higher. They saw something go from nothing to something.

Consistency is a huge part of that, too. I was consistently making those covers.

**At this point, what do you consider a successful project? If you finish something, when do you decide, "All right, I'm happy with this." Do you ever make anything you think is a failure?**

I take a lot of risks. So sometimes things don't work out. I try to be active enough to not sit on those things and soak. Some things don't work. I did a performance piece in Singapore that I think was great. I think it was great in concept, so I really need to figure it out, and I'm determined to do so. I try to save things and make them work as much as they can. Because, why not, you know?

But sometimes you get to a point with certain projects where you have to let them go. I mean, the t-shirt company was similar, the same thing. I was pouring so much energy into that, and it wasn't necessarily paying off how it should have been paying off. We both made a decision, myself and my partner, to close that chapter. I'm still glad we did it, though, because it opened me up to other things.

Sometimes I think it's important to let go, and sometimes I think you learn a lot from holding on. The hard thing is choosing when is the right time to do either one of those.

Also, I'm very careful about how I take on projects. As I was saying earlier, if it's meaningful and has meaningful content, and the concept is strong enough, that helps me get through any hiccups that come along. Because I can ultimately always present a new body of work or extend that concept if I really feel like the concept is worthwhile.

A lot of times I think we have an idea, and we put energy towards making it happen immediately, but the resources aren't right to make it happen. That's another thing that I try to remember: ideas don't have expiration dates. A lot of times, things aren't lined up. The timing is not right for you to do something. You have to come back to it, and you have to do it another time or forget about it. Just let go of that, "Oh, I need to do this in this amount of time" kind of thinking. I can circle projects or ideas two or three years after I've had them, and then deliver.

**You've done clothing and fashion and visual art, client work, and you're getting into doing game design, too. If you have a project, how do you decide what form it's going to take? Do you keep trying different things because certain creative avenues aren't able to fully represent what you want to make?**

Yeah, I feel like that. But I also feel an interest in just working in different mediums. I think like a conceptual artist. I think that's what I'm kind of going into. I'm interested in being able to play with different forms and reinterpret things. I think being an artist is a huge part of your perspective of the world, your perspective of what you're faced with. And I'm not always just looking at paintings.

I'm in the world, I'm playing games, I'm going to the airport, I'm doing all these other things. I think having only a singular way to represent that is stifling in some way. You want to have a perspective that is as complex as life. Having only painting as a medium to express that is just not fun, man. You know what I mean? It's cool, but I think there's more. There's more and I like playing with that idea, and that's why I've been thinking about all of these things, gaming and all of that stuff.

**What feeds your creativity when you're not actually working on projects?**

Lately, I've been playing with game development. So, it's just been making me play games a lot more. I'll take time, play a video game, and just really try to train at that video game and get really good at it. Things like that are really helpful.

I don't know, I feel like I'm doing this thing where I'm just trying to always be in my creative self. I feel as if the art that I wanna produce is the art of my life and the art of my everyday experience. In the way that every part of my everyday experience is art in some way, like a performance art piece. Me going outside and sticking my key into the car to open up the car, in some way, is a part of life, right? And I feel like art is supposed to reflect that life.

I don't necessarily feel like I'm ever really out of it in that sense. It's like an acceptance that this is the thing that I do—that this is my life and I will always have a perspective on what's going on and something to convey or express. In a sense, I'm always in it. I'm always in the wake of inspiration or

right around the corner from the next piece or the next creative expression. It sounds very crazy right now, but you know what I mean. That's really how I think about it. It's very fun for me. That idea of being in that space is very fun for me.

Doing things for clients all the time can be un-fun. Definitely. It can be un-fun. But, for the most part, I try to really stay in that space. I try to stay inspired and positive about everything.



Brandon Breaux recommends:

It's so broad. I'm just kind of all over the place. **Ted.com** is the first thing I wrote down. I wrote **visiting Japan**, because I go there for creativity, inspiration, and I just feel like, in a way, it's the opposite of where I live and where I'm from. I feel like visiting by going into this opposite, other space, you can't help but be inspired in some way. **Figure drawing**. I started it when I was younger. Just going to figure drawing sessions and drawing is, I wouldn't say it's inspirational, but it's practice. It's like me beginning or allowing myself to interpret form over and over again. I recommend just taking different classes. **Silk screening**. Taking in different things and learning different sets of tools. Do something for a couple weeks. Practice at it. If there's something that's left behind that you really want to take with you in another space, then you do it. And then **collaborating with friends**. That's work I really like. I think you can get a lot out of yourself—far more creativity out—when you work with other creatives that you're inspired by. They'll help pull those things out of you.

Name

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Vocation


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Fact



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