

On having the confidence to create anything you want



An interview with artist Petra Cortright

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As told to Lindsay Howard, 2319 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Beginnings](#), [First attempts](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Production](#), [Business](#).

When I first saw your work in 2009, you'd already shown in some museums and galleries, but it still felt like your primary audience was the internet. How did the experience of sharing work through the internet shape your practice?

At that time, I'd been in a handful of group and museum shows, but I didn't have any experience with the art world. I mean, the art world is still somewhat its own thing. But back then, I wasn't paying attention to it. I was interested in my peer group on social media. I still had a lot of hustling to do, a lot of people to meet... looking back, I hadn't even begun yet.

You grew up surrounded by art and artists. Was it natural for you to follow that path, or was there a temptation to resist it? What's been the best art advice that your mom's given you?

The best thing I got from the people I grew up with, especially from my mom, is the confidence to create anything I wanted. I have a natural confidence with art that I don't have with, say, soccer, and I think that's why I made a big decision to stop playing sports and keep going with art. It felt like the easy way out, which is a funny thing to say because art is hard. I'm also very stubborn, secretly. I didn't get good grades in art school because I did whatever the fuck I was going to do, no matter who told me what. I've had boyfriends who were like, "You need to learn to speak more articulately about your work." People have tried to change me. I might agree on the outside, but on the inside I'm thinking, "No, fuck you. You don't know what you're saying. I know what I'm doing." I got that attitude from my mom. It's served me well.



Lintillasniffer-FAT32crack-gluttonKayakingHOWTO.cnf by Petra Cortright (2016 - 2017) mixed media mounted to dibond aluminum, 36h x 70w in. image courtesy of the artist.

As far as your creative work is concerned, how do you define success, and how do you define failure?

I started out making work because I wanted to have a nice desktop wallpaper for my computer. Weirdly, that's still my measure now. I make things that I want to look at, that I want to live with, that I want to see everyday. When I first started making work, I wanted to have a cool LiveJournal. It was all about getting street cred on the 'net back then. It's still the same now, even with physical paintings. They're things I want to have in my house, or around.

Success is being able to live with as little pain as possible, and then failure is the necessary pain that you need to go through. It's all about managing pain levels for me.

How have materials changed for you over the past few years? What have you been drawn to, in particular, and why?

The best part about making digital work is that my core practice doesn't have to change, but I can constantly test out new printing technologies and materials. It's important for me to be able to make things without limits, and not feel restricted by materials. I keep my work digital, and then have fun with the printing. I've used aluminum, silk, raw belgian linen, and cotton rag paper linen. I love it all. The file, or the mood of the file, changes with each material, so I'm constantly testing out new ones. It seems like every couple of years, there's a new process that comes out. I sit back, wait around, talk to people, and continue with my digital practice. I prefer making work like that because I'm not forcing it too much.



10 year_braxton contractions_divine comedy by Petra Cortright (2018) digital painting on anodized aluminum, 60h x 118w inches. image courtesy of the artist.

What's one habit that you fight against, and how do you do it?

If I could get away with it, I'd never go to another exhibition opening (mine or other people's). It's an uncomfortable and boring format. I love seeing my friends. I love seeing their work. I'd just rather see it at their house, or my house, or even on the internet. For many years, my main exposure to art was through the internet. I remember seeing so much new work through VVORK. Of course, I'll still go to openings and show up for my friends because it's very important to support artists. But I'm also someone who likes being alone and experiencing art that way.

What are the ideal circumstances for creating new work? Do you have any rituals?

My biggest thing is that I don't create work for anything in particular. I'm constantly making and then, later on, I'll assign pieces to a particular show. It's better for me when I don't know where a work's going because otherwise I start thinking about people in that city who might see it and the expectations around it. I much prefer creating with nothing on the line. That's the best: no pressure. I'm pretty ahead of production at this point, so that's good, and there isn't a great urgency to produce. It's

taken a few years to learn how to do that, though.



puparazzi by Petra Cortright (2009) webcam video, 3:37. image courtesy of the artist.

Your studio in LA is a well-oiled machine. What have been the most important business lessons you've learned as an artist? Do you have a philosophy for your approach?

I remember there was a time a couple of years ago when I realized that it could be someone's full-time job to manage and run the studio. It was a difficult jump to make, but that's when everything took off. I've had very, very good studio managers—first Lex Brown, and now Geneva Skeen. They're both incredibly competent, and have kept things running so well. Geneva is a musician and is doing great in her own career, too. Before I hired them, I wrote a lot of apology emails. I'd go through my inbox every six months and try to clean up the mess, un-offend all of the people that I hadn't responded to, or deal with things that I let slip.

Eventually, I made a personal decision to be responsible, become an adult, stop avoiding things, and act professionally. Now I try to keep communication really clear, and really brief. I used to write insanely long, stream-of-consciousness emails. I guess it's a funny look to be kind of crazy, borderline mentally ill, when you're young. As I get older, though, I've kept the spirit of the craziness to fuel the work, but not so much in the logistics of my practice.

Oh, and I always forget that the way that I decided to become an adult was to stop drinking alcohol and doing drugs. It made everything too hard—even getting groceries was difficult while doing that kind of stuff. I wouldn't do anything normal. And now, everything is so much easier.

What's a typical day like in your studio?

I don't work every day. Geneva comes to the house several days a week, and the rest of the week she works from home because I like to have days when I'm not thinking about art logistics stuff. It helps me focus. I'll have a painting day every once in awhile. I play around with sometimes having really long painting sessions, but lately I've been actually doing shorter sessions more frequently. It depends. Also, it depends on the schedule of soccer games and what's going on with that. I find that watching soccer and playing with my dogs really, really helps me make work.

I'm a horrible role model because I don't have a very strong work ethic. But when I do work, I'm incredibly efficient and every single thing that I make gets used in multiple ways. When I'm making a painting, it might also become a video, or I'll isolate a paint stroke and turn it into a marble sculpture. Every single thing I do has multiple outputs. I have a specific way of working that makes sense for me and my personality, and keeps things balanced in my head. I don't think it could apply to very many other people.



Nine Inch star Anita Morris (crazy nocturnal) by Petra Cortright (2017) digital triptych painting on anodized aluminum, 73h x 144w in. image courtesy of the artist.

How would you describe the way you make work?

I do everything backwards. I learn enough so that I can do what I need to do, but I won't go the extra mile to actually master it so that it's really polished. I have a punk attitude where I think, "Okay, if I just know 25% of what I need to know, then I can finish that project." It's a rebellious thing. I definitely don't use Photoshop properly. I've mastered the way I want to use it, but I couldn't retouch a photo or make something look realistic. It would end up looking like a meme as if a 12-year-old cut something up and made it.

The pricing model that you developed for your YouTube videos—which was based on the work's current view count—was a breakthrough in many ways because it provided scarcity while also addressing the value of the attention economy. Now that you're making physical works, are these ideas still relevant to your practice?

The view-count model made sense in the earlier days of YouTube. Nowadays, view counts can be so easily altered by bots that it's not as interesting to me anymore. I get depressed thinking about view counts and likes because it's become such a cynical, mainstream concept. It's an affliction within our society. We're just starting to see how bad things have gotten as a result of social media. I struggle with that because in some ways the world has always felt like it's falling apart. Things seemed pretty bad in the Middle Ages, so I don't know. I try not to think about it.

With the paintings, I really like when people photograph and share the work. I'm so unorganized when I do studio visits (even when Geneva has everything organized, if she sends me something I'll lose it in a weird place on my computer), that I end up having to Google myself to see where a piece went. It's helpful when other people document my work because I'm irresponsible. It makes it easier for me.



bunny banana by Petra Cortright (2009) webcam video, 1:09. image courtesy of the artist.

How would you describe your relationship to social media now?

Twitter's the only thing that I still care about, because of soccer. But I'm sure even Twitter will go away eventually. I remember before it was possible to fave a tweet or to retweet. All you could do was send thoughts out into the universe, which was very poetic. There was a time when a lot of the internet was poetic and now it's completely surveilled and commodified. Maybe it never was poetic but, for me, as a young person, it felt that way and it doesn't anymore.

I use Instagram for show announcements, but stopped using it for personal posts. There have been times when my mom will come over and she'll be on her phone, looking at social media. I'll be like, "What are you doing? We don't see each other that often. Why are you looking at that?" People are obsessed with the infinite scroll.

I struggle with being "that person" who complains about how things used to be better because that's not productive. I hated when I was younger and people would tell me how good things used to be, and I'd be like, "Well, fuck you. Thanks for creating such a shitty world for me to exist in." Now, how do I answer that? How do I say to a 15-year-old: "Oh yeah, I liked the internet 10 years ago. You were five then, so you won't ever know about it." I don't know what the alternative is to social media but I want to be hopeful for young people now that I'm old.

What's something you wish someone would've told you when you began making art?

I don't think people talk enough about the danger of stopping making art. You should never stop making stuff—even if it's in secret, or you don't tell anyone. I've seen so many artists stop making their work out of fear, or pressure, or... there are so many reasons. They trick themselves into thinking that they can start again, but then 10 years go by and they haven't made anything. It's dangerous to stop making things.

Petra Cortright recommends:

[The Art of Flight](#) - I tell people it's my favorite snowboarding movie, but it's actually my favorite movie. It's so beautiful.

Naoshima - It's Japan's art island. They have, in my opinion, the best art museum in the entire world: Chichu Art Museum. I cried in the Monet room... and that was the second time I'd been there.

Din Tai Fung restaurant - I recommend the pork xiaolongbao :)

Eden Hazard - He's my favorite soccer player.

Santa Barbara in general, but also Brophy Brothers - It's on the harbor, and it's just a really relaxing restaurant. Very good.

Name

Petra Cortright

Vocation

Artist



