

“Artist Heather Day on Painting Blindfolded and Finding Success”
 Marlena Trafas / August 10, 2015



Heather Day is a creative powerhouse with an incredible intuitive approach to her work. Needless to say, she has an eye for abstraction, interpreting the world around us by the shadowy depths, shapes and contours that make up our everyday environment. She has worked with Dropbox, West Elm and CB2 among others, and today we sat down with her to find out what makes her tick.

LW: How did you first get into painting?

H: I’ve been painting my whole life. My mom bought me a beautiful easel in 2nd grade that I actually still have. Creativity is something that has always been encouraged in my family. I went to an art high school in Chicago and that really opened things up for me. I was learning about Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning and Joan Mitchell. They are my favorite abstract impressionists.

It’s funny because in high school I remember looking at Jackson Pollock’s work, and I thought it was a joke. I thought, who was this guy? I had such an ego back then! I think it was seeing the work in person and really understanding the concept behind it that things shifted for me. Lately I’ve been looking back. When I was a senior in high school I was doing drawings blindfolded. I would hang 20 large sheets on the wall and then put on a blindfold and put on headphones and listen to classical music and just start drawing and every now and then I’d take off the blindfold and look where I was and pick up from there, blindfolded again. It was very much about reacting to the music. I think there was a level of security in that. I was comfortable in my skin. But then when I went to college I became insecure seeing all the talent around. Unlike me, the other students were drawing from life, so I went back to doing more realistic drawings, and I was trying to find my ground again. It came back to me after a few years when I started going back to this idea of loose abstract drawings. I was looking at the city for inspiration, and I realized that abstraction is everywhere. We tend towards labeling everything. We look at the ocean and feel a strange compulsion to call it an ocean. It’s blue, it glistens, it’s made of water, but when you think about it, there are so many more layers to it. It’s so broad, and so huge. Taking simple objects and looking at them with more vague senses really pushed my work to grow, and that’s what I’m thinking a lot about.



LW: Do you have any advice for anyone who wants to be an artist?

H: I think confidence is key, really believing in what you do and convincing other people to believe in what you're doing. That could be buying pieces, following you on social media, coming to your art shows. Every little bit counts. I would also say, talking to strangers! It's so easy to stay within same group of friends your whole life. It's important to go out of your way to attend networking events and parties. Chances are, when you're really tired and you don't feel like going, that's going to be the one event you need to go to! You just push a little further, get out of your comfort zone, and talk to people outside of your network. It's really important.

LW: What would you say was the hardest part of your journey?

H: I mean if we're going to get real, I would have to say finances. I was making money, I was not like a starving artist or anything, I was doing okay. Things really picked up within the past few months. I knew, after reading business magazines, that creative businesses take a long time to develop. Mentally, there were times of self doubt when I would ask myself, should I be picking up another job? Should I be doing this? Usually the answer was just pushing through and emailing more people that would be willing to collaborate, finding ways to believe in what I was doing, pitching my ideas to new people, and getting out there. That's how I got through it. I know some artists, I've read a lot about how they made it, and it always bothered me how a lot of people don't talk about the finances of it. I would say that was the biggest struggle: getting the finances in order and having the money to splurge on better supplies to make my studio practice better. It's definitely about finding a balance between your creative endeavors and physically having a good space to work and all the supplies you need.



LW: How did you manage to make ends meet early in your career?

H: I was working Sales for an outdoor furniture company. It was a 9-5 job, Monday through Friday. I basically put my social life on hold, I didn't see my friends as often. Things started getting busy and I saw potential in really painting for a living. I jumped all in for 5 or 6 months and made sure I could make the jump when I was ready. The key was that I got represented by a gallery and they really helped move me in the right direction to selling my work and getting it out there. You definitely can't just jump in without any savings. I left my job at the beginning of summer and that is technically the slowest time for painting sales. That was risky but I had savings from my job. I guess that was the key: coming up with some cushion and also making sure you are, if you're an artist, making money off it already. When I quit my job I was still doing freelance for the lifestyle blog. So I wasn't only relying on my income from the paintings.

LW: Tell us about the impact talking to strangers has had on your work?

H: My mom was a marine, so when I was younger, I moved a ton and I got used to going up to neighbors and introducing myself. I really like to connect with people at coffee shops. I'll have a conversation with someone sitting next to me, and see what they're working on. Hopefully, we'll figure out some way to collaborate. I used to go to coffee shops and have a ton of work to do and put on my headphones and start working away, and I realized I was isolating myself from the world. I'm trying to be more in tuned with the people around me. My grandma always said, you have people. I always thought that related directly to family. There's so many connections within family but I realized that statement is broad and general because if you talk to people they want to help you and you can help them. If you have conversations going, you can be surprised what can happen.

LW: How did your first year of being self-employed lead self-discovery?

H: I think it's so funny when somebody asks me about my year. That year was a wave of emotions and definitely a roller coaster. It's amazing how much you need to grow up when you become responsible for yourself. You're no longer having that paycheck every 2 weeks. You don't have the same benefits and you have to do a lot of research in terms of making sure you're insured and you have everything you need. You need to be more educated in what you're doing and you need to get more organized. I knew what I was getting into and I was saving up for the jump. But when I finally did it, it was terrifying for the first 5 months. The first couple weeks were the most terrifying because I suddenly had all this time and all this work to do and I didn't know where to start. Getting organized really helped and coming up with a list of everything I needed to get done and I realized that ultimately the biggest growing I had to do was realizing that I'm also running a business. Artists don't like to talk about it because of the way they can be perceived by the art world and appearing as a commercial artist. Ultimately you need to figure out how to run a business pretty fast so that you can keep things running.

LW: Could you explain what you mean by your two favorite words: “collaborate” and “makeshift”?

H: My friends have been making fun of me for awhile because I use these words all the time. I may just need to expand my vocabulary. But I think those words are so relevant all the time, especially being an artist. I always feel like being makeshift. You have to get creative. You have a tight budget with materials and you learn to get creative with resources. I also mean in terms of running a business and getting creative on who you can talk to and who can help you and how you can help them and make a trade. And then there's collaborate. I mean it overlaps with makeshift in that way. I have always just been a fan of talking to people and getting their feedback. Collaborate can mean anything from working together on social media or advertising or it can also mean coming up with a shoot or a print.

LW: You have a gorgeous Instagram account! Let's talk social media.

H: Documenting my work and taking a lot of photos is crucial. I used to have my Instagram account private, but about 3 years ago I decided to go public. I documented the process of creating art. It was more personal and I was a little bit nervous about it. There's this fear of putting a lot out there and things getting stolen and that can happen, but you're better off putting all your thoughts out there and hoping for the best. I started sharing my Instagram posts, and I would encourage all artists to do the same. People really want to see the behind the scenes process. I'm documenting what inspires me on a daily basis. Whether I'm in the studio or hiking on a trail. That's been working for me.

LW: How do you feel about being an artist in the Bay Area/San Francisco?

H: It can be a little frustrating at times. I think it really depends on the day you ask me. I feel a little isolated in San Francisco because there's just not as many galleries here. There's a lot of great art stuff happening in LA and New York and sometimes I'm tempted to move to those cities for 6 months. I see a lot of potential, but I think it relates more to the type of art I do. I'm inspired by abstract impressionism. The art in the Bay Area, in California, is more figurative and digital. So there's that, but I think that's why I'm trying to move myself to travel more. I'm showing more in LA and New York. The art scene in LA is huge. I was there last month. You just walk down the street in the gallery areas and there are 10-20 galleries just within a few blocks. Same for New York, walking through SOHO it's just gallery after gallery. There are some here but it doesn't even compare to LA or New York. I see a lot of potential in the past few months. There's been a few more galleries that have opened up and you know maybe some other galleries in LA are going to head over to San Francisco.

LW: How have things changed over time?

H: I've been able to get a new studio. I used to share space and now I have my own space. I have a lot more room and now I'm getting into sculptures. I think artists worry about business inhibiting their work. They don't like the idea of making a painting and selling it because that's not what their work is about. They're not making it to sell like a crafter would. And I'm definitely not doing that either. I've been trying to find a balance with this. I think growing my business has allowed me to build and afford more and push my work with more experimenting with different mediums and not being on such a tight budget. My work has just evolved a lot because I have a lot more time to be in the studio.

LW: Are you fulfilling your truest calling?

H: Yeah, definitely. I always wonder if I am going to ever feel trapped in what I'm doing. I'm always wondering if at some point I would be willing to switch careers and do whatever I need to do to stay happy. That's what I like about being an artist: it's a vague career and you get to be creative with what you do. I'm happy where I am and I'm very lucky to have so much support from the people who've helped get me there.