

Beginning

The beginning was – is – hard. Seven months into the first year away from the day-to-day responsibilities of a full-time corporate career, I am still unsettled, still struggling to find my rhythm, my go-to-place for inspiration, the grounding I need to work consistently and well. Some days it is there, some days it is not, but always in the back of mind there is this nagging thought that by now I should have this part taken care of and things organized enough that I could just go to work.

That's when the self-doubt creeps in. Is this what I worked so hard all my life to do? What's the point? Why should anyone be interested in the work of a 65-year-old ever-emerging and never-quite-arrived artist?

That's when I tell myself that this is what it means to be an artist. Not knowing is part of the process. I also remind myself that art for most artists is not a choice, but something you need to do at a very basic soul level. Otherwise, who would choose to be an artist? Even with a natural talent, it's not easy. It's usually not financially rewarding and often requires great sacrifice in other areas of one's life. For most of us, there are many good reasons not to pursue an artistic career and few reasons why it would make a lot of sense. Yet, it is something we are (pardon the pun) drawn to do.

Art has been a persistent, yet subterranean theme in my life. Often, it was a secretive place I went to after my day- responsibilities were done, but, even as a young child I was called to the creative side and somehow tried to meld those aspirations with expectations of a 1950s-suburban upbringing. Now, art is something I can wholeheartedly embrace with time and resources I have never had. Yet, what to do, how to begin? I must admit it is all a little overwhelming.

At first, I felt giddy. Suddenly, the world was available to me in a way that it had not ever been. Freed from having to earn a living, free from work responsibilities, family responsibilities, I hardly knew what to do first. An upcoming exhibit at the gallery where I belong, put a little structure on the situation, but it was open ended and, honestly, a bit disconcerting. Some travel with friends, a course at a local art college, helped me put some boundaries around it, but it was way more open space than I was used.

I started journaling, but then I stopped. This is my pattern. My studio is full of journals I start in the month of January. This time, I made it to the third week in February – a long run for me – and now I am picking it up again in July. Also, a typical pattern. There's something about the long days of summer and being able to be outside a lot that awakens in me a kind of introspective contemplation that signals another round of new beginnings. It has always been this way for me and it is a pattern I realize I need to pay attention to, especially now as I seek to discover the mostly still unconscious patterns of my creative life.

This is what I was ruminating about in January:

- Dealing with old family stuff I have saved for art but done nothing with
- Ricocheting between the giddiness of new found freedom and total anxiety about not know what to do
- Switching to a new computer system
- Despair over not understanding how my printer works or controlling color balance with my camera
- The pull between words (my comfort zone) and visual art
- Finding a way of working and rhythm of connecting with my creative self
- Transitioning off work to a more creative life and understanding the differences between personal friendship and new “art” work relationships
- Wondering how my life would have been different if I had put art first
- Getting comfortable with the down time and letting things percolate
- Trying to decide what to work on first
- Scared I will come up empty

Several months later, I have solved most of the technology issues. I have created a body of work that dealt with some of the family things and organized other parts of the ephemera that descended on me. I have moved onto other work dealing with familiar themes of water and reflection and have had some success with entries into three juried shows. I am still struggling with rhythm and connection, but I am more comfortable with the in-between times and understand now that it is part of the process.

Looking back at the beginning, I realize that the not-knowing was an integral part of the process of “becoming.” As I am wont to do, I began by simply photographing the chairs and fabrics and vases that I had salvaged from my family’s attics. Boxes my mother moved from her mother’s attic and old belongings I desperately salvaged by filling up my husband’s Jeep when my father sold his family’s homestead and refused to move anything himself. For a long time, those boxes sat in my studio under tables where I did my work, waiting for me to someday get to them.

In the summer my mother lay dying, I started to go through some of them, sorting out old photographs, reading my mother’s travel journals, looking at some of the hundreds of snapshots my parents had saved of parties with friends and family outings, house remodeling

projects, gardens and holidays. I kept a few of those, but mostly I was drawn to the older photographs -- the formal portraits of a bygone era before every moment was a Kodak moment. Babies and brides, prosperous looking gentlemen, stately matrons and tottering toddlers in stiffly starched collars and Dutch-boy cuts. I recognized my parents and their parents, but the others were strangers to me, though probably somehow, some way related. BY then it was too late to ask my mother much. She had been blind for several years and now her memory was also fading. Eventually, I boxed them up again and in a desire to clean out my studio to make room for new art, I moved the photographs along with boxes of memorabilia and keepsakes to my own attic.

Eighteen months later, my mother gone and finally free to pursue my art unencumbered by work responsibilities, I went through the boxes again and selected a few pieces that seemed to hold a significance and brought them back to the studio: my mother's wedding dress, a silver-plated compote engraved to my grandmother's grandmother, a small pitcher I remember sitting on my grandmother's bureau, a doll's chair, an early glass bottle, mirror and silver pitcher from my father's family's attic.

I had an exhibit coming up at the gallery in four months and had begun ruminating on themes of possessions -- both literal and figurative. But as I looked at these objects in the daylight coming in the window of my studio, they seemed somehow diminutive, tarnished, rust-stained and yellowed by age. What had I been thinking? Possessions, possessed? Out of the attic, in the harsh light of day, they seemed ordinary.

It was winter though and my usual photographic options of landscapes and water were limited, so I started making photographs, arranging various still lives and putting my mother's wedding dress on a tailor's mannequin I had rescued from my husband's mother's house when we were cleaning that out to be sold. Always salvaging. Apparently, it is my way. I struggled with lighting and white balance and relearned my camera and lenses. Then I struggled again with the new printer and computer and translating it all into an accurate color-balanced print. After several weeks, I started making work prints, but the work was disappointing and not coming together in any distinctive way. Sure, these were technically proficient photographs of old things, but these were not possessions with any kind of power or emotional content. Something had been lost in translation.

It was then that I began experimenting with the digital transfer process that I had been using for some of my other work. First on fabric and paper, but then I moved to wood artist panels that I had distressed and painted with acrylic paints. I did a few straight transfers of a single image, but then hit upon the idea of combining parts of images in layers as a kind of digital collage. It took some experimentation, but I figured out to work out the layers so you could see what was underneath, combining scale and proportion to build a foreground and background that leant a three-dimensional quality to the image. Finally, the images were beginning to come alive.

Once I had an idea of where I was going, I began the work of making the digital prints on transparency film, cutting them up and laying the collage elements on top of the painted and distressed panels. It was a laborious process that required several steps between each layer and a final finishing coat of wax. Between layers, I would hang them on the wall of my studio and look at them and sometimes get an idea of what was needed.

This all took a couple of anxious-filled months. I needed to be done by the beginning of April for an exhibit at the end of the month. Finished work had to be photographed, artist statement written, and work readied for hanging. When was I done, what was enough, was it working, would other people see what I was seeing or was it so personal that it was meaningless to them?

What is the meaning of life, of art? This has been my question my whole life. What is the meaning of the things that have happened to me? What am I supposed to learn from this? What is the purpose of these things I do? I can't help myself. I was born as a self-reflective being and have been as long as I can remember. This is where my creative impulse comes from – the need to somehow translate the world I am experiencing into a symbolic form or language that speaks to another sentient being of meaning beyond the surface. Ironically, this quest for meaning is what gives meaning to my life and it is why, despite many distractions, that art has been a constant theme even though I have sometimes struggled to claim it as my own purpose and buried it beneath a host of other responsibilities that I and perhaps others felt more important.

In this endeavor, I was supported by artist friends who would check in with me to validate when things were working and encourage more experimentation when they were not. Without these touchstones, I am not sure in my fledgling state that I would have had the courage to persevere in the darkest days when nothing was working and my “vision” was failing. The idea of ghost-like possessions was a challenging and abstract one and difficult to translate in photographic terms and there were many times when I was ready to give up. However, this is my way to struggle with some abstract idea that is always slightly beyond reach and, sometimes, I have been fortunate enough to grasp it and pull it back into the material world. Sometimes not. This time, I did not know what would happen.

Although some artists work in total solitude, for many of us, the support of other artists is important and crucial, especially in the early stages. Art is a pursuit that not everyone understands. Artists are built a little differently and not everyone understands our need to express ourselves and the various forms that expression can take. The creative process is a mystery for most of us – artist and non-artist alike – and when we begin that process it is handy to have some guides and resting places where we can converse with fellow travelers. Unlike some other careers where competition reigns, I have found that most artists are generous with their time and advice because they realize the uniqueness of each artist's vision and understand the difficulty of the artist's journey in a world that values more financially successful pursuits.

I have been fortunate enough to find artistic mentors throughout my life – teachers, artists, writers who have been willing to spend time with me and encourage my artistic leanings. When I was younger they seemed to find me. Now that I am older, I sometimes go looking for them and it seems I find them when I need to. Isn't there some kind of adage about seeking and ye shall find?

In this first winter on my new artistic life, I find a teacher who can help through the technical challenges of learning a new camera and computer and who teaches me the rudiments of software that I have never quite mastered. I am reminded that learning photography these days is mostly learning where to go for information and how to find out how to do it -- not that different than learning I did in my 30-plus-year day job in corporate communications. Thankfully, some things are directly transferrable from one career path to another.

So, finally, by mid-April, I am ready for my first exhibit as a full-time artist: "Possessed or Possessed?". It is a beginning.

