

Keeping the Lights On and Other Aspects of Being an Artist in America

An Essay by Danny Powell

Starving Artist. The label has a certain ring to it and the images it conjures up of the artist working and struggling for years while his/her talent goes unappreciated might seem vividly attractive to those afraid of “selling out.” But overall it just isn’t appealing. What artist really wants to toil away at their craft without earning something from it? As Joy Drury Cox says in her fifth episode of *Keeping the Lights On*, “I think that artists should be paid for their labor just like the person at the coffee shop or the mechanic or anyone else.” I couldn’t agree with her more.

But art and those who create it are taken for granted in the United States. There are many people in this country who fail to see the value in culture and in experiencing it. Then there are those who do seek out and enjoy art but don’t see the value in paying for it. Still, audiences and potential audiences are not the only ones who reveal how we truly feel about art. It’s also The Powers That Be. The first to go when schools face budget cuts are most often the music and arts programs. And look at how the government treats arts organizations and public broadcasting entities that rely in large part on governmental funding to sustain themselves.

I didn’t come here to preach, however. I will step off the soapbox, for now. The point of all this is to bring some attention to the stories of people like Ms. Cox, Ms. George Ferrandi, and other artists like them whom I’ve interviewed for my documentary series *Keeping the Lights On*. Their stories often go untold, not only because of what I mentioned a moment ago but also because of the all too common fact that most artists do not fully support themselves through their art. Yes, there are certain rock star artists who are widely famous and who make a considerable amount of change from their work. But for the other 99.9% of artists out there, making money from art is a reality quite often outside their reach. So it’s a given that most artists must work the “Day Job” (or multiple ones) to supplement their income or even fully pay the bills. Coffee shops, bookstores, cubicle-choked offices, restaurants, and many other places are dotted with artists secretly dreaming and working on their real passions. It’s like that brilliant scene in Sidney Lumet’s *Serpico* where Frank first meets his new lover’s friends at a party. Each person is introduced initially by their creative identity (such as a poet or actress) followed by what they do for a living (such as working at an ad agency or insurance company). There are more people like this than one might realize. And they’re invisible.

When I started *Keeping the Lights On* I had none of these issues in mind. I simply thought it would be interesting to talk with artists who held unique jobs outside their creative work. I didn’t really care what their stories were, I just wanted to hear them and I thought other people might too. I assumed most of these artists would say the same thing, that “yes, I would gladly quit my day job tomorrow if I made a full-time living from my art.” But as I began to talk with these artists I discovered that while they might all be in the same boat they are each rowing with their own oars and, quite often, in different directions.

Ms. Ferrandi’s “day job” is actually having her own business, Saints Alive, and more so than the income it provides she loves the job because it allows her to make her art free from the constraints and pressures of *having* to sell her art. She even enjoys making art that is difficult to sell, like large-scale installations. I find it quite admirable that she seeks to keep the commercial aspect out of her art making and has found a certain peace and happiness with what she has to do

to balance it. This is not to say that it is always smooth sailing, for while George owns and runs her own business she is still a freelancer and with freelancing comes a great deal of work and the omnipresent possibility of jobless phases. And since most artists are essentially freelancers, they all face the demands of finding consistent work, the hardships of slow periods, and the challenges of having to be both artists and business people.

Ms. Cox works on a very different scale, but she too takes pleasure in having day jobs in addition to her art. There are certainly hurdles that come with working multiple jobs and then trying to find the time and energy to create art, but she manages to make her reality work for her. Having multiple jobs helps Joy prioritize her life and her art, and as she explains in the series it results in a stronger desire to create her own work.

While George and Joy have succeeded in carving out manageable situations despite the difficulties of making art and making a living, there are other artists I've shot for *Keeping the Lights On* who have somewhat different stories to tell. There are tales of lost jobs, no jobs, getting sick without health insurance, and the reality of working jobs they hate. Many artists do not work jobs related to their creative endeavors, and it can be a challenging and often painful experience to balance regular work with what truly stirs their souls. Making rent and putting food on the table can be difficult for anyone, but for those who, on top of everything else, have a deeply innate need to create it is a uniquely different story.

However, these stories aren't just by and for artists. It is important for people, both artists and others, to hear these stories because they are human stories. We all have things outside of work that move us, things about which we are extremely passionate. They may not be art and they may not be things by which we are trying to make a living, but they are important to us and they feed a part of our souls. We all work too much and give too much of ourselves (and our time) to the 9 to 5, the 8 to 8, or whatever type of jobs we have and these other facets of our lives get neglected. So while *Keeping the Lights On* is about artists striving to survive while making art, it is also about our inherent drive to experience life and the things we love. We are all creators, and I think we all seek to create, to make happen, what it is we want to have in our lives. We just do it in different ways.

So maybe there is another reason why art and artists go underappreciated. Maybe we are all working too much to be able to spend more time with art. We end up not having the time or the energy or the money to spend on art and culture. Art adds a significant amount of value and experience to our daily lives and we must nurture those who create it. Santa Cruz Skateboards used to make stickers that said "Support Your Local Skateboarder." (And you should). But I also say Support Your Local Artist. He/she is right in front of you, every day. She's the one making your coffee in the morning on your way to work or serving your food when you're out at dinner. He also might be the one whose desk is right next to yours, filing away all those papers and typing up those documents for people who make the real money. Or she might even be the one restoring the statues of your church or the one assisting a more famous artist create work that you adore. They are people we see every day, but they go unnoticed. They are in plain sight but camouflaged. Each one is enriching your life by the art they create, whether you see it or not. But their work—their art—is still there, offering itself to you. It is there to be experienced. And it has a story to tell.