

EDITED BY SHARON LOUDEN

Living and Sustaining a Creative Life

ESSAYS BY 40 WORKING ARTISTS



JULIE LANGSAM



THE BIGGEST STRUGGLE throughout my life as an artist has been to put my studio time first. This doesn't always sit so well with the people in my life, but after 25 years I have managed to surround myself with those who accept this as a given in our relationship. When I stop to take a look at who is truly part of my life now, I realize that my closest friends and family are those people who understand my need to disengage, hunker down and become a bit of a recluse. These people never take it personally. It may sound harsh, but I have let go of some friendships and relationships over the years when they have been too demanding of my time and energy. My friends and I all share an ability to pick up where we left off, even if we haven't seen each other in months (or even years). This has made it easier to construct a life that is probably selfish at best.

Over the years I have slowly built up a teaching resume. After ten years of adjunct teaching at various institutions in NYC and waitressing part-time (a great skill to have by the way – flexible hours, cash at the end of the night, days free for studio, and most importantly, you don't “bring it home”), I decided I would try to get a full-time teaching job even if it meant relocating. Having never lived anywhere else but New York, I was intrigued with the idea of being in another part of the country and having a different experience. What I initially thought might be an experiment for one or two years ended up being a 13-year

Julie Langsam
*Gropius Landscape (Director's
Residence)*
42"x42"
Oil on canvas
2012
Courtesy of the artist
Photography by Will Laughlin

adventure living and working in Cleveland, Ohio. My teaching schedule was three days a week, and as is typical, I had a month off in winter and three months off in summer. This allowed me ample studio time, and it was one of my most creative and productive periods. I had my first museum show, and got gallery representation in NYC. In addition to teaching and exhibiting, I began to curate exhibitions of other artists' work and create and develop arts programming around issues I was interested in; and this in turn fed my studio practice. Living in the Midwest I came to really understand that there are other "art worlds" out there, other communities, other venues and other like-minded people. I am now living and teaching again in New York, but the experience of living in a city outside the "center of gravity" was extremely valuable.

For me, the studio is for *working*: painting, drawing, developing ideas. I try to allocate three to four studio days a week. For me, this means nothing else is scheduled on those days. I like to settle down and work for eight hours uninterrupted, so I tend not to answer the phone, I don't usually bring my computer with me, and I don't go out to eat or run errands. I try to limit as many outside distractions as possible. I work with an assistant who does a lot of the "paperwork" – documentation, keeping the website, correspondence, etc., up to date. My assistant also prepares canvases for me and does framing and other related tasks, but I don't have anyone who actually works on my paintings. I have learned to work with my assistant in the studio, but I prefer to be alone without any interruptions, so whenever it's possible, my assistant works when I am not there. Research and writing I mostly do outside of the studio in a small office space at home. I find this keeps me focused; when I am working on a painting I am not distracted by the presence of the computer, and when I am writing or doing research I am not itching to pick up a brush.

The way that I have found to balance art/life is to try to maintain an equilibrium between social space and solitary space. I need a lot of solitary space both to work and to just "be." My partner understands this, and it actually works out well that we live in different cities. This solitary space is balanced by both teaching, which is interactive and social, and by the shared

aspects of the art world, such as openings, lectures and other community events.

I have worked with several dealers over the years; I value each of these relationships, and have learned different things from each of these experiences about both the business and myself. I believe in each instance we have been productive as a team, but it has always been a collaborative effort. I have not had the experience of working with a high-profile gallerist, so I have always felt that ultimately it is up to me to make things happen. This leaves me pleasantly surprised when opportunities come my way that I have not sought out, but it is the exception rather than the rule. Although I am never quite comfortable in situations where I have to advocate for myself or my work, I have gotten better at that part of the job of being an artist. There is something to be said for the “fire in the belly” of youth, but I wouldn’t trade it for the certainty I feel today about my choices, my practice, my life, that have only come with time. For me, in the end it is the everyday-ness of the studio practice that yields work that has significance and a life that has meaning. ●