

Advice From Artists On How To Overcome Creative Block by Maria Popova

“Inspiration is for amateurs — the rest of us just show up and get to work,” Chuck Close scoffed. “A self-respecting artist must not fold his hands on the pretext that he is not in the mood,” Tchaikovsky admonished. “Show up, show up, show up, and after a while the muse shows up, too,” Isabel Allende urged. But true as this general sentiment may be, it isn’t always an easy or a livable truth — most creative people do get stuck every once in a while, or at the very least hit the OK plateau. What then?

Not too long ago, Alex Cornell rallied some of our time’s most celebrated artists, writers, and designers, and asked them to share their strategies for overcoming creative block. Now comes *Creative Block: Advice and Projects from 50 Successful Artists* (public library) — a lavishly illustrated compendium at once very similar in spirit and sufficiently different in execution, in which Danielle Krysa, better-known as The Jealous Curator, asks artists from around the world working in various media to crack open the vault of their unconscious and explore the darkest elements of the creative process, from overcoming idea-stagnation to dealing with both self-criticism and external naysayers. In addition to sharing their broader thoughts on the demons and rewards of creativity, each artist also offers one specific block-busting exercise — a “Creative Unblock Project” — to try the next time you feel stuck.

But what makes the project particularly noteworthy is that while it features reflections from visual artists, most of their insights apply just as usefully to other creative endeavors, from writing and to entrepreneurship to, even, science.

One of the recurring themes in dealing with creative block, which a number of the artists articulate, has to do with mastering the right balance between freedom and constraint. Mixed-media artist Trey Speegle puts it perfectly: You have to set up the narrow parameters that you work in, and then within those, give yourself just enough room to be free and play.

Multidisciplinary artist Aris Moore observes: When I am stuck ... I just search for excitement, but not too hard. It is when I find myself playing more than trying that I find my way out of a block.

Painter Lisa Golightly adds: I give myself permission to just make for the sake of making without any thought to the outcome, which can be surprisingly hard. ... What I would tell

my younger self is this: There is no “right” way to make art. The only wrong is in not trying, not doing. Don’t put barriers up that aren’t there — just get to work and make something.

The wonderful Lisa Congdon — with whom I’ve collaborated for some time — offers a “Creative Unblock Project” to explore that interplay between structure and imaginative play: Choose one thing you love to draw or paint (and feel comfortable drawing or painting) already: an animal, object, a person, whatever. For thirty days, draw or paint that thing thirty different ways, a different way every day. You can use different mediums, expressions, positions, colors, whatever. Each day, push yourself to do something much different than the day before, but keep the subject the same. See how keeping one element constant (in this case, the “thing” you love to draw or paint) can allow you to break out creatively in other ways.

Many artists also emphasize the importance of stepping away from the work when feeling stuck — a strategy that makes sense, given how crucial the unconscious processing stage of the creative process is. Multidisciplinary artist Ben Skinner captures this: I know that forcing something is not going to create anything beyond mediocre, so I step aside and work on a different project until it hits me.

And then there’s the Buddhist-like approach of just letting the block happen rather than resisting it feverishly or grasping after an immediate resolution. Illustrator Ashley Goldberg reflects: If it is a bigger creative block, I try to ride it out and just let it happen. I will still draw, but most pieces will end up in the trash, and that’s OK. I think some of the biggest bursts of creativity and artistic growth I’ve had are usually preceded by a big creative block.

When asked to contrast the state of creative block with its opposite, most artists describe some version of what psychologists call “flow”. Collage and mixed media artist Anthony Zinonos describes that optimal state: I have total clarity and nothing but great ideas bubble up in my head. It’s like being on a creative high; you’re on top the world and work seems to be just pouring out of you.

Hand-lettering artist Mary Kate McDevitt shares a similar experience: I could be working without headphones, with someone right next to me trying to get my attention, and I am completely oblivious to anything but the task at hand... One minute it’s 8 p.m., the next minute I’ve finished my project and it’s 3 a.m. That’s pretty magical.

Illustrator Ashley Percival echoes: I don’t want the day to end, because I need to be creative forever! Sometimes I forget to eat, then I realize that I must move from my desk—so I make breakfast at two in the afternoon.

And yet this state of “flow” isn’t the same thing as the mythic divine inspiration. Illustrator Sydney Pink captures this perfectly: The idea of divine inspiration and an aha moment is largely a fantasy. Anything of value comes from hard work and unwavering dedication. If

you want to be a good artist you need to look at other artists, make a lot of crappy art, and just keep working.

But the most powerful part deals with the darkest underbelly of the creative life — criticism. Some artists, like painter Amanda Happé, turn a deaf ear to naysayers and focus on satisfying their own soul instead: It's one of the most beautiful things about doing this — you don't have to care. No one gets to have their say and have it stick. No one can wrestle the pencil out of your hand. You get to keep going in absolute defiance.

Ashley Percival puts it even more simply: You can't please everyone — people will have art that they like and dislike — the main thing is that you as an artist are happy with your work.

Ceramics artist Mel Robson offers one of the wisest meditations on the subject: I think it's important to remember that making art is a process. It is never finished. The occupation itself is one of process, exploration, and experimentation. It is one of questioning and examining. Each thing you make is part of a continuum, and you are always developing. You don't always get it right, but I find that approaching everything as a work in progress allows you to take the good with the bad. You're never going to please everyone. Take what you can from criticism, and let go of the rest. When it comes to constructive criticism, I welcome that and think it is important to have people you can discuss your work with who will give you honest and constructive feedback. It's not always what you want to hear, but that is often exactly what is needed. It can be very confronting, but very useful.

This brings us to the most poignant question: How to unbridle one's work, whether lauded or criticized, from one's sense of self-worth. Collage and mixed-media artist Hollie Chastain reflects: I think as an artist it's very easy to [equate self-worth with artistic success] because of the nature of the work. If you think of art as a job, then your product is so much more than hours invested. The product is a piece of yourself, so of course if the reception is not the greatest, then it can feel like a direct hit to who you are as a person. I think this happened a lot more when I was younger and still finding my way around. I would doubt my direction when a viewer wasn't thrilled. The trick for me is not to put more distance between my work and myself, but to close that gap completely. I can see myself in the art that I create, and that builds a wall of confidence.

Illustrator Julia Rothman — who gave us the immeasurably wonderful *The Where, the Why, and the How: 75 Artists Illustrate Wondrous Mysteries of Science and Drawn In: A Peek into the Inspiring Sketchbooks of 44 Fine Artists, Illustrators, Graphic Designers, and Cartoonists* — strips this sentiment down to its bare, most vulnerable essence: When you put so much of yourself and your time into something, it's hard to separate it from who you are.

Embroidery and fiber artist Emily Barletta reminds us that soul-satisfaction requires defining our own success: I make art because the process of making art makes me happy. Being successful with it and doing it for personal fulfillment are separate ideas.