PROFESSIONAL artist (TM)

How Art Careers Happen

By **Adrian Alexander** - 07/26/2018

Paint Big, by Alisa Burke 2017. Used by permission of the artist.

Artists' careers are as unique as their fingerprints. We see artists licensing their images on products, teaching art to the developmentally disabled, selling original paintings at large retailers like Crate & Barrel and having their first solo museum show in their eighties. How do these careers happen?

Many artists resist the word "career," thinking it implies a trudge along a well-worn path, with signposts clearly marked, decisions made on a calculated basis, and a long-range business plan guiding every step.

Art careers look nothing like this, of course, yet they happen anyway. They meander and take detours and turn back on themselves, unfolding in unpredictable ways, often without conscious planning.

The three artists featured, Alisa Burke, Chris Motley and Lia Cook, were chosen because their unusual careers couldn't be more different. One artist was on the faculty of a major art institution, another created a successful online business from her home in a small town on the Oregon coast, and another had a left-brain career as a lawyer before knitting her way into the art world. What can we learn from their success?

Alisa Burke (alisaburke.com) is a painter and mixed media artist. She supports her family by running a multi-faceted art business. She offers online classes, sells books and DVDS, hosts workshops and retreats, sells her paintings and collages and adult coloring books, and even started a fashion accessory line. Burke writes a daily blog and has 50,000 Instagram followers. Her brand is "Redefine Creativity."

Chris Motley (chrismotleyart.com) spent 30 years in a "left-brain" job, as a lawyer in the public sector. She has no art credentials, even though she enjoyed art all her life. Her mother taught her how to knit when she was 10 or 11. After retirement from her legal career, she began to knit neckpieces. Gradually her work evolved until she was creating 3-dimensional sculptures whose originality gained her national recognition.

Lia Cook's (liacook.com) work can be found in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Smithsonian and the Art Institute of Chicago, among many others. She works in a variety of media, combining weaving with painting, photography, video and digital technology. She's currently collaborating with neuroscientists to investigate our emotional response to images by mapping these responses in the brain. She spent 40 years as a Professor of Fine Art and Textiles at the California College of the Arts.

What can we learn by looking at the careers of such different artists? On the surface they seem to have little in common, but when we examine their careers we find some interesting patterns.

Pay attention to moments of insight

These artists' careers were neither entirely random or carefully planned, but each recalls a moment of insight, where they saw the future. Burke's "ah-ha" moment came when she first taught a class at a nonprofit art center. She had been creating art for years. She had found it hard to make a living selling her paintings and drawings at galleries. When she volunteered to teach at a nonprofit art center, "something clicked" for her. The openness of the environment allowed her to create her own teaching style and content. The response from her students was immediate and enthusiastic.

Suddenly she knew she didn't have to choose one art form over another, to become just a painter, or a printmaker, or a crafter, but that she could do it all, and share what she knew with other artists. This insight became her brand: "Redefine Creativity."

Cook had also tried out several different careers. While she always took art classes, and had a job showing slides for an art history class, she didn't think of art as a career, partly because her brother was designated "the artist" in the family. She studied political science and thought about going into the foreign service. Then she took a bus trip to Mexico, visiting Oaxaca and Chiapas, where she saw women weaving on looms. This was her first discovery of hand-made textiles, a medium that would inspire and inform her career for decades. She became interested in the relationships between textiles, craft and fine art. She later realized that the trip was a turning point in her career.

Motley certainly never intended to become an artist. Her knitting was an enjoyable hobby that gave her something to do after she retired from a long legal career. Knitting filled a gap in her life. She had always had an identity as a lawyer, and when she retired she was relieved to be able to say, "I'm not doing nothing, I'm knitting!" Then she began to show and sell her neckpieces at art festivals. Her moment of insight came when she saw the small placard that had been placed on her table: "Chris Motley, Artist."

Find a creative community

When asked about how their careers happened, all three artists mentioned the importance of finding community: people who offered support, encouragement, information, validation and a connection to a wider world. Cook found her first community of artists when she exhibited her work at the International Biennial of Tapestry in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1973. This opportunity was unusual in that established artists were exhibiting their work alongside unknowns. Cook had never shown her work before, but she applied, got in and as a result got connected to the major people in the field. Also during the 1970s she was part of a close-knit community of artists redefining the field of textiles.

Motley's career wouldn't have happened without the support of her two critique groups. She met the first group at a workshop, and when they invited her to join it meant that her sculptures could be taken seriously as art. Critique groups continue to give her feedback on developing work, often encouraging her to explore new directions. She also attends events like the Worlds of Threads Festival, where she was featured in an article and interview.

Motley also finds community by showing her work at galleries, museums, and art centers across the United States. Whenever possible she shows up at receptions to meet the other artists. She also volunteers her time on the board of an art museum and a professional art organization.

Burke created the community that now supports her business. She was one of the earliest art bloggers (2005), sharing her do-it-yourself creative projects before she even had a website. The enthusiastic response to her early efforts established a loyal customer base for all of her products and services. In addition to her 80 online classes, artists still sign up for the retreats she holds in her home studio several times a year. The human interaction sustains her and her students.

Being connected to others and getting a response from the world told these artists that their work mattered. They received useful professional feedback on their work. They were reminded that what they were doing fit into a larger context. Being part of a creative community helped them grow.

Find method in the madness

Art careers often follow a meandering path. Admirers of Cook's achievements need to remember that she first studied to become an actress. If you envy the success of Burke's art business, don't forget that she spent years in "cubicle jobs" before she reached her goal. People who knew Motley as a

lawyer never would have imagined that a critic would say: "Chris Motley has taken the craft of knitting and elevated the process into the realm of contemporary sculpture."

Yet as these artists' careers developed, structure and method became more important. When Motley learned that there was such a thing as a "call for artists," she used her left brain skills to develop an excel spreadsheet listing the juried shows across the United States. Then she applied for all of those that she was eligible for, and built a career out of meeting deadlines.

Burke combines her creative energy with a structured process for business development. She has a formula to plan out what she offers at different seasons throughout the year. She uses 5-year business plans to test out new ideas, in order to see which of them might prove to be financially viable.

Cook conducts research and stays current with old and new technologies. "I'm always exploring new ideas, experimenting for what the next step might be." At the age of 26 she spent a year in Sweden studying the complex structures of traditional Scandinavian weaving. Her current work grew out of her collaboration with neuroscientists at the University of Pittsburg School of Medicine.

Get Personal

These artists share another quality common to artists who eventually become well known. Before they discovered universal themes or reached large audiences, their art was first personal: it grew out of their own lives.

One of Motley's early sculptures was "living alone," a female torso holding a backscratcher. "It was, for me, the essence of my mother's life after my father died, since she'd never lived alone in her life." The work is both humorous and sad, conveying complex emotions.

As Motley's art developed, her own daily thoughts and feelings inspired her. "On Edge" shows a series of faces teetering on a ledge, giving physical form to the idea of anxiety. Later work became more abstract, yet still full of emotion. "Up, Really Down, and Up Again" gives sculptural form to the thoughts and feelings that shape our days.

Cook's work with neuroscientists grew out of her own curiosity: "I was always interested in how the brain works." When she started to explore responses to faces shown in photography vs. those created as woven images, she based her work on family photographs. "My mother was a photographer, and so we had a huge collection of family photographs." She tried using anonymous images, but found that her own family photographs were more evocative for viewers. These intimate faces from her early life brought up recollections of their own family histories.

Burke's whole life and business came from her personal values and interests. She grew up in a family of artists, whose pottery studio was on the property. She assumed that running a creative business from home "was a natural way of life." She created an art business because she wanted to live on her own terms, not to work on "someone else's dreams and goals." Her own values about art inspired her. She never made a distinction between fine art and craft: "I love my glue gun just as much as I love oil paint." She has invented adult coloring books, a whole industry of do-it-yourself projects and also creates books and DVDs that appeal to a wide audience of artists and makers. She has integrated her art practice and her life into a creative whole based on her DNA: "I always saw the world through a lens of creativity."

There's No Right Way

You don’t have to call it a career, but if making art gives shape and meaning to your days, or is just the best part of your day, then pay attention. Notice your own moments of insight, as they may well contain the seeds of your future success.

If you’re starting an art business, you might need a business plan, but keep it short and strategic. Keep learning new skills and experimenting with new ideas. Look for method in your madness by finding the structures that keep you organized and motivated.

Find or create your own community. Don’t try to go it alone. Friends, family, and other artists who care about you are a necessity, not a waste of time. Connect with art organizations in your field so that you understand how your work fits into a larger context.

Remember that there isn’t any right way to be an artist. You don’t always need credentials or even to know where you’re headed. Art careers are first personal. They grow out of the core of yourself and gradually develop into something larger. Just follow the thousands of tiny steps along your own path.

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