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Sharon Louden's "Living and Sustaining a Creative Life," in Conversation with Brian Young

EDITED BY SHARON LOUDEN

Living and Sustaining a Creative Life

ESSAYS BY 40 WORKING ARTISTS



How do contemporary visual artists achieve success? And what does this even mean? [Sharon Loudon](#) is a New York-based visual artist who understands that success in the visual art world is a complex and multi-faceted process. Her new book, [Living and Sustaining a Creative Life](#), published by [Intellect Books](#) and distributed by the [University of Chicago Press](#), features forty contemporary artists who have been able to nurture a healthy creative practice over the span of a career. The book includes different types of essays and interviews to present unique pictures of visual artists who aren't necessarily well known, but are finding success on their own terms. In an age where auction prices garner top art headlines and competition is intense, it is a relief to find a publication that subtly explores the day to day realities of working artists and what it means to stay committed to one's creative path.

This edited interview between [Sharon Loudon](#), editor of the aforementioned book, and Brian Young, curator, Arts Program, UMUC was conducted on Thursday, September 5, 2013.

Brian: Let me begin by asking “why”? Why did you take on this project? I have known you for a while; I know how busy you are and it is an incredible undertaking.

Sharon: Thank you for having me to talk about this very special labor of love and project. It was a result of a combination of two things. 1) After teaching for many years people would ask me how I made a living personally, and 2) After I got out of college with an enormous amount of debt, I struggled to figure out how to make a living as an artist. (Now) I wanted to be able to have the opportunity to lean on a bunch of my friends who I have a great admiration for to see if they would share with other artists in the sense of community, to be able to empower and inform other artists as to how they make a living, sustain a creative practice, juggle and balance their lives as artists.

To me the purpose was also to have a greater accessibility to artists who may not necessarily be perceived as accessible.

Brian: So, I was struck when I saw the list of forty artists, and I have been a curator for a long time, and most of the artists I didn't know. It seems to me you did not seek out famous artists. In fact you sought out artists who were very successful. When we talk about sustaining a career, we need a specific example of what you mean for some of these artists.

Sharon: Okay, well I will start with some statistics. There are nineteen artists who are from outside of New York, but reside in the United States; 19 people from New York and two people from Europe. (One from Germany and one from London.) These are people I knew well enough that I could trust that they would tell me the truth; that I could work with them and edit their essays, by having an exchange of going back and forth with these artists. I think it's a very fragile and sometimes a nerve wracking position for an artist to talk about these issues and share them with the public. I had to feel as though that

I had this trust with them. That was why they were chosen. There are twenty-one female and nineteen male artist contributors.

I was perfectly conscious of all (of those issues). You are exactly right that there are some artists who are not as well known to some in this book. And then there are some artists who are really well known. I wanted to have a range of different levels to show a variety of experiences for readers who might just be out of college, who want to be an artist later in life, or who are just curious about the artist and their identity in society today.

The book had to be diverse with different examples. There are various road maps that artists reveal through their essays. Whether it is the artist who leans on their family for assistance, or teaching jobs to be a source of stability, we learn about artists and the many jobs they had before they got to a certain point in their careers and what they are currently doing today to sustain a creative life.

For example, [Jay Davis](#) talks about how he has worked for other artists. This fed into a community for him to thrive. [Brian Novatny](#), who has many galleries represent his work and yet he still wants to have a steady paycheck. He has a full-time day job. [Will Cotton](#) came from a place where he had to teach himself contracting skills in order to make a living. He always remembers that even now while having a successful career as an artist. And he is a big giver to his community.

I think these essays give different examples of sustaining a creative life and relate to different people, depending on who is reading the book. You can take from these road maps and run with them. I feel as though many artists can identify with these stories. Some essays are more transparent and some are more opaque. Some begin a conversation on the artist's life and some answer the question more completely.

Brian: Is there a thread stylistically in the mediums the people work with?: Painting, photography, I know Beth Lipman is a glass artist. . . Can you talk a little bit about the diversity of the artists?

Sharon: There is terrific diversity. I was more thinking about where these were in their careers, their ages, their stories and who they are. But number one was that they (the artist contributors) were generous people. They, we, all volunteered to do this project. No one got a stipend to start this. You have photographers, people who do performance, installation, you have painters, sculptors — a little bit of everything.

Brian: Do you think that are some artists have it easier than others? Do painters have an easier time than artists who are conceptual?

Sharon: I am glad that you asked that question. You will find that everyone is generally on the same page. An artist is an artist. Everybody is doing everything. No one is just depending on the gallery to get through each day to make a living. Even if someone is

making a tremendous amount of money, they are still working their tails off to make that happen. So they are working very, very hard to do it.

I would just say, that is what this book questions what is a measure of success. What is that? Is that a career? Is it that the amount of money an artist makes? Is it the fact that they can sustain for many years? That is going to be an answer that the readers will have to make for themselves. Once you place these artists together, they become the salt of the earth, grounded, really normal. In some ways boring in that sense; where they are part, woven in society, in this wonderful way, they are able to sustain a living and able to do it by using their creativity outside of their studio as they do inside their studio.

Brian: You currently live in New York and have a studio there, but you are a Maryland native, as is your husband. Are there artists in your book from Maryland, or are there people from outside New York whose example would be applicable to somebody that came out of MICA or trying to make it in Baltimore?

Sharon: Absolutely! [Annette Lawrence](#) is from Denton, Texas. She is originally from New York. But she sustains her creativity, her life and her career in Denton, which is just outside of Dallas. There is [Amy Pleasant](#) from Birmingham, Alabama; [Justin Quinn](#) is from St. Cloud, Minnesota; [Beth Lipman](#) lives in Sheboygan Falls, Wisconsin. There are people who live in small communities that are sustaining their creativity — by this measure, you don't have to live in New York to sustain your creative practice.

Brian: Dan Steinhilber is from D.C.

Sharon: That's right! [Dan Steinhilber](#) and [Maggie Michael](#), who are artists who are married and have a son. That has been a source of curiosity for me. How does an artist couple make a living, sustain that creativity without the jealousy, without competition, having a child, juggling that with jobs? That is extraordinary. And they are both accessible and absolutely wonderful people.

Brian: So, will you talk about making a living? This is not a get rich scheme?

Sharon: No!

Brian Young: This is not how to game the system? But are there insights into the commercial aspects, like for example, if you don't have a dealer, how do you get one? Or if you do have a dealer, what are some of the pitfalls or some of the things you should know? Or is this book about larger issues about finding balance or some combination thereof?

Sharon: It is a combination. Before I go on about that, I do want to say that I did not want the artists to give advice in these essays. That was not part of this book. There are plenty of fantastic self-help books out there to direct artists. I wanted the artist contributors to speak about their lives and that readers could be observers, can gain

insight into these artists' lives. I want people to garner information from their experiences.

Ok back to your question: Inevitably, anyone who works with a gallery has a mention of how they work with their gallery in one degree or another. Some are more opaque than others. It should be noted that when I was asking people to do this book some people refused because I wanted them to talk about their (gallery relationship). They were fearful about telling the truth. But these artists in the book give a sense of reality to those relationships. There are also people in this book doing different things other than having a relationship with a gallery. This book also shows how people can make a living without that relationship. And if an artist has that relationship what else do they do to supplement their income? I find that artists are doing much more these days and not just depending on a gallery for their sole source of income.

Brian: Excellent. If this book is insightful for young artists and artists who are trying to better their situation, what are some of the insights that can be had for someone who is not an artist but is thinking about reading the book?

Sharon: In the peer review of this book the reviewer said one of the great things about this book is that it talks about a current identity of what a contemporary artist is today. So anybody who has a curiosity about how an artist lives today should read this book. For parents, folks who aren't artists, for someone who is not familiar with a creative life and has difficulty understanding what it is like to be an artist, this is for them, too. My mother read the book and said hands down that she gained a lot of knowledge about what I do as an artist. After she shared her opinions with me, I wish I had created this book so many years ago (laughter)! Life may have been a little easier on me. I'm going to be sure my entire family reads this book (laughter)!

Brian: If I recall correctly there are Forty essays in this book. Give me a sense or a taste of what we might read or some specific insight into one of these essays.

Sharon: Take an artist like [Michelle Grabner](#): She has three children, she is married to an artist, living in Chicago. She started two non-profit organizations ([The Poor Farm](#) and [The Suburban](#)) that she runs with her husband. Then she is the chair person for the Department of Painting and Drawing, at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. And she is currently one of three curators for the upcoming Whitney Biennial. So she tells us a little bit of how she juggles it all. She does this in an organized fashion where she divides her essay into different sections. All in all, Michelle does this while sustaining her creative practice and continues her work and relationships with [galleries](#) which is fantastic.

Here is a quote from [The Art Guys](#)' essay, "Business, capitalism, branding, marketing, and advertising are ingrained in American culture. As artists we consider it our duty to investigate, experiment with, and question all of this. For many years we have done so and now we think we are finally getting somewhere." And then they ask, "May we give you our card?" I think that is so funny. So there is humor; there is information; there is

seriousness; there is just a great amount of information in this book that still, after reading all of these essays numerous times, I remain inspired by these special people.

I want to add to what you asked about before about my choices of artists to include in this book. I did not choose a lot very famous artists. I think that very famous artists — there are very few of them. Many artists leave school thinking they want to be one of those people. But I think sometimes it takes time to get to those places. In another book, perhaps I will have a few more of those people. But I was really looking for artists who were grinding it out day in and day out to sustain their creative practice over many years. It was important for me to have a sense of reality that was grounded.

Brian: Thank you Sharon! And the book comes out in October.

Sharon: Actually, they moved the publication date to September 30th. And you can currently [pre-order this book](#) at a discounted rate before it hits the shelves nationwide. The profits of this book are being divided between all of the contributors!

Brian: You can visit <http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/distributed/L/bo16814556.html>. The name of the book is *Living and Sustaining a Creative Life*.



Sharon M. Louden graduated with a BFA from the [School of the Art Institute of Chicago](#) and an MFA from [Yale University, School of Art](#). Her work has been exhibited in numerous venues including the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, the Drawing Center, Carnegie Mellon University, Birmingham Museum of Art, Weatherspoon Art Museum and the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art. Louden's work is held in major public and private collections including the Neuberger Museum of Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, National Gallery of Art and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, among others. Louden lives and works in Brooklyn, NY. You can find more about Sharon Loudon and her work on her website: www.sharonlouden.com.