

[FRESH ARTS PODCAST] EPISODE 4: SHOULD I OR SHOULDN'T I SEEK TO BE REPRESENTED BY A PROFESSIONAL?

This is transcript of Episode 4: "Should I or Shouldn't I seek to be represented by a professional?" from the Fresh Arts Podcast Should I or Shouldn't I, hosted by Reyes Ramirez, which was published on November 4, 2020 featuring Janavi Mahimtura Folmsbee and Francis Almendárez.

Reyes:

Hello and welcome to Should I or Shouldn't I, a Fresh Arts podcast hosted by me, Reyes Ramirez. Where we explore the decisions artists making every day to succeed in their creative practice. Today we're asking, should I or shouldn't I seek to be represented by a professional? We have artists Janavi Folmsbee and Francis Almendarez to discuss. Hey, you two.

Janavi:

Hi.

Francis:

Hello, thanks for having us.

Reyes:

Of course, of course, I'm excited for this one. So please, Janavi, could you please tell our listeners who may not know you just a little bit about yourself, what you do what feeds you, all that good stuff.

Janavi:

Sure. So my name is Janavi Mahimtura Folmsbee. I was born and raised in Mumbai in India and I actually had to fight my family to become an artist. I call myself a marine conservation artist, because that is literally what I do. I started scuba diving after I graduated at the school of the Institute of Chicago, just looking at the element of water and how it physically connects us all throughout the world. And I wanted to see what was down there, and my work is all about recreating the experience that I have underwater, where I'm invited into a world that is very different, it's its own but I'm invited to be a part of it. And it's about being with your breath in that moment and recreating that beauty that I experience, and I wanted to give that to my viewers. I started working recently with a lot of different marine conservational efforts and marine labs where I create scientific paper art, like artwork for their scientific papers and actually help in terms towards conservation, where the art itself is functioning with science. And this was a lot like a challenge. It's something I really enjoy doing, and I make a lot of public art in Houston as well. I feel like the outreach public art has towards my message is very strong. And again, it brings an underwater world to an audience that doesn't get to see it. So that's a little about me. I am based here in Houston, Texas, I have a studio in the arts district and I work with the gallery called Heidi Vaughan fine art, who is awesome, and I'm excited to tell you more about that.

Reyes:

Francis please, same question. A little bit about yourself and what feeds you.

Francis:

Yeah, so I'm from Los Angeles originally and I came to Houston in 2013 and I've been here on and off, in and out, but I keep coming back to Houston, because it's, it's such a great place to, to be an artist, I think. I guess my work deals with my own personal experiences and also my familiar history of migration and also bringing in the, the ties to labor in particular like my, from my mom's side, at least. My mother and my grandmother both worked as agricultural workers in the seventies and eighties in California. So, you know, just tying my own history to the work that I make. And a lot of it also evolves or, involves other types of labor and considering just labor in general as other forms of not just history, but also just cultural practices and how they all intersect with labor. And, and at the same time trying to reveal its value and elevate its, you know, not just monetary value, but also cultural and historical value. What else? I also had trouble with my parents and they didn't want me to be an artist or they didn't feel like, they didn't understand what was, what was the whole point or idea behind it. But you know, after years and years of just doing it, I think they finally came to terms and they're starting, especially within the last, I'd say within the last three years, they finally are beginning to see the fruit of not only my labor, but their labor and all that they invested in

raising myself and my brother, who also happens to be an artist. So yeah, it's definitely been a journey and I work in the mediums of photography video. And most recently in the past, I would say in the past year or two, I began collaborating with other artists that work in other mediums such as music, sound and performance. But also I have been opening up to work with people outside of the arts again, to re, sorta, to shift the focus and think about how other, other types of labor also incorporate creativity, such as cooking or gardening or sewing, et cetera, et cetera. So I've been trying to expand my practice and working with, with other people as well.

Reyes:

Amazing. So kind of the topic at hand, which is the question of, should I or shouldn't seek to be represented by a professional? Kind of just, kind of a disclaimer with this one is that, this was a tricky one to word, really because, Fresh Arts we deal with like all kinds of creatives from all different fields and disciplines and, and so like represented by professionals is such a huge concept particularly within the arts. And so with that in mind, I mean, we kept that ambiguous for a reason because again, different artists have different forms of representation. I'm a writer, so my representation may look like, like a literary agent, or an editor, blah, blah, blah. For artists, visual artists kind of have their own language for that. And so my first question then is, and I guess I'll have Francis answer this first, when people say representation in an arts creative context, what do you think they mean? And what do

you think people mean when they say that, and what do you mean when you say it?

Francis:

I think, I mean, my first thought is they have gallery representation or, you know, a gallery or galleries that represents them. But I guess it could, it can mean other things as well, I'm not sure. I said I'm not in a position like that. But I, I mean I can see how it doesn't necessarily need to be that, it could be someone, for example, if you're using a social media platform, you can have someone totally in charge of your visual appearance on social media and that can be considered representation. Right? I mean, that is very useful, but I first thought is like a gallery, this, as an artist, like you, at least in, we've been trained to think that's the ultimate goal, to get that.

Reyes:

Yeah. 'Cause it's, I mean, there are artists that, again, maybe aren't represented, represented by a gallery but maybe they'll have like a PR team, right? Where they'll have someone who writes the press releases for, or other ways that, that exists. And again that's, it's kind of a tricky thing to deal with. What is this idea of representation? And so Janavi, same question. When people say representation in an art slash creative context, what do you think they mean? But what's been your experience with that?

Janavi:

So it goes back to exactly what Francis is talking about. We've been trained as artists to think about a gallery as representation. I personally feel like representation is such a subjective term. I do feel like, I almost call it like, every artist needs a cheerleader, that's literally the word I like to use. And I feel like as an artist, you can't really walk into a room and say, hey, my art is really good. It just makes you sound like, not very professional necessarily, and no one's gonna wanna take you seriously. Some people might love that, some people might not. I feel like when you have a team or someone who is supportive of you, that's the end goal, honestly, and that's what you want. You want like this, almost like a campaign of your own. And it's, it's interesting because when it comes to representation, I've worked with several galleries and I've realized the ones that are more successful are my cheerleaders. And that's kind of why I like to use that term. You want someone who can be present and talk about your work in a way you would agree with them to speak about your work necessarily. You want somebody who's ready to go out on that limb and look, and scout and have the same interests. And even when you look at art history and throughout time, it's ironic, Sarah had his mother, there, there are artists in time who had women standing behind them or men standing behind them, they had a cheerleader and that's kind of how I look at it. So that's my term towards what a representation person could be like, that's how I look at it.

Reyes:

Yeah. And particularly in a in a contemporary context where, and Francis you brought this up, about social media. And so the, the ways to access audiences, it's just, it's bigger than ever before, I mean. And that's one way that again, representation could, could manifest, where it's just like, oh someone manages your social media, but I guess a broader question would be what an artist does versus what an advocate does. What a cheerleader does, what someone who represents you does. The, if you're an artist in a contemporary context, should you know how to write press releases? And if you're not really good at that, do you need someone to do that for you? And so I guess my question to you Francis is, what do you think, in your in your particular situation, what, what is the artist and what is the advocacy or what is the cheerleading part for you? Where do you draw that distinction or is there a distinction or, or what?

Francis:

Yeah, there definitely is a distinction I think, at least coming from my experience, and I, I fortunately am a pretty okay writer. And, and I actually, I prefer writing my own statements, writing and sharing that. And for an, a lot of times, if I'm working with a curator or with somebody on a show, they tend to just take from what I've written or what I've said and build from there, or, and then they don't change it too much because they for one, they wanna stay like true to my words I guess. But the reason why I liked that, and I kind of prefer that is because I, only I know really where my work is coming from, and

I also do it in a way to include specific things that I don't want whitewashed, or erased, or overlooked. Because a lot of times what happens is that institutions tend to frame your work in a certain way and kind of play it safe, and I'm not necessarily interested in playing it safe. My work is specifically about certain things and I don't want that overlooked. So for me, in order to keep that and stay true to the work, I need, I find it really important to write it, write about it myself and make that very clear what my intention is with the work. So I, I enjoy having part of that, that as part of my process, but then when it comes to, let's say, like social media, I find it so hard. It takes, I think it takes a certain type of personality or it's like, I just find it so difficult, maybe it's my age demographic, I don't know what, no, I don't know. But I just find it so difficult, I can't, I don't have the energy for it, I'm just terrible at it. I'll post images here and there, but I'm not super promotional or anything like that, I'm just terrible at it. But I do see the importance of it, and I do see how, I have seen how it's helped other artists, and that's great, it's amazing. And maybe it's that there word, just fits that context better. The, the concept of, for example, Instagram. Whereas I don't see my work, I think that's also part of it. I don't see the kind of work that I make fitting that context. Sure an image here and there helps, to sort of say, I'm, I exist and this is happening. But I don't, I don't feel the need or the urge to over supply with images and what, what I'm doing every second of the day or every week or whatever it is. Yeah. I think for what I'm doing, it's not, and maybe I'm

wrong, I don't know. But so far this has worked for me and I'm, I don't feel, I don't feel like I'm missing out and I don't feel the pressure to, to do those things. So I think it just depends on, on you as an artist what, what your personality is like, I guess and also the type of work and ultimately, what is the goal? How do you see yourself in relationship to the "art world"? And what do you see your your work doing ultimately? What kind of work, where do you see it existing, or how do you see it operating outside of your studio? So that's just my 2 cents.

Reyes:

For sure. Janavi, the same question in regards to, again, access to audiences is just bigger than ever. And so kind of like, yeah, like you said, you do need a cheerleader, but I mean, there, it's a, there's a bigger capacity to be your own cheerleader in a lot of ways, but for you, you've chosen that route of having a representative. And so my, I guess my question for you is kind of in the same line of what I asked Francis, but what for you is the role of the artist in what the advocate or the cheerleader does? And where you draw that line or where, or if there's a blending or melding.

Janavi:

Personally, I feel like an artist needs to be doing both of them. In today's day and age, you have to be able to talk about your work, just like Francis says. Losing your voice and your identity is just not something that I am a fan off, and I'm very

particular. Everything I write goes out, I'm a writer as well, and I take inputs, I don't necessarily listen to them all the time, I'm open to constructive criticism, I don't always agree with it. Just because my message is strong too, and I don't wanna lose my voice. And there've been instances where I've been spot on and instances that I've not. And then you learn from the mistakes you make. In fact, I don't like to call them mistakes, I call them learning opportunities. I do feel like social media is like a whole animal on its own. And it's like any business goes and talks to a marketing development company and gets some strategy and business development ideas. So because social media has so much changed what the art world is in a way, an outreach I think, it is important to do a little market research as an artist, see who your target audience could be. But again, I, I come from this strong Indian culture and corporate thinking background of an engineer that my father is. He literally said I won't let you go to art school until you can sell art. So you don't necessarily have to take that route obviously, but I do feel it's important to be doing both. You have to somehow, and when I call them a cheerleader, it's honestly, it depends on the context. Like for me, if I go into a room with a potential commission and a client, it helps me to have somebody there to monitor it and when I don't want to say no, they can say no. And again, it's super subjective as an artist, I also feel it's very personalized. It's a relationship, there's this con, there's this misconception that just having gallery representation is gonna make you successful. I've seen a lot of artists work with galleries and then it doesn't, it's not a right fit, it doesn't

amount to much sometimes. So I feel like personally, if you, you have to figure out what you want as an artist, just like Francis was talking about, what is your objective? And whether your art fits in this context of things or not. I've seen it work with me in certain instances, there have been galleries that I've worked with in the past that don't, don't see eye to eye or they wanna control the art making. I'm not interested with working with someone like that because I feel like creative integrity is super important to any artist's practice, and I would never want me to lose that, and I can't imagine anyone else wanting to lose it. So yeah, I do feel like having the help where you need it, because at some point it depends on what kind of artist you wanna be. If you look at someone like Murakami Takashi, and how he literally has so many people working for him, I feel like I get exhausted with energy of having to make art, market it, sell it, do the social media, it's a lot, it's, it turns out to be a lot, especially when you're doing big public projects, those are another ballgame. I mean, I have to hire project manager and assistants to work on a mural or an installation. What's, there's no harm in talking to somebody to help you manage your business in a different context, that's how I look at it. It's just about management and how you want to move forward with it. Does this makes sense?

Reyes:

Yeah, of course. And kind of in that line, I guess this is kind of, I hope that segues into this question of, what do you, and I I guess I'll have, again, I'll have Francis answer this first,

but what do you feel are the benefits of the route you've taken in regards to, well I suppose kind of first answering, are you seeking representation? Is that something you've wanted to do? Or is that, or just doing your own thing and going along with what, what happens happens, and then answering, what do you feel the benefits of that?

Francis:

Yeah, that's a good question. I, I'm not like seeking it, but I, I will welcome it if someone is interested in helping. Cause like Janavi said, it, it's a lot of work. As an artist you're wearing so many hats, so many different hats and depending on the type of projects that you're working on, or the type of work you're doing, it will require different hats, different types of research, et cetera, et cetera. You'll you're yeah, it's a lot of work, sorry, what was the question again?

Reyes:

No problem, yeah. The, what do you what do you feel are the benefits of-

Francis:

The benefits, yeah. I think the benefits would be you have that support, If, if, for example, working on a public project like a mural, for example, that will take a village. And so to have that support would be a huge help. So definitely any, any help is absolutely welcome and, and will be truly beneficial because then you can focus on, on the art making on by itself or give

more time, more of your time to that rather than that on top of like grant proposals, research, getting permits, finding assistants, et cetera, et cetera. Like you could go down the list of how many people, and how many different things need to be done in order to complete one large project or installation. So yeah.

Reyes:

I suppose my question was more along the lines of the benefits of the route of not-

Francis:

Oh, the benefits of, okay, I'm sorry.

Reyes:

All good!

Francis:

So the benefits of, of not having it's I can, at least from what I've experienced so far, I've been able to do, whatever work I wanted to do without having to worry about whether someone's going to like it or not, whether it's aesthetically pleasing or not. I don't have to worry about that so much. I dunno if other people worry about their work being aesthetically pleasing or not, but I certainly don't. And oftentimes like my family is like, really, you're going to show them? Yeah, why not? But it's ugly. I'm like, well, I mean, I'm not making this to look pretty, that's not why I'm doing it, but, and then someone else

sees them and it just totally makes sense to them, that it looks a certain way or that it's not polished or it's not so clean cut, you know? And it just makes sense for, I guess the subject matter that I'm dealing with depending on the peaf or the project. So yeah, I don't have to worry about that. I don't have to worry about having to, to sell the final product. And that again is, has to do with not having to rely on being an artist in order to make a living. So I'm in a, I'm in a privileged position where I have other jobs in teaching so I can support myself just on those jobs, and so I have that luxury, I can make whatever I want without worrying or without the pressure of having to sell it. So yeah, it does come with that freedom, not, not having to worry about those things. I don't know, I hope that answers your question.

Reyes:

Yeah. It's a, it's something I get. Yeah. Like, cause right. I don't know either. In regards to, that's what you constantly worry about. Like the sellability, I mean. Janavi maybe you could provide more context on that, but I do kind of get the sense that, as a writer myself, there is a difference between like me writing to win contests and writing to get published, versus writing the stuff that I wanna write.

Francis:

There's one more thing I do wanna add, another awesome, amazing part of this, of just being able to do whatever I want is that I've been, I've allowed myself to explore other areas of art

making that I probably wouldn't otherwise. I allowed myself to like write more and to incorporate that and to experiment with performance, to experiment with experimental music, to collaborate. So yeah, I think there's a lot of freedom in that, that I've allowed myself and it's worked in that I've, I've begun and I've learned other mediums as well. And I've begun creating partnerships with other artists, and I really, I discovered that I really enjoy that. So I guess this, it's this, I guess this path that I've chosen has really allowed for, for experimentation and for being able to work with others, which otherwise I don't know that I, that I would have that opportunity or that I would have allowed myself that opportunity.

Reyes:

For sure. Janavi, same question. What do you feel are the benefits of the, of the route you've taken regarding being represented?

Janavi:

So this is interesting because one of the things, a few years ago I was working with a couple of other galleries, and at one point, I decided to work with no one for a little while, 'cause I needed a break. And during that break I realized, there's been this, not, I don't want to use the word misconception, but almost like a veil. And it's something that we don't notice in the art world is without us as an artist, there are no galleries in a way, if you think about it. And I decided to change the

context of the conversation and be like, okay, the ball's in my court, I'm not really looking for a gallery, I don't know what I'm looking for, but I know that this is what I wanna do, and if no one likes it, that's okay. I'm just gonna keep doing what I wanna do. And because I had a gallery that was like, why are you doing murals? Don't do murals, it's street art. I'm like, no, I'm doing fine art murals. I have like an oil painting technique, materials and techniques background, from the art Institute of Chicago, I was like, this is what I do. I went to a super interdisciplinary art school and I didn't wanna limit myself to one medium and just one context of work, because that's not who I was and that's not who I am. So I started exploration and I think it literally, I feel like artists make this mistakes where, this mistake where they're like, I need a gallery, I want to show New York. And I've seen artists do this thing where they're in the right place in their career at the wrong time in their work. And I don't know how to explain that any better without saying it in that sentence, but it's because you could have that show, and then what happens after that? You know, it, it, it just, it doesn't just take having the gallery representation and showing with the gallery. It takes a lot more after that. Like how do you keep going on in your career as an artist? How do you keep evolving? How do you get your work to, where is your goal? The Guggenheim, the Met. How do you get there? I mean, those are ambitious goals, those are dream goals, those are goals that I probably have, I know that most artists do, but how do you get there? That's, that was my question. And it was really, I feel like I was not looking and I randomly met

Heidi and I started talking to her. And I really liked her because she comes with an art historical background, she has an art appraiser background. She was the one person I could be in the same room with, a curator from a museum, and have an amazing conversation about art. And that is rare to find, but then I realized that I have a click and a relationship in a very different way. And it's almost like dating. I had a friend once tell me, it's like dating and it's so true. It is like dating. It's such a personal relationship. And if you don't click, that's okay. If people, in business as well, if you don't click, sometimes deals die all the time. And I think what, the art world can be seen in this way, and it's a different perception, but this is the way I approached it, and I think I made the right decision. But the other thing that I liked about Heidi was she was not limiting me as an artist. She said, you can work with whoever you want, you can show with whoever you want. So I'm not just tied to her. And because she's thinking in a very contextual way of the future, which I think most galleries don't necessarily, they're all like, you have to share your work here and you, if you sell anything in this city, it's my commission. And it does come down to money at the end of the day, which is interesting. But I feel like it's limiting. And again, whenever I've made art to sell in the past, 'cause I used to participate in a lot of the open Saturdays, and it, I find it to be a distraction, because the work isn't my work. And now I'm in this place where I'm making exactly what I want, I'm working really hard towards it, and it's hard to sell that on top of making it. So having someone to do that, and actually get those sales

without having to think twice has been amazing, quite frankly, between you and me. And I also work with people in India, recently, literally yesterday, I had someone reach out and he's like, I wanna promote your art, and I'm like, okay, I need to have a conversation with you. I need to see if I like you, go through, the whole round of like dating is how I look at it. But I'm not in a hurry, it's like how Francis said, he would love the representation to come when it does, and at the right time. I think it's important to meet the right person who believes in your work as an artist. And, and there are different galleries out there. I can walk into a gallery, look at the art and I'm like, okay, I know that this person would never wanna work with me. It's all black and white, it's monochromatic, it doesn't make sense to the work that I do, and that's totally fine. I think rejection is a huge thing in our world too, that artists really can get put down by. But I think the good way to think about it, and this is probably for our listeners is, think of it as the ball is in your court. Who's good enough for you is my question. That's how I look at it. And it really helped me. It, it did like a total change in my perspective of looking at art and how I want to market my work. Does that make sense?

Reyes:

Makes a lot of sense to me. I guess the next question then is, does representation mean success or do you kind of just see it as another tool? So for me as a writer and poet in particular, I mean, and I say that because in fiction and in poetry, even there's like a a line between what means success or, like for

poets you don't have really literary agents. Whereas fiction writers, yeah, you're like, you have a literary agent or what have you. But also publishing with a certain press, having a certain editor does give you that leg up. It does give you kind of like the "prestige" of like, if you publish with a big press versus an independent press, and certain independent presses are more renowned than other independent presses and blah, blah, blah. And I suppose, yeah. My question again, Francis, to you I mean, does representation mean a certain kind of success or would it just be another tool?

Francis:

I think it's both depending how you look at it, and it's definitely a tool, or a collaborative, a collaborative partnership, or however you want to call it. But at the same time, yeah. It could represent success and you, I guess if it comes later in life, you can, you can see that as having had the time earlier to really experiment and find yourself as an artist, and, and then once you do get the representation, they could be a sign of yay, I've succeeded! I've made it this far, someone is interested in what I'm doing. But again, that's like, it goes down to like, your, how Janavi mentioned, it's a relationship between you and whoever this person is that's representing you and your work. It has to be this sort of mutual relationship because they have to, I think it has to be like genuinely understanding of what your work is about, where you're coming from, and if you don't have that relationship, it's already like one-sided, or and that can be complicated. So I

think it's both a tool and it's a sign of success. And I, I really love what Janavi said about how don't, don't see the rejections as something necessarily negative. I think of it as, that's not my lane, I'm gonna continue going this other direction. And it kind of just little by little narrowing your scope, so you can focus on what is working in your work, what is working in what you're doing, focus on that rather than trying to fit somewhere where it's not meant to happen.

Reyes:

Yes. Janavi, same question. In regards to what rates representation as either itself a form of success, or really just another tool. How do you feel about that?

Janavi:

I think it's, again, relative to what your term of success is. Success to me is contentment. So when you've actually reached that moment of like, Oh, I'm here, I'm here, this is my goal. I don't know what my goal is yet completely, I feel like it keeps changing. I used to have some unrealistic goals. I was like, Oh, I'll be 30. and I'll do this show here and that there and that didn't happen, but I don't feel like I didn't succeed at all. If anything, I took a really different path and I enjoyed it. I think it, it goes back to Francis, and how he said, yes, it's both, it's a tool for sure, it's an available tool and it's just like finding the right fit for you as an artist and in your comfort level. And, but then yeah, I can see, I'd like to definitely show with some international more international

galleries, and there, there's a short list of a few that I do want to show with and I'm talking to, but, and here's the other thing, I have been approached by some and I've said no to several. And I've realized that in saying no, it's actually narrow, going back to narrowing down that lane of what I want, because one of the things I've seen artists do is they put so much time and effort into something they'll FedEx a painting that costs quite a bit, and transport to like England or something, and it goes nowhere. And it's, you have to be a little smart about how you're doing it. Exposure is good to a certain degree but it's also really hard to sell art in a city where no one knows you. So there are few steps I think you should take as an artist before doing things like that. Like either participating in some shows in that set city or... So I feel like success is so dependent on a lot of other key factors to get there. Other than just having the gallery as a tool, if that makes sense, you could apply to some grants, do some public work in that city and then show your work. I feel like you'd have, you'd have more of like an appreciation from that collector base or art audience over there, otherwise, yeah. 'Cause I've done shows like in Beijing and Amsterdam and I've sold at both of them, but I've realized that the shows that I've had in the cities that I've lived in to be more successful, just as an observation. And I think it's just because no one knows the artist sometimes, even though it's an international gallery, then you're completely dependent on the gallery, marketing yourself too. So that's another observation. I feel like they're both derivative of each other. Yeah.

Reyes:

Yeah. And I think this goes into the next question pretty well of, again, direct this a Francis first. What are some things artists should consider before seeking representation or not seeking it at all?

Francis:

I don't know, I don't know the answer to that.

Reyes:

That's fair.

Francis:

'Cause to be honest, I've never seeked out representation. I don't feel like I, I'm at, I don't feel like I'm even at that stage. And even if I were, how do you do that? That is the question, how? I know I wouldn't just go up to somebody. But that does bring up the, an important point that Janavi brought up. It's like, when you go to a gallery if every gallery has its own personality, its own taste, they know the type of work that they're interested in. So I guess keep that in mind, visit galleries in whatever city you're in and find one that you feel would fit you, that your work would fit in that context. Look at the roster of the artists, what are they making? What types of work, and does your work fit there? Obviously in a gallery that's focused on geometric abstraction, my work would not fit there, because it's not geometric abstraction. So yeah, I would

say visit the galleries, go to their openings, figure out which ones you would fit in, which ones don't, the ones that don't, cross them off your list, start narrowing down the list And the ones that you may be interested, once you have a short list, maybe, maybe visit, go to their opening, start making yourself known, ask questions, they have talks sometimes or screenings, all kinds of programming, just show up and be present, and talk to the galleries. And then eventually they're gonna start to see you and to know you and they might invite you to be in a group show, or they might invite you to do something and, and then just take it from there. I don't know. 'Cause I'm, I'm not in that position yet, but I think that would be a good way to approach it or begin approaching it.

Reyes:

Yeah. Janavi, same question. What are some things artists should consider before seeking representation?

Janavi:

Francis, you took the words out of my mouth. Like literally networking is key in my opinion. I feel like, and also making yourself knowledgeable. Like I, you know, artists are like, Oh I want to work with this gallery, and I love the work that they're showing, but then they don't know anything about the really great public artists who are in that city and what they've done and who, art history. It goes back to that and educating yourself, so you can have a conversation when you're in that room and you don't, you don't just stand flat on your face and

you can actually engage in a conversation. This is a mistake I've actually seen artists do. And it's, it again, doing a lot of research and seeing, following them all on social media, or whichever ones you like, starting to like the images, commenting on them, making yourself present, applying to shows within the city itself, whatever public art projects are available or even public shows and grants. It goes back to the same thing, every time I applied to a grant or an art exhibition, I look at who the curator is, I see what kind of work they've done, and then I'm like, okay, I'm not gonna get picked, I don't wanna apply. You cannot apply to everything. It takes a lot of energy to do them. And there was one year I might've applied to like 45 different things, got into like eight of them, and I'm like, oh great! That's a really successful thing to do actually, believe it or not. I think eight is a great thing in one year. But then beyond that, I'm like, you know what? Now it's like, I'd rather be super picky because here's the thing, I've also had really big public art projects come my way, and sometimes they don't work out because after you commit with the client, they're like, wait a minute, we want this, and I'm like, but I don't do that. And you know, you gotta to learn, and that's honestly why I like working with my gallery, it helps me narrow that down too. But yeah it goes back to looking and doing the research, figuring out which shows you like, looking at who the curators are in town, going in, visiting all the art museums, seeing the shows. Those are important things to do and not be intimidated, they're just people at the end of the day, it's how I look at it. And I used to feel like I, maybe like four or five years ago, I used

to feel very intimidated and feel like I couldn't talk to people in the art world. And I had to put on a pretense of who I am and I said, you know what, forget it, I'm gonna go own my Bollywood style self and just be myself, and be the marine conservation artist I am. And I like it. I'd rather be who I am and talk to somebody openly. And I, I've made more friends in the art world doing that than I ever thought. So just be who you are, is another thing I like to tell all artists. I feel it's something we're not told often. And we're, we're almost stuck that we can't do that. So yeah, just have a conversation, they're just people, and they want to hear about you, that's the other thing. That's my advice to any artist all over the world. Just, you have to believe in yourself.

Reyes:

Yeah. And kind of a side question I have that I guess I kind of gleaned from the both of you, is you both do a wide variety of, of arts and disciplines, and so I'm curious where do you think that that influences or rather leads into an artist's I suppose, being known. So like for myself as a writer, I tend to write fiction poetry and essays, and I think that's gotten me some kind of exposure that I wouldn't have otherwise if I, if I just focused in poetry. But that's also the thing, if I just focused all my energy in poetry, would I be more known in that context, or is there a trade-off? And so for you Francis, again, you've done performances, you, you've worked with your brother in terms of music, you've done a lot of stuff. Do you feel like that adds to your, I suppose to your, to your knowability, to your CV? Or

is that, or do you just really not care? You just do that because like to do that.

Francis:

I do it because I like doing it. I like the idea of interdisciplinary arts. And I think, I think, and everything is related to everything. But that's just kind of broad, but it is a good question, because I even asked myself this, Oh crap, I'm doing way too much, too many wide variety of things, maybe what, what would change if I were just to focus on one thing and actually just dedicate myself to that? And I, and I start to wonder, but then I'm like, but then I'd get bored of it. And that's, I think that's part of why I don't do that because I would get bored and I just wouldn't be true to myself and to my curiosity and my interests. So then I go back to being okay with doing a little bit of everything. But at the end of the day, they're all related. I feel like my interest in photography is, overlaps with my interest in video and film, which overlaps with my interest in stuff. And the reason why I come back to video and film in particular, is because in a video and film, everything comes together, image, sound, time, narrative, I think that's why I keep coming back to video. 'Cause it embodies all of those things.

Reyes:

Absolutely. And then Janavi, the same question, do you feel, and you've kind of brought it up. Being told, don't focus so much on public art or murals, but how do you feel that that affects, I

suppose your, being known or your influence of doing so many different great projects? I've seen your murals and I love them, and so I imagine that only raises your profile, but also you've mentioned that people are saying, Oh, don't do that.

Janavi:

Yeah. So again, I went to a super interdisciplinary art school. I used to TA in a wooden metal shop. I don't look like it, but I used to do that. And I used to do glass bowling as well. I, for me, when I, again, I think it goes back to what my work is about. When I'm diving, it's so sculptural down there, if you think about it, it's like an underwater natural sculpture garden, like in, in the coral reefs, and just something as simple as our flower gardens, which is a marine sanctuary that I'm making work about. It was crazy. I was next to this coral, that must have been like 12 feet big, bigger than me, and it's right off our Texas bay and nobody knows about it. So how do I bring attention to something like that? I feel like public art has the opportunity for me to do something like this. I'm also all about making my art an experience. It's meant to be immersive. It makes sense because I'm trying to transport someone into that moment when I'm diving. So even the exhibitions that I put together, there, they come together where all the works are, can be sold individually or curated individually but they end up coming together as an immersive art experience. And that's what my work has always kind of been and is. Even in India, when I had my first exhibition at 16, which was crazy. It was meant to, you were transported into the space.

And that's what I do with my art, I love working with different materials, I'm super geeky and nerdy and I'm into chemistry of paint, and I like to make a lot of my own oil paint. I use traditional 18th century grids eye technique to make super contemporary, colorful, odd shape paintings that I do. And it's work that now, because of the public art that I do, people in Houston do know the work and they can identify that it is something that I've done in which has been, that has been a little interesting as an observation. I think it has the power definitely as an artist to make you global. And that's kind of my goal for sure, because I'm not so looking at connecting, it goes back to my work in a way, I'm looking at talking about how we've been connected through water, through art history and time. So I feel like, I feel like it, it's a really good tool for me to talk about that, because I can have work that's here in Houston mimicking work that's in India or in Amsterdam. And they kind of have juxtapositions of conversations with each other, and it does make you iconic as an artist eventually, but that wasn't the end result necessarily. It was more conceptual for me to do it and start creating it that way. Yeah. I think it's very interesting. I did not think about that. And there are some projects where I said no to because they make no sense to my work. I've had a lot of people come to me, they're like, can you paint my logo with your art in the back? And I'm like, well, it needs to make sense to me. What is your brand about? Are you, are you a marine brand? Because you're, it goes back to collaborating with brands. I have done those, like I did do the Houston marathon. I'm not a runner, but I looked at the idea of

breath and looking at our city and colors, and again, I think the colors from the, my work also go back to me as an artist and also from my culture in India, I'm drawn to that. So yeah, I think it depends. It's so, I think this is a very smart thing to consider and see, 'cause it could be something I do. I do think it's a good tool but I also think I don't, I don't wanna say, I don't think you should use it unless it makes sense. Don't, you know what I mean? I've seen artists push it and then it doesn't end up being natural. And then the outcome is not, it's not as gratification, gratifying as you would imagine. I don't know. But it's something that's interesting, it's making me, this conversation is making me think a little more about it. Yeah. I mean, it is interesting. I just, I feel like these are goals that I had as a kid when I saw the Sistine chapel for the first time when I was going to Italy from India, and I had the opportunity to do that. And I saw it and I saw, wow, the impact public art has in its own way through something like that. If you think about it, it's, it makes you feel something as an audience to see such a massive work of art. And how else do you do something so big unless it's on a public scale? That's the other question. 'Cause I don't think, I think like this, I think massively and if that's my canvas or that's my, my installation space, I'm happy to use it.

Francis:

Yeah. Could I add something to that?

Janavi:

Yeah, yeah.

Reyes:

Go ahead.

Francis:

I just, I just wanted to say that, I like to think of being, working in different mediums as a toolkit. 'Cause the more you know, the more opportunities that you can take advantage of. Fortunately, it's opened a lot of doors for me to be able to work in photo, in painting, sculpture, video, it's opened, it's given me a lot of opportunities with teaching in particular, especially like K through 12 where they want a variety of projects like in schools or museums, they want a variety of projects. So it's definitely useful to know more than one thing. And in my experience, it's opened a lot of doors in terms of finding work.

Janavi:

Yeah, that's, that's very true. It makes so much sense. I mean, I feel like there are new tools coming out everyday too, that's the other thing. like AR and VR and then CGI and I'm trying, I'm definitely working on the context of bringing ER just as an installation in India right now. And I think it's, it's crazy, 'cause it has the capacity to reach out to a whole new audience, which does so much for me and for the marine conservation angle. But yeah, I do agree with you Francis. I feel like these are tools that we as artists, the only limitation you have is your

mind, I always go back to saying that. And I really do feel like if you limit yourself, then you're limited. So yeah. It's good to think big.

Reyes:

I think that's a great way to end the conversation. We have a few, really few minutes left. I'm just gonna ask some really quick fire questions. If you can't, if you're stumped, that's totally cool. But these are just meant to be fun. So let's see, Janavi, favorite place for takeout in Houston?

Janavi:

Oh, it's the Thai Lao food. I love Thai food. It's in the heights main street, not main street.

Reyes:

Okay, Francis.

Francis:

I, a couple of different places. I love going to that, Niko? Niko?

Janavi:

Niko Niko's?

Francis:

Yeah, that place is great. I love going to the, in Alief area, there's taco trucks everywhere. I love just driving down and

finding a taco truck. That's great as well.

Reyes:

All right. Another quick fire question. I've usually phrased it as favorite Houston artists but some people struggle with that, so I'm gonna ask, Houston artists that inspired you lately?

Janavi.

Janavi:

I really like James Earls. Do you know his work? His sculptures, in Splendor, he's got a studio in Splendor. I'm also a big fan of, not, I'm trying to think now. Wow! I'm liking, oh, Jesus Morales, oh my God! How can I? Yeah I love his public work. He's got these really beautiful, the police memorial is, it's beautiful. Yeah, again. And I really liked James Earls, his sculptures and the way he plays with lighting, even his woodcut works, I do have a collector of, has a lot of his art and it's really fun to go to the house and see it all the time. Yeah.

Reyes:

Francis.

Francis:

I mean, for me, I think one of the last shows that really moved me, I think, can't remember if it was this year or the end of last year, but Lisa Harris did a performance with, a live music performance with her films, that was really moving and it was just beautiful. And then the audience like became a part of it,

they were singing along. So that really was moving. I also have enjoyed the work of Nick, Nick and Jake. They had a show at DiverseWorks recently. Joo Young Choi is also,

Janavi:

Yeah.

Francis:

She has a show coming up as well.

Janavi:

Yeah, I love her work.

Francis:

So there's lots happening, and they're doing things that I wish I could do, but my, is this yeah. I just wish like I could do stuff like that. So it's really inspiring.

Reyes:

For sure, for sure. My final question, Janavi, any upcoming projects or things you want to let people know about?

Janavi:

Yeah. So I actually designed the bike around the Bay Jersey for the Galveston Bay foundation this year. It's in October and then, it's a bike run in October, and then I'm working currently on an exhibition that I will be showcasing at Heidi Vaughn fine art in 2022. I decided to postpone it, so my family in India can

fly down for it, 'cause they're important to me. But I'm working on like 54 components of art for that show. So... I know, talk about dreaming big. It's gonna be really exciting when it comes together. I've been it's, it's gonna be a really strong body of work. So, and I have some fun little nippets, I actually do have a performance for that show too. So it will be very interesting. Yeah.

Reyes:

Nice, nice. Francis, any upcoming projects or things you want to direct people towards?

Francis:

I have a show right now at Galveston art center that's up until November 15th, I believe, so that's a video installation that I was able to restage. And then in December, I'll be debuting a performance that I did this past weekend. So in the next couple months I'm gonna be editing the performance into a video that will be premiered on Aurora Picture Show's website. Yeah.

Unfortunately we couldn't do it live, with a live audience, but, you know, due to the pandemic, but fortunately we were able to record it. Yeah.

Reyes:

Awesome. Well, that was an amazing conversation, thank you you two for your experience, your words, and I'll see you around.

Francis:

Thank you for having us.

Janavi:

Thank you so much. I do have one thing I wanted to ask you, you did ask a question earlier which is, what was something we would see, we would love to see in Houston's art community infrastructure. Just wanted to answer this really quick. It'll take a second.

Reyes:

Sure.

Janavi:

I do feel like it would be amazing if art institutions, like our museums, would start showcasing more Houston-based artists, and doing retrospectives with local artists. And the reason why I think that would be amazing is because it would actually make our city grow as a Houston art, like an art city. You go to Chicago and you see Nick Cave, he's a Chicago artist, you go to LA, you see , it's just, I think it's important for us to showcase more of our local artists at an institutional level, which I, it's, it's interesting because a lot of artists who are really talented leave Houston and do shows everywhere else and then come back. But it would be amazing if we had more of those opportunities. So I hope listeners out there are hearing that.

Reyes:

Absolutely.

Francis:

Absolutely.

Janavi:

I know you agree with me Francis.

Francis:

Definitely. And I think that would broaden the conversation between local and international and just elevate the whole regional conversation, 'cause there's so much that's being said by artists here in Houston.

Janavi:

Yeah. Yeah. I completely agree.

Reyes:

And trust me, it's the same feeling here for the writing community and the literary community. It's-

Janavi:

Yeah.

Reyes:

It's kind of crazy how how stacked Houston is in terms of talent, but-

Janavi:

We're not showcased, right? I mean, this is it. I think this is our time and I feel like our city needs to change that for us.

Reyes:

Yeah, absolutely. Well again, thank you you two.

Janavi:

Thank you.

Francis:

Thank you. It was great to meet you Janavi.

Janavi:

It was lovely meeting you, I kind of wanna hang out with you.

Francis:

Yeah, me too.

Janavi:

When the world is normal, I'm waiting for the world to get normal again, but seriously I would love that, we should hang out. It would be fun, you too Reyes.

Reyes:

Oh absolutely.

Francis:

Yes, please let do something soon.

Janavi:

Okay I'd like that.

Francis:

Well, when it's possible.

Janavi:

Yeah 2021, I think it's possible.

Francis:

I think so.

Janavi:

All right.

Reyes:

All right. Take care everyone.

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