

Dear Young Artist,

Yes, I think you can do both, participate in the art world and maintain your integrity. But your success in doing it depends on your relationship to your art.

I've been teaching at Bard College for more than twenty years. I've also had the opportunity to meet graduate students at several institutions over the years. More and more, I see students who are driven by a desire to have a show in Chelsea and be a successful artist. Certainly not all students, but I've seen a definite shift.

This is understandable, of course. However, for me, it has little to do with why I make art. I believe that art is made to explore the world and the culture, to explore the chosen medium, to explore one's self. It is made to communicate, in the medium's language, a perception, an observation, an understanding, an emotional or mental state. It is made to answer, or try to answer, questions. It is made for fun. In short, it is made in response to personal needs and demands.

A student might see a great work of art and say to himself, "This is a great work of art. I want to make a great work of art, too." And so, the student sets out to try to do so. And if he has some talent, he might produce something that looks just as though it were a work of art — almost convincing. If one didn't know any better one might actually mistake it for a work of art. The only problem is that the great work of art

that the student so admired was not a product of these same motives. It was the by-product of the artist's personal quest.

Having ambition is not a problem. In fact, ambition is necessary to be able to carve out the time needed to produce your work from the multitude of other demands on your life. The question is how that ambition is directed. If you adhere to your personal path, having shows and sales will not do any harm. In fact, you might actually make enough money to live, even live well. There's nothing at all wrong with that. The problem comes when the market begins to influence your motives and decisions. If your work needs to evolve and change, it may mean abandoning an approach that brought you recognition.

Of course, you do want to establish your voice as an artist and to, as you put it, "develop a true sense of self." But if you wait until you know you've finally found it, you may never have a show. Finding your voice may be a process, not a goal. I have students who start studying photography in college and tell me that they want to "express themselves." I think to myself, "You're only eighteen, how can you express yourself when you don't know yourself?" But that shouldn't deter them. In learning and practicing an art, they may embark on the path of finding themselves.

I have one final thought to add. In doing so, I may be misjudging you and doing you a disservice. But I sense from the tone of your letter

that you may be using your moral dilemma as an  
excuse for not engaging in your work and that  
you are using your vulnerability to deflect  
criticism from me. Cut it out!

Good luck and best wishes,

Stephen Shore  
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