

## Question and Answer Summary

### *Finding My Voice in Formline: Studying Classical to Creating Contemporary*

with Shoshannah Greene

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**Q: How do you balance the creative aspects of your work with some of those more practical aspects of planning for your current project or for your next project? For example, when you're getting ready for a gallery show.**

I really like these calendars from Muji. I write everything out that I need to get done within that month. I like adding colorful things to them, so it makes it more enticing for me to look at. A thing that I learned about getting things done is if I put a smiley face when I've accomplished something on my To-Do List, it makes me more geared toward finishing them.

Often, I'll put things on the calendar for when I have to get something done. I usually avoid working on it first—I'll tidy or clean or do things that aren't geared to what I need to do and just tell myself that it's going to be something I'll do later. I often use the same loose-leaf paper for notes in point form, then expand them later, especially for writing or answering questions. Then I start to go back and fill things in for where I need to get things done, especially if it's writing or answering something.

Email is my biggest struggle. I try really hard on the email part, but usually I dedicate half a day or a full day. If it's a full day, I'll still try to avoid doing the project. So if I do things in point form during parts of the day, then when I go to that big day, I already have small things thought about. I've kind of ruminated on it, so it's easier for me to actually get going on the parts that aren't art, if that makes sense.

**Host: Did you say you put smiley faces next to it?**

Yeah, if you go to Muji, they sell a pack of colorful pens. I color-coordinate different projects to those colors. And then, the smiley faces are little incentives—like a visual Gold Star. That's so important that we reward ourselves for getting things done.

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**Q: When you draw an ancestral object or design (like Haida Formline) in a museum setting, how does the physical act of drawing (the movement, the pace, the focus) create a deeper, more intimate relational connection to the object than simply taking a photograph?**

I asked myself that all this time too, and I'm not really sure. I think a part of it is I'm creating just a relationship with myself in that piece. That's like a quiet, mindful moment between me and the work. Also, it's just nice to have conversations with those. I always feel like I sound so crazy saying I have conversations with the pieces, but I do because I like to see what the artist did—their way of connecting Formline is going to be different than how I think about putting it in, like use of space.

There's this one I didn't include in the slideshow, but it's a horn shaped in the form of a duck, and it's so beautiful. The way that this duck's body is integrated throughout — the Form-line depicting the duck's body integrated through this sculptural piece—is so cool. The way that everything connects and it's still all there.

I guess I don't truly have an answer other than it's just a feeling. Also just knowing that I could study it versus in a photo or on the computer just doesn't give the same experience.

**Q: You channel your emotions into your art (grief, joy, resilience). How do you ensure the finished piece retains enough emotional sincerity that the viewer can feel that truth, without forcing the viewer to absorb the full weight of your personal process?**

I'm mostly just posting things on Instagram right now. I haven't had a show in the last little bit. So if I feel up to it, I'll share a little bit about the piece, maybe one or two sentences. Generally, I don't share the heavy emotional aspect of where the piece came from on a public forum like that.

I usually write more if it's a technical thing, like the mural. I wrote quite a lot for my first mural, which I don't post too much. I'm more comfortable talking than writing something online. The nurse log piece was pretty heavy for me; August was a tough month with three big pivotal things happening in my life. One included being in a really bad car accident. My partner and I came out pretty unscathed, just a couple of broken

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ribs and some bruising. But my car was totaled because of a deer, and it created a space where I really resent the deer here more and also the guy who introduced them. I decided I didn't want to write all of that because I didn't want to create that space for people to comment or message me because, to me, it was just the art I wanted to share.

I was really nervous and shy about posting the nurse log piece because it was a lot more personal than most of my work. I know it sounds funny because I'm talking about losing my dad, but this one was harder for me because it was more of a self-portrait piece. This piece is my most well-received artwork I've ever posted. I've even had people ask if they could tattoo it on themselves, which is so funny because it's a drawing of what I considered myself to be like. It's so moving that people want prints and tattoos of it.

I guess these pieces remind me there's importance in sharing aspects of art that people will relate to in ways I can't see or understand.

**Q: I learned so much from today's session. Do you have any recommendations for materials, tools, or artistic supplies for young and youth artists. I really liked the pen recommendation.**

I guess it's just really got a feel for what you might want to do.

Pen. I highly recommend pen because I find a lot of people, especially those who say they can't draw, are resistant. It's one of my biggest pet peeves because so many people have these abilities. It may not be realism drawing, but you can draw or create really cool things or explore other forms of art.

At the Pitt Rivers Museum, when I was there in 2017, they had a sketchbook guests could take and add to as they walked around the museum. I don't know if anyone's been to the Pitt Rivers Museum, but it's not your typical museum. The founder collected things, and it's basically just stuff—but organized by object, not culture.

The ceiling is covered in paddles from around the world. There's clothing from around the world, and the top floor has weapons from around the world. So it's not separated by culture or community; it's separated by what the thing is. One guest said, "I'm not an artist," but the museum encouraged them to take the book and go with it. The person created an incredible rendering of a gun from the museum using duct tape and electrical tape from the front desk—it was mind-boggling.

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My answer is: don't limit yourself in what you think you might be interested in. Pens are usually my starting point, then pencils and having different sizes of pencils is great. People say it's not the tools, it's the artist, but I recommend investing in good materials, especially if you want work in galleries or collections. Look for things that are archival or lightfast. Something I learned is markers are not archival, so they won't last long. Play around with different papers and textures and go for a deep dive online. There are so many artists sharing what they love and useful information you might not know, like types of watercolor paper or the purposes of different canvases and brushes.

**Q: An artist wants to reconnect with their culture after growing up away from it, by learning a traditional art forms while incorporating their own style but their concern is receiving negative feedback from the community. From what you've shared, most responses to your posts have been positive and celebratory. Have you ever received pushback? What strategies help you move through that if so, without letting it affect you?**

One tip I'd offer is to form a supportive community with friends and other members to create a space for discussing art. In my own journey, I wasn't working alone—I had a large group of friends, mentors, and Elders I could talk to about ideas. I don't consult everyone, but if I'm worried about how something might be perceived, I ask for feedback.

Intentions matter. While some say they don't, I believe they do. It's about making sure intentions are clear and well communicated.

I can't recall major pushback; often, I'm the one challenging norms. I'd also recommend being okay with making mistakes. We're all rebuilding from what we have. The more artists and work we create, the more space we build within our nations and communities, and as Indigenous people overall.

When I was younger, I worried there were too many Formline artists. My cousin reminded me it's important to have many of us. I feared market saturation, but it's not—it's inspiring. I've connected with many artists online, and we learn so much from each other.

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Don't limit learning to your own Nation's art—explore world art too. Start by figuring out what you want to create and how, then seek feedback. You don't need to share publicly right away; find safe spaces and guidelines first.

**Q: What do you see as the importance of art compared to language and cultural heritage? Many people focus on language revitalization and understand its importance, but fewer recognize art. Some see art only as storytelling and assume that means language. So, what do you see as the importance of art for all of us?**

For myself, I'm not as integrated in language as I'd like to be. There's a quote I love that came from a panel at the Bill Reid Gallery where George Brammell said "Indigenous artists don't get to just be artists—they also have to be politicians, performers, singers, and speakers."

I think art, language, and culture are interconnected. At the *Heights of Now* exhibition at the Museum of Vancouver, Gwaai Edenshaw had a piece breaking down the essence of Formline. The translation of "skeleton of Formline" was "storyline," showing how language explains the essence of Formline.

I don't think there's a hierarchy of importance—they all work together toward revitalization. There are learning curves, especially because of how unique coastal languages are. One of my Aunties told me her tongue muscles changed as she became fluent in Haida, which amazed me.

We each need to take our role and support one another. In my community, language keepers support artists, and artists support language keepers. I don't study language as much as I should—I have basic knowledge from school and museum work—but I see how they go hand in hand.

Through projects like the Haida immersion program and the Haida language office, I've worked with language keepers to create art for them. Even if I'm not learning the language directly, my art can help visual learners connect with it. We need to support each other. Language keepers may not want to make art, but we can collaborate.

**Q: How do you move through self-criticism? What strategies would you recommend to overcome it and share your work?**

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I don't really know because I'm still very hard on myself. My partner constantly teases me for how much I doubt my work and its impact. I often share pieces with my partner or friends to get their thoughts or talk about what I'm struggling with. I've never been shy about sharing concepts or sketchbooks because growing up, we always shared with each other—it feels natural.

Sometimes I don't post or print everything. There's a lot of work I've started but never finished because I wasn't happy with it. That's not ideal but sometimes it helps to give space to reflect.

At a certain point, you have to let things go and put them out into the world. I can look at many pieces I've shown today and still see things that bother me, but I set deadlines—like uploading by a certain time for Instagram. External deadlines force me to release the work. Sometimes you just have to let the piece go and live its life. I'm still working on this.