

Shantell Martin: A Creative's Guide to Changing Gears

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Career advice from an artist ready to blow it all up and start over.

*In a world of five-year goals and quarter-by-quarter forecasts, **Shantell Martin** ([Behance profile](#)) just wings it. Martin never “plans” her work in the traditional sense. Check that, she never plans anything in the traditional sense. Her art appears as one big doodle, a continuous black and white line drawing with recurring characters that sometimes leap off the walls and onto Martin’s clothing — like the sneakers she wore when we spoke.*

Martin and I met 3,000 miles from her “normal” life. The London-raised artist uprooted her life in New York to move west for a “residency” at Autodesk, a maker space tucked away on San Francisco’s Embarcadero. Instead of being surrounded by blank walls and a pack of thick black markers, she has chosen a workspace of fabrication machines and 3D printers nestled between biotech startups. Her goal? To reinvent her style into something different, to fight against the urge to ride her comfortable stream of generous commissions, speaker opportunities, and steady pace of work by plopping herself down in the unfamiliar.

Reinvention is a tough, but necessary, part of any creative career. Though, like most things in the creative world, it’s easier said than done. But judging by the stories of most artists, you’d never know it. Too often we see people at the triumphant end of their reinvention but rarely do we get to speak with someone struggling to figure out their next move. Which is why the former Tokyo VJ turned New York drawer turned West Coast maker is a perfect analog for our ever-changing world.

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Why did you move from New York to San Francisco?

I’m feeling this need for my work to have form and shape and perspective. I want my work to be more than something you look at, I want it to be useful in the home and workplace. My drawing needs to get out of the 2D space, and that led me here, a hacker space in San Francisco with

lots of new tools and equipment. So it's the perfect place to pursue this next chapter. I have no idea what I'm doing, but I know the process I want to do.

There have been a few times when you started over, like when you moved from Tokyo to New York. How do you arrive at that conclusion you need a career change?

It is something that you feel and then you either ignore that or you've heard yourself enough that you have to take it seriously. I don't think you arrive there, it finds you. It finds you and you know that you're there because you resist it at first.

For example, I was drawing in New York and it was starting to feel very comfortable. The issue there is, creatively, that means I flat-lined and I knew it. I was doing the same thing, I was good at it, I could draw with my eyes closed. So now I'm trying to put myself in a position to again have a learning curve, to be in an uncomfortable place. In those newly uncomfortable zones you find yourself in is where you are your most creative.

Have there been any false starts in this process? For example, did you try and be a musician and fail?

You know when what you're doing is the right thing. Ideally, you've had practice and made those mistakes in the past. I would love to be a musician, but I don't think that's something I'll tackle in my lifetime. But there's all these offsets of things I want to do like music, and you can organically integrate them into your main thing.

What's your main thing?

Lines, words, characters. The one thing I've learned to do is to create a line that looks like me. I try to instinctively draw a line and have someone say, "That's Shantell Martin!"

How did you get comfortable owning that style?

When I first moved to Japan to teach English, I stopped drawing. But then I had this urge to draw and then I'd wonder, "What's the point?" I would look online and see people that can really draw. I'd think, "There are so many people that are so good and I could never do that! I'll never be that good!" I felt that way for a long time. And then I started to realize, "They're not me." I thought, "What can I do that they can't do? I can do me. And if me looks like this, then let that be the case." It's easy to look around and see people with super-high skill and lots of accolades and it can be hard to start. But just start. Start drawing a line. Work at that line. Get comfortable with that line. And see where that takes you and you'll start to see what you look like.

So how did you finally get back to drawing?

In Japan, I got asked to do some live drawing. There was a band playing and a camcorder that projected my work. As soon as the music started, I had this canvas that I needed to fill and an audience waiting for me. I realized, “Oh shit, there’s no time to plan or hesitate.” Because if there’s a weird space where nothing is happening it’s awkward in the performance. I put myself in a position where I couldn’t think. And it was this crazy avant-garde music I’d never listen to. But 45 minutes in, I’d finish and I’d look and wonder what I just did. And it’s only then that I realized I was a performer that liked those constraints. Now I could start to see what my style looked like and it really helped me and kick-started my career. It gave me this practice of drawing and not hesitating.

Do you think that’s only possible with someone with a spontaneous style like you? How would this work for, say, a sculptor?

Then even the planning is you. It’s all you. It’s the product of everything you’ve learned, where you’ve lived, and those that came before you. It’s literally in your DNA. I have artist friends that plan out 10 steps before they even make something. While I’m more head-to-hand, that doesn’t mean that it comes any more naturally. Art also lies in the process and the planning.

How did you deal with the struggles of anonymity and reinvention when you are at your lowest?

That power of reflection is great, because when you reflect, you remember — and then you’re more equipped when the bad times come around again. I was successful in Japan fairly early in my attempts, and I then didn’t know what else to do. So I came to New York and had to start all over again. That was a huge struggle. In New York, the old career that I made for myself didn’t exist. I came to New York like “I’m here! I want to keep doing VJing!” But that community didn’t exist. I had to start completely over in a way I didn’t when I arrived in Japan.

So I found myself sleeping on couches trying to figure things out. Total cliché, I know. In the moment, it really sucks. But I felt it inside, I couldn’t go back. I wished I had access to money and that people would see my work and love it and buy. At the time I didn’t understand why it was happening. But that’s where reflection comes in. If I came to New York and was completely successful at the beginning like I was in Japan, I wouldn’t have learned all of these things. My feet wouldn’t be grounded. I perhaps wouldn’t have met these people who supported me. When you look back at those hard times you can see why they happened. So for the hard times that come now, I’ve built up this practice where I recognize what a hard time can give me.

Did you lose that meditative sweet spot when your work got too comfortable?

It was more about progress. You want yourself to be able to progress in life and you always want to be moving forward and you always want to allow for that flow. Sometimes, when you're too comfortable you get scared to move ahead of that or beyond that. We sometimes can want to hold on to the comfortable thing.

You just used a lot of concepts familiar to those who meditate — like having a “practice” and letting feelings go by. Is that intentional?

Drawing is meditation. It's important to get to a place where there is a healthy balance of practice and freedom. I don't meditate any more. But for me, meditating was important to realize what that zone feels like. I started to get the same feeling drawing as I did meditating, so I stopped. I think we have those connections in all the things that we do, whether it's fishing or sports. As an artist, it's easier to come to that place because you can see it, visually.

So right now, if someone were to commission you for a black and white line drawing you'd say no?

I'd say no. Just now though. I've come to San Francisco and have five or six months to do this residency to learn and focus. As soon as I say “yes” to things and start flying everywhere, I'm going to get completely distracted. I won't be able to push what I'm trying to do. I've said no to everything for the next six months.

Have you ever grappled with the fear of running out of ideas? That if you try to switch it up, you won't have anything left in the tank?

No! We always have ideas! That's one thing you learn, sometimes you have too many ideas. The thing is to get everything out as much as you can. I've got to get that out and do that as much as it exists in me before I can ever get somewhere else. The next phase only happens when you get everything out.

<https://youtu.be/PWK16vhlNls>

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