Maja Dlugolecki

artist/designer

Portland-based artist/designer Maja Dlugolecki's practice is all about balance—whether she's working on client projects and collabs in the studio, or painting a new abstract landscape out in nature. Here, Maja reflects on growing up in Oregon's Columbia River Gorge; on cultivating community in the age of Instagram, and learning how to sell her work in an authentic and accessible way; and why it's critical to her own creativity to carve out the time to completely disconnect.

Tell me about where you grew up and how your childhood influenced your ideas about creativity.

I grew up near The Columbia River Gorge, about 20 minutes east of Portland. My parents went on a road trip and moved all the way out here from New York City when my mom was pregnant with me. My dad was born and raised a New Yorker, and my mom is from Poland. She moved to New York in the late '80s—they actually met through a classifieds ad in the Polish newspaper! There weren't even photos in the listing. It was very old school and serendipitous.

My mom was a landscape architect in Poland. And at the time, my dad had started a small business. He's an artisan string maker, and is one of only a few people in the world who designs and crafts strings for renaissance, baroque, classical, and modern performance. In the early days, he would hop on a plane to New York or Paris and sell the variety of strings he brought with him right out of the tube. He never spent a dime on advertising, because when he started out the business was based on word of mouth. There was no internet, e-mail, or social media. It's mind boggling to compare it to the way I run my own business today. It was such a different world than it is now.

> "It's me, on my own path, figuring out what works best—whether it's in the studio, or out in nature."

Was there music in your house?

I grew up listening to the Beatles and a lot of music from the early string movement. And my parents had a lot of art in the house. They had these woven wall hangings that were replicas of artwork by Kandinsky and Miró. And there was a lot of Oregon Coast influence, too. Frank Boyden, an Oregon artist who co-founded the Sitka Center, is a family friend, so they have a substantial collection of his art. He's incredibly talented.

When I was a kid, I didn't think anything of the art in my home. I wasn't drawn to it until I had moved out and developed an interest in art myself. Those different elements of my childhood, like going to the coast on weekends, or even camping in Joseph, Oregon, have all come full circle. That's why there's so much blue in my work—bodies of water have always inspired me.

You were just in Joseph for an artist residency at the Jennings Hotel. How did that particular landscape shape the work that you created while you were there?

Being able to incorporate new colors and techniques is something that's really fun about working in new landscapes. Simply being in a place that's different pushes new boundaries for me.

When I was in Joseph it was really hot. There was so much sun, so I was working with the shadows of my body over the canvas. And it was so silent. There's nothing there, except maybe some llamas. It makes creating so easy. There were these lava-like rocks with this deep magenta color, which is a color I don't really work with. And there was this sage, which was just beautiful. Even the smell of it was something I tried to bring out with the green that I ended up using.

A couple of women were in just yesterday looking at that work—I made 13 pieces—and I was noticing that they would take two or three pieces that had similar colors, and then put them together. They were pieces that I had done on different days, but somehow the movement in them was connected, from one to the next. Like a loop or a half circle—one half would fit almost exactly with another. There was this fluidity.

What do you make of that fluidity and connection between them?

It was fun to see how the pieces interacted with each other in this after painting process. That's also why I take process shots; so I can go back and look at them. Then I'll do a stroke, or pour some paint on the canvas, and let it sit and play around with it before it dries.

When you're painting something abstract it's always a question of what colors work. Inevitably you'll overthink things. It's really interesting because with abstract art, a lot of people focus on the shapes. I never do, really. It's more about color and composition. And I enjoy leaving a significant amount of white space, which probably comes from my background in graphic design.

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How is the process of working in your studio different from working out in nature like you did in Joseph?

When I'm working on a commission, I prefer to have full artistic freedom and control. I'm lucky to be living in this area of the world, where I'm so close to everything.

I can drive to The Columbia River Gorge in 30 minutes, and set up on a hill surrounded by that landscape. And a lot of times, the elements that people want me to incorporate into a commission are ones they've found in previous works that I've made in nature. So, I do try to draw from that, because I want it to feel authentic.

Much of the work that I make in the studio, though, is based on personal interactions I've had with people. Kind of a highlights reel of the highs and lows

Like an emotional landscape.

Yes. Like a visual journal of sorts. I'm self-taught, and started painting as a coping mechanism for a rough break-up. It's been about two years since I started, and it's satisfying to see the process of my growth as an artist now. It's hard for me to look at that early work. I didn't know what I was doing, or how the mediums worked. Everything was an experiment. I have a lot of tools now, but I'm still learning. Everything I make still evolves organically. It's me, on my own path, figuring out what works best—whether it's in the studio, or out in nature.

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You document a lot of your work on Instagram. Has social media played a role in your process?

Instagram is my primary platform. When you look at other people's work there, and what's trending, everything can start to look the same. And you look back at work of yours that's sold well, and you think, should I replicate this because it's selling? Or should I keep pushing to create something new?

There's also the marketing aspect of it. The majority of people who follow my practice found my work through Instagram. Being someone who doesn't have an MFA or a background in fine art, it makes my work accessible to the general public—essentially everyone who isn't an art dealer.

Since you didn't earn an MFA, is Instagram also kind of like an informal platform for education, or collaboration?

It's nice to be able to cultivate a community with other artists there, because many of us are learning the process through our own exploration. It's cool to be able to collaborate, and have this open platform to interact with artists at all levels—whether they're at the MoMA, or just doing their own thing in their garage.

I have a lot of followers that are aspiring artists. When I was in school, the dialog that I had with my peers was essential to developing my process. And there are many people I've looked up to as mentors in graphic design. So I enjoy being able to share my knowledge now with people who are in the same spot I once was. I get asked questions about the process, like, What platform should I use to build a website to sell my work?, Are hashtags important?, Should I list my prices?, and How much should I charge? It's really difficult to learn it all on your own.

Who were the artists you looked up to in developing a painting practice?

Helen Frankenthaler has always been an inspiration. I remember being at the LACMA years ago, and when I saw this piece of hers, taking up an entire wall with this deep magenta and darker purple around the sides, it just completely captivated and enveloped me. I strive to deliver that sense of raw emotion in my own work. When someone's techniques intrigue me, I go to the library and scour online forums to find out more about the process. It's a tool that I used frequently when I was in school for design. For example, I use a particular medium now that Helen Frankenthaler worked with. It works with the paint you already have on the canvas, so the paint moves and spreads on its own once you apply it. It's magic.[1]

[1] Maja is referring to "soak staining"; a technique that's used to thin paint and manipulate it on the canvas.

You earned a BA from Portland State University's graphic design program. What was that experience like for you?

My education there was invaluable. I learned so much about process that I still find useful today. The program is so special, because it isn't only about design. The faculty really pushes you to explore your own creativity in the directions that you're most drawn to. It's something that really makes the program stand out in comparison to others, because creativity is where the originality and authenticity and passion comes from. It's what makes you excited to get up in the morning.

I have friends that started companies while they were in the program, because the teachers are open to allowing you to tailor any of your projects to things like building a website for your business, or designing a logo for your brand. I thought since these projects were applicable to real businesses, I may as well work with real clients to build their brands and have an easier transition into work life. That really motivated me to take classes part-time, and work part-time.

Do you have mentors from the program that you still stay in touch with?

The core teachers there are all incredible. And they're so connected to community, so there are all these other people who end up becoming your mentors. People who weren't necessarily your teachers, but were brought in talk to your class, or do a workshop. Adam Garcia is one of those people for me. Even when I was in school, he spoke to me like an equal. He took time out of his day to meet with me. He was just so willing to help out in any way, and answer any questions. And he really encouraged me to continue my practice in painting as well.

Kate Bingaman-Burt taught an A+D Projects class, which is basically the program's in-house design studio. We'd each have different projects and would work in teams, and we also organized things like Be Honest, where the Portland design community is invited to a showcase of student's work from the previous school year.

There were so many students who were creating things outside of the program, just for fun—like posters, stickers, pins, bags, and jewelry. And I was always encouraging people to sell their work, so I suggested we do a pop-up, and I approached Kate about it. She was super stoked, so we put together a team, and the first year we had about 60 students who participated. Now, Good Market takes place every year during Be Honest at PSU and Land Gallery.

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Do you enjoy the business aspects of your art practice?

I do. I think some of that is intuitive, having grown up in a house with a business. And I do take advantage of that. Knowing how to sell your work in an authentic way is critical to being a successful artist or designer. Having the tools and the confidence to do that is so important.

Are you sensitive about who you sell your work to?

It's imperative that good design, and art, is accessible to everyone. I price my art in the same way that I do with my design. If I'm working for a large company, my rate will be different than if I'm working for a lean startup. If a student reaches out to me, that's an honor. I was a student not so long ago, and I know what it's like to want to invest in art. It can be intimidating and expensive. So I have prints, and I also have smaller original works on paper—like the studies I did at the Jennings—that build up to larger works on canvas, which are significantly more expensive. I like having different price points, which provides a little bit more flexibility and accessibility.

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How do you split your time between commercial design work and your fine art practice?

I've had a design studio for about four years now. And I have a variety of clients, mainly lifestyle brands. Most are month to month and consistent, so I know how many hours I need to dedicate to them every week. I try to schedule a day during the week to work on those projects, or sometimes I'll dedicate an entire week to one project, like a website.

Having my design studio as a buffer allows me the freedom to create whatever I feel like creating without the pressure of, I need to sell this in order to pay the bills. So if I'm planning a painting trip, my goal is to focus on painting and to do minimal client work.

I try to be as balanced as I can be, but it's really project by project. It ebbs and flows. I'm not a nine-to-fiver, and never will be. Having the freedom to come and go, to travel whenever I want, or to just get coffee and read a book, is so important for my own creativity and personal happiness.

Are you creatively satisfied?

As an artist, it's about working hard so that I have the time and freedom I need to keep pushing my limits. Even though my residency in Joseph was brief, I feel like I grew so much. It makes me wonder whether I should spend half of every month in the woods. Or, at least a week. I'm most satisfied when I'm creating like that, out in nature—there are so many ways to detach. It's rejuvenating and absolutely magical.

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