Curiosity with Deb Stoner Episode Transcription.

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DS: Deb Stoner AM: Ali Meghdadi GR: Gary Rogowski

GR: Creativity, hustlers, fakers, and thieves. Creativity is not the province of just a chosen few. Those who fear they have nothing to say or that it's all been said before can also grab the fire. But our ideas about practice, quality or failure shape our work. New artists, working artists, strugglers, those who've been at it all their lives grapple with these same concepts. This is the heart of our endeavor, finding the different and similar ways that artists work to be creative on Creativity: Hustlers, Fakers, and Thieves.

GR: Curiosity is our topic this week with Deb Stoner, small artist at large, she calls herself. Her curiosity is prodigious, however. It's astonishing to see the things that she gets interested in. And one can be curious about a technique. What happens if I try this? What happens if I angle my tool this way? But the kind of curiosity I think that Deb exhibits is profound because it leads her to totally new areas of interest for her. What do you think about this, this topic, Ali?

AM: Well, I think curiosity, curiosity is the core of so much of the things that we pursue when we try to do. And at the same time, it's sort of our undoing. It's what turns us on, but it also can deter you, because it has to be bridled, actually. You know, otherwise you just become a flagrant dilettante. That's always been my problem, right? I think that's one of the things that we're trying to find people to talk to in the series that have been able to focus their curiosity and achieve mastery. And I think that's a very unique trait. And so curiosity has to have limits.

GR: Interesting.

AM: It can turn in on itself. You can go deeper into the curiosity you have about a thing. But it is no small thing to be plagued as well as blessed by curiosity. I think that that's a challenge for a lot of people. And to develop mastery, you have to figure out how to control curiosity.

GR: Right. It brings us into a field of endeavor and perhaps we can't get our fill or perhaps we're sated too soon. Well, let's talk with Deb and see what she has to say about this topic.

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GR: I am so pleased to have Deb Stoner as my guest today. Thank you. Hi, Deb, how are you?

DS: Hi, Gary, I'm good, thanks.

GR: I'm going to give a brief biography of you, and I'm certain to leave many things out because you're so prolific. So I met you as a metalsmith at the Oregon School of Arts and Crafts. And you were a metalsmith and teacher there. Then you became an eyewear designer. And after some period of time, moved on to large scale scanner photography. How would you describe it?

DS: That describes it because it's accurate. It's photography that's created with the use of a scanner, and it's big. So it's large scale. So yeah.

GR: Do you miss being a metalsmith?

DS: Well, I'm still a metalsmith. Last night, my husband said, "We need this little doohickey that goes like this in sort of a figure eight, and it needs to be about an inch long, and it has to have two holes in it." And so I sorted through my drawers of wire and this and that and was able in about 10 minutes to say, "Is it like this that you need?" And he said, "No."

DS: Do I miss being a metalsmith? What I miss mostly about being a metalsmith is I miss working with my hands on a daily basis.

GR: Is it curiosity that moved you to different fields? Why, why did you take up eyewear design?

DS: I was trained as a jeweler. Well, first I went to school as a geologist. Actually, that was really hard. I was using my brain in a way that didn't come really natural to me. And the thing that came natural to me was working with my hands and being really interested in jewelry making. I'd gone to a high school in California that had a great metalsmithing program, and I was able to do that every day for four years of high school. And if that's not an inspiring thing for a kid to do, I don't know what is.

GR: Oh, that's great.

DS: Yeah. I just wanted to learn more about making jewelry. And so I ended up talking myself into sort of an apprenticeship with a jeweler in Davis, California. I got to work with my hands. I got to learn a lot of techniques, and I thought that that was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I love the problem solving of repairing jewelry. Somebody would come into the store with something that meant everything to them. You know Jewelry is an extremely emotional art form, and it would need to be fixed. I worked side by side, with a couple of people who really knew how to do all this stuff. And that working with a master right next to me, ‘How do I do this? How do I not screw this up?’ I had gone to a workshop in San Diego where I was studying for two weeks with Arline Fisch and Paul Derrez, a jeweler from Amsterdam. And watching the world of craft open up before my eyes was something really profound. And Arlene encouraged me to apply and go to graduate school. And so I did. I had just a very different experience than most people in a craft program because I didn't have art history background. I didn't have all the things

that I was going to be asked to take. But I had pretty good mastery over the craft of metalsmithing because of the daily work as a jeweler. And that daily work was something that I just thrived on. I really loved it.

DS: When I was in graduate school, there was a particularly interesting fellow who taught in the photography program. And I thought, hmm, this looks good. I want to learn more about photography. And so I ended up studying photography sort of side by side with metalsmithing. When I was in graduate school, one of the things I learned about teachers in graduate school is that they often would assign things based on what they were curious about. What would a group of graduate students do if given the concept of eyewear? What I got to watch was the process of a truly curious person investigate a truly curious topic. This woman, her name was Gail Spence. She was an American who left the United States in sort of her early 20s. And she went to Denmark to become a jeweler. And she became a very good jeweler and a very good designer. So Gail went to the library. She went shopping. This was before the internet where your first thing to look up is Google. That didn't happen. But because that didn't happen, some of the investigation that she did into eyewear was into patents, the books, the journals, the records where you could investigate who made the first hinge on a pair of eyeglasses and what did it look like? She wanted to learn how to use a watchmaker's lathe. And so she turned aluminum and anodized it and colored it and came up with a pair of eyeglasses. It was truly very different than anything anybody had ever seen. She wore those eyeglasses back to Europe when she went home and she was seen on the street by somebody from the eyewear industry who said, "Where did you get those?" She said, "I made them." He said, "I'll buy them." And the next thing I knew, or she knew, she was making a lot of money as an eyewear designer.

DS: The thing that was not lost on me was that as an artist, you could earn a living, and it could be a fascinating way to do so. So at a certain point, I had taught for a while in metalsmithing. I had worked in various different jobs, just trying to cobble together a living. I got an opportunity to teach in Italy and work in an artist's home in Portugal for almost a year. And it all came together in a really magical and marvelous way.

DS: And it was because I had really started to investigate one topic, and that was eyewear. Instead of thinking I could make anything in the world, the world got focused. I got focused on what I wanted to investigate. And I got interested in it. And the more interested in it, the more broad I found that world, the more it opened up.

GR: Right.

DS: Yeah.

GR: Isn't it funny? You think that by narrowing your focus, everything will be narrow, but it's just the reverse.

DS: It is.

GR: This whole new world opens up. In our opening podcast, I talked with my apprentice Ali about a house. I was strolling through the streets of San Francisco and sketching. And the man who owned the house invited me in and gave me a tour of the house. And there was nothing special about it. But he took me into the dining room and in the back of the dining room was a door. And we went through the door and walked down into this wooden library that he had imported from France and stuck on the back of his house that overlooked the Golden Gate Bridge. I was like, what the hell? Just amazing. So that little door opened up into this giant world and it was pretty remarkable. So that's what curiosity means for me. It just opens up possibilities. But how do you get curious? I mean, no one pushed me to do anything like that. Go to work. Make money.

DS: It was an industrial childhood, really. Even if we did for fun, there was a bit of work involved in it. And I think that just growing up in that way where I was comfortable enough to be curious about anything I wanted, I was the first person in my family that I really knew of who was obsessed with reading. I also had curious people in the neighborhood. There was a guy two doors down, Mr. Hudson. And Mr. Hudson had invented, he was interested in jewelry making. He had invented this small casting machine. And he hired my brother and I in the summer times to turn these small parts on a lathe for his little objects that he then sold. And for me, that was just great. I got to learn how an inventor invented things, but I got to be a part in it as well. And I got to be a part in that way that says, "If you don't have this thing, you can make it, and that's important."

GR: Right. But can people become curious? I'm curious about them. What do you think?

DS: Oh, I think absolutely.

GR: A lot of people come from backgrounds where curiosity is not encouraged. You're not encouraged to go to the library or the museum or, you know, I'm speaking for myself. Are you fortunate? Were you fortunate? How do people who come from backgrounds that they're struggling in? How do they become curious?

DS: I believe a lot in chance meetings of humans that are interesting for some reason. I mean, I feel very, very fortunate to have taken, education's always been really important to me. I'm interested in learning stuff. And I've been introduced to incredible people because they were a teacher or they were a teacher of somebody else that I got to know and they know this. And so you can learn that. If you want to go investigate, you go figure that out. So I feel super fortunate that way that I have stumbled my way. My brother and I tease each other who's having the most Forrest Gump moment of time where you find yourself sitting next to someone and all of a sudden your life you know has just changed.

GR: Yeah, meeting someone whose curiosity leads you to go, ooh, never done that. You mentioned to me once that tools, that discovering new tools made you go after certain things.

DS: Oh, don't you have tool lust? I remember meeting this guy who was making stainless steel birdcages.

GR: Oh, wow.

DS: And I wanted to see how he was doing that. And he was using a pulse arc welder oh where you put the two pieces of metal together, put it in this jig that holds it together and send electricity through it and it welds it. And when I saw him operate that, that became like, I want one of those. And you know what I found on Craigslist? I found a pulse arc welder that was used by an orthodontist. And so he was using it on a micro scale. I bought that. I went through a lot of metal. I hurt myself a few times.

GR: Yeah.

DS: I learned a lot of stuff. Interesting. And I learned you know a way to do a thing. So yeah. Absolutely. Tools send you into a new and different realm of curiosity.

GR: So our title for this podcast is Creativity Hustlers, Fakers, and Thieves. You had a response to that title. Remember the note you wrote me?

DS: Oh, vaguely. Mostly that I'm weary of hustlers and thieves in modern society. They seem to be plentiful in a way that's not pleasing to me.

GR: If you had to choose one, how would you describe yourself?

DS: I mean, as a self-employed artist, one has to be a hustler.

GR: Yeah, but thievery is so, I mean, don't you think it's common? And it's not necessarily evil. It's just your eyes are open and you see someone making eyewear and you say, oh, well, I never thought of that. And this would be fun.

DS: I don't think of that as thievery. I think of that as inspiration. You're doing this really interesting thing. I wonder what my take would be on that interesting thing. Like Photography right now is so overwhelmed with I mean, anybody can make a picture with any number of objects within arm's distance without even thinking about it. You know and they can have a good eye or not. It makes the effort that goes into photography education. I don't even know where to go with that. I mean, I can get really bugged.

GR: Go ahead. Because I think the fact that we have, everyone has such access to photography means that it's gotten much worse, that we're just flooded now with bad photos or fake photos or photos that are cobbled together. And it's difficult to tell what's real.

DS: Difficult to tell what's real. What's real mean?

GR: Ah, interesting. Well, we used to use photography in a manner to demonstrate a moment in time. And now we use it, I think, to demonstrate our ability to edit, rather than seeing, you know, the daguerreotype of, you know, 12 people standing in front of a saloon. Now we have images created by, you know, pulling one image and stitching it together with another. So there's that, there's that level of verisimilitude. Now, clearly, every time I take a photograph out here in the country of a great sky or clouds, it's never the same as what I'm really seeing. It's really hard to capture that. And so I don't know that any of our photographs are real in that respect. There's always that, not just the lens, but the image itself has a, separates us from reality. Well, I don't know if that answered your question. What is real? You know, that's a question that a lot of philosophers have struggled with. What is real?

DS: Oh, sure.

GR: Yeah. Well, let me ask you, what is real then in photography?

DS: I've studied a lot of historical photography because I was always interested in the tools that went along with making photographs from pinhole cameras to very sophisticated things. One of the most real photographs I ever witnessed was, there was a photographer, and darn if his name has escaped me, Jerry Spagnoli, maybe, something like that. He's a modern photographer who makes daguerreotypes. So it's a super slow process. And you have to be prepared. You have to have the emulsion on the prepared piece of metal. And it has to be in a dark place, and it has to be ready to be used if you're going to have any kind of spontaneity. On September 11th, he was in New York City, and he looked out his window and realized what was happening. And he plate prepared.

GR: Oh, wow.

DS: He made a daguerreotype of that moment of the plane hitting one of the towers. And I mean, that, to me, if we're talking about real, there's so much involved in that moment of making that extraordinary photograph.

GR: Sure.

DS: Of course, it's not an object that you can make over and over and over. It's a one time thing. It's a daguerreotype. It is a very amazing piece of metal with a very a very amazing emulsion now that has that moment, that piece of reality trapped in it forever.

GR: Right

DS: It's fantastic.

GR: That's where it becomes a moment in time. And I guess my point is that nowadays, that had such a measurable effect on so many people, but the photographs we, you know, you see on Instagram or, you know, the videos and stuff on TikTok. It's just more water, just inundating us and doesn't make us stop and say, "Oh, this is an important point in time."

DS: Yeah

GR: Now all time is important, which renders it unimportant to me. I think everyone has a line with technology. You don't seem to have a line with technology. I have a line in my studio about technology, over which I will not pass. Sure. You don't seem to have that.

DS: The reason I started using a flatbed scanner as a camera is pretty simple. I was trying to investigate tintypes. I wanted to make still life photographs of flowers and print them on metal and make jewelry from it. So I was still a jeweler. And it was right at that point when I was teaching at the Oregon College of Art and Craft and they had this great policy. Teach a class? Take a class. I was learning how to do digital photography. My teacher said, "you know You don't really have to learn how to make tintypes if
you just want to print pictures on metal." The day that he said, "All right, let me show you how to make this digital negative in the very, very simplest way." He grabbed an old dead flower. He puts it on a flatbed scanner. He pushes the button. And then he went through the workflow to create a digital negative from that. And all of a sudden, these lights went off. It didn't have anything to do with what was this tool. It didn't have anything to do with what was I trying to do with it. I just felt this sudden sort of veer into somewhere else that said, "Wow, I have a garden. I want to take pictures like this." It accelerated my curiosity in a way that I had never experienced before.

GR: Oh, that's fascinating how that opened up for you. Serendipity, but also a willingness to be open, makes a big difference. Deb, thank you so much for this conversation.

DS: You're welcome.

GR: This was great fun. I really appreciate your time.

DS: Thanks for inviting me, Gary. It was my pleasure. Good fun.

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GR: Well, that was my chat with Deb Stoner. It's so interesting to hear her journey and the twists and turns it has taken because of her interest in so many different things. Please check out my full interview with her on Creativity-HFT.com. Ali, any thoughts on the conversation?

AM: Yes. She does a good balance of using the good fortune of her childhood and chances that she's been afforded in her life to advance her curiosity and avail herself to discovering new

things. I liked her sunny disposition about some of the more cynical ways you and I have looked at, you know, creativity, you know, as inspiration, not thievery. You know, and obviously a photographer would question what real means. And a furniture maker would be like, this is not even a conversation I can get into because it's so obvious, you know, like a chair is real, you know? But I think that's going to be an interesting thing to return to with other people that we talked to on the show is what their concept of real is, what is authenticity, what are the limits that they draw for themselves in so far as how tools and where your line in the sand is in your shop as opposed to somebody else's can be a real engaging foray.

GR: Ali, you mentioned this in the intro, the blessing and the plague of curiosity.

AM: Right.

GR: And it is so easy now to have our focus distracted by a thousand things in our day and to want to go explore one thing after another after another. And you go down these holes in the internet. Focus is the key. And for that, I think you need discipline.

AM: Yes.

GR: And for me, that means every day that I do this one thing at this one time for 15 minutes or an hour or whatever it takes. And I read or I think or I write, I work at the bench, whatever is grabbing me now, but a little each day devoted to my creativity. And I think that what has to be said about curiosity to close this up is that one needs a willingness to be open to it. If you approach a new question, a new area of study with the preconceived notion that, well, I'll fail at this too, you've already lost. If on the other hand, you can give your curiosity a chance, you will be surprised at where it will take you and what you might find. Now, these may be things only you're curious about, but know what things you will find inside that door. Give yourself permission to open it.

GR: Thank you very much for listening. This has been Gary Rogowski with my apprentice and cohort Ali Meghdadi. Thank you to Deb Stoner for chatting with me. And please join us oh, January 28, that’s a Sunday, Sunday 1pm PT there will be a live stream Zoom chat with Ali and myself on this topic of curiosity. Wwe’ll also have some guests chime in on this idea and its importance. Please check out Creativity-hft.com for the link to the Zoom meeting and join us there for an interesting hour of conversation. Our last chat on Precision was good fun, really was, good fun. And if you missed this opportunity, go to our website again and you’ll see a link to our channel on Youtube. Youtube@creativityhft. And you can check it out there. Thank you again. I appreciate your support. Do good work. Take care.