

Welcome to The Creative Return

There are so many ways we can get derailed in our creative practice, when life has other intentions for us and we can feel distracted or low on motivation. At these moments it can be helpful to do a little mental reboot, a Creative Return – where we can harness a feeling of beginning again, to look forward to the rest of the year and prepare, to be ready to meet whatever opportunities or challenges we may come to.

To do this, the Creative Return will focus on 4 elements: Values, the Big Picture, Reflection and Looking Forwards with the aim of helping you remind yourself of your Why, to feel inspired about your work, to reflect on past successes and to set a course ahead.

I'll be asking you questions that get to the heart of each element and offering chances for reflection.

VALUES

When I talk to makers about 'the why behind the work' I'm often talking about two aspects: when you look inside yourself to find your Why, your Values, and when you look outside yourself to find your Why, the Big Picture. In this section we'll focus on your internal world.

Values

Do you know what your values are? What are the key things that underpin your work?

The values for your creative work will most likely have some overlap with the values you hold as an individual, but they may differ slightly. Your values will reflect your philosophy for working – how you want to be seen in the world, how you interact with people, how you create your products, how you do business. They will also evoke more abstract elements like how you would like people to feel when they use your products, the lifestyle you want to create, how your work might bring people together.



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It's worth sitting down somewhere quiet and thinking about it:

- What values are important to you in your work?
- What motivates you to do what you do?
- What are you trying to say with your work?
- What feelings/experiences do you want to help create?
- Are there any issues that fire you up, that you are passionate about challenging or responding to through your making?
- What do you want to be known for?
- What do you hope other people say about your work?

Remember, your values are yours alone, what is most important to you. Be open to the emotions behind the values, let those emotions help you understand what you need to do in your work to feel motivated, to feel engaged, to feel connected, to feel successful.

Working on your values not only helps you communicate about your work in a more genuine way, by allowing people to see the ethos and principles behind your work, it can also help you make decisions and plan. Do the jobs you say yes to align with your values? Do you spend too much time doing things that aren't relevant to your bigger ideals? Should you be focusing on work that brings you closer to the things you truly care about?

Regularly checking in with your values can help keep you focused on the things that really matter to you and your creative practice. Your values become touchstones in challenging times; they can help you maintain your energy when you need to get things done.

THE BIG PICTURE

Now we're going to look at values from the opposite direction – rather than focusing on what motivates you from within yourself, I'd like you to think about what motivates you from outside yourself. What are the driving forces in the world that help you to create, that spur you on?

Again, as with values, your own Big Picture will be unique to you. You will have encountered people or situations, opportunities or challenges that have led you to your own creative practice.

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Who are those people? What were those situations? Are you someone who believes in the power of art and creativity as a positive force in the world, and your work aims to entrance or spread joy to the people who encounter it? Or perhaps you have noticed things about the world which aren't quite right, things that could be made better, and your work seeks to address those problems, to solve an issue for your audience. Or perhaps you can't imagine doing anything else, that creating in this way is something you have an overwhelming impulse to do.

Whereas understanding your values helps you to share with your audience why you do what you do, and helps you to find your own inner motivation, understanding your Big Picture helps you to place what you do in the world and to feel like you are part of something that extends beyond yourself.

Find somewhere quiet and think about it:

- Who do you make your work for?
- How does your work benefit them? (Remember this is not just a question of utility – enjoyment and pleasure are worthwhile benefits in and of themselves)
- Are there challenges or problems that your work addresses? How does it seek to alleviate or minimise these things?
- Are there opportunities or possibilities that your work engages with? How does it promote these things?
- Or, more generally, why do you do what you do?

Remember, as with your values, your Big Picture is yours alone. You may share similar outlooks with others, in fact community is one of the main motivating factors for a lot of creative people, however, don't start to let judgement or comparison enter into this – whatever the motivation for your work (your personal values or your Big Picture) it is no better or worse than anyone else's. You need to be happy with your own Big Picture or else you will always feel off kilter or in competition with others, which is unnecessary and unhelpful.

Spending a bit of time thinking about your Big Picture can help in many ways. It can help you articulate your work to a wider audience, helping them to understand where the work sits. It can connect you to other people, as once we understand who we are doing things for, and why, we can reach out to them more effectively. But, crucially, understanding your Big Picture will help you when you are finding things tough. Checking in regularly with your Big Picture will give you the boost to keep going when you are flagging, or the burst of energy you need at the beginning of something new and daunting.

REFLECTION

I'm a big advocate for regularly taking time to reflect on how things are going, especially in your creative practice. It can be helpful to pause and not jump straight into the next thing. If we take the time to reflect after each big event or body of work, it's so much easier to navigate a path forward, one that is responsive to our needs and in line with our values. But it's not always easy to find a suitable time to stop to do this. Yes, most of us manage a bit of it in January when everyone is busy making resolutions, but after that the year can be a bit of a free for all. Which is why I have started tying my reflection to the seasons, using the natural markers throughout the year to remind me.

Finding Balance

In the last two sections we thought about Values and the Big Picture. So, hopefully you have a picture of why you do the work you do, what motivates you and what it's all for.

I imagine, if you're anything like me, there was a tendency to only focus on creative or work related things, to slightly ignore the 'life' part. It's so easy to do. But it's vital to take a pause, now, to think about all of it, together. How you would like work and life to collaborate, to find the balance you most need.

A great place to start is by reflecting back on the months already passed. Acknowledge the things you have done so far this year. It can be helpful to flick through your diary or calendar to really get a sense of all the things you actually did.

Exercise:

Write down everything (both work & life). All the time spent working, in the studio/workshop, in meetings, appointments, selling at shows, fairs or events, professional development events etc. If you have family or carer commitments include those. And, don't forget all the things you do for your health & wellbeing- seeing friends, family, and the quality time you take for yourself.

Isn't there a lot? It's easy to overlook so much of what we do, but by noticing and recording the activity of your daily life here, today, you are giving yourself the chance to see how much you have already accomplished.

- What went well? (Give yourself credit for the things you achieved, no matter how small you think they might be.)
- What didn't go as expected? (Consider what happened. How

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much of this was actually down to you, and what you did, and how much of it was down to the situation or to other people.)

- What worked and what didn't?
- How did doing these things make you feel?
- Which of your values did these events uphold? Which ones were left out?
- Would you do them again?
- What would you change/adapt/revise?
- What did you learn from these experiences?
- What would you like to carry forwards through the rest of the year?

Identify the areas where you feel out of balance. The things that might require a bit more focus or a bit more time in the months ahead. And remember, that balance is not a goal or a static state, it's an ongoing process of small adjustments, responsive to the things that happen (planned or otherwise). It's not necessarily something that needs fixing, it's just something to be mindful of, so that you don't feel yourself slipping too far in any one direction. Don't feel bad if you feel your balance is off, everyone struggles. What's important to realise is that you are able to do something about it, if you choose, once you've acknowledged what isn't feeling right for you at the moment.

LOOKING FORWARDS

What's next?

By now you probably have a lot of lists – of your key values for your creative practice and your work, of the things that motivate you, your 'why behind the work'. You'll have thought about the people your work touches, and the role it plays out in the world, how you are part of something bigger than just yourself. And, you may well have started to notice where things have shifted in your practice, where the balance is just a little off. So much thinking, a lot of contemplating some of the deeper elements of your work.

That's all brilliant. But, all that thinking can easily drift away and be forgotten as you return to the daily acts of your practice. Which is why this final section is about looking forwards – to create a roadmap of sorts to help you navigate the months ahead, making sure that you do all the things that you most want to do, the things that will have the most impact on your creative practice.

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Create a plan

One of the key features of setting goals is to make them achievable. There's no point drafting a giant list of all the things you want to do if there's not enough time or you won't have enough energy. So, we need to prioritise: what are the things that if you do them now will have the most impact for you and for your creative practice?

- Draw up a list, bearing in mind what we've thought about so far (your Values, the Big Picture and Balance)
- Select the 3 most important items from the list (the ones that you may feel a teensy bit anxious about doing, or the ones you've been shelving throughout the year)
- What steps can you take to make a start with each task?
Break the big task down into smaller steps
- Now, try to put some time-limits or deadlines on them.
When do they need doing, when would you ideally like them finished? For some tasks you may not be able to complete them in 3 months, so what are the elements you will achieve in that time?

Put this list, and the timeframes, somewhere you can see it regularly and make time to check in with your goals. The beginning of the week is a good time, before things get carried away. Remind yourself of the things you know you most want to achieve, and plan to work on them. Try not to get sidetracked for too long (it's only normal for life to take over and things to slow down or be put on pause). If that happens, see if you can do something small, right now, that will take you one step closer towards the goal.

SUPPORT

Hopefully this process - of reconnecting with your Why, of reminding yourself of your values and the Big Picture, of taking some time to reflect on how things have been going recently, and of looking forwards to what you'd like to do next - will have helped you return to your creative practice in a way that feels rooted in meaning and purpose. But don't worry if it doesn't feel that way. Maintaining a creative practice during a global pandemic is hard work and we are all struggling with so much additional stresses and emotional labour.

If you would like any additional support in reconnecting with your creativity or uncovering the why behind your work I have additional resources on my website and blog posts devoted to these topics.

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This e-flet was written by Melody Vaughan (they/them).

Creative mentoring tending to cultures of care

Melody is committed to working with professional artists, designers & contemporary craft makers who want to build ethical and sustainable creative practices full of care.

melodyvaughan.uk

[@melody_vaughan](https://www.instagram.com/melody_vaughan)