

Welcome to The Why behind the Work

It's so easy for makers and other creatives who produce tangible things like objects to focus on the HOW of their work, but I'd like to talk about the importance of WHY to your practice.

Understanding why you do what you do- the things that motivate you, who you do it for and how it serves them – unlocks a completely new way of communicating about your work. It allows you to tap into your unique, authentic voice.

There are thousands of makers out there, and knowing why helps you distinguish yourself from all the rest. Drawing on these fundamental parts of your practice will help you to connect to the people you want to reach, and it will help you build relationships and trust.

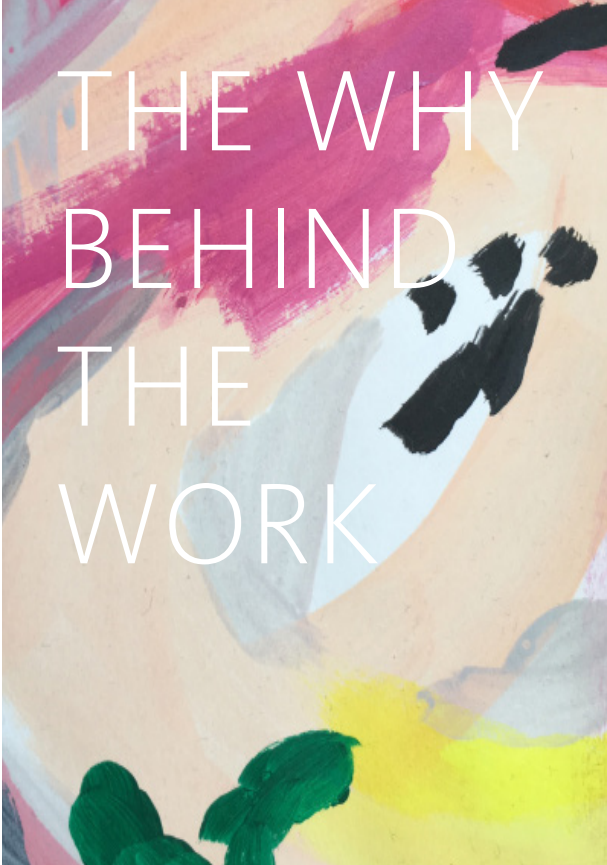
## VALUES

What are your values? What are the key principles 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.

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?



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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.

I like to think of Values and Audience as two sides of the same coin. It's all very well knowing what all of this creative work is for, where it comes from, but if you don't know who it is for then it will never fly.

## AUDIENCE

Your audience will be as unique as you are. It is incredibly unlikely that your audience is 'everyone' or 'the general public'. There will be some people who respond to your work more than others, and that is ok. You should not be trying to please everyone. You will have a core audience – the people you make for and who adore your work. But, it's also worth remembering that your audience isn't just the people who buy or engage with your work directly. You will be interacting with lots of different people:

The people you make your work for (the ideal)

The people who buy your work (for themselves)

The people who buy your work (for others)

The people who see/engage with your work (at shows, exhibitions)

The people who use your products/services (now and in the future)

The people who work with you (other artists, shop/gallery owners, suppliers, colleagues)

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The people who are influenced by you (your peers, followers on social media)

All these people are not the same, but they are all your audience. It's worth getting to know these different aspects of your audience, and understanding when you are interacting with them. How the people who see your work at a show may not be the same people who buy your work from an independent shop, how the people who follow you on Instagram may not be the same people who will read all the text on your website. The way you communicate about what you do should adapt and change slightly for each audience, to respond to the things that work for them, the things they are excited to see and hear.

Becoming fluent in your values and understanding your audience is one of the best things you can do for your creative practice. Tackling the Why questions, and developing your own voice and viewpoint, helps you connect in a more meaningful way to the people you want to share the world with.

## 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.

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.

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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.

Ask yourself:

- 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.

## SUPPORT

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

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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.

Hopefully this process - of investigating your Why, of reminding yourself of your values and the Big Picture - will have helped you explore 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.

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.

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