



SEVEN  
**essential  
practices**  
FOR THE **artist**  
PROFESSIONAL

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## « introduction »

Do any of the following scenarios ring true for you?

- » You've fallen in love with your art practice and can never seem to get enough time in the studio.
- » You are coming back to art after being away from it for a long time, determined not to let it take a backseat again.
- » You wish your studio practice were more regular and predictable and that you didn't suffer from destructive self-doubts.
- » You have established yourself as an artist, yet you fall down when it comes to following through on opportunities to get your work shown and to earn money from your passion.

Being a professional artist is a deliciously rewarding and satisfying life, yet not without challenges.



I was determined and enthusiastic, but suffered from **self-doubts** that left me **paralyzed** both **in the studio** and in the **business side** of things.



In my early years as an artist, I was determined and enthusiastic, yet suffered from self-doubts that left me paralyzed both in the studio and in the business side of my art.

After I graduated from college, I moved out to California and I no longer had successful professional artists to mentor me. I bumbled along, taking every class and reading every book I could find about being a professional artist. I got largely the same advice from each course or book, but what I didn't get was the confidence or a clear strategy to follow through on much of it.

I did submit my portfolio and enter shows here and there but I had a random, inconsistent approach and

absolutely no follow-through. There were galleries genuinely interested in my work but I never followed up!

During this same period, I was on a path of growth and self-discovery. I delved into yoga, meditation, therapy and spiritual and philosophical teachings. I began a daily meditation practice that continues to thrive and support me over two decades later. These studies led to a solid foundation that has deeply influenced how I approach everything I do, including my studio practice and my career as an artist.

I learned to become more conscious and examine my thinking patterns. I was able to observe how *my thoughts alone*, and not solely my actions, were affecting my experiences. I had to come to terms with the humbling fact that I alone was responsible for holding back my success.



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I could no longer rest on a bed of cynicism and look outward at the world with blame. I couldn't hang my lack of success on what I had previously perceived as the problem – narrow-minded curators, aloof galleries, an art world full of elitism and favoritism. I had to let all that thinking go and focus purely on my thoughts and subconscious beliefs.

I had to face the fact that my self-doubts were inhibiting action. I realized how my negative attitudes and resentful perceptions of the art world were affecting my reception there. I also began to realize how much I was buying into the “starving artist” myth reinforced in the popular media, and how deeply detrimental this mythology is to all artists.

I started to think differently about my work and its place in the world. I began to embrace the value of my work and ceased to worry about those who weren't interested in it. This new attitude prompted intelligent, heartfelt action. I began to have more faith in my work. Galleries started seeking me out. Moreover, I *created* opportunities for myself. This led to my art being shown in exhibitions around the globe, museum shows, and major international contemporary art fairs.

Because I changed how I thought about making money and selling artwork, I started selling more. Even while other people were experiencing an economic downturn, I was able to sell work for larger sums than ever before.

And more importantly, I started to have a sense of my place and purpose as an artist. I gained a confidence in my work independent of what others thought. Amazingly, other people's opinions ceased to matter to me.

I felt so passionately about my shifting perspectives that I developed the [Artist Mentorship Program](#) to help other artists experience this same shift.

## « 1. create a studio habit »

Getting in the studio should be easy – it’s what you love to do, right? Sadly, many artists have a tempestuous relationship with their studio practice.

For some, it’s difficult just to get into the studio and they are plagued with energy-draining guilt over it. Others get in the studio, but once there, have difficulty getting started. Many more are plagued by dark, crushing critical voices. Why do you think all those famous artists in the ’50s drank so heavily?

We artists have important work to do in the world and valuable ideas to share. Anytime that work is not brought forth due to lack of confidence, organization, commitment or follow-through, it is a loss to society. It is not just the Chagalls and the Warhols that have something valuable to contribute. Every artist has a raw genius worth honing and refining through consistent work habits.



Every artist  
has a **raw genius**  
worth **honing**  
and **refining**.



The crux of the [Artist Mentorship Program](#) is getting everyone immediately started with regular studio practice. But first, we have to clear the thought patterns and habits that have been standing in the way.

Through the years, I have developed tools to deal with the inner critic, practices to jump-start creativity, and methods for reflection and observation that have truly changed my studio practice. I encourage artists to cultivate a reverence and respect for inviolable studio time. Even if your practice is more conceptual

or project-based, you can still schedule regular time to write, research, brainstorm or work on ideas to keep the creative mind in shape, alert and well oiled. Even the smallest increments of time make a huge difference.

Creativity is like a muscle – use it regularly and it gets stronger, firmer, more toned and ready for action. But if you only work out in fits and spurts, – you won’t be present and ready when inspiration strikes. You won’t be able to advance to the next level, and you won’t experience the satisfaction of noticeable shifts and tangible results.





The connection to **your practice** is what pulls you through the **tough times.**



What the artists in my [Artist Mentorship Program](#) have learned is that studio practice is like a loyal friend. The connection to your practice is what pulls you through the tough times. If you love what you do and you are really connected to your creativity through a consistent practice, you are less thrown off by rejection, or lack of support. Artists who work with me in the program have reported feeling more confidence and clarity in the work as a result of establishing a regular studio practice. A Berkeley artist, Laurie Miller, who went through the program,

shared that she had discovered a connective thread in the work that she had not previously known was there. Through consistent practice, you will know the value of the process to your very core and understand that your work will consistently evolve and change over time. You will be able to ride the dry spells and difficult times with more equanimity. You will also be able to revel in those peak moments when your creative genius shines through.

A lot of artists focus on whether their work is getting outside recognition as a measure of their success. That kind of outward focus is a creativity squelcher. If you are looking toward something outside of yourself to validate your work, such as sales, exhibitions or accolades, it will be hard to maintain your creative practice during the inevitable up and down cycles of an artist's career. In order to maintain the motivation to develop a regular studio habit, it helps to develop a strong and sure understanding of the inherent value of your work whether it is currently experiencing popularity or not.

## « 2. manage your thoughts »

Our thoughts are everything. They can help us move us forward, energize and motivate us or they can sap enthusiasm, stifle creative output or even stop us from working altogether.

Have you ever been working along happily on your art when all of a sudden you felt exhausted and drained for no apparent reason?

Have you experienced being unable to maintain your momentum because you are suddenly convinced that all your work is crap and you don't even know where to begin to fix it?



When we learn how to  
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time in the studio.



All of us have habits and patterns of thought that we unwittingly developed while young. These thoughts literally become like grooves in our brain – neural pathways – that create habits of self-criticism, fear, doubt, cynicism or worry that can be hard to break. When we learn how to manage our thoughts and catch them before an intense downward spiral begins, we can have a happier, more productive time in the studio.

When we are not conscious of the direction of our thoughts, we can get sucked down in a negative spiral. I teach artists how to become more conscious of their thinking moment to moment, before the negativity gains momentum.

One of the processes I teach is the “Studio Check-in”. We set a timer to go off at twenty-minute intervals and pause briefly to jot down our current feelings and thoughts. Without even *trying to change anything*, this practice brings a gentle, mindful awareness to our thought patterns so we have the option to choose more energizing and creative thoughts in the moment.

Pat Churchill, an artist who went through the [Artist Mentorship Program](#), shares her experience:

*“The Studio Check-in for me resulted in a newfound understanding that the state of mind that I go into when making art is not so fragile or delicate as I had imagined. Once engaged I can set a timer and interrupt myself to see how it’s going, and then return to wherever I was without really disturbing the flow. It was sort of like snorkeling, being completely engrossed in the beautiful underwater fish and coral, and then coming up to see where I was in relation to the shore.*

*Of course, after surfacing I just want to dive in again, or if it’s cold and there’s a riptide, get out.*



*During the check-in I would often write down new ideas and directions I would like to take the work I was engaged in. Without the checking in, these might have been forgotten.”*

### « 3. tap into yourself »

I remember the shock when I first started taking advanced painting courses at the Boston Museum School during college. Up until then, I had only studied in a classic educational environment, diligently reading the required texts, taking notes, studying and following the teachers’ assignments. Suddenly, I was in class and *no one was telling me what to do!* For the first time in my life, it was up to me what to paint and how to paint it.

I felt like the miller’s daughter in the fairy tale, who was put in a room full of straw and told to spin it into gold. I had absolutely no idea how. And the funny thing was, hardly any of my teachers were much help with this. They couldn’t teach me how to tap into myself, into my own ideas, and start a body of work or create a connection to my creative source.

It is not at all surprising to me that the majority of people have difficulties being creative. I’ve learned that encouraging innovative thinking can be taught, but most of us were raised in an environment that favored order, uniformity and memorizing existing information over originality, inventiveness and creative chaos.



Most of us were raised in an environment that favored **order** and **uniformity** over **originality** and **inventiveness**.



Out of necessity, I became a keen student of creativity and the creative process. I began to observe and analyze how creative projects are born, developed and nurtured and also to learn what blocks or stifles the creative brain. I studied interviews with innovative artists and ingenious thinkers of all types, noting how they worked and what they said about their processes. I observed myself carefully in the studio, noting what worked and what didn’t. When I taught, I paid close attention to the differences in creativity

in children and adults (and they are vast!). I noted at what age the natural inborn creativity that I saw in young children dropped off. I studied schools and systems of learning and teaching where creativity flourished far beyond what I had ever seen elsewhere.

What I learned has had a remarkable impact on my creativity. Now, instead of fits and starts in the studio, I have an unending stream of creative ideas and projects. I used to worry about having time and energy to bring into concrete form all the ideas that came into my head. Now, I write them all down and trust that the really important ones will be there when the time is right. I have noticed that an idea may come to fruition years later but it will take a different form than I had originally imagined because I have changed. I suggest that you to write down all of your ideas no matter how far-fetched, simplistic or ridiculous they



Write down **all your ideas** no matter how **far-fetched, simplistic or ridiculous** they may seem.



may seem. No matter if you think you don't have time, money or resources for them right now. This is a way of acknowledging your creative mind for giving the ideas to you and encouraging it to generate more. Know that there will always be more ideas than you can execute, and simply savor that you have such a fertile, active mind.

Over the years, I have shared what I have learned about the creative process with artists who study with me. They, too, have learned what an extraordinary difference it makes just to have a deeper understanding of the normal phases of the creative process.

One of the biggest breakthroughs for me was to understand and embrace what I call "The Wall". No matter how many times I have faced it and passed through it, The Wall still catches me unaware. It's that moment, that hour, that week, that, day, when you look at the project you have been laboring on and are convinced that it is utterly irretrievable or unsolvable, perhaps even worthless. You come to believe that all the work you have done was for naught and you had better just give up this whole business of being an artist because your work is no good, you will never amount to anything, you are

wholly incompetent or totally lacking in talent or creativity. The initial blush of enthusiasm that started and fueled the project is dead. Where did the fun go?

It's a horrible feeling.

And yet, it is a totally natural stage of the creative process. Moreover, as unlikely as it may sound, there is a tremendous gift here. You see, when you get to this



The first time you **face these feelings**, it will take **tremendous faith** to keep working **in spite** of them.



point, as uncomfortable as it may be, it means you are about to make a breakthrough in the work. This breakthrough will impact not only this one piece or project, but also all your work going into the future. This is where you truly grow and evolve as an artist. However, you will be unable to move forward without some trust in the process. The first time you face these feelings, it will take tremendous faith to keep working in spite of them. As unreasonable as these self-doubts thoughts may appear as you are reading them now, when you are in the midst of The Wall, they feel like the absolute Truth.

This is where your commitment to practice comes in. This is when your community of support will help you through. You will need to step outside of your own thoughts and ego to move forward. Allow the work to speak to you and tell you what it needs. Sometimes this will mean sitting quietly and reflecting on the work until a way becomes clear. Sometimes, there will be a dramatic shift in the work, other times a subtle change is needed. You may need to seek outside ideas and inspiration to know what to do. A visit to the museum or library, a talk with a friend, a movie, a book or a walk in nature may jiggle something inside you that provides the next steps. Trust that the answer will come. But please don't believe that negative voice that tells you that you are worthless and your work is meaningless. Remember that voice is not all of you; it is just a portion of your personality. Observe this part of you with compassion, but don't let it run the show.

## « 4. cultivate support and encouragement »

If you study art movements throughout the centuries, artists have always been congregating in bars, cafés and salons, to debate, discuss, exchange ideas and spur one another forward.

You can't do this work completely alone. It is unreasonable to think so, and yet so many of us expect exactly that of ourselves. I have learned how essential it is to have support. I value it so highly that I seek out mentors who are further along

on their paths than I am for that kind of accelerated propulsion forward that we rarely achieve in isolation. I benefit not only from their wisdom and experience, but the best ones also help me keep me accountable to my growth and commitments. Getting an outside perspective on your gifts, achievements and goals is priceless. By investing in regular coaching and forming mastermind groups with other artists, I have become increasingly focused and productive. Having a support network of people who are genuinely interested in your success and achievement and are holding you accountable is invaluable. Sometimes you can find this kind of community in artist co-ops, arts retreats, arts organizations and schools. I built into the

[Artist Mentorship Program](#) a community forum because I know the power of this kind of connection.

Portland artist Millicent Zimdars, who went through the [Artist Mentorship Program](#), told me, “The community component...is an extremely effective means of gaining a diverse and candid support/critique group. Inspiration and excitement flourish on the group forum.” Through following the program, working one-on-one with me, and with the accountability of the group, she was able to establish a regular studio practice where there had been none and finally complete works that had been in progress for years.



Getting an **outside perspective** on your **gifts, achievements** and **goals** is **priceless.**





The **highest achievers**  
work with **skilled teams**  
of coaches rather than  
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on their own.



A coach or mentor is another valuable support. Top athletes, singers, actors and dancers all work with coaches and trainers. A president has the cabinet; CEOs have their boards of directors. I have noticed that highest achievers in our society were working with experienced and skilled teams of advisors and coaches rather than trying to figure it all out on their own.

I didn't understand the whole "coaching" niche until recently. I heard about it and took it for some fad or media buzzword, but really didn't know what it was about. Then I had an opportunity to work with a coach I respected and admired. Once I started working with her, I was amazed at what huge shifts I was able to make with her support. Changes that would have happened slowly, if at all, I was able to make quickly with her guidance and insight. I not only had her backing me and holding me accountable but more importantly believing in me – in some cases more than I was believing in myself. She was able to see potential, opportunities and ideas that I hadn't even noticed. She encouraged me to step into a bigger version of myself. Once she opened the door for me, I would hesitate at first but then step through and become this new version of me, wondering why I had been so afraid before.

Now, I make coaching and support the cornerstone of my success strategy. I don't even think of trying to do what I do on my own. Why would I, when support abounds?

## « 5. maintain the engine »

Your physical and mental health must always come first if you are to maintain a balanced and productive life as an artist. Without your health and well-being you do not have the physical stamina or mental clarity to do the work you love.

Artists are notorious for ignoring their health. I have encountered many artists who routinely take risks with their materials, not using proper ventilation or

protective gear. A startlingly high percentage of artists have suffered permanent disabilities, nerve or immune system damage or even died from using toxic materials and practices.

But it's not just the improper handling and use of toxic materials that can damage artists' health. It can be subtler forms of ignoring the body, not making time to eat well, exercise regularly or get adequate rest.

Artists can be prone to overworking. Most have some kind of full- or part-time employment outside of their art practice. To make sure they get studio time, they

may put in long hours before or after their day jobs.

In addition, they love what they do so much it can be intoxicating and hard to stop working. Trying to fit too much into our schedules creates undue stress.

Stress is the leading cause of health problems in the U.S. Each artist must negotiate a workable balance between studio time, work, family, play, and rest.

Just because you have full-time employment or are occupied with raising a family doesn't mean you can't make a significant body of work. There are countless examples of artists and writers who created whole bodies of work while raising children or working full-

time. Many a full-length book as been written in thirty to sixty- minute daily increments.

It is important to remember that your physical body is the engine that drives the machine. If you don't value taking excellent care of yourself, in the long run, the work may suffer. You may become exhausted, lose focus and mental clarity and become less productive. I've seen artists who are unable to maintain a consistent studio practice rely upon upcoming shows and deadlines to push themselves to work long, exhausting hours only to completely burn out and collapse afterwards.

Scheduling in non-negotiable time for exercise, eating healthy meals, and seeking quiet, reflective time all help to create a happier, healthier, saner artist who can joyfully meet the physical and mental challenges in the work.



Remember that **you**  
are the **engine**  
that drives the  
**machine.**





## « 6. get your sh\*t together »

Organizing our time, our priorities, our studios and workspaces, our desks, even the files on our computers can be overwhelming and confusing. We miss deadlines, misplace important tools, and get frustrated about having to wade through mess and confusion to even get started.

As an artist you are probably right-brain dominant, so the left-brain traits of linear and analytical thinking necessary for organization may not be your strong suit. Be gentle with yourself and appreciate the creative genius that springs from your right brain. If you have a vibrant, if sometimes messy and disorganized home or studio, seek outside help if necessary. Your ability to organize your papers, work files, materials, goals and priorities will have a direct impact on your success.

The artists in my [Artist Mentorship Program](#) express a remarkable increase in energy and clarity after our module on organization and de-cluttering. Spurred on by the energy of the group, artists who have had significant difficulties in the past with disorder and clutter make huge strides in organization, freeing up momentous space and time for creative work. By clearing out old, unused and outdated materials, equipment supplies and work, and creating clear, organized workspaces, they end up wasting less time in the studio. Organizing computer files, paperwork and images of their artwork, enables them to respond quickly to calls for entry and important opportunities and to prepare for a systematic approach to sending their work out on a consistent basis.



When I walk into my studio and things are **easy to access**, my creative mind feels **free, ready and eager to create.**



I love the kind of serenity that order brings to me. When I walk into my studio and things are put away and easy to access and find, my creative mind feels free, ready and eager to create. The longer I work as an artist the more important it is to have a highly organized structure for my creative output. I have systems for sorting, organizing, documenting and inventorying my many drawings, installations, sculptures and paintings.

This kind of getting on top of stuff also extends to the big picture, which is so essential to our success. Each year, I reflect on what I have done so far and look over what I want to accomplish in the studio and in my career in the coming year. Then, I create a system of checking in with these goals and visions. I love sharing my systems with the artists in my [Artist Mentorship Program](#), providing them with templates, worksheets, resources for inventory, goals, mailing lists, etc. It has been amazing to me what a difference it has made for the artists I have worked with to begin to de-clutter and create workable systems in the studio and office.

## « 7. accelerate your progress through clear intentions »



The concept of **intention** has had an **extraordinary impact** on my life.



The whole concept of intention has had an extraordinary impact on my life. When I have taken the time to set down intentions and create a clear vision for my work and my life as an artist, it is surprising how many of these things have unfolded for me over time with seemingly little effort on my part. I'll even look back years later and see where a written vision statement I had completely forgotten had taken a surprising and even more delightful form than my original intention.

When I first started to work with intention, I didn't even believe in my work enough to set goals. Or, I thought that setting goals was something other people did but it felt too restrictive and linear for me. It didn't sound like fun, I was afraid I wouldn't achieve them, wasn't sure they would benefit me. Then, as I started to warm up to the idea, I would set goals, file them away and forget about them, only to find them later and feel regretful that I had missed some deadline. Or, I'd remember an application deadline too late and rush to complete it, stressing myself out in the process and resenting the very contest I wanted to win! Clearly, I needed a better system.

Through trial and error, I found some procedures and tactics that work better with my right-brain visual style than many of the traditional, left-brain methods I had learned about. I am now so much more on top of the goals and deadlines that are important to me. To prevent energy zapping guilt, I've learned to pace myself, prioritizing the important goals and letting go of the ones I don't have time for, without fear or regret.

I suggest starting with a big, delicious vision for your life. Where would you like to be with your art in one year? Three years? Five years? Allow yourself to playfully expand with this vision, unfettered by practicality or your own doubting mind. Remember when you were a kid and you allowed yourself to imagine doing whatever you wanted when you grew up? Most artists don't allow themselves to dream large. We stop ourselves because our ideas seem impractical or unachievable or even embarrassing to admit. What I teach in the [Artist Mentorship Program](#) is the difference between the essence of an idea and the eventual *form* it will take. Forms are fluid and negotiable. The pure essence of any idea can manifest in numerous ways. So allow yourself to dream freely and really stretch yourself here, don't worry about exactly how you will achieve your

vision. It's important to listen to these whisperings, yearnings or longings to know where to point your ship. Give yourself some quiet, uninterrupted time. Write everything you can imagine down in vivid detail. Use color; draw pictures, patterns or symbols to make it more visual. Be sure to put the date on this so you can refer to it later.

Next you'll want to engage your practical side. What might it take to bring this vision into reality? There is something of the numinous in how things may unfold, but many of your dreams will require some concrete action on your part. Make a reasonable list of things you would like to accomplish in the coming year. Hold these visions lightly, not tightly.

Remember they may happen in a different way than you expected them to. For example, if you would like your work to be seen by more people, be open



Start with a **big, delicious vision** for your life.

Where would you like to be with your art in one year? **Three years?**  
Five years?



to where and when that might happen. Could it be on your website or blog in addition to a brick and mortar show? If your overarching vision is to increase your income from your art, be open to what forms that might take: Several small sales? One large sale? Leasing or renting your work? Commissions? Mass production of one image or piece?



What is **one small thing**  
that can be done today to make  
this vision a **reality**?



Break big visions into small action steps. What is one small thing that can be done today to make this vision a reality? Do you need to do some Internet research? Or pick up the phone and call someone? Write that down on your to-do list and commit to getting it done by a certain date. You don't need to think of the whole project at once. Too often we get paralyzed into inaction because our vision is so big, we feel overwhelmed. Just as every piece of art is an

accumulation of actions and creative moments, the realization of your goals is simply small, manageable action steps taken one at a time.

Set aside regular and consistent time in your calendar to attend to your vision and goals. Find an accountability partner and check in with each other at least once or twice a month. Make commitments to each other as to which tasks and goals you will complete before your next meeting. You can meet in person or on the phone. Agree that your time together will be focused on business matters and that you will set aside another time for socializing. At each meeting, follow up with your partner and share upcoming competition, residency and grant applications. If you have trouble making decisions about which opportunities to follow up on or which images of your work to send in, ask your accountability partner for advice. It is remarkable how much clarity I gain just from talking an issue over with someone. A decision that had been stymieing me for weeks is often resolved in a matter of minutes.

## « moving forward »

The truth is this work goes very deep. What I am sharing with you are ways of thinking, being, and acting in the world that I have developed through trial and error and refined over 20 years. It has meant the difference in my life between struggle and anxiety to a sense of joy, satisfaction, confidence and purpose that I wake up with each and every day. That's why I've poured my heart and soul into creating in-depth programs specifically to guide and support other artists through this transformation. I would love to help you with your own transformation.

Please email now at [info@themindfulartist.com](mailto:info@themindfulartist.com) if you would like more information.



ABOUT

## Michele Théberge

**M**ichele Théberge's collectors and fans treasure the quiet, ephemeral quality of her drawings, paintings and installations constructed from simple materials such as paper, paint, fabric, mylar, foil and pins. Her **meditative art captures the essence of an idea or a moment in time through the simplest of means**. Collected internationally, her work has been exhibited in museums, art fairs and galleries in New York, Osaka, London, Hong Kong, San Francisco, Miami and the United Arab Emirates.

As a **recognized expert in acrylic painting materials and methods**, Michele has traveled the U.S. and Canada inspiring thousands of artists from beginners to established professionals with the latest techniques and materials.

Michele's web presence is giving her international exposure as a mentor to artists. Her popular online **Artist Mentorship Program** ([www.themindfulartist.com](http://www.themindfulartist.com)) teaches up-and-coming artists how to tap into their creativity at a deeper level, and move into the realm of professional artist. More experienced artists appreciate Michele's gifts for helping them staying focused and effective in their studio practice and marketing.

She holds an MFA degree from California College of the Arts, a BFA from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and a BA from Tufts University.

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