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For Artists, Even Paid Jobs Should Be “Personal”

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Question: I’m not busy enough to feel like I can break away and shoot personal work when I’m worried about paying the bills. How can I switch gears and shoot personal work?

The topic of “personal work” often comes up these days. I think it’s a shame that photographers have separated what they love from what they do for a living. I met a photographer once who was so busy “working” he had not shot anything for himself in years, literally years! That was very sad to me.

All Work is Personal

If you’re a photographer or an illustrator, everything you do is “personal” in some way. Just as a writer infuses a story with her own memories, or a musician laments about his broken love life, for an artist, it is always personal. So how do those who have already separated their art from their work get back in touch with their creative soul?

Always Have Something New To Show

I’m a great believer in shooting personal projects. No one ever has to see them, if you don’t want, but you should shoot for yourself at some point, even if it’s on the way to the grocery store, or when you go visit your family for Thanksgiving! By shooting personal projects, you always have something to promote yourself with. I also recommend finding a personal project that can be ongoing, something you add to when you can. Keep it fun – don’t put more pressure on your life! It doesn’t have to be a massive undertaking, but it can help to feed your soul between paid jobs. Even if you don’t have much free time, you can still find a few hours a week, or take a self-portrait a day ... something!

Most Careers Begin with Personal Projects

These personal projects can often end up getting you work. Many of my clients and other photographers I know began with personal projects, because that’s all they had. One example immediately comes to mind: photographer [Landon Nordeman](#), who I met not long after he graduated school, when he showed his “[Staten Island Ferry](#)” project at the Monthly Photo Salon here in New York. He had spent a week riding the ferry back and forth until he had compiled a wonderful photo essay. I was immediately taken by Landon’s ability to tell stories and infuse his sense of humor at the same time. Visit his website and you’ll see that he now has a lot more stories and assignments under his belt – but it all started with that personal project.



© Landon Nordeman

Another photographer I met through the Monthly Photo Salon is [Chris Crisman](#), who was also just starting out at that time. Chris showed a personal project featuring portraits of steelworkers (his dad was a steelworker) and some of these same images were then accepted into Communication Arts the very first time he ever submitted there. I was taken by Chris' quiet but intense style, both in his imagery and his personality. I then worked with him as a client and helped him edit the rest of his work into a new presentation that allowed him to go to the next level.



© Chris Crisman

Again, his website shows how far he has come. Having now established his environmental portraiture and lifestyle skills, in both the editorial and advertising fields, Chris recently added an unexpected but [beautiful portfolio of landscapes](#) to his website – and although this work is more personal, it still resonates with Chris' signature style.

Shoot a Few Frames for Yourself

For photographer [Chris Buck](#), shooting personal work is a professional obligation, so that he always has something new and different to show potential clients. When Chris is shooting for editorial, if there's time when he's done what the client needs, he'll shoot a few extra frames for himself. Even if the clients don't always love the new ideas and stick with their "safer" choice, Chris now has his own satisfyingly creative image which he can happily put on his website or in his portfolio. A great example is his [portrait of Gary Oldman with pie on his face](#) – when they saw it, the client said, "What's with this picture?" ... and they didn't use it!



© Chris Buck

When Chris is shooting for advertising, however, he's not thinking about personal work. He's respectful of the client's time and money and works hard to execute what the client wants. He also knows that if he has any elaborate ideas that were not discussed previously, he needs to run them by the client beforehand, whereas with an editorial shoot, it's easier to add in an extra prop, because the idea is more likely to have come to him while shooting. These few extra frames on editorial assignments are in addition to the ongoing personal projects Chris also shoots, so he's always applying his own creativity to what he's doing.

Remember to Feed Your Creative Soul

I recently featured photographer [Kwaku Alston](#) in my monthly newsletter, the Chatterbulletin. Kwaku is known for beautiful celebrity portraiture, but he is also a social documentarian, and it was important to him to hit the streets and document something that was close to home – literally. In his case, that was Venice Beach, California. Kwaku really wanted to show something from his ongoing personal project “Venice,” and I loved it so much, I used a second image in my article - a red Volkswagen van...who doesn’t love a VW van, right?



© Kwaku Alston

Although Kwaku has been shooting different subjects as part of this project – from surfers to sandcastles and many other characters of Venice Beach’s unique culture – he has also accumulated an entire [series of VW vans](#). Now he has a series within a project! And, “Venice” was recently highlighted on [The New York Times photo blog Lens](#) – so you never know where your personal work might lead you!