

# Advice from the Trenches: Graduating from Design School



Dear Sister C;

I just graduated from a design school as a top student. I had no problem dealing with tough deadlines or assignments. But now that I'm out, I feel like I'm back to square one. I wanted a career in fine arts. It's not like there's a JOB out here for me. Freelance sucks. We had a few classes on marketing my senior year, and they made it sound pretty straight forward — research markets, send stuff out. What they didn't mention is that the market is glutted and insiders seem to get everything worthwhile, and it could take years to get anything like a steady income going.

In the meantime, I am sinking into a depression that feels like molasses. I don't feel like doing my own art anymore. I don't feel like doing anything. My parents got concerned, came over and dragged me to a therapist and he said something about bipolar disorder and a bunch of other crap and now they all want me to take this medication. At this point, I feel so shitty, I'm thinking they might be right. What do you think?

Art Less

Sister C says:

I'm sorry, but I really gotta say this: What are you, some kind of idiot?

If you really want to be an artist, you have to learn how to deal with this shit. Look, obviously you have talent, but talent is just part of the picture. Hard work and a resilient character are more important in the long run. If you go out there and just float around, hoping someone will recognize your genius, you're gonna get creamed. With all due respect to the medical profession, doctors don't have a clue when it comes to artists. We are all pretty much bipolar. We have intense emotions — we ride the roller coaster instead of bobbing up and down around the merry-go-round. The trick is in learning to control it. The really great artists are in control and out of control at the same time. It's not a trick you learn overnight.

You don't learn how to handle emotions by taking antidepressants. Those pills work by distancing you from ALL of your feelings, not just the bad ones. Great art requires passion and drive. You don't get that by becoming an even-keeled, monotone version of yourself.

Right now you are experiencing culture shock. You went from a fully supportive environment where your only responsibility was to create. Now you have to make your mark in an unsympathetic world where there are lots of really good artists trying to make their mark, too. Nobody knows who the hell you are. I don't think you know who you are yet either. It's the struggle that defines us, and you seem like you want to drop out before you even get started. If you want to be an artist, you can't solve problems by letting Mommy and Daddy and the nice, understanding doctor medicate you so you don't feel uncomfortable. Life is uncomfortable. Get used to it.

My advice? Don't try to freelance to earn a living while you try to find a gallery for your fine arts work. Freelance is a full-time career and you will be competing with agents and commercial artists who are approaching this as a business. Get a part-time job so you don't stress out over the bills, one that doesn't drain your brain or tax your energy. Then get out in the world and learn something about real people and what they do and how they feel. Stop thinking about yourself. Become part of the arts community. It will open up a new world. There's a lot of people who understand what you are going through. You can help each other through. After a while, you will have things figured out a whole lot better than you do now.

You aced school. That was Phase One. This is the Phase Two. You are ready for it, you just don't want to do it. Things were good in school. You were fed assignments and patted on the head. Now you're not. Boo hoo. If you had a history of mental illness, or couldn't hack classes, I might be concerned, but in all honesty, I think you're just being a baby.

Take a while to adjust and learn. You didn't leave school ready to be a mature artist; you left school ready to grow into one. So grow up, already, and get out there. Closing yourself off in a self-pitying depression or padding your brain with medication ain't gonna do it.