

'And by the way, everything in life is writable about if you have the outgoing guts to do it'

SYLVIA PLATH

An artist? Who, me?

Your friends love your work, strangers love your work, but a doubting voice inside still taunts you. So, how do you stop underestimating yourself?

Strolling through the woods back to the cabin, leaves crunching underfoot and the still-warm breeze propelling a seemingly endless supply through the air, I stop to take a breath. Russet colours twirl to the ground to settle silently, and there's a symmetry between this autumnal spectacle and the words and sentences that tumble from my mind, coming to land... who knows where. Cold air gently fills my lungs, and I breathe

into the truth of how much beauty there is in these early moments of creation – of the weaving together of emotion and observation.

Soon enough I will be sitting at my temporary desk here in the Highlands of Scotland, writing this piece, fractious about how best to layer words that create the imagery of my intention, anxious that they will be received in a way that nurtures authentic connection. In short, I know that soon I will feel the familiar prod of self-doubt, of not-good-enough-ness, and so I embrace these serene moments of gathering words like leaves, and of being open to how and where they might take shape.

Creative doubt

If you too, at times, feel that sense of inadequacy rearing its shameful head, you're far from alone: it's thought that as many as 70 per cent of people suffer from what's termed imposter syndrome, and creative personalities are particularly susceptible. *Psychology Today*, the world's largest online mental health and behavioural science destination, says that sufferers typically 'feel that they aren't as competent or intelligent as others might think – and that soon enough, people will discover the truth about them'.

It's far from a new phenomenon, of course – artists through time have shared these same emotions. Vincent van Gogh was known to have suffered crippling self-doubt, as the wealth of letters to his beloved brother Theo attest. 'It's curious that Maus has the idea of inviting young Bernard and me for the



Opposite: Alice at her typewriter. Above: Ant Savage at work on his narrowboat, and his pieces entitled *Narrowboat* and *Hope*

next Vingtistes exhibition,' he wrote in September 1889. 'I would really like to exhibit there, while feeling my inferiority alongside so many Belgians who have an enormous amount of talent.' The artist's letters are scattered with talk of incapability and lack of ability – yet, in death, he has become one of the most lauded of the Post-Impressionist painters.

A defining moment

UK-based artist and printmaker Ant Savage traces his own self-doubt to his lack of formal art education. Despite a happy childhood, his working-class background meant that he wasn't encouraged to pursue art as a career, even though he showed a natural ability. 'I had a love of drawing from a very early age, but the idea of that becoming a job was pretty much unimaginable. It wasn't the kind of thing people in my immediate environment were doing.' Instead, for 23 years, he worked in factories, as a labourer and painter and decorator. It was the death of his best friend Dale that proved a catalyst for change. Needing space to grieve, Ant quit his job and began filling sketchbooks with illustrations, sharing his creations with friends. Five years on, he now makes a living from his art, hand-carving, hand-pressing and mounting his own lino prints from a kitchen worktop in his narrowboat home. Yet he still struggles to call himself an artist.

'I began making art professionally through a moment of grief and loss,' he says. 'There wasn't any pre-planning or ambition involved, and this sometimes makes me feel like I've snuck

in through the back door, without any of the commitment or training you'd expect to find in a professional artist.'

Keeping it real

Like Ant, textile artist India Hannah Pixie, from Milton Keynes, in Buckinghamshire, UK, finds it a challenge to acknowledge that her success is down to hard work and long hours perfecting her craft, rather than luck. She works entirely by hand, using vintage tools to create nature-themed portraits from yarn. Having spent some time creating the kind of art she thought might be popular, with little success, it was trusting her instincts that finally brought a creative breakthrough.

Finding a stash of grey yarn in a charity shop, she immediately thought of pigeons. 'I've always liked pigeons,' she explains. She created a piece from the heart, using a 1970s tufting tool and an Oxford punch needle, afterwards posting a reel on social media showing how it was made. It attracted not just pigeon lovers in their droves, but others intrigued by her process. 'I added a caption about how much I love these birds and how I think they're unfairly treated. I couldn't believe it when it went viral,' she says. (See *Breathe's* feature on pigeons on page 44 for more on these underappreciated birds.)

India's story of authenticity and staying true to your passions perhaps sheds some light on the source of the insecurities familiar to so many. For in choosing to try to make a living from your art, you're essentially putting your imagination, your likes and dislikes, your inner self on public display, and few things



Above: India and some of her work. Opposite: Paul performing with fellow musicians

can be more daunting. Coupled with a lack of formal training, it's the perfect breeding ground for an imposter complex.

India agrees: 'I am entirely self-taught and learned everything I know through trial and error, so I can definitely fall into the trap of comparing myself to people who have studied art.' However, at the same time, she can appreciate that this lack of professional training has also been an advantage: 'I think it has allowed me to be more experimental, because there's nobody to tell me it's wrong.'

While delving deep into what truly makes you tick rather than hopping onto a particular trend can be scary, this is ultimately what makes your work your own and draws the audience it deserves.

Strength in community

For musician and video producer Paul Smith, this kind of vulnerability is essential to creativity, and lies at the core

of his work. 'My songs draw upon the hardest parts of my life: grief, regret, hardship. To write, I fall into a shadowed cocoon, oblivious to the outside world yet also bringing it into the narratives of songs. It can be painful and exposing, creating in this space, and as songs take form, a common feeling of fear sets in: "What if it's no good? What if nobody likes or understands it? What if I've failed?"'

It seems imposter syndrome is a common problem; even stage performers are not immune, often hiding behind an illusion of supreme confidence. Paul believes the desire to create isn't necessarily something that is chosen, but instead something that chooses you, which leaves the door wide open for self-doubt.

One way he works through his feelings of inadequacy is in the building of community. Like Ant, Paul also lives afloat – on the Lee and Stort Navigation, north of London – and through his project Howling Barge he invites fellow musicians to perform aboard his boat, *Violet Mary*, wherever he moors. 'There's

nothing like performing your songs to a receptive audience to dispel that dissenting voice of the imposter,' he says. 'We need our creations to be appreciated and championed, reviewed and tested, collaborated and improved, and for them to find their purpose before we send them out into the wider world – where our art is needed now more than ever.'

In the face of advancing technology, where words, art and creative crafts are at risk of becoming lost, it's clear there's a need for individuals to keep creating. As Paul reminds us: 'Artists such as Sylvia Plath and Charles Bukowski created from pained places of doubt and suffering, but it's when we reflect on the human condition that we feel less alone.' Self-doubt, then, is to be embraced and used as a way to inspire and connect.

Reaching the end of this piece, I recognise that whether my words fall unheeded to be covered and trodden by wellied feet or are caught with delight by mittened hands and tucked in the pockets of winter jackets, I will keep writing. Because

recognising that creativity can grow from a place of humility, vulnerability and lack of ego means art is doing what it should: touching people with a truth and sincerity that stands the test of time.

Words: Alice Elgie

Alice Elgie is a nature-loving writer who shares words about her wandering lifestyle through hold-in-the-hand letters and podcasts. Visit aliceelgie.com

Find Ant online at antsavageart.com or follow him on Instagram @ant_savage_art. View more of India's work at indiahannahpixie.co.uk and on Instagram and YouTube. Paul performs under the name Violet Mary, find him at thehowlingbarge.com and standout-films.com

Feel like an imposter yourself? Turn over for tips on beating it



BEAT THE IMPOSTER

Stuck in a spiral of self-doubt? Try these tips from the artists featured here

- Switch off and head outside into nature.
- Take a few deep breaths and tune into your heart.
- Ask yourself: what truly makes me tick?
- Experiment with new ideas and play projects.
- Be open to others about mistakes you feel you've made or future worries.
- Take the pressure off. Stop striving for perfection and see where it takes you.
- Create an in-person community local to you and share ideas, inspiration and early works.
- Champion other artists and recognise that while not all creations can be loved by everyone, everything is worth creating.