

The Process of Finding Your Niche

A talk by George Garrastegui, Jr. for Works in the Works (March 21, 2023)

Review by David Lee

What if we shifted from job titles to attributes? What if, instead of focusing on the “what” of end results, we focused on the “how” of the creative process? These questions (and others) were addressed by Professor George Garrastegui in his Works in the Works presentation on March 21, 2023. Before both a live and online audience, he shared his crowd-sourced insights on creativity and niche-carving (accompanied by eye popping visuals).

Personal brands should build upon what makes us unique. In his account of the personal branding process, Garrastegui brought listeners along on a journey, from LaGuardia High School of Music & Art, to Graphics Manager at Aéropostale, to Art Director at *Urban Latino* magazine, and finally to City Tech’s Communication Design Department. Making the switch from industry to teaching brought up key questions about the creative process. Increasingly, college graduates and professionals alike are tasked with articulating and showcasing what we have to offer. As George explains to graphic arts students, “what we do for brands we can do for us.”

It was during the 2017 Design Writing Fellowship Workshop that George realized his strengths as a storyteller, and decided academic writing was not his preferred mode of expression. Thus, this graphic artist went into the orality modality, launching the *Works in Process* podcast. Now up to Episode 26, *Works in Process* has George interviewing designers and graphic artists from his peer network. The podcasts last over an hour, and while the subject matter ranges, three questions serve as conversation starters:

- 1) Where did you grow up, and were you creative as a kid?
- 2) What was your first creative job and how did you stumble into it?
- 3) When did you first consider yourself a creative?

Professor Garrastegui saw these exchanges gravitating around, not so much on *product* (which he calls the “what” question) but on *process* (related to the “how” and “why” questions). From each interview, Garrastegui derives some axiom of creative practice. For the “how” question, advice ranged from “embrace other mediums” (Robin Landa) to “be more uncomfortable” (Daniel Castro) to “unlearn what you were taught” (Terresa Moses). In an interview with City Tech Professor Eli Neugeboren, the advice was to accept “acting as if” as something integral to skill development.

If the *how* question is about the means, the *why* question is about motivation. Deon Mixon said to sell your perspective. Lisa Pertoso reminded listeners to lay off the self-imposed pressures, which tend to be the most severe. For Mike Nicholls, the advice was to remember that you have value.

Garrastegui’s talk imparted the need to try different things. He noted that designers call it “ideation.” Scientists call it “experimentation.” Product developers call it “prototyping.” What each has in common is being able to *fail safely* and learning from mistakes. After the talk, discussion followed about applying *Works in Process* insights to academia. The emphasis on process over product is a way of seeing learning as something happening along the way (and not just the shiny result).