

The Art Hustle with Jesse Reno

Cory: Hey there everybody, it's Cory with The Abundant Artist. I'm super excited because today, I've got Jesse Reno on and before Jesse says hi and I dive into stuff, I have to tell this short story. I was- so my wife and I just moved over to the eastside of Portland, and I'm getting to know the neighborhood and stuff and I was walking around a few weeks ago, and I walked by this art studio, and it's like, you know, it's very much like an art studio. It doesn't look like a gallery or a museum or whatever, it's like definitely there's the working artist that works here. And so I pop in and I look around, and I read this guy's bio, and this guy's- the bio basically says "I'm a working artist. I make a living from my work. I've been doing it for twelve years. I've sold thousands of pieces of art and I love what I do." And I was like "Oh my gosh." Like, nobody writes about their art this way, this is so great. It's really really refreshing. So I had to figure out who this artist was, so I went into the studio and he wasn't there so I just walked around and looked at stuff a little bit and I looked him up online and I thought okay I've got to get this guy on the podcast to talk about his work. So Jesse Reno, say hi to everybody! I'm super excited you're here.

Jesse: Hello everybody, thanks for having me on. Super stoked to be here.

Cory: Awesome. So Jesse, when I mentioned- I took an Instagram of your bio and shared it, and a couple of friends were like "Oh man you've got to get Jesse on the podcast" like Flora was like you definitely, Jesse's awesome. Several other people were like, "Dude, you got to get him on." So I'm excited you're here. You paint so intuitively and I love, like I walked- I went way down a rabbit hole of watching YouTube videos of you painting and other people like, and you talking at workshops and stuff, and it seems like you live most of your life that way, just pretty intuitively. Is that a fair assessment?

Jesse: Yeah, it's weird, I was thinking about that question and yeah- I mean I make plans, I try to follow them, try to use logic in there, but definitely go with my gut still, let that kinda prevail. If something doesn't feel right I'll kinda choose it or not choose it based on that more than economics or what seems like it might work- cause you never know, I mean everything's 50/50 anyway, or 75/25 or something. So I'd rather, I don't know. When I do things cause I want to do them and they don't work I could care less, you know, in a good way, like I'm not mad about it, but if I make a decision based on "this should work and this should be something great" and it doesn't work, I find myself to get really irritated, so kind of learn to just trust my gut. Yeah I flow pretty easy now, I mean I've been full time long enough that I can kind of do that, I've built it up that way, I've kind of decided that's the most important thing is having freedom so that you're making the choices you want to rather than you know chasing things or just taking everything, you're trying to throw some kind of logic in there. I mostly take everything anyway cause you never know. Anything, the smallest thing could turn into the biggest thing and likewise in reverse, so.

Cory: Yeah, it seems like you hustle really hard. Like you're working a lot.

Jesse: Yeah, for sure. I mean especially in the beginning, I mean I had serious rules to get me here. Where it was like, I had a full time job and it was like alright, ten hours a week either trying to get a gig, or making contacts, or make 10 contacts, whichever one comes first, then you're off the hook and you can paint. Because it's one thing to paint, it's another thing to make a living from it.

Cory: Oh so that's interesting, so you had a rule for yourself that you had to do, like, business stuff and marketing and sales first?

Jesse: Yeah.

Cory: And making contacts, and then you could paint.

Jesse: Yeah, because my thought was if one in ten of those works, well you know, better to make ten and hopefully one works out, and kind of built up out of that. Did like quick math and I was like alright, there's 52 weeks in a year, that's 52 contacts, contact 500 people, something should happen. You know, and now it's just- it's pretty much- I stayed on like literally that level of hustle for probably the first four years, and then things started to happen that I didn't really need to make ten calls, it was like calls were coming in and I was just kinda navigating them and saying, well navigating- pretty much said yes yes yes yes yes for another five years, but now it's like okay, what are my- what do I want to do? So.

Cory: Do you have- by the way, we've lost your video. I don't know if you needed it, or-

Jesse: Oh, I don't know. Where...(mumbling)

Cory: So if you mouse over the- your own face, or your avatar, there should be a little menu that drops down that has a video and microphone. Other people in the chat are saying they can see your video, so I'll just trust that that's working. It's all good. So you went through this process of you know, trying to make, trying to hustle and make phone calls, and then saying yes to everything for a while, and now you sort of say no to some stuff. Do you have criteria for what you say no to?

Jesse: Basically it's like, how fun's it gonna be is a big part of that. And you know- it's a combination of probably fun, economics, location, if it's travel-based, just cause it all got ahead of me. I mean it's like all fun in the beginning to do everything, travel everywhere, and then you get to a point where you're like there's only so many months in a year, I only have so much energy, and all the travel takes away from creativity and fun and for years I like, I had fun doing the whole thing, but it was like my music got shelved, a whole bunch of other side projects it was just focus and chase and now I just break it down to like how many people am I going to connect with on this event or workshop or lecture, whatever it is, mural, anything. Where is it, I mean murals, painting big exhibitions take priority. Yeah, you know, just kind of where's it gonna get me, I kind of ask the basic questions of how good does this seem.

Cory: Cool, so for you, like your art business looks like making murals, making original paintings, I noticed that you also, you have like a shop online where you sell some prints and some other stuff. I think you have- I think I saw that you had painted a skateboard?

Jesse: Yep, I've done a little bit of permission and licensing work. Not too much, if it hits me and it's something that I really like and agree with then I'll do it, but-

Cory: Oh, okay, so the skateboard was a license deal?

Jesse: Uh yeah, it's part of a run, like the oldest skate shop in Portland, so that was a no-brainer. I've done like a handful of stuff, some skis, some shirts, some other stuff back in the past, but it's not something that I chase. I'm more like if that shows up on its own, good deal, then I'll go ahead with it. Just cause I find that more than not that just leads to more questions, more specificity, and [unintelligible] than doing another project that's gonna take the same energy, it'll frustrate me.

Cory: Yeah, I agree. And so when you say frustrate you, what does that mean?

Jesse: That could mean any number of things, that could mean somebody telling you you're free to do what you want, and then telling you what to do in the end, or telling you "more like this, more like this", it's like I'm not a really good "more like this" guy, cause I'm trying to do things from my gut. It's like I don't know what I'm going to paint, so to tell me to paint even something you've seen me paint 20 times, like a horse, once you tell me to paint a horse it's like you curse the whole thing. You're probably going to get a squid. So I know better to just stay out of it. I mean I can do it, but I can't tell when it's honestly awesome and done. I mean it might be, but it feels contrived, so that it doesn't feel real. Having your gut be the sole teller of what's really real and feeling it and looking at it like "wow, this is awesome, I didn't expect this", well if you tell me to expect it, you're kinda cutting the equation down and that's just- right, that makes me kinda nuts.

Cory: So for those who don't know, who haven't gone down the YouTube rabbit hole watching your work, on your website you describe your work as contemporary primitive abstract narrative, and you paint intuitively, and I just- you know, to understand Jesse's process I would encourage you after you watch this interview or listen to this interview, go to YouTube and watch some of Jesse painting, or go watch like people talking about his work. So it's really interesting to watch you paint. And to hear you talk about your work. So you talk about living with mistakes, and in your painting what does that mean?

Jesse: Well, to me, I don't know, it's weird I'm trying to think where that exactly came from. I mean I make mistakes- I feel it's better to make mistakes and fix them, and not- so I don't really even count it as a mistake half the time, and sometimes a mistake turns into something awesome, so that one almost doesn't count. It's- I pretty much fight with them, battle with the paintings, do whatever I need to do to get it to a point where I'm fixing mistakes constantly, I'm making them and fixing them or going with them, when I realize they haven't been a mistake, so that process is kind of like I work on a lot of stuff at once, jump around between pieces so that I have a clear head cause it's easy to think just cause things didn't go the way you want they're a mistake, but I don't really think that's a good way to look at things. When you're seeing it with a fresh head just cause you intend one thing to happen and something else happens, like if I go to Mexico on vacation and get a gig, is that a mistake? No. You know what I mean?

Cory: You're supposed to be on vacation! No getting gigs while you're on vacation!

Jesse: Right. And sometimes it is a mistake, you should be on vacation. But like, things like that can happen and same with a piece, you know, you're going in one direction, you can get frustrated, you paint over a bunch of it at least to some new whole idea concept that's something that really seems purposeful, then again it's not really a mistake it's just some step in getting there so I kind of put them- I kind of like to refer to everything as an instance, more than you know- and then I mean in life I don't know, it's the same thing, I feel like mistakes, you choose what you choose cause you're choosing it, so you're still going to learn something from the mistakes as well, you know. I've made I guess mistakes, but they've all taught me other things, so I feel like those are knowledge, it's weird. I'm not the smartest guy but when something happens I see it and I can make sense of it.

Cory: It sounds like you just have a natural tendency to work really hard and learn quickly.

Jesse: Yeah, yeah, I pay attention. That's what I'm saying- I'm not the smartest guy but I'm definitely paying attention, if I see an idea I follow it. Things that happen, a mistake, like a great mistake I made early on, and related to this is well, it wasn't a mistake at all, but I was doing like upper level shows, coffee shops, hallways to industrial buildings, just showing my work wherever I could at the time, and nobody was making cards or promotional materials. So then I thought I'll make my own promotional materials, I was like well there's five gigs coming up for the next thirty months, maybe everybody will give me 20 bucks. So I hit up all the places I was showing at and said hey I'm making this card, would you throw in twenty dollars, I'll put your information on there. Everybody gave me the money, I paid for the cards, and all of a sudden when I was handing out the cards, nobody thought "oh you're a cheapskate you put five cards on one," everybody was like "whoa, you've got a full schedule look at all the stuff you're doing, look at everywhere you're showing!" So after that, what do you think? Every card I made was like that- I didn't make individual cards for promotion, I just put everything I was doing on everything. And it seemed to really, you know, activate people, make them respond. So.

Cory: That's so clever, so to pay for the printing of the cards you had all the places you were showing pay you twenty bucks.

Jesse: Yeah, I asked them, and if they wouldn't have done it I would have done it anyway, but you know I figured they didn't want to put out 100 dollars but I bet you they would put out 20. I mean who wouldn't give you 20 bucks, you're doing a show with them, you're doing, you know. And then like I said the best part was just that everything was on there, the way people responded to it is so much stronger- I'd given them cards before, like hey, I'm showing here and they're like oh cool. When you give them one with five places, it was like whoa!

Cory: Yeah. So you mention on your website that you've been in over 100 galleries. Is that like art galleries and coffee shops and you know like every place you've shown, or is that just art galleries specifically?

Jesse: No, that's a collection of everywhere I've shown, but I'd say at least, oh let's figure, yeah, probably half of that or more than half of that's been galleries.

Cory: Yeah. And if you Google Jesse, everyone listening, you'll find a whole bunch of online galleries that are showing Jesse's work and you can read interviews and stuff they've done with him in

those places and what they've written about him. But how in the world did you nab that many galleries? Like are you- how long did you continue doing it, or rather I know you said you were doing ten calls a week, but how did that- those fifty plus galleries come about?

Jesse: Uh, pretty much like that, as well as one leads to another, somebody sees you showing someplace, almost everything leads to something else, even if it's a coffee shop, you could have your show in the coffee shop and then somebody who runs another space sees it and asks you, and group shows, other friends asking you in, that starts to cross up a lot. But mainly just going for it, most of it's things I just hunted them. And when you break it down it sounds crazy, but fifty divided by five is only ten. That's ten shows a year. You know, and that's kind of what I did for the first eight years or something, you know sometimes even more than twelve shows, foreign ones, national ones, [unintelligible] but yeah, just hunting 'em and then what that leads to on its own.

Cory: Nice. So that's a lot of shows. That's a lot of activity.

Jesse: Yeah, totally.

Cory: How do you do that many shows? Like how do you physically prepare to do that many shows?

Jesse: Well, I mean I work all the time. I mean for the first, again, like, up to let's just say up to like three years ago, I mean I was making like two to three hundred paintings a year. I mean I paint every day. It's all I really want to do. It's kind of, for a while it was like all I knew how to do. I'd try to take a vacation and I'd just sit on the beach for two hours and then go paint. So that's a big part of it I mean I always have work on hand ready to go, I was pretty smart when I got to a point like around 2007 or so, I had a big show in L.A., I got ahead, made really good money, sold a bunch of paintings, made a bunch of money at that show, my immediate thing that I learned there was I watched them and what they were doing and I was oh they have a system, he hangs stuff, he frames stuff, he glues stuff, he boxes. I was like you know what, this much money goes to a bigger studio, this much money goes to a system, I get zero of that. Keep hustling. And I hired an assistant back then, and so I've had an assistant for the last ten years who does anything from boxing to framing to running stuff to the post office, updating my website, photographing my work, sizing images, all the tedious stuff that you don't really want to do. You find somebody who's like your best buddy who can do it. And you're happy to hang out with for ten hours a week or so, anywhere from like ten to twenty depending on how busy we are. If we're slow we pretend that we're working for ten hours and we work for five. You know that's the other part of it, you can only do so much that's what I started to realize, I was like whoa, getting not necessarily burnt out but I'm getting run like a dog here to do all these jobs, it's way super effective, and way worth it because even ten hours of work, we all know, I'm sure you know, if you don't want to do something that ten turns into twenty real quick, cause you go I'm gonna get a coffee before I do that, I'm gonna walk the dog, I'm gonna walk in a circle, I'm gonna do six other things, you know.

Cory: So yeah, it's about like doing the work and not making excuses to do other stuff before you do the work.

Jesse: Yeah. And then when you get to a point where you can afford it find somebody else to do the stuff you want to make excuses about and become a director.

Cory: Awesome. Awesome. So the person who is your studio assistant, are they, is that person an artist or is it just like they're just have a completely different skill set and this is what they do for you?

Jesse: Let's see, I've had three different guys, my first guy, they've all like dabbled, been like drawers or something, but they weren't necessarily artists, they weren't like trying to be an artist. Two of them after they worked for me for a long time kinda went more in that direction, had some shows, one assistant, he's working on, um, he's like 50/50, his career, maybe more, living off of art and then odd jobs and working for me. But mainly, mainly what I look for is somebody that I can get on with and that's not, let's not say stupid, but not stupid. Like, I feel like if you've got somebody who's smart, whether they know what you're doing, whether they know these jobs, if they're good at kind of getting on and you can work with them, they'll learn the jobs. I mean it's not that hard. My first was way into computer stuff, so that was a plus. Did a lot of inventory, back inventory, created like a killer website, back end for me, regardless of what it looks like in the front.

Cory: I was gonna ask, like, so all of your pieces on your website have an inventory number on them which is super helpful because you're so prolific, right, 4,000+ pieces. So if they all have an inventory number when somebody inquires they can say I'm looking for this number, right? What does that look like on the back end, if somebody says I'm looking for piece #1005?

Jesse: So what I can do is log into a section that allows me to search by item number to whatever number you just said, title, size, price, like say you didn't know the number, you gave me the title and maybe there's three of them that are something with a unicorn and I'm looking and I can be like okay so it's this big, or it's this price, type that in and that in and it will bring it right up. So I'm able to search by any criteria that I've divided the painting into like that I've set as a criteria. And then as well as that, like for my own inventory and keeping track of, I can organize them, there's like a whole back end section which is like things that are in the studio that aren't on the website, things that are installed, things that are at galleries, each gallery's got a name and an inventory next to it I can search real quick like what do they have still, oh somebody asked about this painting on the website but it's in Puerto Rico or it's in- wherever it is at a gallery. So I can keep track that way and I can mark them sold that way. Basically it's a database, to use a database on the back end. Yeah.

Cory: Yeah, that's great. So I love the fact that you're so like intuitive and flexible in the studio, and on your business side, like you've really got it together. Like you're organized, you know what you're trying to do, you're thoughtful about it, do you have any habits or things that you do that allow you to shift between those two different ways of working?

Jesse: No, that part gets kind of janky sometimes. It all depends how active- like I'm pretty good at do work first, get it done, or if something's bothering you get it done so you can just peacefully paint and do your stuff. At times it gets jumbled up, or like you're in the middle of a great session and you get an email from somebody who wanted to buy a giant painting. That can throw your whole day off. Sounds great, but it's like "ooh, this is gonna happen," checking email

every five minutes, but they're like a normal person who checks email once a day, and you check thirty times and you're like why didn't they respond, and so it can be a little janky. I've- you know, that's kind of like my one thing that I'm still kind of working out. I've got it down pretty good, but then I'm extreme in the other direction, so then I just don't check for days, I'm like "this is work time" and it's not bad, I mean I don't- nothing gets ruined in that way, I don't blow off things that are important, I've done different things to try to navigate it, I've tried to like make work day email day with my assistant, like if it's non-essential, I let it wait a couple days til work shows up again and let him answer it so I don't get too activated. But yeah, it's just kind of jumping back and forth. And I'm kinda like that anyway, so it kinda does work. Like I kinda like, sometimes I don't go to the studio, I'll work at home where it's like do some cleaning, do some painting, do some email, go back. Inevitably when you're painting you get to points where you're just stuck, or you're burned out. You're not even stuck, you just gave all the creative energy you have to this ten paintings, what do you do now? Oh I'll go check email now. That'll take about an hour. You know, and then try and do something that erases it afterwards, like eat lunch or skate the dog or whatever it's gonna be to kind of reset-

Cory: Did you say skate the dog?

Jesse: Yeah, dog pulls me and I kind of stand there...

Cory: That's awesome. What kind of dog do you have? What's your dog's name?

Jesse: I have two, I've got like an eighty pound mutt named Buddy, who's like going on 16. He skated pretty hardcore 'til he was 14, and now another little 40 pound name Froggy who's like got way too much energy who still pulls me dead weight up a hill. So yeah-

Cory: A forty pound dog who pulls you up a hill on a skateboard.

Jesse: It's madness. Like her front legs aren't even on the ground in the beginning. She like jumps off it- yeah. Pretty fun. There's little safety issues here and there, but overall.

Cory: That's great. That's great. So you've got deep roots in Portland. Did you grow up here?

Jesse: No, I've been here for like thirteen years? Fourteen years? Somewhere right in there. 2003/2004. Right in that cusp.

Cory: Where did you grow up?

Jesse: Like, it's almost like early teenager in New Jersey, and then rural Pennsylvania which was kind of rough- it's kind of like thirteen years everywhere-ish.

Cory: Why was rural Pennsylvania rough?

Jesse: Well, imagine if you came from like, something equivalent to like SE Portland, you're hanging out, you're like five blocks from a whole bunch of commercial stuff, places to skateboard, places to do whatever, and then you moved into the middle of the woods and you look like this and the woods people didn't really like it. So that was like the next bunch of years.

Cory: Yeah that's interesting. I was just in, I was just in Raleigh, North Carolina, and you know I run around in a hoody everywhere here in Portland, and in Raleigh everybody's like... dressed. So I looked like a bum in Raleigh. It was pretty funny.

Jesse: Yeah, that happens to me too.

Cory: So you sell not only through the galleries that you show through, but you also sell through your own website, how do you navigate that like some galleries don't want artists to sell on their own, so how do you navigate that?

Jesse: Right. Yeah, sometimes it's annoying, I'm not going to say it's tricky, I mean it's very cut and dry, they don't want you to show anywhere else but the gallery. I mean I'm sure that's been in my way with some galleries, where some people just haven't even hit me up because that's not in their mechanism or their ideas. I mean my pricing's consistent from my gallery to my website to their gallery, whether I'm getting commission cut into it or not, the price is the same, so I don't really- for me I just don't see the difference. It's like, you know. And if they're all different paintings, I mean yeah, there might be some commonalities, but go look through there. Tell me that there's one that's the same. So you're selling individual product, everything's one of a kind. Why should there be a problem if they cost the same consistently based on size? Because that the only thing that's common. If we've got two 2x2s why are they different prices? That could be a question I wonder about, but beyond that. And again early on, when I was hustling and wasn't this successful and was doing it all, didn't have an assistant, I mean I ran into that with galleries, but I just had a conversation and say exactly that to them, and what I noticed early on was, in a handful of cases well one would argue, and then you'd say well then don't show my work, and they'd say but it's great, and you'd say then why don't you show it? And just deal with it. I mean you're a gallery in another state. And I- the other thing is, like yeah, some collectors will go to the sites and go search it out, but I'll tell you that like in experience of all the hundred galleries or a hundred places in thirteen years, there's people who just see what they see, grab it when they get it. There's somebody who's looking for the cheapest price they can get it, and there's people who just go to galleries and don't go online, I mean there's so many in-betweens that I don't think there really needs to be that conflict whether they think it does or not. I think there's just rules that people make. But I've had very little times where somebody went to gallery, got a piece and, same thing there, I tell them well guess what dude, if I know it's your collector I'll give you your cut anyway. If you've got a collector-

Cory: The galleries that you work with are usually okay with that?

Jesse: Well I'm offering them their share. Whether they make the sale or not. If it goes through my gallery. And some of them are still difficult about it. At which point I say to myself, well maybe I don't want to work with you. Either we work this out or what? I mean I've had no gallery that's supported my whole career, I mean I've been living for thirteen years. There's nobody that made me 8 years' worth of money. There's a couple galleries that made me like a bunch of months' worth of money, but again, what am I supposed to do when that runs out? It, my backbone has been my own career and my own hustle and I've already, by the time that was even happening I was making a living for four years, five years, six years. So unless you can prove to me that you're going to make me the same level of living or better, I'm a fool to quit my job and give it to you. So it gets, you know, like I said, I'm sure I've cut off some opportunity, but

overall I don't know. I'm waking up when I want, paining what I want, making choices, I'm making, I'm weeding through choices. So I guess it's all going okay. It gets internally conflicting at times for sure dude, and I question what have I done, or should have I done that, but then you look and you're like I don't know. You know, and if you give it all up to somebody you gotta look at the other side if that, well who are they? And what are they gonna do? I have an example that- it was somebody who did great work for me, I loved working with them. They did nothing wrong, they did everything right, taught me so much, and you know- enter that conflict at the end of our showing, and we're like I don't know if I can deal with you having the way you work, you just have too much work ad you work too much, and we want you know, kind of like ownership of your work.

Cory: Huh.

Jesse: So that we don't have competition. And I was like well you know, I'm gonna keep doing what I do, I don't want to go back to a day job. And whatever. That kind of fizzled for a while, and then about a year and a half later they were like you know what dude, we're going to open this space and we want you to be the crown jewel, like the grand opening show, so I put all this work aside for them, gave them all this priority, and then they're like you know, like two months before the show was supposed to happen they were like oh well, the economy kind of crapped the bed like, in the gallery we're moving to the woods. So what I'm saying there is you've got no guarantees from them. But yet you're supposed to give all these guarantees and you're supposed to jump through all these hoops and what you're gonna do for them. It's like I don't know, I just ask the same questions- what do you usually sell work for, who are your clients, what are you doing for promo, and even with all that stuff you just don't know. So I don't know, to me I'd rather have my hand in 20 pots cause if one boils over, you got 19 left. If I give it all to one person and let them have control and I start sitting easy, forgetting what I'm doing, get lazy, what happens if they move? And close their gallery, you know what I'm saying? They're now giving you like a severance pay. There's no unemployment to get to collect, there's just you with no money and no job now. So.

Cory: Yeah man, I hear that a lot from veteran artists who've been selling, you know, in galleries for hundreds of thousands of dollars, and then the gallery goes away for whatever reason, so I certainly appreciate where you're coming from. So we're talking with Jesse Reno, a Portland-based artist, a couple people asking you know, asked me to say your last name again over on the live chat. And Rachel Lane says where the hell do you store all your work?

Jesse: In my giant studio in the back room that you couldn't see through the window. It's all back there, there's probably about three hundred paintings at the studio, they're all just packed like crazy jim jam. You can come see.

Cory: Cool, so I'll also say that like, Rachel, like not only is he, you know he's storing a few hundred pieces in his studio, but he's sold you know thousands of pieces. So if you're worried about inventory and having too much work, go sell it.

Jesse: Yeah, totally. I mean you know, you kind of said the dynamics without saying them in a line, this was another thing I came into with the gallery, it was just funny- I never did this math til somebody questioned me, but like, well dude it says in your thing that you make 3,000

paintings, like how am I as a gallery supposed to deal with that? And I was like well, I only have 300 they're like oh, only 300! So you have 300 paintings! And I was like well dude, did you do the math? That means I sold 90% of them. And then all of a sudden they looked at me like I was crazy and I was like it's basic math, you can't- I was like, yeah, I don't know how that answered their question but I kind of put it in perspective where it's like, well again I'm supposed to give you control and you're supposed to be in charge of me, but I somehow between me and other galleries before you, we reached this number. So yeah, and I mean if you're having too many paintings, maybe the prices are too high, maybe at that point, you should, you know it all depends on where you are in your career. I mean I started out selling stuff as cheap as I could. That people were like there's no reason it's not to buy it, I mean I just did hard math right from the beginning, you know, and who are you, what did you do to earn this level of pricing?

Cory: So let's talk about pricing for a second, cause I know that everybody that's listening is gonna be super curious about how you handle your pricing. I did a workshop over the weekend, and somebody asked about their pricing, and we went on an hour-long tangent talking about how to price your art. So Sara O'Connor points out that right now your art looks like it's about \$3 per square inch, do you price it that way intentionally, or do you price it more intuitively?

Jesse: No, that became intentional over time. Dealing with galleries, getting to a bigger level of people who are like, this is how you should do it, this is the way it's done, I said okay I'll give it a go, that seems about right, you know, and it's adjusted from whatever, square inch, I don't know what it is. We have a spreadsheet again for that, that's assistant work, so. I don't know the exact number but like yeah, let's say if that's \$3 now it started out at say a dollar, it started out me selling paintings for \$25, \$50, a hundred dollars, those were my prices back in the beginning of time. But- and then how did they get there, it's like you know well I've done, in the beginning it was like well I'm selling them kind of as fast as I can make them, they should probably be higher. But I would usually ride that out for a couple months so I could stash a bunch of money in my bank account so I could have more time ahead, basically it's like- the more money you've got to back yourself up, the more you can, when you up your prices, if there's a lull you can sit through it, you're not getting desperate right away, you know. And then basically it's like well, x amount of shows, then you start showing in a gallery with real recognition, then all of a sudden you've showed in five galleries with real recognition, you're live painting at the Telus ski and snow event, you're getting asked to do murals like, okay, people really want this, I'm doing really well, the bank account's getting big, I guess I can adjust to what they want. Part of that is them in the mix, like galleries saying you're priced too low, it should be this, and you're like okay, well I've got this much saved, this is what other artists I feel like I measure up to, you know, as well, like in terms of quality and in terms of exposure. So kind of rose to that level, and then you get to a point where, you know, the more you're doing, your credentials and as well as your expenses, you know, it takes a bigger studio to run this, it takes an assistant to run this show, all the stuff you have to pay for. So what kind of math do you need to have to kind of make that all flow and be economical as well as travel, traveling for events, traveling for painting gigs, shows, lectures, demos, all that stuff. So, and now my pricing's been consistent for, well it's stayed the same for about maybe the last like three years or something. I'm really happy to get it, I feel like I can work as hard as I need to to get it done, I don't have to, like, rush anything, I feel like that's pure work you know, where you're trying to, my directive has always been to just make the freest

like, freest in terms of I can work on it as long as it takes and I know I'm not going "okay it looks good enough" I mean that's not being the best artist you could be. So now I'm at a point where I can just do that as well as I have enough gigs that I feel like I've earned that. I guess that's the thing, do you feel like you deserve what you're getting, and why, you know so I can feel strong about the pricing and clear about it. Wow I'm not into that question.

Cory: I love that I asked you about pricing and you ended talking about the concept of self-worth, and do you feel like you're getting treated well, right? And I love that so much, cause it's like pricing is such a weird psychological trigger for everybody, right? It's not just artists either, like software developers and product makers and crafters and everybody gets weird about pricing, and at the end of the day it's really all about, you know, are your prices such that they make sense compared to other similar products, and do you feel good about what you're getting paid for it?

Jesse: Yeah, I mean that is really the bottom line, otherwise you're making stuff up and then of course you're gonna feel weird, how are you- you know what I mean? Cause everything could be like that. I mean all the art that I think probably is like that. You know, the events that like, whatever, I mean it's subjective, I mean from the buyer's perspective and the artist's perspective. Where are they gonna meet and what do you wanna do. And that's like, I think, I see a lot of people, they're like, well I see work for this price all the time, it's like, well is there a red dot on it? Is the artist making a living? I don't know, I want to make a living, you know. Some people have jobs, there are people who don't care if they ever sell it. You know. so.

Cory: Is there a red dot on it. That's gonna be my new favorite question.

Jesse: I mean it's true.

Cory: So what was, what was the day job you had before you went full time as an artist?

Jesse: The last one I had I was a mailman at a community college for the professors and students and faculty, it was cool. It was like nice, you were pretty free, you walked around, you could walk around weird places, nobody could really know if you were working or not.

Cory: That's awesome.

Jesse: I did that job for about 7 years. Before that I was an offset printer and a mailman and did video, did live sound for a while, that was like my previous life was doing music and being in bands and doing those things. So I did a lot of time kind of jumping between two jobs and doing part time band stuff and sound stuff.

Cory: Right on. Yeah, I did sound stuff when I was in high school and after high school for a little while. Yeah.

Jesse: Right on.

Cory: I did an outdoor concert for the Jets. Remember the Jets?

Jesse: Yeah yeah yeah, that's crazy. I did Ziggy Marley, I did- who's the tally me banana guy, I did one for him. Harry Belafonte.

Cory: Yeah yeah, that's hilarious.

Jesse: As well as a bunch of metal bands and punk bands, but those were kinda like the high level. Weezer back in the day.

Cory: Someone asked what your inventory system was made out of. I know it was a custom solution, but do you know if it used any particular software?

Jesse: It's... what is it...it's a PHP, I mean it's a custom inventory system, but it's a PHP.

Cory: Okay. So I don't know how much you want to talk about this, but one of the things that came up when I was doing some research on you, somebody mentioned that you had some eye damage when you were younger, and that that influenced the way that you make art. Is that a fair assessment?

Jesse: I would guess so, I mean pretty much my right eye it's like I've got like no, I can see out of it if I close this eye, but in like 30 seconds it goes blurry, it's like it's straining to look, it's a lazy eye. I don't know, like sometimes you'll notice it just droops off to the side, who knows what it's looking at. I don't know, I don't know when it's on or off. And basically my peripheral vision is like really small, it's why I'm doing this, like basically I can't see my hand unless it's right in front of my face. So whatever that does, it does something. And definitely the other thing is that I'm really light sensitive, so I'm always squinting in the sun, and if I close them I can notice a total color difference, like this eye I'm guessing this eye sees normal, but this one, it's like you just jacked the contrast on everything. So I don't know exactly what that does to my work, but I just assume it does something, and like I tend to paint really close to my work when I'm having a session, and I get back to see perspective and adjust composition, but I mean my jump is so much greater that a lot of accidents happen, things that I don't expect, instances of like, oh that face looks great, and you step back and you're like whoa that is way out of whack... I kinda like it. So I don't know how that would differ, since I only have my eyes I can't like try yours on to see what it would be. But. And even that's an interesting thing to bring up, it's like I'll say this about that, I'm not saying it's good or bad, but that's an outsider art gallery. So what are they doing? They're finding some aspect of me that they can further market, moreso as this individual that they want to promote.

Cory: Yeah, the outsider art thing is really interesting. It started as like, people started calling artists outsider art because they were, they were essentially handicapped people, right, when it started. And it was a way of labeling and defining the work, but outsider art now has become, I don't even know what it is anymore, like what would you define as outsider art?

Jesse: I mean, I think even then, the like, whatever, the defining factors, they seem to say like someone who's not worried about the gallery scene or against that, who's like making work purposefully like raw and aggressive. I mean there's multiple definitions. But those are ones I've heard, so I did like connect to it, I thought when I started painting, I was like I have a website, I'm just me, some crazy guy with a bunch of paintings and a website using eBay, selling stuff on the internet and eBay and I don't care if a gallery finds me or not. Like all I want to do is escape my job, that was my directive. And you know, it's kind of funny because over time you know, now I can say oh I've showed in a hundred galleries, I've done all this stuff, but I still kind of feel like the outsider because even in the conversation I mean, do you hear it, like what do you do when there's a conflict with a gallery? It's like we either solve it or I walk away. That's like a choice

you're making, and it's like standing, like not necessarily- I'm not like against it, if we're doing something good and we're connected, happy handshakes all the way man, I've got your back. I'm loyal to you, you know, let's make this work, but otherwise, I mean my still- my base objective is to remain free doing what I want, painting what I want, when I want, where I want, and not getting like okay, well we have a hundred mile radius on you and we have a hundred mile radius on you and you can only show here, here, and here, you know, this is what you need to do, we need more bunnies.

Cory: More bunnies? What does that mean?

Jesse: Well, cause that's the other thing that happens.

Cory: Oh, cause they need more bunnies in your paintings, yeah.

Jesse: We sold twenty bunnies, we need more bunnies. It's like, it was Easter. I was excited. Or you know, I don't know what triggers an idea. So it's just kind of drawing that line, but I feel like that's kind of outsider in its own way, either way. I don't know.

Cory: Who knows.

Jesse: Everybody's, it's all just opinions and words.

Cory: Just opinions and words. So you said you like to get away to beaches, do you have any favorite beaches in Oregon, or anywhere?

Jesse: I like em all, I really like going to Ecola State Park, somewhere where there's serious woods next to the beach, kind of like good for me. I'm not like a too much sit in the middle of the beach with an umbrella guy, I kind of like to be by the trees or go for a hike and then hit the beach and go back. Lincoln City's cool, it's pretty mellow, not too many people over by Taft School. There's all that good wood in mass amounts and it always kinda changes, I like that. Where are all the whales, wherever that is, they have that little lookout past Lincoln City, Whaler's Bay maybe? That's like part of it but it's got another name. Yeah, I don't know. I'm not really that picky, I meant those are the places I go a lot, I go to Short Sands, that's pretty nice. The state park up near Astoria, Fort Stevens. I like that, it's not really the beach but I like all the wreckage. ... That's actually really nice as well. But yeah I spend a lot of time in Lincoln City and Ecola, that's kind of like my go to, they're like two different things to me. They're extreme. And what I get from them, the difference in em, I like walking around looking at driftwood seeing how it looks like, whales or animals, and you know that's that, and then Ecola's just about getting in the woods. That place is just like dinosaur forest to me, just driving up there is enough almost. You know what I'm saying? I don't know if you've ever gone up there and just drove up I mean the level of trees and moss density and just going up and up and up and then we you get there it's like oh my god it looks like ... there's a dinosaur hiding, he's here somewhere.

Cory: Oregon is like ridiculously beautiful. We're really lucky to live over here. So the- you've talked about your relationship with galleries and you know, you didn't come from the art world, like you didn't go to art school, did you even go to college?

Jesse: I went to college for radio TV, just 2 year community college.

Cory: So you're not from that sort of academic background. Over the weekend at this workshop that I was teaching we had a couple of artists who were, you know BFA/MFA, on that track, right? And they really struggle with the idea of getting out and selling themselves. Why do you think there's such a difference in that attitude between you and them?

Jesse: Because they have just created a ton of rules. I mean I've got a bunch of art school friends, and it just seems like they just, I mean we're talking, I've got no rules and I make weird rules for myself that I develop on accident that aren't, those are bad accidents or whatever, okay accidents maybe. But the- you know there's just ideas, I mean if I said to you hey, you could start selling your work on eBay and make a living. It just sounds so backwards, doesn't it? Does it seem,

Cory: It's definitely different from what they tell you in art school for sure.

Jesse: Right. Well and it just seems like well, who's buying your work, these aren't museums or collectors or collections, you know you've got all these ideas. I mean basically I was the wild man. Somebody said that to me, like, after I've been painting about a year and half, and they told me here's my thing, check me out, Gus Fink, go search me on eBay okay dude, I've been making this much money, I haven't had a job since I was 18 years old and you check it out. I've been a power seller for this long. And I looked at it, and I was like whoa. This dudes making two grand a month, fifteen hundred, three grand, look at that, that's survivable, looking at his eBay. And I couldn't do it. And he said dude what are you doing? Why aren't you doing it? You told me you could make ten paintings a month, you could quit right now! He's like a normal dude, like normal like me, we felt very similar, into the same kind of music, aesthetic and stuff, and I was just like, it still took me like 6 months to start doing it. Why? Now imagine if I went to school and somebody gave me all these ideas of what was right and wrong and what was prestigious and non-prestigious or whatever, acceptable or what's going to damage your career. Well I'm just going to stand in my way, and you know I'm not saying they're wrong, if that's what you want to do, it's like what's your directive? You've gotta get real straight with what your directive in life is. Is it to get in a museum or is it to pay your bills? And guess what, one probably leads to the other. Once you get into 100 galleries, who knows what credential you've gained by being that madman? Or again, maybe you did stand in your way and you're oversaturated in who knows?

But I think, I think that's just really it. Whatever you learn, you're learning it from someone who you're seeing as authority. Who's your authority figures, is going to be the next thing. If you don't have one and you're making it up as you go, you're creating some superhero that you could be, whereas if you've listened to somebody who wrote a book, who did this thing and they're wealthy and they succeeded, you go "well I want to be like them." Well you've made that your directive and you know, part of that's your power maybe, and your knowledge and then part of that may be your own way, I don't know. Cause it's like you're not the other person. I'm never gonna be you, you're never gonna be me, I'm never gonna be, I mean that's something I learned too, all my different buddies. We share information. Hey you should try this! That buddy tries that, it doesn't work for him, I try what he tells me, it doesn't work for me because we have different interests, levels of excitement about this thing, I tried to do illustration for a like, magazines and stuff. One shot, I got totally irritated, I'm never doing this again. You know, where he's like "what, I'm supposed to call ten people or I'm gonna-" you

know what I mean, it's just all what your skill set is as a person, and even beyond skill set, just your like, wherewithal. Wherewithal for something, or you know, how much you like it. So yeah I don't know if that really answers the question, but I just think yeah, I don't know. Whatever you want, but who you're reading and who you're believing, and not that they're a liar, just how does that pertain to you? How does their life and lifestyle, because that's really what you're committing to as well. If I'm going to go to all high-end galleries and deal with that community, you know what, I might want to take this off, I might want to fix this, I might want to wear different- you know what I'm saying? I can try to be as, I mean I'm pretty articulate, I can talk, I'm very social, I want to talk to people, but like, I still know I go in these places and I'm still getting looked at as like the wild man, or like oh that's fun, I'm kind of at the circus, but I don't need this. I've had that experience, not even knocking the people, it was just a bad fit that I chased, you know? It would have been better if I wasn't there, probably. It probably would have been better if I wasn't there and there was just a statement and there was no picture.

Cory: Interesting, what do you mean by that?

Jesse: Well if you just saw my work and you didn't see me, you don't know who I am. You make up a story of who I am. So maybe you made an old guy with a nice long gray beard or no- clean shaven, and you know, I'm saying sometimes the identity- I feel like I fit 90% of everything I'm doing, I mean I don't try to fit it or not fit it, I try to be myself in the work, in my career and in myself, but you know, if you're, if you're going to like some high-end clients, they might be like who's this kid? I mean people were calling me a kid 'til about a year ago. 'Til there was like a little gray in here. I had to be fully free to not be a kid. It's like was I a kid when I was 35? I don't know. But I looked like one, so I was getting, definitely that stood in my way in certain things. And that drove me, actually that's a great example of what you're saying, that drove me to seek out a different type of gallery and I got more like engaged in the underground scene because it was cool to be a skateboarder, it was cool to have tattoos in that scene, that didn't stand in your way, that was just a high-five. Where in the fine art world, you're supposed to be some other kind of individual whether they want to say that or not, yeah you are. And you're supposed to use different words. My words meant the other symbol for that sometimes. Or at the time anyway.

Cory: Yeah, I think that's super interesting. Definitely there's an element in the fine art world of if they want to take, you know, an outsider artist or an artist who doesn't come from that educational background and elevate them to these big galleries and museums, they will sand off the edges of the artist and try to make the artist look, try to make the artist more palatable. Right?

Jesse: Yeah, even if they're not going to, and some don't, they're doing that mindfully. They're choosing the wild cat and going we've got the wild cat! Check it out! It's just marketing and it's just an acknowledgment between school and non-school, and even talking to again, this is not saying better or worse, it's just they talk different. The use different words. They have different educations. All stuff they learned in school, which I can say probably opened certain doors for them and closed certain ones for me because they have a different, you know, and in my opinion, and again it's just an opinion, an excessive, like, how do I want to say it- basically you're like looking up to them in a hierarchy. I'm going- you get in a conversation with me, and you're a gallery, you're asking me a bunch of questions, what have I done, what I like, why should you

show me, I'm gonna say what are your collectors, what average price do you sell work for? The galleries get offended, like who the hell are you to ask me? It's like I'm the other 50% of your money. You're half the team and I'm half the team, so I want to know what your half of the team's gonna do for me. When's the last time you had a write up in a magazine? Do you get national attention? Do you promote yourself nationally? What do you do for advertising, you know? And art school- I could just say that to my friends and they're like what the hell are you doing, you can't do that. I'm like no, you can't do that. I can! You know. But again. I'm not saying my way's the right way, it's just what are you doing? What are you trying to do? I want to make sure that they're at the same level as- and sometimes you know. You don't have to ask the question. You're like, oh I've seen this gallery in 10 magazines, well there's no question, right? But if it's some gallery I've never heard of. Well, you know. Not everybody's heard of me, not everybody's heard of you. Some people have. It all depends who you ask kind of deal. So.

Cory: Galleries get shocked when artists know how to talk about business.

Jess: Yeah, totally, totally, and most don't have experience, they're just happy to get in or just ready to jump through a fire hoop to do it.

Cory: I really love the fact that you come from the back ground that you do, and you've been in fifty galleries, and all of the artists who would die to get into a gallery can't get in. I just find that super, super interesting.

Jesse: And maybe they could, you know, if they were bothering people. And you don't bother somebody once, I mean that's actually worth mentioning, we didn't bring this up, I mean to get even my first show at a hair salon, I went in there 7 times. Like oh, the person's not here today, or wait, oh, this is pretty cool, they'd probably like it, okay, they're not here today to see it, oh they're not here today to see it. Oh they saw it, let's make a plan. Come back next week. Come back next week. I mean the first giant mural I did, I was supposed to have scaffolding and paint, and I was supposed to do it this time and it was like, oh has been two weeks already? Oh come back in a week, oh come back in a week, oh you know what dude, you could start this week, but I don't have scaffolding or paint. I went and bought a bunch of paint, he said he had two ladders, so I got up on the ladder and I used a roller. You know, you gotta want to go do it. I mean I could say I could- so many example of where, it's like, if you really want something, you just keep going. You gotta keep plugging away, you know. Even my giant show in LA, it was like, I got in a group show with them, got another group show with them, kept asking for a solo show. No response for my email. No response. Ten emails. No response. I thought, well how did they find me in the first place? They saw a giant mural I did. My friend was like hey dude, I know this is kind of crazy, you said you wanted to do another mural, but [unintelligible] is offering \$50 and all the beer you can drink to paint their smoking room. I'm not even an alcoholic, I had like 5 beers. But you know, that in the next email I sent was NEW MURAL, blah blah blah blah, sent the message again. How 'bout that solo show? I got a response that night. Let's do it, that's killer. I'm not saying that works every time, but it's like, think about what it is- what stands out, what's gonna make you stand out? If it's not your education and your skill background, well then you'd better have some other kind of proof if your pudding, you know? You'd better be easy to work with, you'd better be a hustler, you'd better have some great work or something that's like, that you don't see all your friends doing. At that time I was doing a 20 x 60 foot

mural. That was in 2004 when you didn't see people doing that, you know? Now it doesn't stand out that much, now people using cherry pickers and scaffolding and getting paid and using projectors, it was like I was just making a mess on the wall for 4 days. People were wanting to beat me up for making a mess on the wall. 'Til it turned into the real thing.

Cory: That's awesome. Well Jesse Reno, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me here today man, I'm running out of time but if somebody wanted to follow up with you and learn more about who you are and stuff, where should they go?

Jesse: They can go to my website, just jessereno.com. that's great, or on Instagram its @jessereno. You can see what I'm doing, almost every day I'm on there, sometimes multiple times a day. That's probably my most active spot, but yeah. Email is the best one, through my website. I'm on that like a hawk.

Cory: Cool.

Jesse: Or my studio in Portland. It's on 30th and Burnside, 3022 East Burnside. So anytime I'm working in there or you can make an appointment either way, an appointment doesn't mean something official, it means shoot me an email and say I'd like to come over there and grab the ten minutes over, I don't spend too much time saying to many things, just be ready for lots of painting.

Cory: Cool man, thanks so much I really appreciate you taking the time.

Jesse: Awesome, likewise man, thanks for having me on your show.

Cory: Alright, have a great day!

Jesse: Cheers!