

John Hendrix (Full Text)



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Claire: How long has this been your studio?

John: We've been in this house six years, but I was in the attic for a long time. And then my kids got old enough that they really needed their own rooms, so we put our bedroom up there and there was this huge shuffle and I thought, "How long could that really take?" A week! To move two floors and reverse them. So I'm down here now, which is actually better because I can kind of blast the music and people don't hear me.

When I was in New York, I had a studio with people, and I was not quite aware of how essential that was for me. In some ways the teaching takes the place of the studio.

Claire: It's a community.

John: Yeah, and I think that's why I love teaching. I don't think I would do it—the benefits are great—but I wouldn't do it if it didn't feel like I get to interact with people and talk about design and illustration.

Kyle: We talk about that a lot. Art is like an expression of your community, and if you don't have something that you can express on, it's like designing in a vacuum. We've been on the road since June and it's gotten to the point where we just need normal conversations with people. The project helps, because we meet people who are creative, but it's not community. We have some similarities, but it's not regular conversation that can evolve.

Claire: It's like what you said where you didn't really realize what you had when you had it, with a studio. When I was in school I was sick of critiques, sick of people, and couldn't wait to get on to the next thing.

John: Yeah, it feels like you just want to move on, but then you realize oh wait, that was amazing to have.

Claire: I've always wondered this about people who work from their house, and especially since you have kids: when are they allowed to come in?

John: I have big rules, but they always dissolve immediately. I do keep candy in here, so they know when they come down they get something fun. My kids are totally welcome, and they paint and hang out down here sometimes. I have an eight-year-old son and a four-year-old daughter. They get what I do, to a point, though at one point my son thought I made all of the picture books in the world. He came home and said "Dad, we read your picture book at school today." I said, "Oh, that's great! Which one?" And he said The Polar Express. And I said "I wish."

But he gets that I make art and that's my job, and I think that's cool. I try to encourage it in him as much as possible, but my dad was super cool with encouraging me but not forcing me to do things, so I'm trying not to be like "We're gonna take art lessons and you're gonna be the next whatever." I just want to make

sure he does what he's interested in.

Kyle: That's a phenomenal thing for a parent to realize. I often talk to Claire about how my dad keeps waiting for me to get a real job, and he was the one that took me to art lessons in third grade. When I think back on that I realize that was pretty ballsy of him for not getting it at all. I think at the time—

Claire: —he thought “He's only in third grade, what could it hurt?” [laughs]

Kyle: Yeah, he said “This'll fade.”

John: My dad had me intern with an architect, because in his mind—he was in the Navy for 30 years—“If you draw, surely the only job is, well, I think you draw as an architect.” So I interned with an architect when I was in like junior high, and it was AWFUL. But it was right around that time that I found the local comic book store, and I had never experienced that world before. I went and thought, wait a second, this is somebody's job. Not only to sell this stuff, but who made all this? It seemed crazy. But as a kid, I just had no place to think of art as anything other than the stuff that goes in a museum, and that seemed abstract.

Then all of a sudden, the story books and picture books that I read had people who made them!

Claire: Back to what you were saying about kids: Everyone we know is having a baby right now, and it's easy to have lofty ideas about how we should raise them. But you actually have kids, and you're still saying an ideal thing.

John: I think you should absolutely go into parenting with a lot of ideals, because those are going to get eroded eventually, so then you'll have a nice baseline of ideals. It's messy, it's the way it should be. I have friends who are artists and have dedicated their life to their work, and say they're not ready for kids, and I really understand that. I really understand the feeling that you're going to lose your work, which is an incredibly important expression of who you are. But there was a moment a couple weeks ago when I was with my family, and I just felt like “This is the best thing I'm ever gonna make. I'm never gonna beat this.”

I feel sorrow for my friends that don't want that. I know what a huge sacrifice it is to have family, but I just think when you're old, when all your friends are old and all your other family is dead, you're going to have a family that's yours. I mean, that's a pretty macabre way to see family, but I don't know. I don't know if you want kids.

Claire: We do, well.... sometimes I think it's only because I've always thought “Oh yeah, I'll have kids someday.”

John: How old are you?

Claire: 24 and 25.

John: Yeah, I met my wife in High School, and I married her right out of college, so we were really young. And when we got to New York, we were 24 and married, and most people thought there was some scandal involved.

Claire: Like a shotgun wedding?

John: Yeah! Like, what happened? Clearly this is not a conscious choice you made. What an odd choice. I'm sort of talking to the choir so it's easy to be very bold in my opinions, but I think it is so much harder to

get married later in life. I think if you get married young and early, so much of your life is formed together. I have friends who have gotten married in their 30's and 40's and then you've got a whole lifetime of experience you're trying to fold in together.

Claire: How has having kids been a sacrifice for your art, your work?

John: I just think if I was alone, if I was just me being a Bohemian artist in my mind, I don't know if I would live in St. Louis. I would probably live in New York with other creatives, I would probably dedicate every moment of my waking life to making art and making things that cemented my place in visual culture. On some level, that's incredibly poisonous....

Claire: How so?

John: I think raw, unchecked ambition can be detrimental to self. In some ways, family has offered a check against that for me. Of something that's completely good, in a different way than work. Because work's certainly good—there's so much to it that's excellent and amazing. But family, and even teaching, to some degree, is a way to push back against the selfish drive of making things that are for yourself and the enjoyment of making work and all that.

Claire: Before you had kids, were you doing that, art all the time?

John: Yeah, when I lived in New York for four years, it was like art camp. My wife and I were married, but we lived and had our lives that were completely centered around my work and what I did and the friends I met there, and it was amazing. It was intoxicating. New York is like a chapel of work. Everyone is so dedicated to their work that it doesn't seem bizarre to work constantly, all the time. I remember—I still actually struggle with this—going to bed seems a little bit like a failure. The feeling was, every moment that I can be awake, I need to be working. There are still nights I'll go to bed at like 12:30 and feel like "Oh, gosh, I'm not really committed."

I had really high blood pressure when I was in New York. I don't know what it was attributed to. I was on medication for high blood pressure. It's such a cliché.

Claire: And you were 25.

John: Yeah! Was it the Rat Race? I don't know. It seems like a Woody Allen movie, but yeah, I was caught up in it. No question about it, though: it was fun. Super fun to do that.

I think teaching now has been great for me because I leave this place [my studio]. I'm actually not a classic introvert—I'm not a person who can sit in my studio, in the dungeon, for seven days straight, and be cool. I need time out, and interacting with students that are passionate about drawing and making images, is great. It's really a help and a relief to talk with people

Claire: What are you most passionate about?

John: I'm passionate about drawing, making images, storytelling. When I think about the stuff that was important to me when I formed the idea of loving drawing, it was always centered around storytelling and making magical pictures and images that opened up new worlds and new things I'd never seen before. All of my work is about drawing, and really the love of drawing—how that's just an elemental thing in my life. I'm really lucky, in a lot of ways, that my job is so connected to something that I love.

I try to remember that on days when I'm frustrated or I'm doing stuff that I don't think is as good as I

want it to be. I still am one of the small percentage of humankind that gets to do the thing that they're most passionate about.

Claire: When you worked at design firms, did you feel that you were doing in any part what you love?

John: No! And that's what was so crushing. I got out of school, I had all these ideas about what design is and process. I still remember I was given a logo to do for an online bank, and I worked all night on these logo sketches and brought in like 15 sketches. And at the big meeting with my creative director and everyone, I showed 15 sketches and was talking about what the concept was, and super excited about my process, and he just said: "They're great, but next time, don't even do the sketch, just do the logo. You gotta get to the next project, it's not worth all that." And immediately, I thought "My professors lied to me! The process is a sham!"

So I was really disillusioned my first couple jobs. My first job was in PR and it was really corporate. My second job was a lot better, it was in a small boutique design firm, but I was still designing and art directing, and not drawing every day. I got to do some posters where I could draw, but I got to that spot where I was realized, "This is going to be the rest of my life." Mainly because I was making a paycheck and not starving and had a good job. So that's when I decided to take out 60 grand worth of loans and go to New York, because I needed to put something on the line.

Claire: Oh, so SVA was after you tried working.

John: Yeah, I worked for two years, because my big plan was "I'm going to get a design degree, I'm going to do a big job in design, and freelance at night. Seems so perfect!" But I would get home and be completely bummed out by my job. I was working all day on stuff that was close to illustration but not exactly illustration, and it was just the worst. I was doing a ton of writing at that time in my life, just writing all the time. Because I had no creative outlet and I had no idea how to design projects for myself. So I did like two images over the course of this two year period that were for myself, because I couldn't figure out how to make my own work, couldn't figure out how to access my own ideas and stories that I wanted to make.

That's something that grad school really gave me: not just the community of peers, but really taught me how to find content in my own interests and passions.

Claire: Were you married when you took out those loans? How hard was it to make that decision?

John: I remember really regretting being married—not because I didn't like my wife. I had so many friends who seemed like they were enjoying their twenties, and I was working this terrible job, 9 to 6 every day. And I got that job because I thought "Oh, I'm married, I need to have a job, that's what you do." So it really pushed me into a career that I was angry about. But that choice was so good for me, looking back. I learned a ton of stuff. I later went on to work at the New York Times, and I never would have gotten that job if I hadn't worked in corporate PR for a couple years, where I knew how to deliver bad news on the phone, and how to talk to a boss, and be professional in a context where you can't just email people.

So that time turned out to be really useful, and I never would have chosen that, is sort of my point. So being married saying "I'm making money, but do we want to do this, do we want to take out these loans, do we want to give up a job." My wife was so great. She had a really great job, really a dream job for her. She was working at a campus ministry—she did not study theology, has no seminary degree—but got a job ministering to women, and essentially hung out with people all day. And we had to get rid of our dog to move to New York. So it was all these sacrifices that she made directly for us to go. And she denies this, but she's the one who told me to go back to grad school. She doesn't remember this conversation, but I vividly remember being completely despondent on my bed, just saying "What am I doing?" And I remem-

ber her saying “We should go back to school. Why don’t we do something?” I just remember it so vividly, and she denies that it ever happened, but I remember thinking “Yeah, why don’t we just move to New York?”

After that, we went on our first visit to New York, to just see the school and look at where would we live, and Andrea, she cried the whole time. In the hotel room, she said “I can’t do this, I don’t know what this is.” She cried on the plane on the way out and said “I’m scared of this place.” I mean, it was truly a disaster. We were staying in the upper west side in this Best Western that was the size of this table; it was so tiny. She would not leave the hotel room. She said “I’m afraid I’m gonna get lost, I’m afraid it’s not safe.”

Claire: Where is she from?

John: St. Louis, we’re both from here. So we were midwestern hicks, essentially, coming to the big city thinking that every person is a murderer. So the first trip was not good, but God bless her, she came. And it ended up being an incredibly formative experience in our marriage and in my career. It was a great adventure, but in some ways, it was a sacrifice too. We’re still sort of chained to that debt, and during that time we didn’t travel a lot—essentially our travel and adventure was just living in New York. Which was amazing, but we didn’t have a lot of the early adventures you could have as a young person when you don’t need to make a lot of money, you don’t need to have a lot of overhead income to live. 1800 dollars of rent is a real burden. You’ve got to work to pay that off, and there’s this sense that New York is going to eat you if you don’t keep making money.

Claire: How worth it did it feel then, and how worth it does it feel now?

John: I’m a very optimistic person by nature. I tend to be a sort of magical thinker. When I was there, I was like “This is all going to work out.” And only since leaving do I look back and realize what in the world, how risky was that! But at the time I thought “This is amazing, I’ve totally got this. I’m totally going to move to New York City and become an illustrator.” That seemed a very reasonable assumption. I look back on it now and think that’s crazy.

But I think a lot of artists have that weird sense of going between thinking you’re a genius and a hack, over and over again. And there’s also this magical sense of “It’s going to work. I’m going to make it work because I can totally do that.” I have an amazing ability to put aside failures that I’ve had—I think it’s survival, I don’t think it’s because I’m this rigorous thinker. It’s because I can’t dwell on them. I just can’t keep making things if I think about the bad stuff I’ve made over and over again. Just yesterday, I was scrolling through something on my computer and I found a piece I hadn’t seen in years and it actually caused me to let out an audible groan. I involuntarily went “Uhhhh.” I was just overwhelmed with “Is this what I was making then?” Obviously I pushed that stuff away and I think of my best work, because I have to. I have to think of the best stuff I made; otherwise, I can’t keep making things.

Claire: Besides the things you’ve already mentioned, what have you had to sacrifice to pursue your passion?

John: We had to give up a lot of the things that come with early young adulthood. We didn’t go out a lot. We didn’t have much of a stomach to do the party scene and that sort of thing—we just didn’t have a lot of desire for it. We just didn’t have a lot of flexibility, because we took on all that debt. Our parents are not poor by any means, but they couldn’t pay for our schooling. Andrea had very little school debt, so for us taking out this big amount of money just felt like it was putting back even our family plans. We thought “Do we want to have kids? Are we going to have to get rid of this before we do?”

Even in teaching, I think there’s a level of sacrifice, because you take time out of your own work. You

get a ton back, I think, from students, when you're interacting with them, when you're trying to help them become the sort of people they want to be. On those days I feel totally down and am thinking I'm giving up too much time to other people and not enough time to the work, or I'm not really as committed as people who still live in New York and can dedicate huge chunks of their life to making their stuff.

Claire: That's why we did this project. I feel like everyone says "To be successful, you have to be obsessed." So when you feel that you're not obsessing enough, how do you deal with it?

John: I do think that there is a level of obsession that is needed to make work like this. Mainly because it's time consuming. It's actually sort of insane when you think that you can spend a week making an image that someone can consume in less than a second. Right?! That's not good math. Poor graphic novelists—I read *Amulet* to my son the other day, Kazu's work, and I read it to him in maybe an hour. That's maybe a year's worth of work. It's not fair at all. So there has to be a level of obsession, I think, to make this stuff continually. And I don't think that's always a bad thing.

I say that, and I also fear the obsession, too. I fear it controlling too much of my life, and controlling too much of my mental fabric. Where I continually think about the work even when I leave the studio—that's one of the things I've really tried to work on, as my kids have gotten older. At the end of the day, I want to go upstairs and leave that all behind. That terrible drawing of that guy I made; I'm going to leave it downstairs. Because when I was in New York, I thought about it all the time. It came with me, and I was always trying to solve problems to learn things. And I think a balance there is healthy.

Claire: What are you afraid you'll never accomplish?

John: Oh man. [laughs] I don't know. I've talked with Sam Weber about this a lot: the whole idea of what is it that we're making? What are we leaving behind? What is the goal here? I've always said I want to make a lasting work of staggering genius that the world has never seen. I mean, honestly, that's what I think! It's insane to even say it out loud, but I think that. "Is it possible that I could make some dumb thing that could stand the test of time throughout the history of the world?" I don't know. That can't be what I'm going for, but I actually think it might be.

So, there's a level of insanity as well. I guess I want to enjoy what I'm making; I want to wake up every day, and love drawing and love the experience of seeing it when it's done. But I guess I want to make stuff that lasts? What's the definition of lasts? That's why I've moved from editorial into kids' books. The thing I make in a magazine is on the stand for a week, and then it goes in the kitty litter tray. At least the book goes on a shelf and it lives in a library for a while, and kids experience it and they read it, and I get letters from kids, and that feels amazing. So, I've been going more towards the books as I get older, mainly because I think I do crave a sense of permanence, or of a catalogue of work, or of something that feels significant.

Claire: What was the first time you felt like a professional?

John: Oh man. I love hearing people's first job stories, and I did little tiny things professionally in Kansas, but they never felt real. Not until I was in New York. The moment I got to New York, I had all this debt, and I was possessed with getting work. And this is where I try to tell my students that the fear of failure can be such a tool. I was so afraid of working at The Gap. Of having all this debt, and having nothing to show for it. So when I got to New York, day one, I started promoting myself and I sent stuff out. And I got a job very early on for *The Village Voice*. They just called me. I didn't have a cell phone, this was before cell phones. They called me on a landline at my apartment, I got it, I worked all weekend on it, and it felt just amazing to get that first call and think "I think I'm doing it, I think I'm a professional."

Claire: Were you really nervous to talk to them?

John: Yeah, and I didn't realize at the time that I was trying to act like I'd done it before. Since having worked as an art director at the New York Times, there's nothing better than to call somebody when you know it's like their first job or their second job, and to just have them sort of freak out, or lose their shit a little bit. Just be like "Oh, man! I'm so excited! I'm totally gonna do a great job. I know I can do this." Instead, I was too cool for school. I said "Yeah, I'll do it. M-hmm. I'll get you sketches, or whatever." I was trying to pretend. I was posturing a little bit. But I was terrified. In fact, I did three or four sketches, none of them worked, and he had to essentially hand me the idea, and it ended up being a terrible piece. It was awful. I mean, it ran, it printed. They didn't give me a kill fee.

But I don't think I really felt like a pro until I did my first New York Times piece. This was before email. I did not even scan my images. This was 2001, right after 9/11. I did a piece for the New York Times Letters page, and I hand delivered it, and it was the first time I ever went to Times Square, I'm sure. The first time I went to Times Square, the first time I went to the New York Times building, and I just thought "I'm delivering a piece of art that I made to the New York Times, and it's going to be around the world in 12 hours." I could not believe it. I just stood in the lobby! After I delivered it to the art director, I just stood there, because I thought "This might be the last time." I truly felt like there was a one and done possibility. I thought, "If this does not work, this could be it."

As soon as it got accepted, I called my family as if I'd won the Miss America pageant. I said "Go out, right now and just stand at the newsstand and pick up the New York Times tomorrow—I guarantee you're gonna be amazed." [laughs] It was awesome. My mom actually screamed on the phone when I told her, and she doesn't do that! That \$175 spot felt like a life-changer. Way different than my first piece.

Claire: How soon after that did you get another one?

John: It was a while. [laughs] I don't think I worked for the New York Times for another year; it was a long time. Which is something I tell my students: "Listen, get that first one, totally go crazy, but then you gotta go get another one. Hold onto it, because the next one may not be coming for a while." But then I got a little piece in Foreign Policy Magazine, I got a little thing in the New York Press, and I did some more stuff for The Voice. Those little alternative weeklies were great proving ground for learning your chops, doing a little black and white drawing of a celebrity in a day.

I think about it now and it seems like such a stringing together of luck and...You look back and think "How did I ever do it?" and now I fondly look back like "What an adventure," but at the time it was just complete panic.

I try telling my students they've got to enjoy that time. Right out of school, that first five years is super fun. There's so much stuff, and you don't know what's going to happen, you're flying by the seat of your pants on a wire. I guess it's only fun in retrospect.

Claire: Did you have a point in your mind where you thought if you hadn't made it, you'd go to law school or something?

John: Like the fall-back plan? Here's the problem: I did the fall-back plan first. And it was terrible. So I knew what was waiting for me. So I had a fall-back plan of "I guess I'll be an art director," but I knew what it was, and I did not want that. I had two years in grad school, and my hope was that I could land some sort of job to keep us there longer, because I felt like the community was so good. I was in the center of illustration, so it just felt amazing.

Claire: Right now, today, do you feel like the work you're doing is completely what you love?

John: I do feel like I have a level to get to. And I don't know if that's something I invent in order to keep myself working. It does seem crazy. I'm doing exactly what I want: I'm writing my own books, and designing projects that I have written and authored and I'm selling them to people and they're getting published. There is nothing else that you can do, as far as I know. And yet! There is more that I want to do. It's just different kinds of projects, or projects that reach a bigger audience—that's important to me now. Not just writing a book and having it publish, but writing a book and having it well-reviewed and popular, to sell well, to find your audience out there.

So yeah, there are tons of things that I still want to do.

Just yesterday, I tweeted that I wanted the world to ignore all the previous images I'd ever made because I feel like I just figured it out. 10 years in, and I still feel like I think I'm just about to figure out how to make something. That Malcolm Gladwell quote gets used a lot, but the 10,000 hours: you put that in and then all of a sudden you realize, okay, now I'm going to go to work.

So it feels like that now. I've written several books, but I feel like I'm just getting my sea legs.

Claire: Where do you think you get that insatiability? When you look inside where does it come from?

John: The drive or desire? That's such a good question. I don't know if you can teach desire or not. I don't believe in talent, really—I think there are gifts that people have, but I think that 90% of what people do in their career is hard work, and then there's that x-factor of "Do you want to do it, do you love it, are you passionate about it?" I think some of it had to come from my family and my parents who were supportive and who always thought what I did was interesting and were big fans of my work. I don't know any successful illustrator that doesn't have some form of that drive or that interest to do and make stuff.

And it's not exactly practical. Sometimes it's a desire to make things that make no sense. Or it's a desire to make stuff that is unmarketable, that you're not getting paid for. Like today, I spent two hours working on a t-shirt of a comic character I'm working on that has no function! It has no purpose. I'm not going to make the shirts, I'm not going to do anything with it, but for whatever reason, I had to work on it. And some of that is bad time management, and some of it is knowing that you sort of have to follow the things that you're interested in, even when that is unpractical.

Claire: Can you talk about community? What does it mean to you?

John: I miss having a studio with friends in it. I shared a studio when I was in New York with Katie Yamasaki and Yuko Shimizu, both amazing illustrators. We sort of had a rule: if you had your headphones on, you didn't want to be bothered, if you had your headphones off, come on over and chat while we work. That was a wonderful thing: when you need that ten minutes to not even talk about your work but just talk, or when you do need help, say "Come over here. When you look at this do you see the squirrel first or see the goat first?" Just having someone to bounce ideas off; I really miss that.

Community has become to me my students, in a lot of ways. I will bring them work in progress to show them not just process and how I make stuff, but I like showing people my things. I like showing them how they're made, and hearing their comments, and trying to explain. You've never figured out how little you know about something until you try and explain it to someone, and you realize "I don't even know how I make these things." So much of my process is intuitive, and not analytical. If you can unravel your process to the point of being able to explain it to someone, it really is illuminating. And it's fun. It's fun to have that front row seat for a student when you show them somebody's work and their eyes just light up. They've never seen anything like that before, and they come back the next week and they've clearly done nothing but look at that person's work, because they're copying it. They're verbatim copying the thing you've just shown them. Honestly, there's nothing that feels better than that: getting someone excited. It reminds you

of the first time you saw something that knocked your socks off.

Claire: I thought of this question today while we were driving here: You're religious; has there ever been any work that you've turned down for moral or religious reasons?

John: Yeah, my faith is a big part of my life, and a big part of my community, too. I live in the neighborhood that my church is in, so those are a big part of each other. It does affect my work: If your faith is not impacting your work on some level, it can't be that important to you, I don't think. If my work is important and my faith is important, they have to overlap on some level. I have turned jobs down purely based on content. Very early on in my career, one of my first big publications that I was in was Playboy, and I really justified it because it's this haven for illustration. Historically, it's been this huge advocate. So I was in it, and I went and got the issue off the stand, and opened it and just thought: I don't like being in here. I don't like this thing, I don't like this magazine. I knew the art director at Playboy—we actually went to our undergrads together—a coincidence. He had called me in the past and I said "Man, I would love to work with you, but I'm not going to work for Playboy anymore. I was in it once, and I knew right away it was just a bad fit for me."

So I have made choices like that. They've never bothered me that much....I don't know if I'm losing work because people see me as something. I don't know, and I'd probably rather not know.

Claire: If you could pick just one word that's your best advice to creatives, what is it?

John: Patience.

I thought long and hard about this, and I kept coming back to it. I wanted a better word, but it was the first word that came to mind. I wanted something like "Passion!" or "Desire!" That's what Neil Gaiman would say if he was giving a lecture, and you'd think "Man I want to go make something!"

But I just wish somebody had said to me in school: "Relax. You don't have to come out of school and be the Caldecott winner." The great thing about drawing and making art and design and type is that you can do it your whole life. I just heard this amazing interview with Gregory Manchess, and he's in his 50's, and he said, actually, a very similar thing to what I did before: "I think I finally figured out how to make something."

So you can go your whole life and keep learning and getting better, and I certainly came out of school just incredibly anxious about succeeding or getting in annuals, or having some awards that prove I'm going up, not down. And it ended up being a kind of obsession that was not helpful. It was not an obsession where you're passionate and you love making; it was an obsession that was inward in a spiral of just navel-gazing. So I try to tell my students, just relax. If you make stuff that you are interested in and you think is valuable, ultimately an audience will find you if that stuff is good and well-made and interesting. The one comfort you can take from illustration is that it's almost a pure meritocracy, in that the good work, I think, will get seen if it's good. So set your mind to making stuff that's excellent, that's good, true, and beautiful. I think if you do that over and over, people will find your work.

I got to New York and I was so possessed with being successful, because I thought if you get to 25 and you haven't done it, it's like mathematicians: they all say they have their greatest success by 27. If they haven't made it by then, it's over. But it's just not true. In fact, my old studio mate Yuko, she was 10 years older than me when she got to school. She's amazing. I'll never beat her at anything, so I'm at her feet.

Claire: She did business, right?

John: She did corporate PR for 10 years. And she credits a lot of her success to having that experience in the corporate world, but if you were to tell one of my students "You should go work for 10 years in advertis-

ing, and then decide to do illustration," they'd say "No, you can't do that."

She had good work, and it was weird, and it was personal, and the audience found her. She was definitely persistent, but she was actually on the waitlist, if I'm not mistaken, at SVA, where we went together. Which is astonishing to think about.

Kyle: The thing I always say is in the past, the great, astonishing thing was to have character—I love Star Trek so this might be weird, but even just 50 years ago, Captain Kirk was an old man, everyone on the ship was old—but now the great strength is youth. For some reason we've evolved into this culture where everyone's 20 years old.

John: That is weird. I think it is internet culture to some degree. There's this sense that we want to be geniuses. We say "That thing you made was amazing, and you didn't have to work hard; that's proof you're a genius, right?" I just get the sense that my students are afraid to even let someone see them trying at something. They want to be successful, or just fuck it. They act like "I'm not doing this if I'm not good at it." I look back at my old work, and I was not good at it, and I was publishing this stuff. I'm so thankful that I didn't really know what I was doing. I was struggling, I was learning on the job as I was making stuff.

That can be a pitfall: waiting until your stuff is perfect before you get out there. That's also just as dangerous. You need to just keep making things and put them out, see what happens.

Claire: The camera just shut off. That was perfect timing.

John: I've filled it! It's had enough.

Claire: Can you show us a hobby of yours?

John: Yes. I fence.

Claire: Really?!

John: Yes. I put up picket fences and paint them. [laughs]
No, the sport of fencing is something I do.