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## The Scientific and Creative Process of Artist Jaq Chartier

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Jaq Chartier's work on display at Robischon Gallery.

**For artist Jaq Chartier, art was always what she loved doing as opposed to what was practical.**

But, that didn't stop her from pursuing the arts. It made her even more determined to make it work.

Jaq Chartier's painting practice has landed her work in the collections of Microsoft, The Allen Institute, the Progressive Art Collection, Charles Schwab, as well as on the show, "Billions". She also co-hosted the art fair Aqua Art Miami concurrent with Art Basel.

Chartier's paintings are a cross between scientific and creative processes, found through continually testing of materials and experimentation.

Inspired in part by images of DNA gel electrophoresis, Chartier explores the interaction of different materials like spray paint, mediums and gessos. The result is a spectrum of



resembles small, colorful Petri dishes arranged in a grid of saturated, bold lines—another reference to the XY coordinates of a DNA gel electrophoresis readout.

We caught up with her to talk about how she got started, how she got to where she is now, and what she discovered along the way about her creative process while building an art career.

### **How did you get started in the arts? Did you have someone to encourage your path?**

My mom was a single parent, my parents got divorced when we were pretty young. She had always wanted to be an artist herself, but had been thwarted by her parents who sent her to business school; art school wasn't practical. She went to school near RISD and was always wistful about it, so when I showed interest, she was encouraging.

In eighth grade, they moved the town library into a boring brick building. They had a contest for someone to do a commemorative painting of the library, and there was a \$100 scholarship attached. And I decided to do it, but it was kind of last minute. So my mom let me take three days off of school to do this painting—which was a pretty big deal because I was a good student and school was really important to my mom.

So there was a message in there that this was important, more important than even going to school. And then I won the contest, and there was the \$100 scholarship attached—which meant I had to go to art school to redeem it. So it set me on this path that this is what I was going to do. It gave me a great foundation, one you don't normally get in a small town.

*She took it really seriously. She knew what it was like to have that passion crushed in her.*

*When I showed interest, she didn't do anything at all to discourage me. She almost overcompensated and encouraged me more than probably most parents would have.*

We were poor, and the idea of going to art school was kind of dumb in a way, not the practical choice to make a living. But there was nobody in my family who had gone to college before me, so no one was trying to talk me out of it. If they had, someone might have been saying go to law school or go to med school. I mean, I could have, I had the grades. But art was given this supreme importance by my mom. It made it easier to go with the flow of that because that's what I loved doing as opposed to what was practical.

### **How did you decide to turn this passion into a career that supports you?**



Making a living has never been an easy thing, it's taken a long time. If it was about making a living, this is not the path I would have chosen. I'm doing better now, but for many years I didn't.

As soon as I decided to be a painter, I decided I didn't want student loans.

I didn't want student loans because immediately I was thinking this is not a way I'm going to make money—so I don't want student loans to force me into getting a real job to pay back the loans. And so at that point, it was stripping things down into 'what's the simplest lifestyle so you can actually be a painter'?

**Your work has a strong science aspect to it. Tell us a little more about how that developed.**

To begin, I always gather source material—images I'm attracted to, things I like to look at, and at a certain point after grad school, I was really into an organic abstraction kind of mode. I didn't have a plan that was encompassing a whole body of work, just one thing leading to the next, just sort of groping.

I was teaching a basic drawing class for non-art majors at the University of Washington, talking about source material, and since they were all non-art majors they were studying a whole bunch of different things. To get across the idea of source material, I was saying how I had just seen the OJ Simpson trial on TV, and there were images of DNA electrophoresis.

I didn't even know what it was called, I just was describing it. One of the students pops up and goes "well I'm studying electrophoresis—I think that's what you mean—and I have this image." She pulls it out of her notebook and said "here, is this what you mean?" I said yes and that I want to start looking for images like that because that's where my interest lies and she said, "well you can have this one." So that launched me into gathering images of DNA electrophoresis.

**What was so attractive about electrophoresis images to you?**

There was something about those images, they were organic abstraction in their own way. Then I was teaching for Golden Acrylics a few years later, and I was doing a lot of testing of the materials for Golden. And one of the things they train us to do is take all this technical information and we translate it for artists and we teach artists how to use materials.

There are paints, gessos, and mediums—lots of materials—and each one interacts differently. There's a lot of trial and error. I would make what we called "demo boards" where we would show students illustrations of how materials work. Some of the boards would explore one coat of a particular ground versus two coats versus three coats,



etcetera, set up in a grid layout. When I stepped back and looked at these boards, they were similar to the paintings I was making in my studio — but more interesting.

The demo boards also brought in this idea of testing, and I started to see them as paintings. And the DNA thing locked into place because DNA electrophoresis images are an XY coordinated grid with a test going on, and everything has a meaning. So everything fell into place — the three things: what I was doing in the studio already, the DNA imagery, and the testing for Golden all came together in this weird way and launched this new body of work called “Testing.”

### **What was that body of work, “Testing” about?**

At first, it was all about different kinds of materials, but at a certain point, I discovered by accident that when I had water-based, water-soluble ink underneath other layers, it started bleeding up in interesting ways. I honed in from there on just working and experimenting with ink.

Once I moved into the area of exploring ink, I played with burying ink under things like spray paint and gesso and seeing what it would do and how it would migrate and bleed out. All of that exploration merged with the organic abstraction I had been doing.

At that point, it became a new body of work where each experiment would suggest the next thing.

After years of groping as an abstract painter — where I was trying to figure out everything about painting in each painting — this new way of working broke things down into simple experiments that I could get my mind around. One thing would lead to another, and there was ongoing work. As long as I was curious then there was something to do.

I pretty quickly came up with rules and boundaries for certain things I can and can't use, because it has to be a real test. I don't even know where that idea came from, exactly. It's just that once I saw it, for me it made sense. It has to be a real test, rule number one. Everything in there has to support the test in some way. If I coat the whole thing with a beautiful red glaze, it might look cool, but then I can't read the test. If I can't read the test it doesn't help me move forward.

They were pretty simple tests at first. By scientific standards they were not even scientific—like one coat of spray paint versus two coats of spray paint ... does it make a difference? Simple.

And, of course, I'm doing this all by hand, not actually measuring specific amounts of spray paint. So a scientist would say there are no real controls for this. But it was good



enough for me. Anytime something happened and I didn't understand why it happened, that would lead to another test.

The evolution of it is following the questions and my curiosity.

It's funny because there's this whole thing about DNA and human evolution, but I'm also looking at it as a metaphor for science and the idea of wonder and exploration. There's also the concept of evolution even in the paintings. I'll look at them sometimes and think, "Why do some things keep repeating in the work, and why do other things become dead ends?" It has to survive in the climate of the studio and climate of the gallery system, and yet persist enough to make me interested. It's interesting to me what survives my own natural selection process and what doesn't.

### **Do you view your work more as a scientific process or creative process?**

It's really all about creativity and the creative process, which has always really interested me and there are lots of metaphors out there. There's a really great book I've stumbled across called *Fire in the Crucible: The Alchemy of Creative Genius* by John Briggs. I keep finding copies on Amazon for a dollar and giving them away to friends. It goes through the whole creative process but talks about different types of creative people—artists, scientists, writers, etc. Each chapter focuses on a different aspect of creativity, for example, the dichotomies of how artists feel introverted and extroverted, lazy and really ambitious. We have all these contrary aspects of how we are as people.

*He talks about how creative people can hold opposing ideas in their minds without feeling like they have to make a black and white decision. Creativity is really about staying in this in-between place where you aren't deciding something and then that's it, you stop thinking.*

It's playing around in the gray area—that's where you discover things. That's where you find something, where nobody else has looked as closely.

Not everybody is cut out for that. A lot of people like a simple answer, yes or no. Then they can move on to the next thing. It's uncomfortable to hold two opposing ideas in your mind at the same time and not pick one. But artists for some reason seem to like it.

I think anybody who is working in a creative way has that, and maybe it's partly what fuels the work, the moving back and forth between the two sides. You're moving, you're not static.

There are different types of scientists. Some are purely research-driven and they're just exploring, open-ended. There are also some that are doing a job with a goal in mind.



## **How does this hybrid of a creative and scientific approach to your work change how you view the process as art with a capital “A” or craft?**

There's a lot of craft in what I do in my studio and I'm also really aware of the differences.

In the craft part, I'm trying to perfect a technique so that it's always predictable and gets me where I want to go in a clean simple way.

The creative artistic part of it has to be open-ended. There has to be room for me in the moment to change my mind or try something different.

*Both things are happening in the studio all the time. It has to be in balance, or the craft can take over so much that it shuts down the exploration process.*

But there's a lot of craft in anything. Any painting that's being made has a ton of craft in it.

There's this whole theory that you shouldn't get too good at something, but to me, that's like throwing the baby out with the bathwater. There's nothing wrong with the craft. That's what makes you a master at something. You're developing a skill no one else has at this particular thing. Why would you want to throw that out, it's your thing? You've created it.

And then you have the ability to improvise in that realm. Not getting too good at anything, it's an easy answer for how to make trendy art, but it's not good long-term. It's good for a sprint, not a marathon. Plus it undermines the reason most people get into art in the first place.

My theory is that people get into art because they want to make something beautiful—and then the first thing the art world tells you is maybe that's a bad thing.

## **Where do you stand on the whole art vs. craft debate?**

Not mastering your craft works for people whose creative process is about an idea. They are just trying to find the right material for that particular moment.

In that case, you don't really need to become the master, you can hire someone to do the mastery for you. But not everybody is a conceptual artist. Not everybody is working from that point of view. It's a relatively contemporary idea that it's about the idea and not the object.

There are a ton of people like me who are really interested in the object and making things that are about beauty. We approach making art from what we want to see and



then figure out where it lands in the world after the fact—instead of figuring out what the art world is going to put in a museum and then trying to make that.

The beauty of the art world today is that you can do any of it. Whatever type of creativity is in your mind, you can find a way to make it. There's an audience for everything. And, you don't even have to physically make everything yourself.

**Let's move on to some business questions. How has your role as an art fair organizer changed your relationship with your art dealers?**

Because of the art fair, I had this really obvious shift where I realized that art dealers are people—which of course they are. But before, I saw them in almost a parental way. They're the parent, you're the child. So there's this sort of sense that you're in this power struggle with them. For some artists, they're trying to please their art dealer while some artists are trying to rebel against their art dealer.

I think that's where a lot of artists get into trouble, they stay in that mode even when they're long into adult years. Artists sometimes use an art dealer in ways that they would never treat any other person. Like, you get what you can and then you take off. If you get a show and then a better opportunity comes along, you ditch your dealer, often in a rude way. I think it's a very short-sighted way of handling the art dealer relationship because you're not realizing that the art world is a small place.

Everybody talks about everything. So if an artist gets a reputation as being a user or irresponsible or not respectful, that gets around and you burn a number of bridges and then you're done.

**What about if you don't have a dealer yet and you are approaching a gallery?**

The other side of it is if you're trying to get into a gallery, trying to figure out how that works and either being too shy to make any approaches or being too shy to follow up and stick with it.

I have this classic story where my husband and his friends at one point had a gallery, and early on while we were painting the walls, everyone was talking about some slides that had to come in from this artist whose slides they all liked. They were unanimous in liking it which is rare. So then there's this little pause, and I asked: did anyone call the artist?

No, nobody had called the artist.

So then they said, well, we really want to work with her, we will call her and sort it out. So a few months later we were back in there painting the walls again for another show,



and I asked, “hey did anyone ever call that artist?” No. And by then, they had forgotten her name, they didn't know where her slides were, and it just came and went.

Now if that artist, after sending in her slides, had come into the gallery a week or two later and had talked to any one of them working that day, they would have been all over her. But she didn't follow up. She thought it went into the black hole, they didn't like her, they had rejected her. But the reality was they all loved her work. But, they were busy, they never followed up, something else came up, other artists came along, and it was just the luck of the draw that her work fell through the cracks.

They are humans. They are busy. If only she had followed up with them. This doesn't mean you stalk them, but you can make another inquiry. Six months later, maybe you send a postcard of what you're doing. Or you just walk in the gallery and start chatting and say, “Hey, I sent some slides a few weeks ago. Just wondering if you got them.” It's a hard thing to do because your ego as an artist gets in the way, and it's like, “Oh, no response? They must not like me.” We don't normally think about it from their point of view.

### **So what's the best mind frame to go into approaching a gallery with?**

Taking it personally is what stops you from continuing to build the relationship—you take one rebuff as the end of the story, instead of it just being one moment.

If you don't continue to build a relationship, the person doesn't become familiar with who you are and you don't give them a chance to finally reach out to you. Especially if you go the opposite direction and you become belligerent and mean. You burn a bridge forever—and not just with them. Art dealers talk to each other. If you burn a bridge with one you can better believe the others are going to hear about it and look at you sideways from then on.

You are trying to find a business partner.

The last thing an art dealer is looking for is an artist who wants them to do everything for them. So they are looking at what you were doing when you're not even working with them yet. What are you doing on your own to show them that you can take charge of things yourself, that you are going to be a partner, and that you are going to work as hard as they work?

Part of it is that a lot of artists don't really understand what art dealers do and they think they are getting 50% of the sales of the painting for the dealer to just put in their pocket.

Anybody who has run a business realizes how much money it costs to run a business.





The vast majority of the money you make goes back into running the business, not into your pocket. And an art dealer deserves to make a living just like an artist deserves to make a living. So some of it has to go in their pocket, or why would they do it?

And what the gallery does for an artist once you are in a gallery, it's a long-term process of building your reputation as much as theirs.