



Lisa Congdon

'I spent years doubting my credibility'

LISA CONGDON IS ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST IN-DEMAND ARTISTS—BUT SHE DIDN'T PICK UP A PAINTBRUSH UNTIL SHE WAS 31 YEARS OLD. HERE, SHE TELLS US ABOUT HER JOURNEY FROM ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHER TO BESTSELLING AUTHOR, ILLUSTRATOR AND ARTIST.





Here I was only a few hours old



Playing dress-up as a child

Blowing bubbles in my backyard at age four



With my niece Mia in 2000



With my mother in 1977

I have always loved the color pink



My 3rd grade photo



Traveling in Thailand



With my parents and siblings at my college graduation in 1990



My first partner Marguerite introduced me to the world of art and design

NAME: Lisa Congdon
BORN: Niskayuna, US, 1968
CAREER: Fine artist, author and illustrator. Lisa first picked up a paintbrush at the age of 31. Since then, she has created art and illustrations for clients that range from the United Nations to 'Martha Stewart Living' and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Her work can be found all over the world, in mediums as diverse as fabrics, stationery and museum exhibitions. Lisa is also the bestselling author of seven books about art and creativity, and is an in-demand public speaker and educator, talking to audiences about paths to becoming a flourishing artist. She lives in Portland, OR, in the US.

PAST

'AS A CHILD, I NEVER SAID I WANTED TO BE AN ARTIST. I THINK A LOT OF PEOPLE ASSUME THAT WE'VE BEEN ARTISTS OUR WHOLE LIVES. I WAS DIFFERENT'

I was born in Niskayuna, in upstate New York, US. My memories of it are sort of vague, since I only lived there until I was about eight years old. In 1976, my family moved to California, and I've been more influenced by growing up there. We lived in a town called Los Gatos, which is a small suburban city in the Bay Area, not far from San Francisco.

We weren't wealthy, so we didn't travel too much, but growing up outside San Francisco I had some early exposure to art and design. I have two siblings, an older brother and a younger sister, and my mom created lots of opportunities for us to engage in art, or play or take classes. My mom had this giant German loom in our house—she was often weaving and making wall hangings and she sewed a lot, too.

There was a really distinct 1970s aesthetic in my home. My mom was really into 1970s color schemes, those typically bright-but-muted colors of the era. We had all kinds of art and graphic design and textiles around the house. She was also a really amazing cook; my mom was one of those people living a life where she really worked with her hands a lot and made things from scratch. She was the quintessential seventies mom.

I think my dad is actually a really creative person, too, but he's a scientist, so his interests and work were much more analytical. I used to sit at the kitchen table and watch him work at night. This was before you had computers in the home, so he would sit at the table and write equations on graph paper. They were beautiful.

My dad has meticulous handwriting and for me it was like watching art being made. He's a really interesting, funny, creative guy.

As a child, I never said I wanted to be an artist. I think a lot of people assume—and I think this is true for a lot of artists—that we've been artists our whole lives. I was different. When I was little, I wanted to be an archaeologist. I loved going to flea markets and thrift stores and the challenge of finding treasures, and collecting things. And I'm still a collector to this day. **In my studio, I have weird collections of old things everywhere. I'm really drawn to things that are obsolete: things that we don't use anymore, or that no longer have a purpose in the modern world, that are relics.** Digging for things: the challenge of that was really appealing to me.

Going to college was transformative for me, because I began to see myself as somebody with intellect and ability, in a way that I hadn't in high school. I had some really amazing college professors who told me I was talented, and that I had skills. That was super important for me to hear. I started thinking, 'What am I going to do with my life?'

I graduated from college and wanted to take a little time off before I went back to graduate school. I did a lot of soul searching and realized that I might be interested in being a teacher. It meant I could go back to school quickly, get a teaching credential, and work with kids. I didn't think it was something I was going to do forever—it was a good job for the time being. Of course, it ended up being something that wasn't forever, but I enjoyed it very much.

I taught at elementary school for about eight years. The school where I worked was a poor, inner-city school in San Francisco, and we got a large grant of money to do some improvements. About a year later, the organization that gave us the grant offered me a job, so they poached me away from the school in a sense! I ended up going and working for not-for-profit organizations that worked in schools all over California for another ten or eleven years. >

PRESENT

'I DIDN'T FEEL SAFE GOING FULL-TIME AS AN ARTIST UNTIL I HAD ENOUGH WORK TO AT LEAST PAY MY MORTGAGE'

I was in my early thirties, and I needed to find myself. I had just ended an eight-year relationship with somebody I loved very much. That relationship was fraught with a lot of problems, and I knew I had to move on. I found myself really relieved after it ended, like a refrigerator had been lifted off my shoulders. But also kind of empty, because my life had revolved around this other person for most of my twenties.

I had never taken an art class as an adult, and I just had this urge at the time to dive into something creative. It was a way of figuring out if this was something that could bring some meaning and some happiness into my life. As a matter of fact, it did. But at the time, it was just an experiment.

The very first class I took was a painting class. My brother and I took it together, and he was also going through a big transition in his life. We sat in the back of the classroom and it was just an opportunity to hang out together. **My brother never took another painting class again, but I was so entranced by the process that I kept taking more and more.** I wasn't particularly good, or any better than anyone else. I wasn't like, 'Oh, this is my gift'; it was more that I enjoyed myself.

That drove me to want to do more. I lived by myself in this little apartment, and I set up a tiny art station on my kitchen table. Around that time the Internet was becoming a space where you could look at art. I started researching different artists, experimenting with mixed-media collage, and drawing with ink. My work looked very different to how it looks now. I was a complete beginner, I didn't have technical skills, even though I was

taking classes. Probably as early as 2004, I started posting pictures of stuff I was making on the Internet. I had no intention of becoming a professional artist. It was just for fun and to share with my family and friends. And that was really the beginning for me.

Back then, I still had my full-time job. Then I went part-time, and also co-owned a store called Rare Device in San Francisco and made art. So at one point I had three things going on. I would go to the non-profit job in the morning, then in the afternoon I would go to the store, then at night I would go to my studio. That only lasted about six months and then I quit the job. I still had the store and my art practice, and over the course of four years I was able to do less of the store and more of my art. **I think it's good to transition to full-time art-making. It sometimes means you have to work longer hours or a bit harder for a period of time, but I think financial security is important**—it certainly was to me. I didn't feel safe going full-time as an artist until I had enough work to at least pay my mortgage.

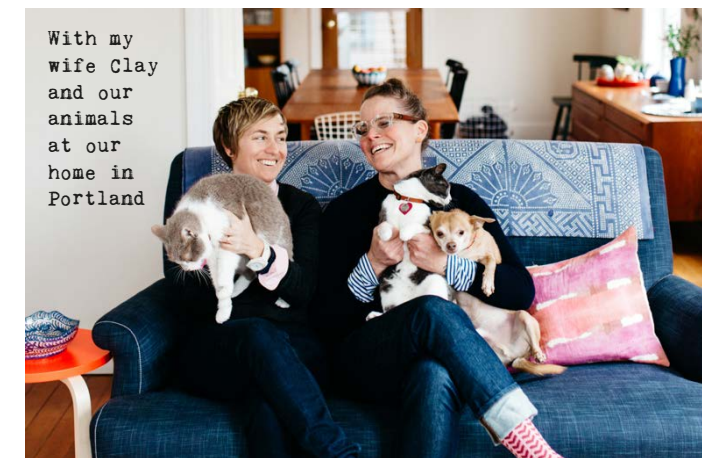
I knew I was an artist by profession, but I was really uncomfortable with that notion, because I had a very severe case of imposter syndrome. I spent a lot of years thinking that I didn't belong, that I had no credibility and that I was a fraud for calling myself an artist. I still do sometimes, because I didn't become an artist until later in life and I'm self-taught. I had a moment in 2011—I had already been a professional working artist for four years and I was invited to be in a museum show. I remember

opening the letter from the museum which came in the mail, and thinking, **'They have the wrong Lisa Congdon. This is a mistake. There's no way this could be happening'.**

I had to change my mindset. I'd become so bogged down by feelings of self-doubt; so much so that I was pretty much constantly anxious. I realized that I was just as much an artist as someone with more experience or more schooling. I think writing my book *Art, Inc* helped me to realize how far I had come and how much I knew, because it was my job when I wrote that book to share my experience with other people. >



In front of the largest painting I've made to date, 2014



With my wife Clay and our animals at our home in Portland



Filming a class for Creativebug



In my San Francisco studio in 2011



I have lots of tattoos. This photo was taken in 2011



I often find myself smiling when I work. Art makes me very happy



In my Portland painting studio last year

FUTURE

**'YOU CAN'T CONTINUE TO REGENERATE
CREATIVELY UNLESS YOU HAVE TIME
TO DAYDREAM, RELAX AND DO NOTHING'**

There's never been a better time to be an artist. The Internet has levelled the playing field, meaning if you didn't go to art school, or if you live in a place that's not a big city, or all the things that might have previously been barriers for you as an artist have now gone away. We live in this world where we're all connected in a way that we weren't even ten or twenty years ago.

I moved to Portland three years ago with my wife, Clay. I had lived in San Francisco for eons, and I really did love it there—it's a beautiful, exciting city. But it's also crowded and expensive. Portland is smaller, but still with a really vibrant creative community. There's a lot of innovation happening, and Clay and I love it here. It's also surrounded by the most beautiful nature, so it's sort of the best of both worlds. It's a magical place.

The only person who really feeds into creative decisions is my wife. We've been together for ten years. I was just starting out when we first got together, so she's watched my work evolve. I feel really lucky because, while Clay is not an artist, she has a really great eye. She's the person who I go to and say, 'Do you think this piece is done?' or, 'What more do you think I need to do with this?' **She's the one person I feel really safe with, because I know no matter what, she's not going to judge me.** I think it's really important as an artist to have someone who you can go to, to get an honest opinion about your work and give you creative feedback.

A couple of years ago, I got really burned out from working too much, and I didn't realize it until I was having health problems and a lot of anxiety. I wasn't leaving enough

space in my life for relaxation and enjoyment. You can't continue to regenerate creatively unless you have time to daydream, relax and do nothing. You have to build that into your life in order to feel happy, and to continue to have ideas. So I made a very conscious decision to change the structure of my life. I still work really hard, I still take on a lot of projects, but I'm also working super hard on having downtime, on allowing myself to relax: reading books, getting outside, not freaking out about deadlines...

About five months ago, I got an iPad and I started drawing digitally. I had resisted it for a very long time, but I was really suffering from bad tendonitis in my right arm, and people suggested that if I changed my way of working I might experience some relief. Just looking at my digital drawings from five months ago to now—if you were to go back on my Instagram feed—it's noticeable how much more developed they've become. **I think it's important for people to watch artists develop their work in real time. A lot of people wait before something's 'perfected' to show it, which isn't actually possible.** I might not be doing it as well as someone else, but I think it's important for people to see that the creative process is messy, even for 'real' working artists.

I definitely have ideas about what I want to do in the future, but for the most part, what feels liberating to me, especially after ten years of feeling overwhelmed with work, is actually not knowing what's going to happen. I turned 50 this year, so I'm very conscious of getting older right now. I'm trying to really embrace it as something

positive. Because I think for a lot of younger people—I was like this!—getting older is such a scary thing. I didn't actually have much professional success or feel fulfilled professionally until I was in my forties. If you'd have asked me when I was 20, I would have told you that being 45 was kind of old. And yet I don't feel old at all now. ●

INTERVIEW OLIVIA GAGAN PHOTOGRAPHY PROVIDED BY THE INTERVIEWEE ILLUSTRATION SHUTTERSTOCK

