

Episode #029 (Transcript)

Charlie Sandlan (00:02):

I remember walking the streets of Manhattan back in '99, 2000 and I would stop in my tracks. I would catch out of the corner of my eye some street art. Some wheatpasting graffiti that would just blow me away. Not only was it exceptional in its detail, but the work was catching something I thought really extraordinary about the human condition. It was rich in empathy. It could be a mother breastfeeding her baby, two indigenous children kind of caught in this awe inspiring moment of surprise. And I thought to myself, "Fuck. This is an artist who is a relentless observer of the human condition." Well, her name is Caledonia Curry and she goes by the moniker Swoon and for the last 20 years she has turned herself into, I believe, one of the more important contemporary artists working today. And it is a privilege to be able to share with you my conversation with her. So put the phone back in your pocket. Creating Behavior starts now.

Charlie Sandlan (01:15):

(singing)

Charlie Sandlan (01:38):

Well, hello my fellow daydreamers. Today is a special episode for me. This is an artist who I have been ... Really I've been following her for 20 years now. Swoon. The artist, Caledonia Curry. Just a few things to say about her. First, if you do not know her work, you should. I would go to her website, swoonstudio.org, to look at much of her work that you can see there. There's a great documentary on her called Fearless, which is worth watching. This is a woman who back in 1999, 2000 when she was putting her art on the streets of New York was crashing into a predominantly male dominated genre. And she's now considered to be one of the greatest street artists in the world. She's also an artist who ... And I think this is what really drew me to her, is her

work taps into her primitive unconscious, into her daydreams in a way that is I just think incredibly courageous. And we'll talk about this. She was born into addiction. Her parents were heroin addicts and her family suffers from generational trauma, which who's families don't in some way? But her life's work has not only been mining that for her art but also in healing herself and getting on the other side of that.

Charlie Sandlan (03:11):

And it has changed her work. We're going to talk about those things. This is a woman who also pays it forward. She goes to Haiti and builds houses. She goes to Kenya to work with the people there. She's just a giving human being. And much of her work is legendary at this point. Back in 2008 she created this piece called The Swimming Cities of Serenissima. And basically what she created were these rafts made of just junk and art. And along with her friends, she sailed these rafts down the Mississippi River and the Hudson. And they would stop off at certain places and read poetry and play music and perform and it was just like these merry band of revelers. And she didn't get accepted into the Venice Biennale in 2009 so what did she do? She packs up these rafts, takes them to Venice, and sails them right down the canals of the city. And she crashed the exhibition basically. And her work, what she did there, became the most extraordinary thing about the entire Biennale.

Charlie Sandlan (04:28):

She bought a church. You can believe that. She bought a church in the town of Braddock, Pennsylvania. And she had this vision of refurbishing and re-tiling the entire church. She learned how to make tiles. They were making hand made tiles in the basement of this church. And we're going to talk about why she considers this to be her greatest artistic failure. This is a woman who created a foundation, the Heliotrope Foundation, which is dedicated really to helping communities, helping people recover from natural disasters. She is leaving an indelible mark on the world and I just

have a lot of respect for that. We start off our conversation talking about trauma and how it relates to the artist. She has spent most of her adult life trying to get on the other side of hers. And we romanticize artists who sort of flame out, that end in suicide. Whether that's someone like Kurt Cobain or Amy Winehouse, Sylvia Plath, Ann Sexton, you name it. I mean, there are a lot of people who burn out. Philip Seymour Hoffman. And I just want to read a quote of Swoon's where she talks about this and then I'll turn it over to our conversation.

Charlie Sandlan (05:57):

She said, "We romanticize their suicides to imagine that their self destruction is some form of rebellion. To kind of watch the beautiful sparks of their flaming out with an almost puerile fascination. But I don't believe that's a viable form of rebellion anymore than I believe that it's an inevitable cost of a creative life." And on that note, here's Swoon.

Swoon (06:24):

There are various reasons in our culture specifically why sometimes people develop coping strategies to trauma that our culture really rewards. Workaholism is one of them. Being kind of unboundaried in a way that sometimes trauma can lead to, I think it can have this upside of meaning that you are making unlikely connections, but I just think it's certainly not the only way that that happens. And as I am somebody who works to heal, I'm like, oh, and this isn't the only way that this story goes. I think for me it's not just that you don't have to not have reconciled your pain to create, it's also that I almost think about rebellion. And I think that we have this image of rebellion which is very often actually an image of a person who's falling apart in a very high spark way before our eyes. And they're doing rebellious things of course, but I was like, what if there's a deeper form of rebellion which has to do with questioning the domination culture that we live in that crushes vulnerable people under and that causes these kinds of beautiful meltdowns that we see? Like what if there's a form of

rebellion that involves healing and pushing back against that culture as a whole? And that's I think where I get really into questioning the dramatic burnout model of being creative.

Charlie Sandlan (08:03):

Well, plus many of the great artists, we see their life, and they do, they flame out. And in tragic ways. And it becomes sort of idealized.

Swoon (08:15):

Yeah. Exactly.

Charlie Sandlan (08:15):

And so we all think, "Oh yeah, well you've got to be really fucked up and you've got to damage yourself in order to do something of value or to produce something." But that requires a lot of hard work on yourself. You've done a lot of hard work on yourself to come to terms with your childhood and I'm just curious how it's changed you as an artist? Understanding yourself more deeply, understanding your primitive unconscious in a way that you didn't when you were 25.

Swoon (08:45):

Totally. The first thing that I think I've noticed is that I'm more flexible. And I think what I mean by that is one thing that ... To go back to trauma. For folks that don't have as much of an introduction to what we're talking about, I grew up in a heavily drug addicted family. I grew up in a family with a lot of mental illness and suicide and depression and things that are difficult to survive around and grow up around, especially as a small person. One of the ways that the psyche responds to that is by becoming very rigid and locked into your ways of being. You get your coping strategies and you just fucking do them because that shit helped you survive and you're stuck to that. And I hit on all these really well rewarded coping strategies like workaholism, like all this kind of stuff.

Swoon (09:37):

And so many people who gain recognition have this deep need to be ... What do you call it? Confirmed. Seen, heard, all of that. And of course I had that. But as I started to heal and I started to say, "Oh my god, am I going to lose my creativity?", what I in fact found is that the rigidity of the trauma response, as that has started to leave my psyche I've become more flexible and I've started to make really dramatic changes in the way that I work and to do things that I wouldn't have done five or 10 years ago because I would have been like, "I need to keep doing what I've been doing. I need to always gain approval in these ways." And lately I've been like, "Well, maybe I don't. Maybe I'm about to do something super unpopular." And I think sometimes from the outside people can be like, "Oh, you were so much better before." And I'm like, "No. Actually, to me, I'm better now." Because I'm braver, I'm exploring things that are way more off the path. And maybe that does look weirder to the outside world, but I'm like, creatively that's where it's at for me.

Swoon (10:40):

Whatever the outside world thinks it can think. But for me, that's really where it's at is the sort of healing and the hard work on myself has gotten me to a place of much deeper flexibility and risk taking creatively.

Charlie Sandlan (10:54):

So you're saying you feel more of a risk taker now?

Swoon (10:59):

I do. Even though I was building rafts and driving them in front of barges and shit back then. Our lives were at risk, but-

Charlie Sandlan (11:10):

Yeah, literally.

Swoon (11:12):

Literally. But there are ways about ... Like we said, questioning the patriarchy. Speaking out against abuse in ways that are super unpopular and people are like, "Oh gross. You're [inaudible 00:11:28]." Those are the kind of risks I wouldn't have taken

because I needed a certain kind of hard edged-ness or I needed a certain kind of social approval. So now it's like I feel like I'm more willing to be awkward. I'm more willing to be very uncool. I'm more willing to be earnest in a painful way. Like, "Yep, I'm talking about this. We're doing a meditation show. How dorky is that?" But for me that's more risk taking.

Charlie Sandlan (11:57):

See, that's fascinating because I know that you've talked a lot about the ... And I think you even said it took every ounce of courage that I had to make Medea. And to me, I don't know how it gets more risky than putting that kind of childhood experience into art. And it's funny to hear you say that you feel more of a risk taker now, when I would just say that seems to be the riskiest thing that you could possibly do.

Swoon (12:24):

Well, that's one of the outcomes. And that level of risk was so deep. When I was making the Medea at the canyon, which you saw, we were setting up this whole entire show that was a retrospective. I was about to set down street art which was a scary move on its own. I was doing all these things. And then in the middle of it I was like, "And I'm going to tinker with my own psyche. I'm going to get down into my own psyche and try to map my own psyche onto the physical world." It was just terrifying. It was terrifying kind of day and night. Like what am I doing? Is it going to work? Does it make sense? Is this too risky for my mental health even? I had people who were encouraging me. I had friends that were helping me work through the text. I had this amazing sound designer that came in and saved my ass at the last minute when the whole thing was going to fall apart. I had a lot of support. I had my therapists. I had a lot of support to be able to do it. I don't think without that support I would have been able to.

Charlie Sandlan (13:25):

Do you ever get scared that your idea well has dried up?

Swoon (13:31):

I wonder if it ever will but I don't get scared that it does because I'm still like, "I need to make this movie. I need to make this thing." So that never ... And part of the reason why I don't worry about it is because my idea well isn't like some thing in space. What my idea well is is myself in contact with the world and the world is pretty fucking infinite if you look at it. So because what I'm constantly doing is taking my brain and just putting it in contact with the world, that just feels like there's not really an end to that process. If I made a decision to only draw portraits in a certain way for the rest of my life, yeah, I would run to an end of that. Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe you can look at the human face forever and I would discover new things in that. Probably. I mean, people do it and they get to incredible places within their work.

Swoon (14:29):

But me personally, how I kind of keep that sense of freshness and aliveness is by continuing to ... I kind of feel like my creative well is like ... I wish I knew a good word for this metaphor, but imagine you had some kind of a bit of a chemical salt and you could mix it into different kinds of substances. And you're like, "I'm going to mix it here. I'm going to mix it here. I'm going to put it on the street. I'm going to build a house. I'm going to build a raft. I'm going to make a play. I'm going to make a movie." You just take this thing and you keep leading it into these different environments and these different circumstances and it's having a different chemical reaction each time.

Charlie Sandlan (15:10):

What I try to train actors to do is to allow their empathy to come to the surface, allow their humanity to come to the surface, to get them to understand that if you're going to be a good actor, and this is true for any art, you've got to be fascinated with the human condition and you've got to be a relentless observer. What is it about the human condition that most fascinates you?

Swoon (15:30):

It's almost just like the experience of experiencing humans. I just find that I can study different subjects for only so long and then I hit a wall. And some walls you hit earlier than others. But something about looking at people, there's just no wall. I just am like ... It feels like they open up and they open up and they open up and they don't stop opening up. It kind of goes in a couple directions because it's some of ... It can just be like watching people walk down the street and being like, "Oh, this is how that guy carries that bag. And is he tired? And what's he thinking about? Is he thinking about ... Why did he lift his shoulders? Is it because he's worried about his family or is it because he just realized he forgot the milk?" And then all of a sudden you get into this thing about culture where you're like oh my god, culture, people, the way we relate to each other, the way that we need to find more empathy for each other and we need to be able to touch our own pain in order to do that. And it's just these rabbit holes that keep opening up.

Charlie Sandlan (16:46):

There's a great book by Angela Duckworth called Grit. Her point is that at the heart of any real success, people that have grit, what they do has to do with giving back. There's a big part of giving back that goes into someone's work. Man, you give back more than just about any artist I follow. I'm just wondering what that does for you creatively. Whether it's Haiti or Braddock, Pennsylvania or Kenya or all these places that you go, what does that do for you as an artist?

Swoon (17:24):

Yeah. I think when I first started to sort of sense that I needed to find ways to give back it sort of came out of pain. It was just this feeling that the world is in pain and I am in pain and I don't know how to tolerate this suffering. And perhaps I shouldn't tolerate it. So asking myself, well, what does that mean? How can I help? Can I be of service here? Can I be of service there? And I didn't grow up with any religion at all so I had no model for ... Some

people have that built into their lives. It's built into the way they grow up. And I didn't. So I had this kind of pain that was born out of not having a way to give back. So I started and then what I found, when I went to Kenya I was just invited to do this thing. I was invited to do some teaching at an orphanage. And I got there and what I realized is that I had very little to offer to be honest. Anyone could have done that teaching. I didn't have to go to Kenya to do it. People in Kenya could have done a better job than what I was doing in fact.

Swoon (18:39):

Instead, what I understood, what I learned is that I had some deep unresolved issues having to do with all the things that these kids were struggling with and that they showed me that these issues that they were dealing with of abandonment and of neglects, many of them had gone through serious abuse in their homes. And the way that I connected with these kids showed me that I had a lot that was unresolved in me. And then of course I tried to say, okay, well how can I be involved? The equality effect was this incredible project that's about stopping this epidemic of sexual abuse that is happening in Kenya but I would argue is also global. And the folks in Kenya there are doing such incredible work and so it was just an honor honestly to be invited to be a part of it. And through that process of working with these kids and that they had gone through these horrific rape often, and connecting with them and then slowly it dawned on me that although I had been invited and I had responded that was something more to the fact that I had been invited and why I had accepted so readily.

Swoon (20:00):

And I realized that my own family, my mother and many of my aunts and uncles had been sexually abused and had been emotionally abused and that that abuse ... Because of the way that they weren't able to heal their abuse, because of their innate psychological sensitivities, that abuse expressed itself as

dramatic drug addiction. And then that expressed itself in my life as deep neglect and abandonment. So it was like connecting with these kids. I helped in the small way that I could. And in fact what I got was this deep view into my own well of need.

Charlie Sandlan (20:42):

I grew up, went to grade school, Catholic high school. I was molested by a priest when I was 13.

Swoon (20:43):

Wow.

Charlie Sandlan (20:44):

I had to deal with my whole life my relationship to men, my relationship to men in authority. We all have it. Did you ever think, "How the fuck did I not end up an addict? How did I not end up like my parents?" I would think that would just be something that would be terrifying.

Swoon (21:01):

Well, I think that you and I, and I don't know your history with addiction but I would say looking at where you are I would imagine that creativity came in to the place that addiction would have come into. For me it was like, I found painting at 10 and all of a sudden, because I was talented at it, because I was in a stable enough place in my life by that point where I could actually get taken to art classes, right at the time when I hit 11 and 12 I went through depression, I went through these things. I would have started to unravel, but I didn't because painting was already there and I already had it and it stayed with me and it affirmed me and it focused my mind. It calmed my nervous system. Because so much of what happened with my mom was that she didn't have a way to calm her nervous system. Trauma jacks your nervous system up to 11 at all times. And if you don't have a way to work with that, you're going to drink. You're going to do drugs. I mean, why would you not? That's the thing that calms you down. That's what you do.

Swoon (22:07):

But if you're lucky enough like I was lucky enough that I could key in on that painting and I could calm myself down.

Charlie Sandlan (22:21):

As opposed to having a drink and shooting up or anything like that.

Swoon (22:21):

And I think that as flawed as my childhood was, I believe that in some ways I was protected from some of the things that my mom experienced. I had my sister who loved me. Somehow I had enough comfort that I was able to calm my own nervous system in ways that other people around me were not.

Charlie Sandlan (22:41):

Interesting. My dad died 10 years ago. And I'm just curious what ... Having both parents now gone, did it lift a weight off of you in some way or did it ... How did it change you?

Swoon (22:52):

How I felt ... My friend described it to me best and I was like, "Yes." He said when my second parent died I felt that I had been shot out of a cannon into space. Like there's no ground under your feet, there's no orienting signs anywhere. You're alone in the universe. And I don't have kids. Luckily I have my brother and sister. But I just felt like where is earth? Where am I? And then another friend came in at that moment and said, "I know this sounds weird, but one day this is going to be the best thing that ever happened to you." And I think that sort of speaks to the sense of something being lifted. And what I mean by that is that all of our parents I think this must be true, and with my parents, they each had a lot of mental distress and they coped with it in a lot of very specific ways and there were lies that they told themselves. There were lies that they told me. They wrapped me into their very unhealthy ways of thinking. My nervous system would tune to their nervous system in these very upsetting, unhealthy ways.

Swoon (24:04):

And I loved them. I loved them so much. And yet, to be free of that is a kind of a freedom. You have to accept their death and you have to accept that they're gone. And while you're accepting that, there's a way of saying, "Oh, and I get to reinvent. I get to say I don't accept all of the sort of mental squalor and anguish that was built into growing up with you. I'm going to clean it up now. Because I can."

Charlie Sandlan (24:33):

I tell all my students day one that if you're going to live an artistic life it's going to cost you everything. And you might not understand that right now as you're sitting in my classroom. But if this is the life that you're doomed to live in some ways ... You're cursed. We're all cursed. The artistic path. Looking back now, what does that mean to sacrifice all of that? To not have kids. It's all about the work. I mean, I'm the same way. I don't have kids. I never will. My whole life has revolved around the work.

Swoon (25:04):

It scares me. I'm not not having kids. I want to have kids. I just don't want to have kids more than I want to have kids. What that means is that I do wake up like, "What did you do? What did you do? Why did you do that? What are you thinking? You're lost. Is this what life is about? What is life about? What's going on?" I get that. Like when we were talking Buffalo earlier in the installation and I was saying how disruptive it is. I really feel like I have a way in which I transmute myself into what I'm doing to the point where I'm almost gone. During an installation period I don't do other things. I don't make difficult phone calls. I don't hang out with friends. I'm like a non entity during those periods where it's like I get home, I eat a bunch of cookies, take a hot bath, and sit in my sweatpants. And I'm fucking done. Because it's like I've burned it down to the quick or like all of me is already transmuted into what I'm doing and there's not me left. And I'm just like I wouldn't put kids through that.

Swoon (26:25):

I kind of believe in art in this crazy way, which I think probably most people who make their lives in the arts do. Where I believe that we can cut a hole in space time and that we can let in eternal forces through that hole. And that we can send messages through that hole, through space time. Like when I, as a teenager, stood in front of a Vincent van Gogh painting and it was doing this and I was like the cells of the world are vibrating. I know that. I know what happens when the cells of the world are vibrating. I feel that. And I was like, "Motherfucker, you've been dead for 100 years or more. You cut a hole in space time and you communicated to this teenager and you were like, 'I know your mind. I'm in your mind.' Like how the fuck did you do that motherfucker?"

Charlie Sandlan (27:28):

Yeah.

Swoon (27:32):

And I believe in that. And at that moment I was like, "I'm not alone." I've felt more alone with friends than I felt at that moment standing in front of that painting.

Charlie Sandlan (27:46):

Do you think you've had that with other works of art as well?

Swoon (27:46):

Absolutely. Yeah. Robert Irwin is a big one. I mean, Kathe Kollwitz, Kiki Smith, films. Even films of ... Bob Brannaman is a filmmaker that was friends with my dad and I remember encountering his films as a teenager. Not even well known. Just these beautiful things that he made and I just was transported and taken to a place of mind, a place of soul, a place of spirit. And I believe in art that way and that's why I give so much to it.

Because I'm like this isn't some object. It's all of these things together. It's you. It's the object. It's the moment. It's the feeling. It's like if we can get this magic going, the thing lifts up off the ground. It becomes a different place and time. So the pressure to make something epic, for me is that pressure. I want to give that back.

Charlie Sandlan (28:43):

Well, it seems like this new project you've got, Seven Contemplations, is very much that. To have seven different places that address very specific parts of the human experience, it seems like this whole piece is about providing something beyond just like, oh, here's some art on the wall. You can leave your time here having absolutely contemplated something deeply about yourself and about life that might just help you. Help your relationships, help how you relate to people.

Swoon (29:15):

And also the way that I have it set up. I think for people who actually sit with it and do the breath work and do the contemplation and do the looking, I think that there's also some experiential stuff that can really open up for people if they sort of take the time to experience it. And that also for me is important. I don't know. I have this memory of being four years old or five years old and I was with my dad at a park and my dad had gotten clean by this point and we would do fun stuff like go to the park. Me and my dad and my sister. And all of a sudden we were sitting in front of this pond and there was a lotus. And he was like, "Oh my god, look. It's opening." And we were like, "What?" And we just sat there and we just breathed really quietly and we watched it and it just opened right before our eyes like in slow motion but we could see it. And that's one of those early instances of realizing that through the senses you also can transcend the day to day just by keying into something, by slowing the breathing down, by experiencing the breathing or experiencing the body.

Charlie Sandlan (30:42):

Was that awe?

Swoon (30:42):

That was awe.

Charlie Sandlan (30:42):

Yeah.

Swoon (30:42):

It was real awe. I've never forgotten it. It's like I was five years old and we looked at a flower. And we would tell each other the story. "Remember that time?" It was like one of those things. We all thought about it. I can't share this exact experience, but maybe I can set up the conditions for people to start to enter into these kinds of experiences of wonder, of awe, of transcendence. But also, and I think the other thing that's really important about meditation is that sometimes your experience is just of irritation. Of just, "God, my mind is a mess." And that that's part of it too.

Charlie Sandlan (31:20):

Well, it was such a great idea and I'm always talking to my students and certainly as actors you have to ideas. You're never better than your ideas. You said, "I know that an idea is real when I get very mad about it." How do you know when an idea is worth investing the time in and what did you mean by getting mad at it?

Swoon (31:41):

Okay. Well, here's an example. I started making stop motion animation and-

Charlie Sandlan (31:48):

Which is so fucking cool by the way. Let me tell you. Really fucking cool. I don't know what the name of it is with the Raggedy Ann and we took that piece. Great. Unsettling. Really unsettling.

Swoon (32:04):

Thank you. Yeah, it was a hard piece to make and an important piece to make and thank you for appreciating it. So I started making stop motion and it got me. And then I had this whole wild thing happen where I wrote this children's story and it was just one of those weird things that that just happened and I was like, okay. And I had this and I put it away for a couple years. But then once I started making stop motion I was like, "Maybe I should pull that children's story out. Maybe I should think about it." And so I was like, "Okay. Yeah, I'm going to make this feature film with this stop motion." And I'm thinking about it ... And then I go down to Florida and I go visit my brother. And I jump in the swimming pool.

Because he's got a swimming pool that he just cleaned up. And I just, as this often happens to me ... Water is like the medium for the message to me. Water just like ... So as I'm in the pool I'm like, "Oh, I could film under here the stream scene." And then I popped out and I looked at the shed and I was like, motherfucker. Swoon (33:01):

So my brother lives in our childhood home. That's his home now. And this is the home where I've lived since I was five, off and on. And it was a home in which a lot of very destabilizing things happened, including my mom had a major psychotic breakdown where she thought that aliens were coming and they were going to eat us and that she had to force feed us alcohol to poison ourselves. That happened at seven years old. Totally terrifying. My father luckily came to rescue us. I was afraid she was actually going to murder us to try to protect us from the aliens. It was bad scene. So I wrote this children's story about the events. So I'm at my brother's house, I get out of the swimming pool, I walk back to the shed, which is the backyard where all ... Same yard, same place where all these things happened. And I go, "Oh my god. You're going to film it here. You're going to do a giant scale, outdoor, stop motion animation in the fucking shed of the house that you grew up in, in the yard where these terrifying things happened."

Swoon (34:12):

And I was like, "I hate you. I hate you. This is going to be so hard. People don't do giant scale, outdoor stop motion animations for a reason. We are going to be dealing with all these ... Not just to mention the mud and the snakes and the fucking possums, but the internal demons and the sun and the rain and the light keeps changing. And it's giant and it's molding and it's falling apart and it's like 1,000 degrees and why am I Florida and my brother hates me and because I'm taking over the backyard and what are we doing?" I just could see it all unfold and I was like, "That's right. We are doing it." Because I would-

Charlie Sandlan (34:50):

So what keeps you from saying, "Oh, fuck it. This is too much. Nope."?

Swoon (34:55):

Because it's right. Like you know it's right. You're like, "Oh, it's right. I can feel it." I wouldn't even get that mad. I would just be like, "No. We're not doing that." But I'm like, it's already hook ... It's just like this ... Like events pop into place. And this happens to me a lot where ... So the raft. I talked about the rafts for, I don't know, three, four years before I ever did it. And then this one day this friend of mine, we're on this trip, da, da, da, and he was like, "Well, why don't you do it like this?" We drew this little sketch on a napkin and I was like ... Again, it's just like you can feel the spheres align or something. And all of this energy pours in and then I'm like, "Oh my god, I can't believe you're going to do this to me. I can't believe you're going to make me do this." And then yes, you are. We are going to do this.

Charlie Sandlan (35:44):

It's interesting to hear you talk about getting ideas from people and you've certainly been a collaborator but yet you've said that you hate collaborating, that you're not a good collaborator.

Swoon (35:53):

Yeah.

Charlie Sandlan (35:55):

But that's kind of all you do is collaborate.

Swoon (35:59):

Uh-huh. Yeah. I mean, I think you have to discover your collaborating style.

Charlie Sandlan (36:04):

What's yours?

Swoon (36:05):

Well, I like to be the creative director. I'm not a consensus collaborator. I'm not even great at horizontal structures. I like to be the creative director and to be able to ... And I like to have other

people sort of be the creative director of their piece. So for example, I have a collaboration with some folks where we work around trauma and addiction. For example, one of my collaborators just made this book but I was involved in the conceptualization and let's make it and fund it and all these things. But when it came time for her to make the piece, I was like, "That's your piece. You make the piece. Like I'm not going to get in there with you and tell you how to do it or what to do unless you ask me to. Unless you need that." And in fact, she had somebody that she likes to work with so she worked with that person. And I kind of feel the same way where I'm like, I think there's a lot in horizontal collaborations. Everyone wants to have a say in everything and everyone wants to be involved in everything. But I like to be like, "You trust me with this part, I trust you with this part, and if we decide to consult each other we will."

Swoon (37:14):

And that's kind of a little bit more where my style has evolved to. Because I've had some unsuccessful collaborations where everyone was trying to be on all aspects of things. Also, with collaborators you have to trust that all of your collaborators want the creative outcome more than they want to feel their own influence.

Charlie Sandlan (37:39):

Is that what happened in Braddock? Because I know you've talked about what you, I guess, consider a failure. Which I don't know if it's a failure or not. It's just that's expensive to try to tile and to restore a fucking church.

Swoon (37:54):

I mean, a big piece of that ... There are various reasons why I consider that a failure and I think the main one is that I didn't move there. Because in some places I have been able to. In New Orleans I worked on a project where I was a collaborator from afar. The project in Haiti, I was able to just spend some per year there. There's all kinds of chemistry that has to come together for

that to happen, including economic chemistry. So Braddock, I think we were super young. All of us. We didn't really quite understand what we were getting ourselves into. I sure as hell did not. A bunch of the sort of necessary chemistries just didn't quite kick off. Yeah. It was a very heavy lift. It was a very, very heavy lift.

Charlie Sandlan (38:40):

How was it to kind of bring yourself to that point ... Or not bring yourself, but you get to that point where this isn't working, I have to pull the plug on this.

Swoon (38:47):

It was like a divorce. I mean, not that I've ever had a divorce. But I assume that when people get divorced you don't just decide one day. I think it's like ... It was like okay, first we're all in together, then I'm like, "Actually, let me shift and try to work in this way." I just tried all these different things. Let's try this. Let's try that. Let's try this. Let's try that. And finally I was like, "This isn't working." But I had to accept it by degrees. And then I think finally what really, really did it for me was when my parents died and when my focus shifted so much. At that point, then I was like, "Actually, I don't even want to focus on architecture in this moment right now. I actually want to focus on addiction and trauma and healing and these other things." So that was the big moment where I was like, "Okay, I have to accept this."

Charlie Sandlan (39:40):

You can't come into this kind of life worried or obsessed with success or wanting to be famous. You've got to do the work. You guys got to do the work. And if you do good work, they will remember you, they will discover you. And that's what you did. You just did the work. You just didn't give a fuck. You went out on the streets in a male dominated field and just did it. What was it like to get a call from Jeffrey Deitch and say, "You know what, I've seen your work and you're incredible."?

Swoon (40:13):

Yeah. I had a panic attack immediately. I just remember that whole week after he called I would just be on drugs. And I'd be like, "That's weird because I didn't take any drugs but I'm on drugs." And I was like, "I think I'm having panic attacks because my life is about to change."

Charlie Sandlan (40:28):

You knew it when you got the call?

Swoon (40:29):

Oh yeah. Yeah. You knew it. It's interesting because I think the first time somebody interviewed me for the Pratt school newspaper I was like ... Every step feels like a thing so it's not ... There are those big steps like the Jeffrey step where I had a big panic attack. And there was that moment when I looked back in my journal I was like, "Holy shit girl. Things were happening for you at this moment." There was definitely this one moment where things just went to the stars. But there was a lot that built up to that moment. There were years and there were opportunities which also felt huge which seemed small to other people but which felt really huge to me. So it definitely had this very big foundation that it built on. And in fact, I remember when he called I had already decided that my window was over and my career was about to be over. And then like six months later he calls and I was like, "Oh, I guess it wasn't over." But that can happen, right?

Charlie Sandlan (41:28):

It can.

Swoon (41:28):

You're just like, "Oh, it's not going to happen for me." And then you never know what or ... And I'm trying to really respect those forces to just be like you never know when things happen and why and there's so much disappointment. Another thing I think a lot of people don't understand is they think that if you get success that you're just free and clear, but there's so much disappointment, there's so much worry that can happen. You bring all the same problems with you. You have all the same

catastrophes. There's never a moment where you're just like, "I'm invulnerable and this is dope and I'm set for life." I mean, I don't think there is. Maybe somebody feels that way.

Charlie Sandlan (42:07):

No. Listen, actors are rejected all the time. It's one rejection after another. You'll audition maybe 150 times in a year or two where you book two or three jobs.

Swoon (42:15):

Wow.

Charlie Sandlan (42:16):

And that's successful. So there's a lot of disappointment and it's how you navigate your way through the frustration and the disappointment and the artistic struggle. I'm curious what was the biggest disappointment that you've had artistically?

Swoon (42:33):

I mean, I guess it must have been having to accept that I could not finish what I started with the church in Braddock. I do think that has been my biggest disappointment. And just having to accept that I had a lot of dreams and I couldn't make them happen. And I could still be like, "No, I'm going to do it." But I'm not going to. I'm not going to. And I have to be real about that.

Charlie Sandlan (43:00):

That can be a tough pill. You've got to be honest with yourself right?

Swoon (43:03):

Yep.

Charlie Sandlan (43:03):

And just like fuck, forget it. It's not going to happen.

Swoon (43:06):

It's not going to happen.

Charlie Sandlan (43:07):

At least I'm not going to do it.

Swoon (43:09):

Yeah. And I have to let all that go and all the things I hoped and all the things I said and all the promises that I made. All of it. I have to say we did what we could do and it ends here. And that's hard.

Charlie Sandlan (43:22):

You are an incredible writer.

Swoon (43:23):

Thank you.

Charlie Sandlan (43:25):

An incredible writer. You have an exceptional talent at being able to put words together. I mean, do you know that you're a good writer?

Swoon (43:34):

Yeah. I like writing. I feel like something happens for me when I write, for sure. Yeah. It's like that thing where it's like does something happen? And for me, my brain ... I love to write.

Although, I mean, I love to surf and I'm a shitty surfer so it's not that loving something makes me good at it. But I don't think of myself as a great writer. But I think of myself as a writer that people can read. And I'm proud of that.

Charlie Sandlan (44:04):

Did you really puke on Fox headquarters in red, white, and blue? I was trying to imagine how you guys did that and it was just like one sentence in a article. I was like, "What the fuck?"

Swoon (44:16):

Yeah. It wasn't pretty. That was Leslie, who was part of Toy Shop. Leslie Stemm. I think she was inspired by another group and she said, "Let's do this. Let's do this kind of agitprop thing." We were in our 20s, we were wild. It was the Iraq war and Fox News was being Fox News and we drank ipecac. And we ate different colors of pie. Blueberry, cherry, and something white, I can't remember, so we could puke red, white, and blue. And then a bunch of us drank ipecac and puked on Fox News.

Charlie Sandlan (44:48):

That's amazing.

Swoon (44:52):

I almost forgot that we had done that.

Charlie Sandlan (44:52):

What do you think our responsibility as artists is to testify, to disrupt, to challenge?

Swoon (44:59):

Yeah. I mean, I think all of it. I think it's like as artists our moment is to figure out where we work best and to work there. You pointed out the piece I did in Detroit. I did a little political poster because I got invited to do it and I was like, "Okay, I'm just going to do this." I think that that's somewhat of a strength of mine. I don't think it's my biggest strength so I just did it once. My particular work's a little slower. So right now one of the things I've started to do is I'm starting to do some work around white folks who are ready to acknowledge the legacy of slavery, of the removal of indigenous people within their own family lineages. To say let's look at ... This isn't some abstract thing. This is like what's going on in our family histories and let's try to understand that and grieve that and heal that and try to take responsibility for that. And for me that's a long, slow process and the work is very emotional but I think that one of the things that I see when I look at Trump supporters and particularly the Trump supporters in my family, it's this deep lack of emotional maturity and it's this deep lack of ability to take any kind of responsibility for anything.

Swoon (46:15):

And to say you're sorry. And to say let's work together and let's change. It's this total like, "I'm just going to be a two year old and blame everyone and blah, blah, blah." And so for me, there's political work and there's agitprop and there's out in the street organizing, but there's also the question of how do we be more mature emotionally so that we can be leaders emotionally and show people ... How can I try to teach myself to take accountability so that I can be an example for the people in my

family who have zero ability to take accountability? Or who think the other side of accountability lies death and murder. Maybe it's in fact healing, connection, and being deeply rewarded while making a sacrifice that you feel good about. Maybe that's what's on the other side of accountability and in fact in sort of saying okay, let's try to show people that it's not what you think it is. For example, I think there's all these ways and those are two of the ways that show up in my life but for other people, I just feel like there's infinite ways that you can try to sort of look at the landscape of what's happening and say how do I push the needle forward?

Swoon (47:31):

Is it on racism? Is it on misogyny? Even I see people starting free refrigerators. So is it even on trying to remember how to share in this moment of COVID? Anything.

Charlie Sandlan (47:45):

You need empathy. We have an empathy deficit right now. And you've got to be able ... And certainly actors have to do this, artists have to do this. You have to be able to step into the shoes of another human being and see the world through their eyes. And that's what we're going through.

Swoon (48:02):

I would argue that we are getting better and better all the time and that right now we're just having a hiccup.

Charlie Sandlan (48:09):

I hope that's what it is.

Swoon (48:12):

Because I just watched this movie last night called Traces of the Trade. It was about the slave trade. And this guy said his own family was involved in the slave trade and he was looking at what it must have taken to do what Europeans did. And he said, "MY god, the tolerance for violence must have just been astonishing. Like the lack of empathy must have been astonishing." And when you think about child labor, when you think about all these things

that we used to tolerate that we don't tolerate anymore, I think even though we're having this spasm and we're having this moment where everyone just wants to act like a two year old and let their id drive and just be like, "Me, me, me.", I think that that's a reaction against what's truly happening, which is that we are deepening our empathy and connecting and learning emotional resilience in these bigger ways and that we're just having these pushback reactions against this deeper truth that's really actually taking place.

Charlie Sandlan (49:18):

I think it's very important to operate outside your comfort zone. It's the only way to grow. And I'm just curious right now, what work are you doing that's making you uncomfortable?

Swoon (49:30):

The work around ... I just started a study group this week and we watched that movie *Traces of the Trade* which was about a family recognizing their history of interacting with the slave trade. Trying to say, "Okay, I'm going to start researching my family. I'm going to go to Florida. I'm going to trace all this stuff back and see what these people have been doing for the last five generations and then try to figure out how ... Is there a way that my own trying to research my family, is there a way that that contributes to the public conversation in a way that creates healing and accountability and racial justice?" But that's pretty scary. It's a pretty scary idea to start digging into so that's making me pretty uncomfortable but I'm pretty passionate about it.

Swoon (50:23):

(singing)

Charlie Sandlan (50:26):

Well, my fellow daydreamers, thank you for sticking around and keeping that phone in your pocket. If you find yourself in Buffalo, New York or you want to go to the website of the Albright-Knox Northland museum, you can see Swoon's latest exhibition. It's called *Seven Contemplations* and it will be there till January 10th.

You can follow this show wherever you get your podcasts. Subscribe to it please. Leave me a review on iTunes. I would really appreciate that. You can go to my website, <https://www.creatingbehaviorpodcast.com> You can leave me a message through SpeakPipe on my site. You can follow me on Instagram, @creatingbehavior, @maggieflaniganstudio. Lawrence Trailer, thank you for the music my man.

Charlie Sandlan (51:05):

My friends, listen, you tap into that primitive unconscious of yours, play full out with yourself when you can, and don't ever settle for your second best. My name is Charlie Sandlan. Peace.

Charlie Sandlan (51:17):