

# Sustaining Creativity IN NYC

BY FLETCHER BONIN '13

On the corner of 22nd Street and 10th Avenue in the Chelsea section of Manhattan, above the retro Empire Diner, Brazilian graffiti artist Eduardo Kobra has made his mark. The expansive mural features the likenesses of Andy Warhol, Frida Khalo, Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat. Typical of Kobra's disruptive style, their visages replace the familiar faces of Mount Rushmore, swapping the gray subtlety of the Midwestern original for the Technicolor vibrancy of its Manhattan locale. One of 18 bold murals completed by Kobra in 2018, this piece functions not only as an homage to four of the most influential, transgressive artists of the 20th century, but also speaks to the inherent creativity of the city itself.

Much like the murals tattooing the sides of buildings and overlooking city blocks, creativity is intrinsic to New York City's very identity. Creative expression is as quintessentially New York as the Statue of Liberty, dollar pizza slices, and smoking cigarettes in black skinny jeans outside your friend's Off-Off-Broadway one-woman show. One can hardly leave his or her cramped apartment without being bombarded by a city that yearns to perform, to create, and to be witnessed. Turn a corner and you may recognize the diner from *Seinfeld* or the iconic toy store where Tom Hanks danced in *Big*. Mind your head when the subway dancers start spinning and kicking acrobatically from the ceiling rails. Anywhere else open-mic nights might be sad affairs, but here they fit perfectly into the performative food chain. Lightning has struck the city so many times that a tangible, collective sense of hope, wonder, or bafflement now permeates the hazy metropolitan air.

It is all of a piece: the chaos of the city channeled into paintings, theater acts, bucket



Fletcher Bonin '13



drumming, graffiti, street dancing, avant-garde fashion and, I suppose, even the sadist playing an accordion on the subway at seven a.m. during my morning commute. Much like Warhol, Haring and Basquiat before them, several Abbey alumni have found their beacon in New York City, the answer to their creative calling.

As it happens, the creative opportunities of the city have funded my lavish metropolitan lifestyle as well, as evinced by my cigar box apartment and my reliance on pretzel carts for all my meals. I work at an art gallery – slash – production studio in Hell's Kitchen, hidden on the top floor of an old brick warehouse overlooking the Hudson River and the newly completed Vessel sculpture. Complete with a 90-year-old freight elevator, decorated with abstract art, hosting a rotating coterie of film crews and celebrities and two precocious feline residents, it's the kind of place so painfully New York it could not possibly exist elsewhere. While I was just a tree-climbing faculty child during Maggie Moran's tenure at Portsmouth Abbey, I had the good fortune of sharing the campus with Frank Pagliaro, Nick DeLieto, and Peter Vergara as a student. Now that I too live in New York, our worlds have once again, delightfully, collided.

#### FRANK PAGLIARO '10

Though he graduated from the Abbey in 2010, Frank Pagliaro's history with the School extends well beyond his student experience. From 2014 to 2016, Frank taught both English and Humanities at the Abbey, while houseparenting in St. Aelred's and functioning as the technical director for the School plays. While he admits to missing the classroom and witnessing students "discover the book that spoke to them," and while acknowledging that the Abbey has always been a place where he could be amongst "people whom I loved, who loved me and wanted the best for me," Frank has found a new home in New York City.



Frank Pagliaro '10

From nine to five most days you'll find Frank in Midtown, working for the software company Schrödinger. In his capacity as a recruiter for the company, Frank notes that this role attracts many actors, given the premium it places on interpersonal skills. Indeed, it was a passion for acting that drew Frank to New York in the first place. Every weekday evening, Frank attended classes at the Stella Adler Studio from 6:30 to 9:30 until he recently graduated. Somewhere between his full-time job and these intensive acting classes, Frank was able to find time to attend auditions, meet up with fellow Abbey alumni for impromptu interviews, and presumably, eat and sleep.

When pressed on the most difficult part of the acting classes, Frank details his revelation that his "authentic self is worth showing," stressing the importance of, "digging past those walls to see something real, honest." While at first he hurled himself into the city's notoriously competitive audition scene, he soon felt "directionless," with no "rigorous training, no physical discipline" to stand on. This led him to the Stella Adler Studio, where he fortified the foundation that he hopes will prepare him for a career in theater.

Of course, Frank maintains no illusions about the difficulty of the industry. "I'm pretty sure I will always have to have another job," he says, before going on to assert that "the work of acting itself makes me happy." Entertaining the possibility of success for a moment, Frank admits to having two dream

roles. The first, familiar to any Abbey grad, would be Shakespeare's *King Lear*. The second would be that of Roy Cohn from the 1991 play, *Angels in America*, by Tony Kushner (later adapted into an HBO miniseries). Chuckling, Frank acknowledges that both are "roles I couldn't play for forty years," and yet, "that descent is

fascinating—characters that go from kings of their realms to being reduced to nothing by the end." As for actors who have inspired him, Frank is quick to answer with James Gandolfini, legendary as Tony Soprano in *The Sopranos*. So impressed was Frank with Gandolfini, "this soft-spoken, nerdy theater guy who found that character," that he ended up writing a thesis on the subject in his senior year at Williams College.

As for roles he's played, Frank recalls his portrayal of Henry Drummond in the Abbey production of *Inherit The Wind* as one of his all-time favorites. Of Jay Bragan, the School's director of performing arts, Frank notes that he is "a consummate professional," a resource that "I didn't appreciate as a student.... His dedication is on a different level," with an uncanny ability to "teach both the new and experienced actor on the same stage," while building "a robust performing arts program" throughout his tenure at the School. Frank's taste as an actor runs to the classics— Chekhov, Tennessee Williams, Becket—an appreciation that he knows stems directly from his time spent in Abbey classrooms.

Indeed, Frank references Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* as instrumental in his decision to pursue acting. Playing the tragic character of Gayev in his last show at Williams, Frank thinks back to this climactic moment, onstage, "standing there, reflecting...I was in both of these worlds, overcome with emotion." It was this "synchronicity between myself and the



*Peter Vergara '14 during his internship at the Metropolitan Museum of Art*

character's experience" that led him to the counterintuitive conclusion that, "I feel most myself when playing someone else."

Of course, this path that Frank has chosen is not without frustration, mainly the audition process, in which you are "trying to put your heart on the table and some jerk says, 'next.'" For being "free and vulnerable, you might get smacked down anyway." New York, too, offers plenty in the way of discontent. Frank notes that the "grind mentality" that charges the Manhattan air "is not conducive to artistic life." Still, he asserts that New York is "one of the only places in the world where I can only be an actor, where I can hone my craft."

Given what I've seen of the city, I'm inclined to agree with Frank. If there were ever a place that could make a King Lear out of a personable, sandy-haired kid from Cape Cod, this might be it.

#### **PETER VERGARA '14**

If you plan on visiting Peter Vergara in New York City, my recommendation would be to plan a time when the Sotheby's spring Day Sale has passed. Otherwise, you might only catch Peter early morning as he enters the palatial Sotheby's building on the Upper East Side or when he slips out late at night. Under the guise of friendship, I was able to trick Peter into meeting for a coffee, though he was careful to choose a café within a two-block radius of the world-renowned auction house.

Officially, Peter is the administrator for the Day Sale for Impressionist and Modern Art, focusing on works from the mid-1800s to the 1950s. While Sotheby's Evening Sale regularly draws headlines for the quarter-billion dollars changing hands over the course of one evening, the Day Sale is less expensive (though certainly not inexpensive) but higher in volume. This of course makes Peter quite busy in his capacity as Day Sale administrator. His duties include coordinating the contacts of artists, curators, and buyers, overseeing the export and import of paintings, and

cataloging Sotheby's online sales. Despite this harrowing job description, Peter appears remarkably sane, never losing sight of the fact that he is trafficking in the rarefied air of the art world. March 11 marked the 275th anniversary of Sotheby's first auction, a number that comes as no surprise given the fact that the auction house is the oldest company on the New York Stock Exchange.

While it may surprise you that someone not five years out of the Abbey might land such a sought-after position, it would surprise none of his classmates. Growing up in Madrid, Peter frequented El Prado and Museo Reina Sofia. However, his first exposure to art history as a subject was in Allie DeSisto Micheletti '05's AP class. When a dentist appointment absented Peter from an art history class, he was struck by just how upset he was to miss out on the lesson. This sentiment surprised him not only because DaVinci was the topic du jour but also as a sensation of loss that rarely accompanies a class excusal. Of Allie, Peter remarks, "she is the defining reason why I am involved in art. She was also invested in the work and there's a lot to be said for a teacher who's passionate." Recently, Peter met up with Allie and Abbey art teachers Kevin Calisto and Joney Swift at the Metropolitan Museum of Art to view the masterpieces housed therein. Reflecting on the outing, he reports that his former teachers "are examples of people living and working in the arts, and they're happy!"

Thus encouraged, Peter set out to study art history while attending Fordham University. Fordham's New York City location proved fortuitous, as it is centered in a major art hub. Soon enough Peter was giving tours at both the Met and the Hispanic Society, something he still does to this day when things aren't so hectic at Sotheby's. While giving the Met the praise it deserves, Peter finds himself drawn more to the curated



intimacy of the Hispanic Society. In the summer of his junior year, Peter landed an internship at Sotheby's and later reapplied as a trainee. Securing this position, Peter was able to rotate through all four departments of Sotheby's, gaining experience in the varied inner workings of the revered auction house. However, during this trainee period a position opened up in the Impressionist-Modern department and Peter jumped at the opportunity, forgoing the other departments in exchange for the position he's now held since December.

Without much time to rest on his laurels, Peter was thrown into the tumultuous volume of Sotheby's Day Sale. An art historian at heart, he sometimes resents the volume, wishing "that I could go deeper into each work," though he notes that he is "getting better at math by necessity" given the number-crunching that is required of the job. He is quick to clarify, "when it gets tedious – measuring frames, punching in numbers – I'm doing this for a unique work of art." Yet unbroken by the bureaucratic elements of the job, Peter associates a certain amount of romanticism with the work. Of the paintings he handles, he reflects on his role in the cycle, "While it's changing hands, it gets a fresh life...It's physically in my hands for the interim between its long time spent in private homes and collections."

It is no coincidence that an art historian like Peter would end up in a city like New York. According to him, all big auction houses are in major cities, because "that's



where the museums are, and museums go through auction houses when they rotate their collections." And, he adds, "buyers don't buy without seeing. All the money is here, all the buyers are here." Though originally he thought he might pursue a Ph.D., Sotheby's has opened his eyes to the possibilities offered within the art-auction world. Ideally, Peter says he'd like to follow the track at Sotheby's to eventually become what's known as an art historian specialist, where he would be relied upon as a generalist, forming catalogs and talking to interested, passionate buyers—two aspects of the industry he feels are most in tune with his interests.

I asked Peter which painting he'd cite as his favorite of the moment. His mind pored through the vast mental catalog he's amassed to this point; he lands on "Las Meninas" by Diego Velazquez. Not only did he grow up observing this piece at El Prado, but Velazquez's "paintings speak for themselves, independent of artist or context."

Speaking as one of the fellow classmates to first witness Peter's engrossment in Mrs. Michelletti's art history class, I have little doubt that Peter will continue on his rapid upward trajectory through the art world.

### NICK DELIETO '13

If you attended Portsmouth Abbey between the years of 2009 and 2013, chances are you

have a cherished shot taken by Nick DeLieto bejeweling your Instagram or framed in your bedroom. In fact, much of our interview was spent poring over old photos cached in various Facebook albums. To view Nick's photos is to understand on a fundamental yet intangible level that some photographers and photos are undeniably better than others. It's not unlike tasting Godiva dark chocolate after snacking on Hershey bars your whole life. While our faces and profile pictures have changed since graduation, Nick's camera eye has only grown richer. In high school we hardly deserved him, and at present we can neither afford him nor afford to overlook him.

Officially, Nick is a freelance photographer for *LOVE* magazine and fashion giant Givenchy. However, in an industry saturated with talented photographers, nothing is guaranteed; yet he's carved a path for himself, rarely making an appearance from behind the camera. Whenever he does show his face, his work draws comments from high-powered editors ranging from, "You're so young!" to "We trust you; let's cultivate you."

In the beginning, while shooting a fashion show for *LOVE* magazine, Nick recalls struggling with the limited time allotted to him, given his untested status. That changed when he "found an all-access bracelet on the ground." With this skeleton key thus affixed to his wrist, Nick was able to shoot the lineup at the 'Palais de Justice' in Paris where he was covering the show for *LOVE*. "I shot all those models in this incredible light," he recalls. Back in the dressing room, "one of the models was still in dress, and I shot her in this beautifully lit hallway just outside." He sent the shots to his editors at *LOVE*, slightly worried that he'd be exposing his covert bracelet heist in doing so. Within a few weeks, Givenchy had contacted *LOVE* magazine

expressing a desire to post Nick's photos to their official Instagram account, which at the time had nine million followers.

"The way I got anything in this industry is by asking," Nick says. And ask he did, sending off an email to several contacts he found online, and a few weeks later he was bound for Paris, on assignment for Givenchy. Asked why his eye is drawn mainly to the fashion industry, Nick pauses before answering, "because of the exploration of that beautiful raw emotion," adding that "the top fashion houses are at the top because of the quality of their art." Through fashion photography, and indeed photography in general, Nick feels a unique ability to combine documented reality with creative ingenuity. Having studied psychology at Fordham University, Nick feels especially drawn to the humanity of the models wearing the clothes, the people behind the intricate stitching of each piece. His is an effort "to capture feelings that translate on a universal level...my hope is that my work will be that emotional."

When it comes to the fashion industry, Nick exchanges rose-colored glasses for camera lenses. "Fashion is interesting because it's so beautiful," he states before noting the flip side of that coin, that "it can attract people for the wrong reasons." As Nick sees it, Instagram, monetized followers, commercialization, and supermodels have further mired the industry in superficiality. Nick is especially troubled by the focus on stringent body standards, social climbing and the premium placed on exclusivity.

When asked how the city plays into his career, Nick quickly responds, "It is my career; everything is here...there's always new energy, culture and money, all constantly turning." Scroll through his website ([nickdelieto.com](http://nickdelieto.com)) or his Instagram (@actuallynicholas) and you'll find elegant portraits of subway passengers, a source that he often taps to achieve that indisputable image of humanity so ubiquitous in his photos, even dating back to his days at Portsmouth Abbey.



Nick DeLieto '13



During that time, and speaking as a classmate of Nick's, his camera and the photos he captured were a function of our relationship as a class. We recall specific moments in which dozens of us were gathered around one computer to view Nick's photos from Prom or Spring Fest. While we all might like to think we supported Nick by cherry picking photos of ourselves from his albums and framing them for our personal shrines, online or otherwise, Nick remembers that "Mrs. Bonin was my champion. She's an incredible resource, always believed in my art, believed in me as a human being. Not every teacher understood me at the Abbey, and she saw me for who I was."

Prior to the Abbey, Nick toted a Polaroid camera, gradually progressing to a point-and-shoot, and then in his sophomore year, he graduated to a truly professional camera. It was then that he started shooting everything. "It was just fun at the time," he reminisces, unaware that it could one day be his career. And while shooting freelance for Givenchy might sound like 'making it' in the traditional sense, Nick makes it clear that ultimately he wants, "to be trusted to create things of my own vision, to shoot a campaign for a major publication," rather than executing other people's vision as he does now.

As for sources of inspiration, Nick cites Sarah Burton, current creative director of Alexander McQueen, as "a genius, connected to her art...I would love to document that," as well as the visionary photographer-director Harley Weir. Like her, Nick has no desire to bow to tradition, asserting, "I don't want to play by the rules." It is this irreverent mindset that landed Nick a spot in *Dazed* magazine's lineup of their featured 'Incendiary LGBTQ Youth' last year. Of this fact, Nick finds that "my queerness allowed me to tap into an infinity that now comes through in my work, allowing me to be anyone and no one."

Reflecting on his path into the tumultuous world of professional photography, Nick concludes, "Nothing I studied in school got

me to where I am. I asked for the job that I have now, asked people that I'm scared of, actually." As for advice for aspiring photographers and advice he would have given himself in the beginning, Nick says, "Don't hesitate, trust in your ability, and ask." Though this may be the first time you're reading of Nick DeLieto, I have no doubt that you will bear witness to his work and recognize it for the Godiva dark chocolate that it is. Whether you seek out his work yourself or one day pick up a copy of *Italian Vogue* and recognize the name on the cover, keep Nick DeLieto on your radar.

#### MAGGIE MORAN '07

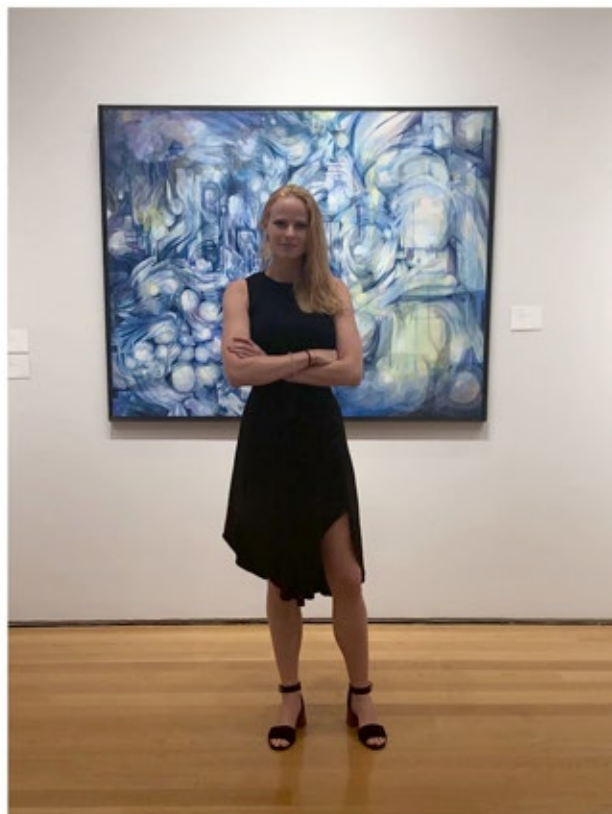
There are few people as enmeshed in the art world as Maggie Moran. Not only is she the client digital experience manager for Christie's Auction House in New York, she has also established herself as a painter in her own right. While a day's work at Christie's would be enough artistic fulfillment for most of us, Maggie paints every day after work for at least an hour. Should you view her work on her website ([mgmoran.com](http://mgmoran.com)) or on her Instagram ([mgmoranfineart](https://www.instagram.com/mgmoranfineart)) you'll likely notice her distinctive style replicated throughout three mediums. "The work I'm doing is pretty cyclical," she explains—rotating between figurative, expressive, and oil pieces. Generally, she is "moving towards applying traditional methods to abstract, non-traditional subject matter." Closer inspection of this assertion proves revelatory, as all of Maggie's work appears to be united by this cohesive effort.

Maggie's ascension to her current position at Christie's is inextricably entwined with her career as an artist. Following her college graduation she was happily surprised to find almost immediate commercial success, selling several paintings and thinking, "OMG, this

is so easy!" However after a six-month dry spell during which none of her paintings were sold, Maggie pivoted into a gallery director position in York, Pennsylvania. There she "found an affinity for digital organization of people's collections" that would suit her, not realizing that Christie's loomed in her future.

Maggie eventually moved to New Jersey to be closer to NYC and took a sales job at a gallery in SoHO. There she quickly discovered that sales was not her passion. Shortly thereafter, Collectrium, a subsidiary of Christie's, contacted her about a digital cataloging position, referencing her work back in Pennsylvania. Thrilled by the opportunity to reenter this realm of the art world, Maggie worked her way up from contracted employee at Collectrium to a full-time position in Christie's emerging digital sector.

As for her own art, Maggie finds that the new position has given her more flexibility to focus on her artistic work. She still sells her paintings, often by word of mouth,



Maggie Moran '07



enjoying success despite the limited marketing she's done for herself. That said, her work was recently shown in a gallery in New York. Furthermore, her paintings can be seen adorning the walls of the Christie's offices on the 20th floor of Rockefeller Center – acquired by the gallery during the staff auction.

At Christie's, Maggie cites the people she works with as one of her favorite parts of the job. For an artist and art lover like Maggie, to be "surrounded by museum-quality work twenty-four-seven," as well as "access to people who know so much about those quality works," is certainly a dream. Of course, she admits that some auctions are more fun than others. Overseeing the sale of a George Michael collection is perhaps more stimulating than, say, a late night wine auction for buyers in Hong Kong.

As for her goals as an artist, Maggie asserts, "If I could paint all day, every day, for the rest of my life, I would." The process and study of painting clearly enchants her as she compares painting to an "unsolvable math equation that you're always just getting close to," and that in painting, "there will always be something new to learn, something new to paint." Maggie's passion for painting is contagious, nearly inspiring me to drop the pen and pick up a brush.

Undoubtedly, certain vexations permeate both realms of the art world that Maggie occupies. When it comes to Christie's, Maggie finds that often the "art world isn't all about art," and that art itself, at times, "has a certain amount of pretension." She believes that "art should be accessible, at least in conversation, to as many people as possible." As for the tribulations she's experienced in her own foray into professional painting, she finds issues that are not dissimilar to the art world at large. It seems galleries oftentimes subtly imply that artists should be "selling yourself first and your art second." As Instagram followers and industry connections factor into curatorial visions, the system can be difficult to navigate. It would appear that

galleries often fail to see their role in this pretension that the artwork itself so often seeks to subvert. In Maggie's own words, "It's not a blind tasting." And yet the galleries are also an indispensable resource to the city's artists; she hopes to find a gallery that's a good fit for her work.

With New York functioning as the de facto mecca of the art world, the city often influences Maggie's work. Since her arrival, she's found "architectural elements in my work," that weren't there before, as well as "colors that have become more muted," the respective results of the blue-gray, geometric architecture of the skyline. Almost every day, Maggie runs "along the Brooklyn pier overlooking Manhattan," and certain "things I see have become focal points" in her paintings.

Asked about her time at the Abbey, Maggie reminisces on the newly built art building, and delighting in its magnificence. Maggie recalls a "freedom to explore different ideas I had without constraint." To illustrate this point, Maggie recounts a story from Mr. Hobbins' Political Science class. Maggie remembers doodling portraits of her classmates and even Mr. Hobbins, which amused him to the point that he asked to keep one for himself. And given the fact that the School was so small, "people knew I loved painting," resulting in opportunities such as painting a giant mural for a School play, commissioned by Mr. Bragan. Certainly the Abbey was structured, "but with a personal touch," she adds fondly.

Though Maggie has always painted, she long considered it to be solely a hobby. In fact, she planned on pursuing a career as a doctor, perhaps focusing on plastic surgery, and completed three years in the pre-med track before an epiphany in her junior year. Realizing that nothing made her happier than painting, Maggie decided to pursue it full time. Undeniably, it's worked out for her so far.

Maggie has a hard time choosing a favorite painting of hers, saying, "It depends on the day." Eventually she decides on a piece entitled "The Storm," which currently

hangs in a bank in York, Pennsylvania. Of this piece, she says, "I didn't have a concept when it started," though painting it soon after hurricane Sandy nearly demolished her hometown, she recognized that the emotional elements of that loss appear in the painting itself. As for artists who inspire her, she is quick to rattle off several names, including Julie Mehretu, George Condo, Dana Schutz, Agnes Martin, Christopher Wool, and Umberto Boccioni. Lauding their originality, Maggie is moved by the paths these artists have blazed in an industry too often reliant upon tradition.

Asked what she might tell herself when she began her foray into professional painting, Maggie replies, "I don't think I'd tell myself anything," knowing that, "I needed to feel that fear of not knowing what's next." Later in our conversation she amends that advice slightly, saying she might tell herself, "chill out, it's all going to be ok...I wouldn't have listened to that but I'd like to hear it."

And as it happens, it is all ok. Given Maggie's rapid success in the art world thus far, it would surprise no one if she continued her upward trajectory.

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From the outside, New York may seem like some grotesque, eternally hungry beast churning through one starry-eyed wannabe after the next. However, it is important to remember that it would not be the paradigm of creativity it is today without the original vision and passionate dedication of its most daring citizens. New York's iconic character is derived directly from the colorful, imaginative characters it hosts. Counted amongst these characters are Frank, Peter, Nick and Maggie.

These four Abbey grads are proof positive that a creative career can be possible even in the most wonderfully ruthless, beautifully chaotic city on the planet.