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  - [Copyright](#) (14)
  - [Creative Commons](#) (3)
- [Making Money Online](#) (29)
- [Online Careers](#) (116)
  - [Blogging](#) (31)
  - [Freelance Writing](#) (24)
  - [Internet Literacy 101](#) (5)
  - [Online Arts and Design](#) (26)
  - [Online Authorship](#) (31)
  - [Online Business](#) (42)
  - [Online Entertainment](#) (29)
  - [Online Journalism](#) (25)
  - [Online Sales](#) (25)
  - [Social Media and Community Management](#) (16)
- [SEO](#) (3)
- [Social Media](#) (20)
  - [Facebook](#) (0)
  - [Google+](#) (1)
  - [Pinterest](#) (2)
  - [Twitter](#) (1)
  - [YouTube](#) (3)
- [Standards](#) (4)
- [Tips and Tricks](#) (7)

## How Nellie King Solomon Made Art into a Career

Simone Collins

4

Coming from a long line of ancestors with independent and creative careers, self-sufficiency and entrepreneurial talent runs through [Nellie King Solomon's](#) veins. For years, she has been creating paintings on large sheets of mylar (though her work is taking new directions now) and has earned a sustainable living from her work for over a decade.

After learning more about Nellie's career and work, I asked for a phone interview hoping she might share some of the secrets behind making a full time living from a pursuit that, for most people, can only be recreational. Her insights, summarized below, did not disappoint.

### Things to Consider Before You Choose the Life of an Artist

When people ask Nellie if they should become an artist, her typical response is "Not if you can help it."

Nellie asserts (and the other artists we've interviewed agree) that you should only become an artist if your need to create art feels like an innate need ("Art chooses you; you don't choose art"). If you can't help but constantly create art, if you come home after a day of working only to draw more sketches or arrange still lifes and photograph them...and if you are willing to let your work as your artist take precedence and reshape everything else (including a social life, leisure time, vacations, a comfortable apartment, a stable income, etc.), then you probably have what it takes.

This is not to say that Nellie doesn't think artists can't have deep friendships, a sweet home life, and even a beautiful family while still creating fantastic work (she does not believe the old '50s model of the dysfunctional, self-absorbed egotist artist). You just have to budget your time and not waste it complaining in a coffee shop. "It's edgy to be nice" at this point.

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Just know that choosing the path of an artist will take over your life and redirect it in ways you cannot foresee (if it does not, you're probably not focused enough to be successful). In grad school, Nellie would wear headphones (without any music) just to keep people from talking with her. She would arrive in her school's studios at 5pm as it started to empty out and work into the wee hours of the morning to make sure she had plenty of space and no distractions. She turned out piece after piece, and made significant progress. As she puts it, "tuning your meditation into an occupation becomes a preoccupation."

With regard to finances, Nellie knew that she was taking a big risk by choosing the career of an artist, however it was a risk she was willing to take. Being able to follow her passion was more important to her than being able to make a lot of money.

What's more, the pursuit of an artist does have its financial perks. While you may not make much money, you don't have to spend much money (except getting an advanced degree) before getting started. Nellie also appreciated how little overhead an artist must carry. Compared to the office, supplies, and employees her architect father dealt with, Nellie saw the work of an artist as relatively simple and low risk.



## How Distraction Detracts from Success

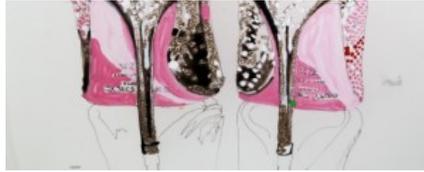
One of the biggest factors distinguishing Nellie's struggling friends and colleagues from those who have successful creative careers is an ability to eliminate distractions. Her most successful artist friends never lose sight of their goals despite even life-changing events and significant challenges. They avoid falling into what Nellie playfully refers to as "eddies:" unproductive loops of distraction from one's work.

Traps into which her struggling colleagues fall include:

- Issues with friends, roommates, neighbors, exes, and families
- Dead end circular trains of thought
- Complaining about and analyzing problems instead of immediately addressing them



- Shiny get-rich-quick schemes or faulty, unsustainable opportunities wrapped up as simple solutions
- Nellie's friend Eric McDugall has a very simple recipe for life: "ABC: always be cheerful." While that sounds about as vapid and painful as any California fair weather friend-ism. Nellie admits there is some wisdom and truth to his words. The people who can help you learn and grow want to see your best side before they invest in you.



You might notice that many of the distractions that absorb you and paint you in an unfavorable light arise from a lack of confidence. Nellie sees confidence to be one of the most important factors contributing to an artist's success, as it makes a huge difference in helping one maintain focus and steer free of swirling, unproductive eddies.

## The Importance of Capitalizing on Every Opportunity

Though Nellie champions the idea of avoiding distractions and getting work done, she does not advocate becoming a hermit and shut-in. Nellie sees value in every opportunity- no matter how small it might be.

This is something she learned from her family, which has long had a history of building robust, high-profile careers using smaller, less-attractive opportunities as stepping stones. Back in the day, for example, her father had a hot dog kiosk in Oakland to design. Most people see that kind of opportunity as an uninspiring dead end, but Nellie's father utilized every ounce of creativity he had to make it as cool as possible and then get as much press for it as he could. He went on to become a prominent architect and tenured architecture professor.

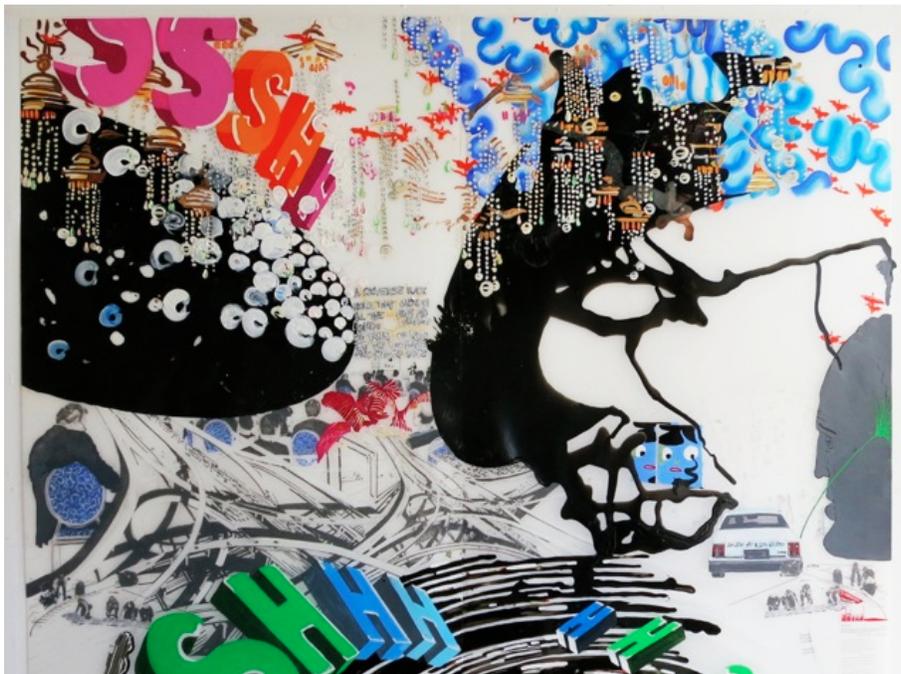
**CAPITALIZE ON  
EVERY OPPORTUNITY  
NO MATTER HOW SMALL**

**-NELLIE KING SOLOMON**



Artists should utilize every opportunity they get to expose their work to more people. This is how one builds a network of followers, dealers, and buyers. She compares getting one's work out as an artist to "being most up," which means having the most tags up as a graffiti artist. It makes a difference. People notice.

Even the smallest galleries can lead to serendipitous introductions- Nellie has yet to encounter one opportunity that has not, in some way, contributed to her success. She encourages others to turn their noses up at nothing; just so long as they not lose sight of their vision and goals. A good artist must be able to identify the difference between an opportunity and a distraction.





## Navigating the Rapidly-Changing Art World

Nellie is in the midst of shifting her artistic style and focus and re-evaluating the manner in which she approaches the art world.

For the past decade or so, she has worked in the traditional art world, with more old school dealers, networks, and galleries. She is now looking into what younger dealers and newer galleries are doing- where they're selling, how they address digital , social media, their chosen friend groups, and physical opportunities to display and create work, etc.

Nellie has found a clear and growing divide between different generations of art dealers; the traditional art world does not seem to be as comfortable with experimentation and digital art marketplaces as many new upstarts. There is a great deal of concern as to whether art loses its value when it is available online or printed digitally, whether artists can continue to sell works of art at traditional price points when entering online marketplaces, and whether old school art dealers and galleries will ever fully embrace them.

As there is so much flux in the art world, and because the jury is still out as to what the best approach would be for one who wants to pursue a full time career as an artist, Nellie sees fledgling artists today as having a great opportunity to forge their own paths and set new precedents. Artist are not completely confined by the old set of dealer artist rules. Artists are dealers. Artists are curators. Artists are collaborating on ways to break out of the box.

## A Second Look at Using Teaching Positions to Supplement Creative Careers

Many creative types (artists, writers, etc.) utilize stable income from teaching positions to supplement more variable income from commissions, sales, and contracts. With a father who supplemented his career as an architect as a Professor at UC Berkeley, Nellie originally saw teaching as a natural career path to take.

Interestingly, working as a teacher was not as financially rewarding as she expected, and prospects for making an income through teaching are even worse now than they were when Nellie experimented with the option.

After some time teaching as an adjunct professor at Stanford and the California College of the Arts, Nellie realized the time she spent working on classes yielded far less income than the time she spent creating and selling original art. Though teaching certainly looks good on a resume, Nellie decided to drop her teaching positions given how significantly less financially productive they were. The exchange of ideas and community built through teaching is rewarding, and can lead to fascinating friendships. Nellie was subsidizing that teaching experience with the sales of her art, not the other way around.

Over the years, Nellie has seen fewer and fewer opportunities for creative professionals to gain a sufficient or stable income from teaching positions. Tenure is extremely hard to get now, and adjunct teaching positions take a great deal of time and resources while offering very little pay and no job stability quarter to quarter, let alone year to year. For those who might be interested in reading more about issues with finding a tenured position within higher education, Nellie recommends reading [Faulty Towers: Tenure and the Structure of Higher Education](#).





## How Family Background Contributes to Success

Nellie admits that she has been blessed to grow up with a family that understood, celebrated, and supported creative pursuits. She had the benefit of growing up amongst a family with a long history of making an independent living using one's wits. Self employment was as natural to her as it was as to her dad, who was told by his Freudian shrink father: "Have a hot dog stand- just as long as it is your own."

Nellie's maternal great grandmother made her fortune as a milliner during the gold rush; her grandmother was a pianist; her mother was a ballet dancer, writes books, and did graphic design in the '60s. Nellie's paternal grandmother made money writing historical fiction romance novels while her grandfather worked as a Freudian psychotherapist and her father became an architect and professor.

Not everyone has the privilege to grow up learning how people create independent careers. Not everyone is repeatedly exposed to tactics enabling one to identify business opportunities and capitalize on useful networks and shifts. Nellie acknowledges that support, insights, partnerships, and advice from family members have contributed significantly to her success.

This is not to say that you cannot build a sustainable career for yourself as an artist or writer just because you come from a family that has only ever supported itself through work for other employers. It is nevertheless important to understand how much one's experience, connections, and network can contribute to victory or failure. If you do not have friends and family who understand how to create successful careers as creative professionals, make new friends who do. They may make all the difference in the world.

## There is No Prince Charming

A theme in Nellie's advice throughout our phone conversation was the importance of self-sufficiency.

**Nobody is going to make your life easy as an artist. You will not be suddenly "discovered" and have an easy life from that point on.**

Nellie acknowledges that while giving a creative pursuit your all is essential if you actually want to succeed, it is also a luxury many people cannot afford. If you do not have capital to work with during periods of experimentation or growth, you will simply not have what you need to get started. But maybe you can work another job to pay the bills while you stay focused on your art goals. Nellie knows legal assistants and web designers who have done it. However if you cannot give your work a good portion of your focus because you are busy working full time or taking care of your family without breaks, you are not at all likely to turn it into a source of income that can fully support you. Art does not take all your time; life should be full with family and friends too, but it does take a solid two days a week, an inner drive, an urgency to say or make something, and another two days a week on emails.



Photo by Sabriba Buell

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Image of Nellie with Camera: self portrait shot in NYC.

Final portrait of Nellie: Sabriba Buell

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