

2016 Interview with Lauren Rosenthal (Artist and Environmental Activist)

Kate: Can you start by telling me about where do you think your fascination with rivers came from? I read your manifesto-

Lauren: You did?

Kate: -where you talk about interconnectedness and how rivers represent that. Would you say that rivers are still a topic of interest for you, generally, or-?

Lauren: Oh, absolutely, and the environment in general. I definitely would call myself an environmentalist. How far back does that go?

Kate: Yes.

Lauren: How was that instilled in me?

Kate: Yeah.

Lauren: I've tried to piece this together a bunch of times when I've had to talk about my work. But I grew up in the suburb of Philadelphia with two parents who were raised in the city. In row homes without any real exposure to nature. They're very urban people. We never went hiking or ... I mean rarely. Nature was going to the swim club (laughs).

I remember a couple of times, maybe we went to the Poconos skiing and maybe went on a hike one time but my mom is really not interested in being anywhere where there's bugs or anything.

Kate: Like a true, urban spirit.

Lauren: Yes. I remember in elementary school there was this field trip. It was called the Bug Olympics and we went out ... I remember it was so annoying because we had to put our socks over our pants and wear that gross, DEET spray because we were out in the woods. The thing was like go out in the woods and collect bugs and then bring them back to this central location where they do all these weird races and obstacles-

Kate: The bugs?

Lauren: Yes. It was like this goofy thing but I think the main purpose of it, looking back, was just to get kids out in nature and to learn about bugs and to learn about things. Well, the guy who chaperoned, he was one of my classmates' fathers, was definitely an ex-hippy kind of guy and loved nature. I'm sure his son, Noah, was super-exposed to nature. Just being out in the woods and being with him, he made it come alive-

Kate: Because he was so excited about it?

Lauren: Yeah, yeah. I remember just loving being out there in the woods. It was magical to me. That's the earliest that I can really pinpoint it and I feel like that was in fifth grade. Then, when I was in college ... There's this whole stretch of time where there's nothing and then when I was in college, my closest friend was studying both art and conservation biology. And I went camping for the first time with her but I also took a class. I think what made the biggest impression on me was my freshman year I took this class in biological anthropology and the professor was an excellent lecturer. He was so engaged, engaging and-

Kate: Makes a big difference.

Lauren: Yeah. He was amazing. His last lecture was basically this prophecy about how water ... About water scarcity and that was really what we were going to have to deal with as adults. I mean maybe he talked about climate change; I don't really remember but I remember water scarcity and him just being like, "This is really important," and having this really big impact on me. Not that I knew what to do about it.

Kate: Right, but it resonated, somehow.

Lauren: Yeah. I took some other environmental classes when I was in college and I loved them. I loved reading books; I loved learning about the national park system. I spent a lot of time outside. I went to college at Washington University in St. Louis for undergrad. It was also like an urban campus. My junior year or senior year ... I don't remember which year it was. Both of those years, by then I had declared my major. I was a sculpture major and once you got to that point, you were given your own studio space.

You weren't really taking classes anymore; you're just expected to be in the space at least three days a week for eight hours a day making whatever. You could solicit critiques from your professors but no one was really hovering over you. You were free to do what you needed to do. At that point, even before that, I think, a little bit but at that point it was very clear I started making this really overtly activist environmental work. I was taking an Italian Futurism class, which was a really wacky art-

Kate: I have no idea what that is...

Lauren: It was during ... when all of those movements were happening like Surrealism and it's like ... it's been so long but it was like turn of the century kind of thing. Industrial age and they were like the futurists were really interested in speed and power and cars and moving fast and electricity. The work was not great that came out of it, I don't think (laughs). Most people probably don't know that much about it because it wasn't fantastic. There's a couple pieces that you learn about in art history but the guy who taught the seminar that I took, that was his area of specialty because you know how academics are.

Kate: Yeah. I know (laughs).

Lauren: He was really into it but these guys were friends with Mussolini and they were really aggressive and they would have these big performances or happenings and then just incite riots. They were just really in your face kind of activists, in a way. Politically engaged. I did a project. There

was this ten-lane highway that was being proposed over the largest natural lake in Missouri and so I decided to do this crazy, just guerrilla campaign of putting up all these fliers everywhere against it ... There was a vote coming up and it was just like, "Vote no for this." I did these mildly pornographic-

Kate: I think I might remember this. I came to a talk you gave at Lafayette. Was it like a ball-and-chain something or other?

Lauren: Yeah. It was environmental activism but in this really gross ... I mean in the beginning, you imitate things so there was that and then I also worked with this environmental group at the time and they wanted 'a spoketree.' It was the same campaign. It was against this highway. I made this costume and I went to all these rallies and pickets and talked to people and handed out pamphlets and was on the radio. I don't know. Is it art? Is it activism? It was some weird thing in between and then I did this public art piece. I spent a lot of time walking around. There's this one creek that went right through an urban part of the city that, in part, was covered because a lot of the creeks have been covered for roads and stuff. At the part where it was open, there were just shopping carts and all kinds of trash in there. I dredged out all these shopping carts and I turned them into trashcans.

Kate: Oh, interesting. I remember that, as well, from your talk.

Lauren: Yeah. I have images of all this stuff that I can send you, if you'd ever want to look at it. This is all super-old work right now.

Kate: Yeah. When is that, roughly?

Lauren: That was probably in '98 or '99. It's funny to think about that. I mean those were both about water.

Kate: Yeah. That seems to be a continuum.

Lauren: You know, it's actually funny, there's a piece before all those pieces from when I was a sophomore where ... and I don't think I have any images or any remnants of this piece but it was just a copy of Christo, like how Christo does things and it was a blanket of fallen leaves over a lake. It was a proposal for it. It was a drawing of all these stitched together leaves that just covered over a lake. It was based on a story. It was for this lake called Creve Coeur Lake. There was a story of unrequited love or love lost or something and this. Maybe it was a Native-American woman and a white man and it just couldn't be. They loved each other but it just couldn't be and then the story is that she threw herself off of these cliffs into this lake. There was something about a fallen woman or something.

Anyway, I had this idea of putting out this blanket of fallen leaves over the lake. That was the first body of water thing. That was definitely for a class but I don't think it had to be something like that; it's what I chose. Obviously, there was a trajectory of doing these things and then I went camping for the first time somewhere in there and really loved it; loved being out in nature. Loved waking up in a tent outside in the fresh air. Just felt good. Then, I finished college and I had no idea what I was going to do with my life. That was actually a super-hard time in my life. I fought with my

dad the whole time that I was in college because he really didn't want me to study art; he thought it was ridiculous and how could I make a life out of that.

Kate: Not practical.

Lauren: Which he was probably right (laughs). Sometimes, I wished I had listened to him a little more. He was like, "Study something else, too. You can study that but do something else, too." I was so stubborn. My mom's an elementary school art teacher. I grew up always making art. I can't even remember not making art from when I was a little girl. I went to art camp every summer. I was in theater. I edited the literary magazine at my high school. I was the art editor of the yearbook. Art was just who I was, am, always. I can't even imagine separating myself from all that.

Kate: Are you an only child or do you have siblings?

Lauren: No. I have a brother.

Kate: You have a brother.

Lauren: He's not at all an artist-

Kate: He's not. Was that his upbringing as well? To be immersed in art or was that something you guys did together or was that just something that-

Lauren: No, he was not. He was really much more athletic than I was and-

Kate: You just went a different way?

Lauren: Yeah, yeah. He went to sports camp. Whatever we liked to do ... We were exposed to everything. I remember I did play soccer on a team and didn't like. I remember I did ballet and didn't like it. I did gymnastics and didn't like it. My parents exposed us to everything but I just loved art. I remember being one of those teenagers that just goes in my room and draws in a sketchbook all night or something like that. I had this big bulletin board and I would make big drawings and change it out, sometimes.

Yeah, I just was always making art. Then, when my dad was like, "No, you can't just study art in college." It didn't make sense to me that I had been so supported through all of my life and then all of a sudden, "No, you shouldn't do that. That's not a good life path," just ... I think it was really hard for me. In retrospect, it was hard for me to process that, so we fought like cats and dogs. In the end, I felt like, "Oh, my God. I'm falling off the edge of the earth. I don't know what I'm going to do. What am I going to do with this degree?"

There was this thing that I had enjoyed doing with the Hillel, which is like the campus Jewish organization when I was in college. I had gotten involved with this group through the Hillel. We'd written a grant and gotten some funding to do this literacy program in the inner city through arts. It was theater, visual art, and maybe music, also. It was all the arts. I really enjoyed that work. I really enjoyed using art to make a difference in kids' lives. I didn't know what I was going to do after school, after college ended, and so I actually applied.

There was a fellowship through the National Hillel Association where you could apply and your application would go out to all the Hillels across the country. It was a one-year position to basically engage Jewish students who didn't identify traditionally with Judaism but might find their way in through other avenues like social justice, which is a very strong value of Judaism. I thought, "Well, whatever. I don't know how I feel about Judaism but this is an alternative way of being involved in it."

I grew up in a very, I guess ... I mean I wouldn't say very religious family but I grew up in a traditional way going to Hebrew school two or three days a week and I was bat mitzvahed. Yeah. I mean definitely it was a part of the identity that my parents tried to instill in me growing up. It wasn't like a super-foreign thing but I definitely in college struggled with religion a lot and thought about it a lot and read about it a lot. I dated some people who weren't Jewish, which caused a lot of friction with my dad, also. Obviously, we got through it because I married an Irish-Italian guy who's definitely not Jewish (laughs).

In any case, it wasn't that far of a stretch for me to do this kind of work. I was excited about getting to do more of this potentially activist work. I think that is what drew me into it, more than anything. Here is an opportunity and whatever because I had no idea what I was going to do. Anyway, I got offers all over the country and then my mom was like, "Please come back to the east coast." I don't know why but I just remember saying to her, "If I get a job in North Carolina, then I'll come back to the east coast." She's like, "There's all these colleges in Philadelphia," or whatever. I had gone as far away as I could to St. Louis. They wouldn't let me apply to any schools further away than that (laughs).

Kate: Here is the boundary.

Lauren: Literally, the next day I got a call from Duke.

Kate: That is so weird. Sometimes, I feel like-

Lauren: Super weird.

Kate: -if you just put that sort of thing out there-

Lauren: Yeah. Really strange. I was like, "Okay, guess this is happening. I guess I'll go there." I went on the interview and went there. I hated the job but this is the interesting thing that happened. I actually love this story. When I got there, I was always really interested in community-based, public art. I felt like that was what I really wanted to do. I did do a semester in college at American University and it was art, architecture, history, and cultural policy. That was the topic of that semester. It was like a study abroad but it was here in The States. While I was there, that was what I studied: community-based public art. That's what I was most interested in.

When I got to North Carolina, there used to be this publication but there also used to be this website with all this information and links to community-based public art programs. They actually were based in Saxapahaw, North Carolina, which is about half an hour from Duke University. I was like, "What the heck? I can't believe it," because I had spent a lot of time looking at this site and

whatever. I found this one community-based arts project that was called the Haw River Festival. I remember I printed it out and I was like, "I need to check this out when it comes," because it happened in the spring. Well, I ended up hating this job at Duke for all kinds of various reasons but I really liked it in North Carolina. The reason I wanted to go there, by the way, was because some people had told me it was beautiful and I just had this vision in my head as it being this natural, beautiful place, which actually it really is.

Kate: Yeah. I went to graduate school in Raleigh-

Lauren: Oh, you did?

Kate: -so I know that area and I was born in Chapel Hill, actually.

Lauren: Oh, cool. You were?

Kate: I lived there as a baby and moved on, but I know the area.

Lauren: Yeah, so in a way, nature brought me there. It made me think to go there. So when I was leaving this job at Duke, because it was supposed to be a year but I quit in the middle of the semester and I was looking in the paper for other jobs, I saw that they were hiring this coordinator for the Haw River Festival. I was like, "What are the chances of this?" I applied and then after I had my interview I felt like I wasn't really prepared to do ... It just felt like it was too big of a job for me, so I actually withdrew my application and I did some other things. Then, the assistant coordinator job was posted and I did get that. I did go ahead and apply and get that. I saw what that was all about and that was the most amazing experience and it was really formative for me. It was my early 20s and these people who I met ... The Haw River Festival is the three-week long, traveling environmental education program.

Kate: Oh, my gosh. Okay.

Lauren: How it works is that it starts at the head waters of the Haw River and then for a week a group of 20 to 30 volunteers pitches tents, puts together a couple of hoop houses where they cook breakfast, they cook meals. They bring a whole, shit-ton of canoes and they set up a camp on the edge of the river. Everybody gets trained how to lead fourth graders through a series of activities on the river. Then, school groups from that area come out for half a day field trip and they learn about testing pH, so science pieces. They learn about natural history. They learn about Native-American history. They do a little bit of art. There's nature walks and games and then there's a puppet show at the end that's always environmentally focused. Then, they leave and all the group that's there volunteering who just spent the day leading them through these activities can do a canoe trip. Sometimes they do yoga together; sometimes they take a nap. Whatever. It's amazing. Amazing people.

Then, the next week it's a whole other group of volunteers that are down in the middle section of the watershed and all the school groups from that area come for field trips that week. Then, the third week it's a whole other group of volunteers and it's down by the confluence. It's the same thing; all the school groups from that area come. The coordination role is getting all the volunteers together and you're there for all three weeks. It was awesome. It was so awesome and the

people were incredible. It was the most creative, open, just beautiful group of people. People who structure their lives in really interesting ways. People who live off the grid. People who are artists and have flexible lives. It was super eye opening and amazing to me.

Kate: It sounds amazing. It seems like you have to have a certain kind of a leader to create that energy. Was it a leader or just the people involved?

Lauren: The people. There are people who signed up to do this crazy thing so ... and a lot of them had done it for a lot of years. This is something that had been going on for a good ten years or something before I even came in to be one of the organizers for it. I ended up organizing it for four years. It was just a temporary job. It was just half a year of work or whatever so then I'd have to piece other things in. I didn't make a lot of money doing it but whatever; I was in my 20s and you do crazy stuff like that in when you're in your 20s.

Kate: Exactly.

Lauren: It was amazing.

Kate: To get people together like that and have it feel so open and creative the whole time, year after year, that's pretty cool and unusual, I would say.

Lauren: Yeah. Every night there would be a check in where everyone would get together. We'd get in a big circle and you'd pass around something like a stick or a stone. When you had it, you were the only one who could talk and just reflect on your day and everyone else listened to you. Then, you'd pass it. There was no time for asking questions or ... It was just a space to share what happened in your day. It was a beautiful, really cool group of people. I think I just fell in love with all these people and with the river and I decided that I wanted to go back to graduate school, though.

At some point I felt like, "Okay, so I'm carrying on a tradition that's a community-based arts project that someone else created." I'm involved in it and in carrying it on but what do I have to offer? I envisioned myself creating my own community-based arts project of some kind and I decided it was my time to figure that out. I decided to go back to graduate school and I was lucky enough to get a full ride to UNC Chapel Hill. The program is super small; it was really little but it was the perfect program for me and I didn't have to leave my community down there because I was pretty rooted.

Kate: Sure. After all that involvement and close contact with all these artists and people.

Lauren: Yeah. I was pretty ... it was a little distracting, I guess, being in graduate school and having all that, but whatever. Then, I found myself in the studio in just a box like this. Just white walls like, "What the heck?" I didn't know what I was doing. Most people who'd go back to school and have a studio like that, they make a lot of junk that they don't know what they're doing, at first. I always had this one map of the Haw. The map of the whole watershed and it was just up in my studio. Then, I found myself tracing it and doing experiments like collecting river rocks and grinding them down and doing experiments with making drawings out of that. Then, I made this big ... that big drawing where I use all the ground river rock and then erased out the line of the river.

It was so funny because I kept calling them drawings, drawings, drawings and then one of my professors was like, "So, what's with this map?" I was like, "Oh, my God. I haven't even thought that it was a map. Duh." Of course it's a map. It came from a drawing of a map. Then, one of my other professors also makes work with maps. She does these bomb drawings. Her name's Elin Slavick. Elin o'Hara Slavick. She was like, "You know ..." and they knew I was activist and she was like, "You know how political maps are. You know how charged they are." She told me some books to read and she told me to invite this guy, Dennis Wood, into my studio. He came to my show, to that show, actually. We've developed a really amazing friendship. I read his books and I contacted some other professors in the geography department and had them in my studio. That was the amazing thing about going to UNC, was that because I didn't go to an art school, I had an access to all these resources that were outside of my discipline-

Kate: And you reached out to them, sounds like.

Lauren: Oh, yeah. I took a watershed science class and I got very involved with the GIS librarian there and she helped me so much to do the things that I wanted to do. I ended up just going for it with this mapping stuff because it was political but in a way that was really subtle and in a way that still felt like I was making something beautiful. I'm still making objects and beautiful objects. I liked that. I think that's ... at the beginning of making art as a young person, it's just so satisfying to make something cool.

You're like, "I just did this cool thing. Check it out, mom (laughs). Hang it on the 'fridge." I think there's always a little bit of that. I guess not for everyone but it felt good to be making things again, too. Not just doing community work that disappears, which there's also something really beautiful about that whole thing. But it was a way of doing both; still paying respect to the environment and trying to say something about it and our relationship to it and to each other but not being so in your face. Not using that Italian Futurism anymore (laughs).

Kate: That's just so interesting to hear that journey and how you know inside where you want to go.

Lauren: I've been making that work for quite a while, now. I think it's funny because I was really trying so hard to be a working artist. To have that be my life. I had lots of other jobs. I taught adjunct. I didn't really like teaching very much. I worked in other people's picture frame shops, which I always enjoyed a lot. I worked at Labyrinth Books in Princeton for a couple of years. I did all the course book processing for Princeton University and it was office work and it was terrible.

Kate: You had to pay the bills, too.

Lauren: Yeah, but I was still like part of an artist collective in Philadelphia at the time and I was really trying. I would make work at night and I was still showing as much as I could and applying for things all the time. I actually leveraged with my bosses to get Fridays off so that I could have a little bit longer weekend so that I could have more time to do the work. Then I found a job at a picture frame shop in Lawrenceville, Philadelphia. I was still making work at night; making art at night and on the weekends and everything and working really hard to try to make it all work. I don't know. I got to a point where it wasn't really fun anymore.

Kate: The making of art wasn't fun anymore?

Lauren: Yeah. It felt like this ... I don't know. There's so much competition and there really is a lot of snobbery in the art world and a lot of "who do you know?" I just felt like it didn't feel authentic to me. It just didn't feel like I wanted to keep on doing it but it was weird because every time that I've said out loud or to myself, "I'm not doing this anymore. I'm taking a break from this," then an opportunity just falls from the sky onto me. It's really annoying (laughs).

It's almost like a test. Like, "Do you really want to say no or not?" I have really continued to keep on making ... Even when I started my business, I was like, "Okay. I really need to focus on the business," and then this curator contacted me. This independent curator from Charlotte, North Carolina. She's like, "I've been following your work and I'm doing big show about water and I want you to make a piece for it; specifically for it. Will you do it? We have this much money. Can you write a proposal?" I was like, "Yeah. Okay."

I ended up spending a lot of months of my life making this piece. Every time I do it, I remember that art is one of the hardest things. Making art is one of the hardest things that I've ever done in my life and it always is challenging to me. It's also incredibly growth inducing and rewarding but it is really hard. Anyway, that piece was a gigantic effort and way more than I imagined but the folks down there were super grateful to me. I showed with some people who I've admired for a long time. You know Stacy Levy?

Kate: I do.

Lauren: She was a part of that exhibition and I got to meet her, which was really amazing and I've always admired her so much.

Kate: What piece was that? Do you mind me asking?

Lauren: Of hers?

Kate: Of yours that you developed for that project?

Lauren: Oh, it's called "Mecklenburg County Creeks Drawing," and it's giant. It's 12 feet tall, maybe, and 10 feet wide. Then, I collaborated with a group at the university. They did a rotating slideshow, basically, on video monitors that included some oral histories and historical maps. A bunch of information just to supplement the map. Then, the history museum down there bought the piece. In January, I went down and installed it in its own, permanent display-

Kate: That's so satisfying, right?

Lauren: It's like what you always wanted and what you always imagined would be the big thing. It really is and I thought, "Man, I really could probably make a life doing this, now. I think there's enough traction where if I really pushed this, I probably could show a lot and maybe get grants." It would be hard work but I might be able to do this. Especially because this is an issue that is so important right now. People are more aware and involved-

Kate: They're listening more.

Lauren: This is the funny part. The McColl Center, which is a really well-respected center down there that has ... They actually have a residency for environmental artists. They contacted me about doing this residency down there but it's for four months and I was like, "Man. I can't believe this is happening. All these things are happening, happening." I said no to that one. I can't be gone for four months right now. I have a business and I actually enjoy being here and running this business and being a part of the community.

Kate: I love that there are those opportunities for artists and you know there are writers' residencies, too, but they're always for these long periods of time where I feel like the only way most people could do that is if they're 20 or they just happen to be single and not that many people are in that situation.

Lauren: Darren [Lauren's husband] does them every year.

Kate: He does?

Lauren: Because he teaches so his summers are open. I get it. I'm an artist so I think that probably some wives might be like, "Really? You're going to leave me for a month or six weeks or whatever and go to a different country?" but I'm like, "Go. Do this thing." Last year he was in Iceland for six weeks but he just went to a two-week residency, which was super quick. He loved it and it was in Maine. There are smaller, shorter ones. Especially for writers.

Kate: So you turned it down. Was that something really different from a decision you might have made even a few years ago?

Lauren: Absolutely. A couple of years ago, before I had this business, I think. Before I was more rooted here, yes, I would've jumped on that opportunity. Timing is everything sometimes, I think. I also had a show at Penn State Abington recently that was really great and they want to start some kind of short-term residency program and were very interested in having me maybe launch that off. I would totally do that because it's very close by.

I think there's still ways for me to continue. It's just a matter of them being the right opportunities.

Kate: Cool that you're getting invited to that sort of thing.

Lauren: It's amazing.

Kate: That really shows there's been a turning point in some ways, it seems like.

Lauren: Yeah, because I'm not ... I don't seek anything out anymore. I have too much to do here. That project I did for Charlotte was a huge effort and it took so much of my time and energy. Making new work is like that.

Kate: Sure, because you just so immerse yourself, right? In order to do it well.

Lauren: Yeah, and I guess that I'm at a point in my life where I probably don't need to make more money. We're stable. I mean we're not making tons of money but we're okay. I feel like I'd like to feel like I'm making a living. That I don't have to worry about money and that art isn't the only ... It's not the only goal I have anymore. Being a famous artist is not ... That's not my main mission, now.

Kate: That was your main mission at one point?

Lauren: I feel like, yeah. I really wanted to be a part of that conversation and make a difference in that way. I guess I feel like, as I've gotten older, and this is probably common ... I don't think that this transition in thinking is unique, but I feel like there are all kinds of ways that I make a difference every day by living a small life and taking care of myself and my community. I don't need to have this big, New York career or whatever to have a full, whole, meaningful life.

Kate: I've just been having these conversations recently of this experience I had with my book where I surrendered to the idea that it would be published. I said, "I'm okay with this. Nobody's going to publish it. It's okay." It was at that point that things shifted and I got a call from someone interested in publishing it. Do you feel like you had this idea that you were going to be a famous artist and then when you settled into the idea of being something else, things shifted?

Lauren: Maybe. I also think something else shifted that was hard. That was a more visible, internal processing shift. A few years back, before I had this space, my parents were like, "You should really make ketubahs." They're Jewish marriage documents. I was like, "Why? Why would I make those?" They were like, "Because you can make money doing that and you're talented. You have skills to make beautiful things and why not? Why are you making all this work that's sitting in your closet? You have a show but it doesn't sell so then it's at home or whatever. Why don't you make something someone wants?"

Kate: Something people will treasure.

Lauren: Yeah. I was like, "That's selling out." I had this whole academic ... I mean, I really think it was put in my head by academia that this is the path to be a real, serious artist and then there are these other paths of being an artist that are commercial, which is less than or that it's not serious.

Kate: You're doing it for money instead of it being part of your vision or whatever. Yeah.

Lauren: Yeah, so I decided to do it anyway. It was really hard for me, emotionally, mentally. It was a super hard shift. It was the best thing I've ever done, I think.

Kate: Because, why?

Lauren: It was because of a couple of things. One is that I feel like I am so much more open to appreciating so much more art than I was when I was focused in this narrow way about thinking that only certain things were real art; real, serious art. Slowly, over time I've shifted out where I can really appreciate every ... all kinds of art and just see that it's beautiful and that people being creative

is beautiful. On top of that, making those ketubahs, it's so cool to make something that I know somebody is really excited about; they're like, "We love it. Thank you so much. We're going to have it forever."

I know it's hanging somewhere in someone's house and that it really means something to them about a powerful moment in their lives. That's not nothing; that's not selling out, I don't think. It was just a really big shift in thinking that was really rewarding. And I'm still doing that; that's a big part of ... Actually, by doing that, that was how I was able to rent this space, because I was making enough that I was like, "Okay, I can pay the rent on space. I don't have to do this in my attic anymore."

Kate: You've been doing that for a few years, then?

Lauren: Since 2012, I think I started? Somewhere in there. 2012 or 2013.

Kate: I'm not familiar with ketubahs.

Lauren: I'll show you some.

Originally, I made a couple of them by hand and then I got this machine that's usually made for cutting vinyl but I figured out how to rig it up to cut paper. It's still a process of making them. It doesn't just happen instantly but otherwise, I don't think I could make the popular designs over and over. I would be so bored of cutting it.

Kate: They're beautiful.

Lauren: My friend in Alaska, I made one for her of the town in Alaska where she lives. It's really beautiful. It's one of my favorite ones. It's really cool. They're all cut paper.

Kate: Cut paper. So cool. Love it.

Lauren: I think for me, a lot of what inspires me and motivates me is interconnectedness so that's circling back to the beginning and I feel like weddings ... life-cycle ceremonies, any kind of life-cycle moment like a wedding, a birth, something like that, that's a part of communal life. Families coming together. There's just something really beautiful and human about those moments and I think that's really powerful. I would not have ever imagined that this is what I would be doing or this is what my life got shaped into, but it feels right.

Kate: That's really cool. Now, you have the framing business, which keeps you busy, and you have this-

Lauren: Yeah, those are the two main components of the business.

Kate: Do you still produce art on your own ... or do you do it when you're asked?

Lauren: Mostly at this point there's just not enough time-

Kate: Time to produce something new-

Lauren: Yeah, and I don't know what I would make. For me right now, my creative energy is in growing various pieces of the business like being an entrepreneur is a creative practice and I feel like the business also supports Darren's studio practice so by having this business and by making enough money for him to have a studio and support projects that he wants to do. I feel like I'm really contributing to his growth as an artist and I love being able to do that, too. At this point, I would say making ... and I call that piece of my work my fine art. I feel like that's taken a back seat at the moment. I don't feel like it's over but it's not where my main focus is.

Kate: One of the things that I always think, when you hear people talk about creativity or creative people, it is about ... they're talking about creating art of some kind or writing something. It's never ... I don't know, I'll just use this example. Scientists are hugely creative, right?

Lauren: Absolutely.

Kate: They're creating these new ideas but it's like ... I always find it fascinating that that's just not something that the creative world sees as much.

Lauren: Well, people tell me all the time, "Oh, well I'm not creative," and I'm like, "What are you talking about? I know you're creative." I'll ask them, "What do you do? What do you do for work? What do you do for fun?" I'll be like, "Well, just because you don't make art, that doesn't mean you're not creative."

Kate: It's very interesting. You're talking about creative energy into your business. I think that's absolutely right. It can pour wherever it goes.

Lauren: Yep, yep.

Kate: Wherever it makes sense at the time.

Lauren: Wherever it needs to go. Exactly, exactly. Thanks.

Kate: It's really fun to hear about the whole journey and I really love it. Do you feel like you're still an activist?

Lauren: That's an interesting question. Hmm. I guess that begs the question "what is an activist" or what does it mean to be an activist? This is what I'll say: I still am very conscientious about decisions that I make, even in the running of my business. I picked this space as a solar-powered building. When I first opened, every frame molding that I had on my wall was eco-friendly or American made. I've branched out a little bit from that but still probably 85 percent are. All of my ketubah papers are made in wind-powered facility and they're post-consumer. They have 30 percent post-consumer content. I still do charitable work for organizations and people who are doing important things. Do I go to protests? Do I do the things that most people associate with being a hardcore activist? I would say no, but I don't think that that means I'm not an activist, I guess.

Kate: It sounds like you're good at just figuring out where you are, like checking in. "Okay. I'm not so comfortable doing this. I'm going to do this. It feels more right," and you're not afraid to

move, for lack of a better word, into something that's maybe different from what you had been doing.

Lauren: Definitely. I would definitely say that because Darren ... It's really noticeable to me in contrast to being partnered with Darren because he is a straight arrow. He commits to something and that is what he's doing for the long term. He knows and there's no shifting. I am much more fluid. I'll notice, "I'm not happy with this. I want to move this direction." It drives him crazy, sometimes, because he wants it to just know what's happening but I don't know. I just feel like life is so changeable and you have to move with it if you want to stay happy (laughs).

Kate: Yeah, I would agree with that. It's true. Okay, I'll just end with this. We talked about this a little bit but the future. Are there other things that you dream about now or are you more present-minded?

Lauren: No. I guess I'm not 100 percent present-in-the-moment minded. I would say that I'm more future thinking than past thinking. I'm not like a nostalgia person who just sticks in the past. I'm much more plan ahead future thinking. I'd like to have more freedom. More time flexibility and freedom. Having a business that has regular hours is pretty rigid, which I never actually wanted, but it is a good place to start because the more I'm here, the more I want people to know I'm here but I'd like it to be where I can get to a place where maybe the business is more of a by appointment only scenario so that I can be more flexible about having more time to potentially make art or be with family or whatever it is. I prefer to have ... to see that my day is wide open and then figure out what I want to put in it.

Kate: Yeah, open to possibilities.

Lauren: Yes. I guess, that. There are projects. There are art projects that ... You saw my atlas, right?

Kate: I've seen a picture of it.

Lauren: I've wanted to forever make that into a smaller version that's a book that has some kind of essays or I've never figured out what the other piece is. I'd like to collaborate with someone on it. I'd love it to be something that's accessible to more people than just four copies of this big thing because it's a cool idea. That's something that is sitting around waiting to happen. I also made that public art proposal for Lafayette that really ... whatever. I don't care if those things ever get made into permanent things out in the world but I have this big camera obscura and I'd love to do a project where I go with this thing down a whole river-

Kate: Oh, that would be cool.

Lauren: -and take pictures ... someone take pictures of me doing it and me taking pictures inside of the thing. This whole journey and I don't know exactly what it is but this photo log of space and time superimposed on maps. Whatever. I don't know. I see that, too. I would really love to do that. I think there's probably funding for stuff like that, if I wanted to find it. It's just like where is the time and what, so there's stuff like that I'd love to do. I'm going to have a solo show coming up at Sussex County Community College. I don't know exactly when or what's happening

but I'd love to make something new for that. I was thinking about figuring out what watershed that space is in and then doing some of those wall drawings. Maybe collecting some rock and doing them right on the walls of the gallery as a part of the exhibition. I haven't done those in a long time.

Kate: I particularly love those-

Lauren: Oh, thank you.

Kate: -or the one that you did.

Lauren: Yeah. Thank you.

Kate: That one really sticks in my mind.

Lauren: I only did that one of them. I'd love to do more of those. There's more. There's definitely more.

Kate: Ideas percolating.

Lauren: Yeah.

Kate: Well, this has been fascinating, so thank you so much.