

Photography and
Illustration by
Kristin Cofer

Music, photography and culinary art of Courtney Whitman

The Loving Belly

Interview by Elizabeth Rhodes

Channeling her lived experience into a multi-sensory creative expression, working from the San Francisco Bay-area, Courtney Whitman created *The Loving Belly* as a digital space for her unique blend of writing and food photography infused with her soul-deep connections to cooking and alternative music. She discusses the journey so far with *Auxiliary Magazine* as well as the power of music and the alchemical nature of food and considers where the future of the journey might lead.

When you began *The Loving Belly*, what was its original intention and scope?

Courtney Whitman: Around 2012, I began to have a lot of digestive problems. I discovered that I have a lot of food intolerances, and that eliminating certain foods from my diet helped me to feel better. This forced me to learn how to cook, because it was difficult to find prepared foods that were compatible with my new dietary restrictions. I wanted to share the healthy recipes I'd created with people who had food intolerances that were similar to mine, and offer comfort, and I was also very interested in food photography. But for years, the blog remained a fantasy and nothing more. I was undiagnosed bipolar type 2, and I was crumbling under the pressure of modern, mainstream, adult life: the office job, the grueling hours, the unsustainable levels of stress. I had no energy to give to a food blog. It wasn't until 2017, when a repetitive strain injury forced me to stop, taking me out of work for 8 months, that I was able to rest, recover, and reevaluate my life, creating space for *The Loving Belly* to emerge. In 2019, I finally launched my blog and Instagram account.

But sharing my healthy recipes soon felt pointless. There were too many people who were already doing the same thing. And I didn't

like the social media culture that surrounded food blogs: the empty conversation and quid-pro-quo commenting associated with that community. So I shifted my focus to honoring my favorite music by expressing it through a combination of writing, photography, and food. Since listening to music while cooking was a big part of my therapeutic healing from overwork, it was a natural pairing. Even though I listen to all kinds of music, so far I've dedicated TLB to goth, darkwave industrial music. They've been some of my favorite genres since I was a teenager, and it seemed fun to try to use rainbow-colored vegetables to express something associated with darkness.

Grief is a topic you tackle throughout your work, whether it be in making decisions about how to use your creative energy, what job to hold, or in the more conventional sense of processing the loss of a loved one. In your article titled "American Horror Story: How My Father Worked Himself to Death" you wrote:

I wanted to make a meal to nourish my father's spirit, to care for him in the way I was never able to in life, because I was too young, too oblivious, and too unaware of all the ways in which he was suffering. I can see through his eyes now, and know what he must have felt. The reality of his experience has come home to me.

This struck me as a ritualized way to approach grief, something you could recreate on special occasions to bring you closer to the person you love. Do you see this act of curating a meal with your father in mind as a form of ritual?

CW: I would say it was therapy more than ritual. The project in its entirety was the thing, the meal was just a part of it. There were many components. Like visiting the places he used to go. Going through boxes of his things that hadn't been opened for 25 years. Making the rusted metal backdrop that I used for the photos, distressing it every night while our apartment filled with fumes, listening to my father's music while I did so, opening up all the windows to let the evening fog blow through, and feeling connected to him through the wind and the mist and the light of the moon. The project brought him back to life for me, in many ways. But it was about the writing more than anything. Drilling into trauma full-time, without a therapist, for months, as I revisited my father's death, processed repressed memories, and unearthed family secrets that were concealed from me were occupational hazards I hadn't anticipated. But these were things I needed to understand in order to write the piece. And coming out the other side has been one of the most beautiful and meaningful experiences of my life.

Music, especially entire albums, has also been important in your work. What is it about music that has the power to so intimately connect us to our feelings and become emotional mile markers in the narrative of our lives?

CW: Music helps me understand my feelings, ground into my body, and sometimes, even leave my body. Music isn't just words. It goes beyond. In this way, it can tap directly into your soul. It can be a



This Page
Photography by
Courtney Whitman

Father Project
Photography by Courtney Whitman

refuge, a shelter, or a gateway to ecstasy. There is nothing that stills my mind or facilitates transcendence more effectively than music.

You wrote:

I used people to feed the algorithm the way celebrated Instagram coaches tell you to, concealed under the veil of cheerleader-y friendliness. "Be social!" they say. "Give likes away like candy!" "Fake it till you make it!" The irony is that this perpetuates a culture of quid-pro-quo inauthenticity. You respond to the same compliments from the same people, over and over, every day. The artifice is draining, the conversations are transactional, and this empty chit chat comprises hours of your workday.

You wrote about breaking from a cycle that was not serving you. Is this phenomenon of "quid-pro-quo inauthenticity" something new or is it something humans, especially creatives, have always been faced with?

CW: That quote is from my personal essay about what it was like for me to use Instagram to try to make *The Loving Belly* be the way I learned a living, and how that negatively affected my mental health, and my art practice. As someone who had never used social media much prior to launching TLB, I was naive to its hazards. I think social media is changing the way people behave. Inauthentic-

ity and sycophancy have always existed, but social media puts it on steroids. People who are “trying to get ahead” by posting on social media are encouraged to like, comment, and react to everything they see. This person could be an artist who hopes to grow a following, a 12-year-old girl trying

to be more popular at school, someone kissing someone’s ass about something they posted on LinkedIn, or the kind of person that fills the chat box of a corporate Zoom meeting with squee every chance they get. Either way, the sheer volume of inauthentic interactions a person becomes capable of is terrifying, and dehumanizing.

Tell us about your photographic process: how do you put together the visual representation of your connection to the music and food featured in your images? Is symbolism important in the color, texture,

and specific item choices you make?

CW: Sometimes. For my project about my negative experience with social media and Instagram growth culture, *Instagram, Capitalism, and Vampires: Confessions of a Food Blogger + A Gluten-Free Venetian Feast for Drab Majesty’s Modern Mirror*, the colors I chose were very intentional. I was inspired by some of the green-tinted promotional photos of Deb Demure that Nedda Afsari created during the *Modern Mirror* era of Drab Majesty, which inspired me to collect a variety of pale green flowers to adorn

the album, some of which were so pale and ethereal in texture they reminded me of Deb and Mona’s wigs. Nedda’s photos, as well as the work of photographer Kristin Cofer, made me want to try to work with colored light for the first time. I chose green light because it is the color of money, and my project was largely about how Instagram and capitalism corrupted my relationship to my art practice. I also wanted to work with green because I wanted the self portraits where I’m using my phone to have an air of putridness, as though my phone was a sort of bell jar that I was trapped inside. I used a red scrunchie to play with vampire aesthetic tropes while referencing the movie *Heathers*, to express how I felt about the empty social culture surrounding food blogs. Moving past these toxic influences in my life was catalyzed by hearing Drab Majesty’s “Oxytocin” for the first time while dancing at a club on a particularly rough night, which I wrote about in real time, line by line, for the entire length of the song. For those photos, I worked hot pink and long exposures to express my euphoria and ecstatic release. I became a massive Drab Majesty fan after that night, and I was delighted to learn that *Modern Mirror* is a concept album inspired by the myth of Narcissus, set within a contemporary digital landscape. It became a validating framework through which to view the unhealthy experience I’d had with Instagram, and forge a better path, which is why I made a meal to honor them.

What is your perspective on our current collective relationship with food? Is it a positive relationship or one that is off balance, and why?

CW: This question feels a little broad for me, so I’m going to zero in on something specific that I do have some experience with in terms of our collective relationship with food, which is how the wellness industry and Instagram culture can lead to orthorexia. For anyone who doesn’t know, orthorexia is an eating disorder in which a person becomes obsessed with only eating healthy food, and that obsession becomes destructive. It usually begins as an innocent desire to eat more healthfully and feel better, but for victims of orthorexia, this spirals out of control. For me, in my early to mid 30s, the influence of media outlets like Goop, and social media wellness gurus preaching that all life’s problems can be solved with spirulina and kale, led me to do things like quit my antidepressants cold turkey and eat nothing but pureed bitter greens. I became obsessed with cleansing my body, fear of food dominated my life, and after quitting my white pills, I fell into the most debilitating depression of my life. I insisted on treating my depression “naturally,” through a combination of diet and herbal medicine prescribed by a naturopath I was seeing, because I had been brainwashed into thinking that conventional doctors and medicine were “unclean.” The herbal medicine made my depression worse, my fear of food continued to intensify, and eventually I hit a point where I was no longer sleeping, and eating nothing at all, because nothing felt safe. I made a project about this experience on my blog called *I’m Not Afraid Anymore: Healing From Orthorexia with Joy Division and Potato Leek Soup*. The project is about my journey back to health after orthorexia, why I returned to taking white pills to treat my depression, and what embracing “forbidden” white foods like potatoes and dairy has to do with my relationship to the song “Insight” by Joy Division.

How has your relationship with grief, mental health, and trauma changed since you began doing this work?

CW: The work I’ve made for TLB is the best thing I’ve ever done for myself in that regard, especially the act of writing. I now realize that generally I’m called to write when I have a lot of strong feelings, but don’t necessarily know why. The writing helps me to understand, move through, express, and let go. It makes me feel like I know who I am, and that is very empowering.

Listening to your playlists has been a wonderful addition to your writing. How did you go about putting those together and were they inspired by any particular piece you wrote, images you shot, or recipe you created?

CW: The playlists are not inspired by anything more than a desire to share the music I love with others, help people find music they might not have heard of, and to help lesser known artists who I think are doing incredible work to be found. The struggle for visibility is something I’ve come to know intimately since I started TLB. It’s one thing to know you have created great work. It’s another thing for people to actually be able to find it. So if I can help someone who has created work that moves me by putting their song on my playlist, or making a culinary valentine for them, that feels meaningful.

Your playlists feature many independent artists along with artists you feature in your work at The Loving Belly. How do you find

music and what is exciting about music these days?

CW: What’s so exciting is how low the barrier to entry has become given technology, even if that also makes it harder to be noticed. There are some amazing independent post-punk bands making music these days, and some of my current favorites are Qyburn, Ruin of Romantics, Empathy Test, Fearing, Primal Wound, and Patriarchy, among others.

To anyone who feels inspired by your work and is new to cooking, how would you advise them to get started and develop their own style?

CW: I’d say don’t be afraid to keep it simple. Try to get your produce from a farmers market. When your ingredients are super fresh, you don’t need to do much with them. And make sure you turn the stereo up and dance while you cook.

Since your work is so heavily influenced by music, what are your current top five albums?

CW: My musical preferences tend to change with the seasons. As the weather has gotten colder, these are the albums I’ve been drawn to lately.
Kate Bush: *50 Words for Snow*
Matt Borghi: *Awaken the Electric Air*
The score to *Bon Voyage*, *Charlie Brown*
New Order: *Movement*
This Mortal Coil: *Filigree and Shadow*

Tell us about what’s exciting you in the Bay Area—what venues, club/DJ nights, record stores, shops and places are you loving these days?

CW: I don’t shop much, but there’s a vintage shop in the Mission I really like called ISSO SF. They always have a lot of florals. It’s always a treat to stroll through Amoeba whenever I’m in the neighborhood, and I always like to look for used Skinny Puppy vinyls when I go. I love to go dancing at Death Guild at The DNA Lounge because they have a great sound system and the DJs always play my requests. But mostly I love to take walks. I love to walk to Pier 70 to admire the industrial ruins and savor their beauty, because that landscape is always changing as the area is being redeveloped. I love to walk through the Panhandle during the golden hour, and I love to hike in the Interior Greenbelt, which is a hidden fairy forest in the middle of the city. || A

Check out Courtney’s articles and photography at her website www.thelovingbelly.com and find her playlists on Spotify by searching for “The Loving Belly.” You can also follow on Instagram and Pinterest @thelovingbelly.



Modern Mirror
Photography by Courtney Whitman

“When your ingredients are super fresh, you don’t need to do much with them. And make sure you turn the stereo up and dance while you cook.”

—Courtney Whitman



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