

How to Successfully Do Art Commissions

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Interview with Kate Themel by Clara Narthey

Today, I've got Kate Themel with me. Kate is an award-winning artist. She has a BA in Fine Art and has been working in fibers for 14 plus years. She creates some very stunning portrait quilts. Kate and I will be talking about art commissions. Kate has a lot of experience in this area.

CN: Kate,
welcome to
the Clara

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Nartey Blog and this episode of Textile Art Business Interview. It's my pleasure to have you here.

KT: Thank you, it's nice to be here

Kate's Journey into Textile Arts

CN: Kate can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

KT: I'm an artist living in Cheshire, CT with my husband and 2 sons. My studio is in our basement, which is very convenient. It makes it easier to find the time to work, even if it's during odd hours. I've been an artist my whole life, using different kinds of materials. I made my first quilt in 1996 but started concentrating seriously on fiber art around 2003.

CN: You have a bachelor's degree in fine art, right? How did you come to choose textiles as your art medium? Was this something that happened in college or after?

KT: Yes, I have a bachelor's in art, which gave me an education and experience with painting, drawing, sculpture, photography and graphic design. I didn't get into fiber art until much later.

I started my first quilt (which I designed myself and sewed by hand) in 1996. It was a Christmas gift for my first son. I found the process really relaxing and fulfilling.

Also, using fabric offered me a way to work without the toxicity of paints, oil, turpentine etc. And it also let me work in smaller chunks of time, not worrying if my paints would dry up before I could finish a composition.

Kate Themel's Creative Process & Rituals

CN: Kate, tell us a little bit about the techniques you use.

KT: The way I create my compositions is very similar to a painting or collage. I cut out shapes in different colored fabrics and layer them together into a mosaic or layered collage. After they're in place I sew the pieces with hand-guided machine stitching. The free motion stitching is similar to drawing. I use the stitch lines to blend colors, create texture, add small details and define certain shapes.

CN: We all have different ways of creating. What's your own personal creative process like? Do you have specific times of the day you do your best work? Do you have any creative rituals you do before you get to work?

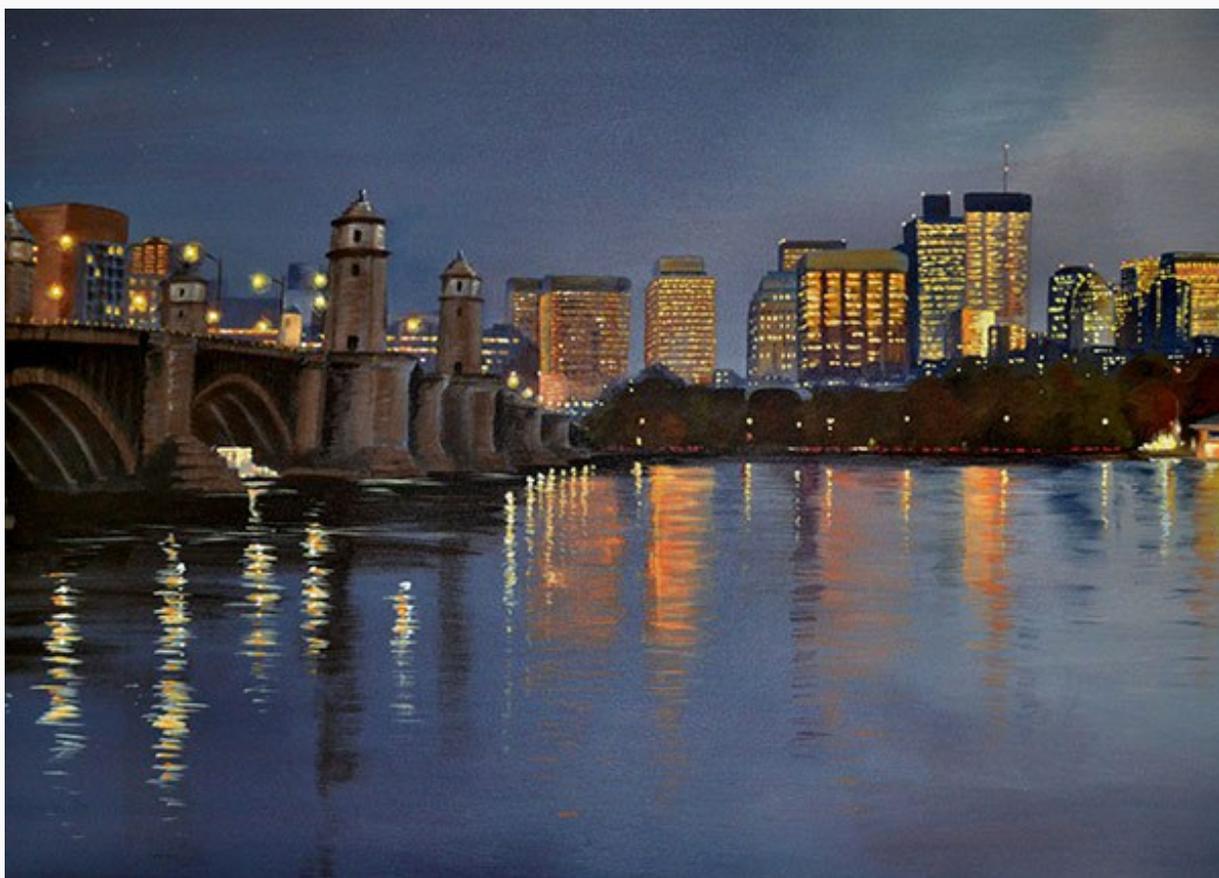
KT: My best, productive hours are between 9 am and 2 pm which happens to coincide with my son's school day. I tend to spend a lot of time in the "planning" process. I sketch several versions of a design, pick out the fabrics, work out a finished-size sort of paint-by-number pattern for the final piece and then get to work executing the plan.

As far as a ritual while I'm working in the "production" phase of the process... it involves loud music and a lot of coffee.

I work on one project at a time. In between projects, I have a ritual of cleaning my whole studio before starting the next thing. It kind of resets my brain a little bit. If my surroundings are disorganized and cluttered, I feel like my mind is disorganized and cluttered too.

How Kate got started Doing Art Commissions

CN: The other day when we were talking, you mentioned that



"Boston Harbor#3", by Kate Themel is one of 3 paintings on display at Centerpoint Advisors office building (Needham, MA)

"commissions" are a big part of your creative business. How did you get started doing commissions?

KT: Over the years I had done several quilts that were gifts from one friend or family member to another. Or done at someone's request. Baby quilts, custom pieces, etc.

One of the first major, professional commissions I did was for Yale University. The AACC (Afro-American Cultural Center) asked me to create a series of quilts to commemorate the 40th Anniversary of the Center. The building, known as "The House".

A friend of mine was on the planning committee for the Anniversary events, and he recommended me to the Dean. We met and talked about expectations and subject matter, and they gave me a lot of freedom with the designs.

Set Conditions to Ensure Art Commissions Don't Limit Your Creative Freedom

CN: I often hear people say they don't do textile art commissions because they don't like taking artistic directions from other people. Obviously, that's not a problem for you. Why is it not?

KT: I have certain boundaries and conditions that I stick to when accepting a commission. The work I create will be

my personal interpretation of an idea that the client and I have agreed on.

I will make creative decisions along the way which may diverge from the original sketch or photo reference. I have enough examples of my work available for view on line and in person so that a client can get a good idea of the type of thing I do. They are hiring me for my artistic and creative skills, so they have to trust me to make design decisions as I see fit.

I only use materials from my studio, like the fabrics I buy from my trusted vendors. That way I can keep the consistency of quality for fabric, batting, thread, etc. Also, it saves me the time I'd take getting used to some new material. If a client insists on incorporating some special clothing or other items into the work, I can often accommodate them but I will charge a bit more for that.

How to Communicate Effectively with Your Art Collector

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CN: Communication is very important when you're doing art commissions. Collectors usually have specific ideas in their minds of what they want. How do you make that happen? What do you do to ensure they can easily communicate their ideas to you and you can, in turn, understand what they're trying to get across to you?

KT: *The initial concept meeting is the most important communication* I have with the client. I make sure we both understand and agree to each other's plans and expectations before any production work begins.

I like to start by asking the client what they would like to see in the finished piece. I'm not asking them what they want the artwork to LOOK LIKE necessarily. Most of the time, the client doesn't know the answer to that – which is why they are hiring an artist!

But I ask them what they would like to SEE in the finished piece. For example, people commissioning a portrait want to see their loved ones. But they want to see more than the person's physical appearance. They have photos for that. They want to see something of their loved one's personality. Their soul, maybe. Something that reminds them of a life.

Another important question for the client is how they would like to use the work when it's done. Will they use it as a memorial to a person or event? Is it meant to brighten up the waiting room at a pediatrician's office? Will it be framed and hung on a wall? Do they plan to use it as a blanket? This information is more practical; it will determine how I construct the artwork.

Some clients are able to visualize the finished piece as we're talking. Other times, I will come back with a quick

sketch and general color scheme, to give them an idea of my vision. Before I cut the first piece of fabric, the client and I must both feel comfortable with the creative plan.

How to Price Your Art Commissions

CN: When you're



"Three Amigos", by Kate Themel was sold to a private collector in Boston, MA

approached with a request for art commissions, how do you come up with your prices? Do you have a system? Do you charge upfront or wait till you've had a chance to figure out supplies, the time required and complexity of the request?

KT: My prices and timeframe are based on the finished size. I found this to be the simplest way to estimate. **At the moment my formula is \$2.50 per square inch, and one month for every square foot of the finished size.** So that's my default setting. I do charge more for special circumstances, such as a very quick deadline or if the client wants me to use special materials like clothing.

I don't charge anything for the initial conversation or consult, or for a preliminary sketch. However, once we decide on a size, time frame and price, and the client feels comfortable to move forward with the art commissions.

I charge anywhere from 20% to 50% of the agreed price up front before I start production. This allows me to buy materials but it also means the client is invested in my time and effort. When the finished product is delivered, the client can accept it and pay the balance, or they can reject it and we both walk away. In which case I would keep the rejected artwork as well as the initial deposit.

CN: How have you structured your payment schedules and contracts to work for your commissions?

KT: Basically there are just 2 payments. The initial deposit and the final payment.

Should You Provide Work in Progress Photos or Visits for Art Commissions

CN: People approach this question differently. What's your opinion on allowing your client to review your work in progress intermittently as you go along the creative process?

KT: I'm more than happy to discuss all kinds of options during the design consultation meeting(s) but after that, I need to work alone. I do not provide "in progress" photos or visits while working on commissions.

The piece may go through several drafts and variations before I am satisfied with the design, and sometimes the final version looks very different than it did at earlier stages. I have found that sharing photos during different stages is confusing to the client and slows down the whole creative process.

With every commission, my goal is to meet or exceed the client's expectations. If for some reason I find that a major part of the design or construction needs to be changed from the original drawing, I will communicate with the client to explain my reasoning and we can discuss the options. As the artist, I must have the final word on creative decisions, and I take that responsibility very seriously.

The Challenges and Joys of Public Art Commissions vs Private Art Commissions

CN: Kate, I know you've done both public and private commissions so you can speak on this topic. What in your experience, are the different challenges and joys of public commissions versus private commissions?

KT: The biggest joy of a public commission is seeing your work on display, and having people see it and mention it. Public commissions can also lead to additional work, which is nice. We're all trying to make a living after all.

Private commissions are rewarding in a different way. Those are the ones when you are directly honoring a person's loved one, pet, special experiences. They see the artwork and (hopefully) through it they feel joy and happiness and relive some good memories.

I did have a slightly difficult experience with one of my public commissions. No problem with creative freedom or the common vision for the piece.

But when it came time to fulfill the contract payments, they didn't follow it and were kind of dismissive and bullying the way they treated me as an artist. I was young and maybe didn't have the confidence to stick up for myself against a big client.

In the end, everything was paid as agreed but the payment collection process was an awkward and unpleasant experience. Since then I've learned to be more assertive, while always keeping communications polite and professional.

One of the toughest parts of doing private commissions, believe it or not, is diplomacy. Not every photo makes a great quilt.

Often people come to me with snapshots of their loved ones, asking me to create a portrait. But sometimes I need to tactfully explain that the photo is not usable (not that their loved one isn't beautiful!) They look at it and see only the beauty of their beloved family member.

They don't notice that it's over exposed and washed out, or the person has their eyes closed, or they have a strange expression. Or it's out of focus or such low resolution that I can't pick out any facial features, or there are odd shadows across the person's face which obscure the shape of their face. Things like that.

We can usually resolve it with additional photos. I just need enough to see the person or pet I'm meant to interpret into fabric.

How Art Commissions Affect Your Ability to Build a Cohesive Body of Work

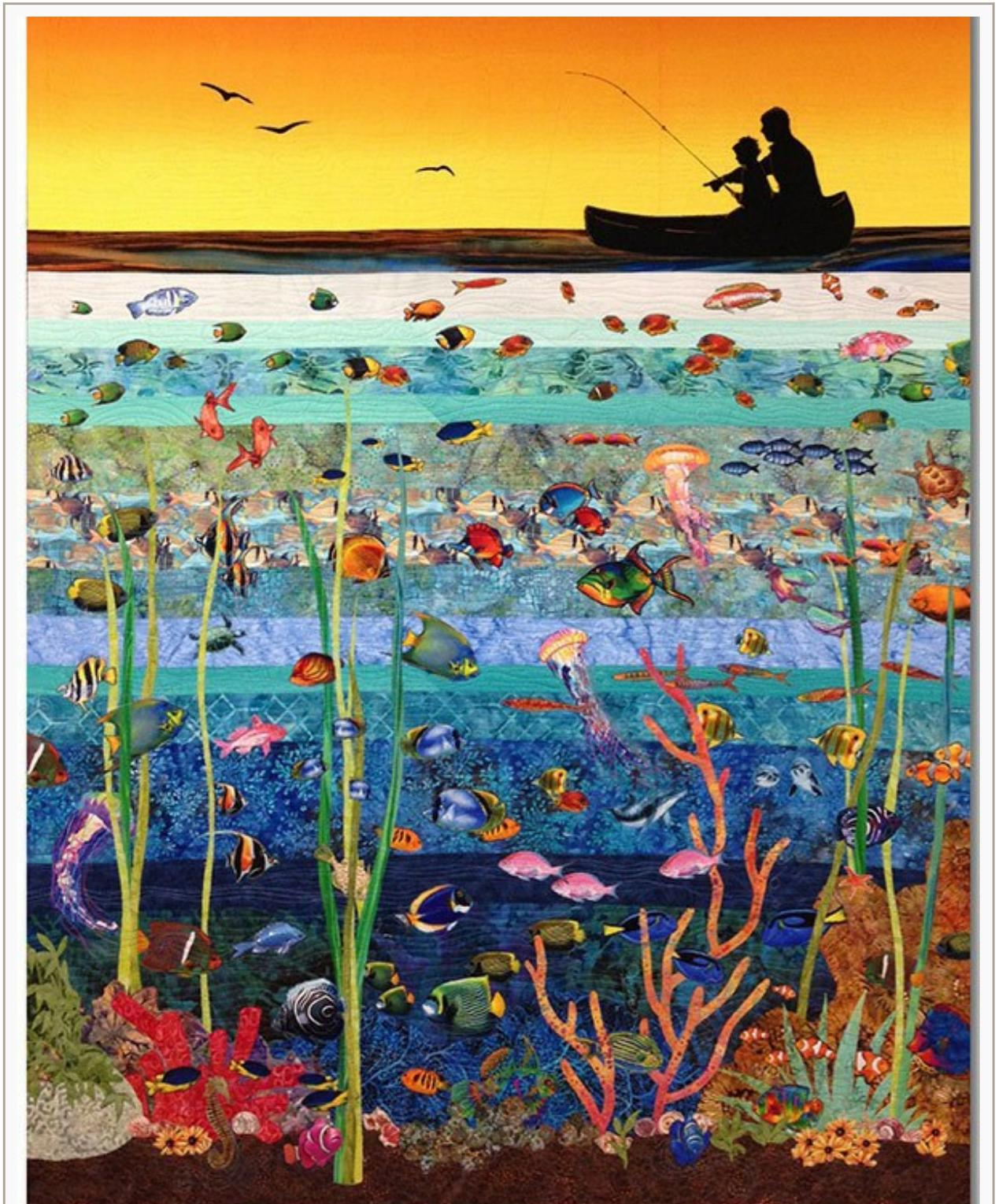
CN: Some artists worry that doing commissions will mean they can't experiment and create the kind of work they like. And thus, it's difficult to create a cohesive body of work when you do commissions. Do you agree?

KT: No, it's not a worry for me. That could be a problem if you allow the client to dictate the style of your work. If that is the case, you would have a hard time creating cohesive work. You will also probably get burnt out with commissions because they won't be very fun to do.

My position is this: If a client wants to hire me because they've seen my other work and like the way, I put together a design. So they're already OK with the kind of work I like to do. I'm open to different color palettes, subject matter

and such. But I don't change my personal style or my artistic voice unless it's a direction I already want to go as an artist.

If the person doesn't know me or if they just want someone to sew some specific fabrics together according to their own specific design.... Then I have to politely decline the commission. Someone else can do that. They don't need my particular skills and artistic sense. I've had to do this exact thing before and lost out on a potential paying commission. I don't regret it.



"Sea of Imagination", by Kate Themel is currently hanging in the Yale New Haven Pediatric Specialty Center at Long Wharf (New Haven, CT)

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Kate's Favorite Part about Doing Art Commissions

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CN: What do you love about doing commissions in general? And what is the most undesirable part of doing commissions?

KT: In general, my favorite part about doing commissions is frankly, being able to create work that I know will be sold. That's the truth. I love doing portraits – especially the furry faces. And I like having a starting point. The commission provides an idea, an inspiration. So I'm not always generating that by myself. It makes me feel connected to the clients as people, similar to a collaboration.

The undesirable part is the double edged sword. I'm not always generating the ideas by myself. It's fun but it's not as fun as creating something from start to finish. Bringing something from within my own mind into reality.

Conditions Under Which Kate Will not Accept Art Commissions

CN: Was there ever a time when you did not accept a commission? If so, why? If not, are there conditions under which you'll not accept a commission?

KT: Yes, I have.

For the most part, I've been able to work with clients and come to an understanding about a commissioned piece. But there have been one or two occasions when I had to pass it up.

One example was a client who wanted me to create a grid-format, blanket quilt, made from T shirts. There are a dozen websites who advertise this type of thing. I have nothing against them. I declined the commission because for me to do it would be very expensive for the client and the end product would be no better than what they would get from another T-shirt-quilt-making business. So I suggested a few sites that the client might want to investigate, and we parted on friendly terms.

Do Art Commissions Compromise Your Quality of Work

CN: I'll like to circle back to the topic of creativity. Do you find that running a creative business impedes your ability to create your best work? How do you personally handle that?

KT: No. Running a business doesn't prevent me from creating my best work. Just because it's a commission doesn't mean it can't be your best work.

When you run a business you need to consider other goals. Such as paying your bills and not wasting materials. And making time to talk to people about your work, and yes sometimes getting out there to market yourself.

And it means you don't have the luxury of ONLY working when you feel inspired.

However, it's not always easy to think freely and creatively while also keeping track of business needs. Sometimes I

need to get out of "business mode" and switch to "creative mode" which creates a kind of dead zone in my creative process. If I stay too long in



"Yale Anniversary", by Kate Themel is part of a 7 quilt series, currently hanging in the Afro-American Cultural Center at Yale University (New Haven, CT)

the business mode it's a little harder to get up and running again on the creative side.

Kate's Business Philosophy & More

CN: Kate, I don't know about you. But I find that a lot of our resistance to building creative businesses have to do with our mindsets. What is your personal philosophy that helps you to be successful in your creative business?

KT: My philosophy is that I will create the pieces that I love and that I would hang in my own house. That way, if they don't sell, I'm happy to have them around. And I trust in my own taste. If I love it, someone else out there will love it too.

CN: How do you want to be remembered?

KT: That I added beauty to the world.

And now to the two reader favorites of my Textile Art Business Interviews.

Kate Themel's 5 Faves:



1. Husqvarna Viking Mega Quilter sewing machine – I actually have 2 of this same machine, so I can still use one when the other is out for cleaning/ maintenance.
2. A good camera – for taking photos of anything and everything that moves me, and also for documenting my work and entering shows.
3. [Surface Pro 3](#) – my touch screen laptop
4. [Avery water soluble, acid-free glue sticks](#). I could not live without them!
5. Scissors. Some really good, sharp scissors.

Kate's 6 Success Tips for Successfully Accepting and Creating Textile Art Commissions



1. **Start local** – let people know that you’re interested in doing commissions. Tell friends, family, coworkers so they can help spread the word.
2. **Always have your business cards on you**, and don’t be afraid to give them out.
3. Online presence – Create and **maintain a professional looking website**. This is essential. As a visual artist, you need your work to be seen. Put the extra time and effort into high-quality photos of your work. Keep your website up to date!
4. You should always, always, **always, RETURN YOUR MESSAGES**. I understand the need to work and not be interrupted. I don’t answer the phone or the door while I’m working. But I set aside time to check messages and return calls & email as soon as I can. If someone reaches out to you with a question or an invitation, answer them. You don’t have to say yes to everything but at least give them a reply and thank them for their interest in your work.
5. If you can afford it, **join a professional organization**, like [SAQA](#) or [CT Women Artists](#). We are often isolated in our studios. It can get kind of lonely. It’s helpful to have support and encouragement from other artists. Bigger organizations have resources and reach, to get your name and artwork out there to a larger audience.
6. **Do excellent work**. Big or small, treat every art commissions like your signature work. Your name will be attached to it forever.

Thanks so very much Kate. This has been great. Finally, here are

Interview Highlights & Quotes

- I have certain boundaries and conditions that I stick to when accepting a commission.
- My favorite part about doing commissions is frankly, being able to create work that I know will be sold.
- I do not provide “in progress” photos or visits while working on commissions. I need to work alone.
- Running a business doesn’t prevent me from creating my best work. Just because it’s a commission doesn’t mean it can’t be your best work.
- I charge anywhere from 20% to 50% of the agreed price up front before I start production.

To learn more about Kate, visit her at www.KateThemel.com

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Clara Nartey is an artist and a writer. She interviews thriving entrepreneurs to help artists learn how to start or grow their creative businesses. To get more of her writings and access to her free resources for textile artists, makers, and creators, sign up here [sign up here](#).
