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Creativity at Work: film director Jeff Zwart

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How do you express your creativity at work? How do you help teams of people reach their creative potential? And how do you do so when your work takes you far beyond any notion of a traditional office setting?

In this edition of [Creativity at Work](#), I explore these topics and more with renowned film director, racer, and photographer Jeff Zwart. If you've watched television in the past year, odds are you've felt the emotional impact of Jeff's creative portfolio, ranging from innovative ads for Porsche to global adventures with Cadillac to truly breathtaking and groundbreaking work for Forza Motorsport. Our conversation happened at an Open Garage Talk hosted by the [Revs Program at Stanford](#) and the [Center for Automotive Research at Stanford](#). We looked at several of Jeff's films as part of our exploration of creativity at work.

Jeff is more than the self-described creator of "things you mute". He is also a world-class professional race car driver, so his creative office is as likely to be the zinging cockpit of a Porsche in Colorado as it is the windswept landscape of a Patagonian film set. Not only does creativity happen in both these work environments, but what Jeff experiences in one deeply influences what he does in the other. In this synergistic way, Jeff's creative process combines courage, serendipity, intuition, and a strongly-held vision to forge truly remarkable creations:

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The video of Jeff's thoughts is included above, but for easy access I've also included a list of inspiring quotes below, each punctuated by my own learning from listening to Jeff. Click on the hyperlink in each, and you'll be taken to the corresponding spot in the video.

Let all your life passions inspire your work: ([view](#))

"The two passions I have feed each other. Because I live in a performance, high-action commercial world, naturally if I've been blasting up Pikes Peak—156 turns, finishing at 14,000 ft with huge dropoffs, huge consequences, and never knowing quite how it's going to turn out—that's a lot like my regular work!... The perspective that I get, by being fortunate enough to drive a car on an absolute limit, with the consequences, with the thrill of it, the motivation of it—all of those things that you digest in one run up a mountain like that—is so inspiring that I naturally want to translate some of that into my own work."

Relentless focus helps get you to the top of the mountain: ([view](#))

"...my creative process is to strip away things, move away from other things that are going on in life, just like you do driving up Pikes Peak... you strip away things, you step off into that first shot of the day, and you let your intuitions take over."

**Optimism transforms challenges into opportunities:** ([view](#))

"If there's an amazing rainstorm coming towards you, don't run the other way. Use it as a backdrop! There's just so many things in this great world we live in that offer opportunities to you... weather has brought more opportunity to me that it's taken away. Some of the most amazing scenes, some of the most amazing shoots I've been on are where weather has been marginal, yet you make the best of it. You have to be constantly be open enough to make the best of it, and not become paralyzed to go forward."

Your entire life experience can be a wellspring of creativity: ([view](#))

"You never know what childhood experience will mean later, or where it will turn your thought process. When I was nine years old, my father bought his first and only new Porsche, a

356C. It was in the beginning of May, my birthday was coming up... and [my parents] announced we were going to go to the Indy 500... it was all about Porsche, it was about racing, it was about 'how can I be around this?'. And photography, and filmmaking ultimately, was my way to be around motorsport and sports cars and Porsches and all this world."

Discover the limits by prototyping everything: ([view](#))

How do you know whether you're going to end up with something good? Where are the limits of feasibility? Jeff's tale of testing a bucket drop of 300 gallons of water on an unsuspecting pickup truck is too good to just quote here—hear him tell it yourself!



Moving past a fear of failure helps you take better risks: ([view](#))

"When you have confidence, you're willing to try things. When you don't have confidence you pull back and you go with what's safe... I have that confidence; it allows me to be more creative, it lifts that cloak that hovers over you of fear of failure and it opens up opportunities."

Creating something remarkable—like Jeff's recent commercial for Forza Motorsport 5—is its own reward: ([view](#))

"It's an emotional thing for me, because it's everything we've been talking about: it's racing intuition, it's wanting to do things for real, it's photography, it's cinematography—it's all the things I'm passionate about... this scale, and the speeds we worked at, was pretty extraordinary."



Finally, here's a list of the films discussed in our Open Garage Talk. I hope you enjoy watching them:

- **GT3 Climb**: the story of Jeff's winning 2011 run up Pikes Peak
- **Cadillac ATS vs The World**: two-and-a-half months of shooting around the world with Derek Hill
- **Porsche Call of the Wild**: the role of sound as a means of telling stories
- **Porsche Family Tree**: launching the Panamera
- **Splash**: introducing the 2011 GMC Sierra Denali, with a side of mud.
- **Rocket**: a highly evocative mix of archival NASA film and Tanner Foust behind the wheel of a Chevrolet Corvette ZR1
- **HP F1**: what would happen if Juan Pablo Montoya and Ralf Schumacher raced radio-control F1 cars?
- **Forza Motorsport 5**: the world's largest zoetrope, turned inside-out

And that's it for this edition of Creativity at Work. Because it's so interesting to watch Jeff at work, I'll leave you with this look at his 2013 run up Pikes Peak:

This essay is dedicated to the memory of Professor [Cliff Nass](#), who (among many, many other things) was the Director of the Revs Program at Stanford. He passed away a few days before this Open Garage Talk. He is dearly missed by all of us.

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