

## THE BLOG

# How to Quit Your Job and Start a Business Doing What You Love with David Totah

🕒 05/26/2016 04:10 pm ET | Updated May 26, 2016



Zev Gotkin



Freelance Content Marketing Writer; Entrepreneur

On a sunny Spring afternoon, I had the pleasure of sitting down with David Totah, New York art dealer and entrepreneur, to talk about art, business, and doing what you love. There is a saying ‘When you love what you do, you never work a day in your life.’ Many of us dream of such an existence.

David Totah is someone who made that dream his reality.

Totah comes from a long line of art dealers in Europe, but he always viewed art as a hobby, rather than a career-path. After graduating from the Wharton School of Business, David wanted to establish himself in the United States and finance seemed like the most sensible way to do it. After years of working on Wall Street, starting his own hedge fund management company at the age of 29, David Totah decided to leave that world behind to embrace his true passion - art.

TOTAH is a product of David Totah’s vision to connect artists who desire to be independent, bold, authentic, and willing to do what is unpopular with audiences who share those same ideals.

**Your background is quite different from that of the typical art dealer. Tell me about your time in finance. What made you leave it behind to start an art gallery?**

I've been immersed in the art world since I was a child and independently engaged in the arts since I was 19 years old. Post-Wharton, going into finance was my way of finding my own path in life. Starting my own business managing hedge funds from scratch brought me immense satisfaction. It suited my knack for negotiating, strategic building and creative expression. While building my expertise and knowledge was exciting, my passion was always art. Art was my 'secret garden,' if you will. Collecting and learning about art was my escape from my professional life. After my career in finance was no longer satisfying for me, I decided to start my own business based around what I truly enjoy.

Interestingly, I had to go through all of that to come full circle back to where I started. Years of preparation and acquired knowledge are taking me back to my family tradition. I had to find my own way and discover who I was in order to fully embrace what I'm currently doing now.

**Starting your own business at 29 is a pretty bold and courageous move. At any point, were you nervous about embarking on a completely different career path from the one you had known?**

I'm attracted to the unknown; I like pushing my limits and going places I haven't been before; and I have a strong creative bent. It may sound strange, but having an artist's frame of mind on Wall Street helped distinguish me. Having trusted my creative instinct for years in finance, I feel a close affinity to my artists. Like them, I enjoy the risk factor, and taking chances though they may set me apart and render me vulnerable. When the day came to take a leap, things felt right and exciting. At that stage, you start getting encouraging signs, like an invisible hand that helps you along your path. I guess most call it luck.

When I was 29 years-old we signed an 8-year lease on our offices at 152 West 57th Street. It was as an astronomical financial commitment for me at the time. I called my best friend laughing, telling her to be ready to bail me out of jail as I had no idea how we would pay this rent! We ended up doing well fairly quickly and things fell into place as the business grew. Starting your own business before you hit thirty can be gratifying, but it's also very daunting . Having those offices with a view of the Park felt like a grown-up thing to do at a time when I didn't feel like a grown-up.

### **How does TOTAH reflect your outlook on life?**

I operate from a place of authenticity, audaciousness, and a fine sense of aesthetics. Mysticism is also part of what I'm interested in. In our current exhibition, "Verba Volant Scripta Manent," one of Alighiero Boetti's works spells out the phrase "The Infinite Possibilities of Existing." I strongly relate to this phrase. It alludes to an aesthetics of mysticism, which is prevalent in both the work I collect and my life at large. I think an art dealer needs to have an inner vision. Remaining loyal to that vision and being able to communicate it is crucial for people to understand what you're doing.

### **You describe your TOTAH as not just an art gallery, but more of a cultural hub. In what way is TOTAH a cultural hub? Does it foster a sense of community?**

We live in a fast paced and quickly gentrifying world that imposes placing things into a box. With TOTAH, I aim to transcend the typical definition of a gallery, making it a nexus for creative freedom as well as projects and art that emanate from an authentic impulse. The sense of community I envisioned has been gradually forming thanks to artists and audiences who are engaged with and responding to our message. This summer we are starting a program of free screenings, three nights a week, revolving around a theme of Light, and we are actively creating programs that empower the artistic and entrepreneurial spirit.

Sounds exciting! I'll be sure to check them out. What would you advise people who want to start their own business, but feel stuck in a job they're not passionate about?

Many of us feel stuck because we tend to avoid letting go of the decaying sense of comfort fostered by our current circumstances. The void of the unknown, can feel very scary, but a fully lived life is made of the unknown. Courage is the most important quality in every aspect of one's life. In three words I'd say "follow your heart" — even when it appears to be impossible.

My two favorite quotes are both from accomplished women. Gertrude Stein said: "If it can be done, why do it?" That quote is on my fridge. The other quote is from the writer, Anais Nin who said: "One's life grows or shrinks based on one's courage."

**Many people like to jokingly say: "Don't quit your day job." Do you think a person must do what one loves in order to be successful?**

Success can have a very broad meaning and we tend to associate it with financial prosperity or fame. But true success is doing something relevant; something that feeds not just one's own soul, but helps or inspires others along the way.

There isn't really a black and white answer to this question, because very often being in a job we don't love is part of our journey — a process we must go through to build experience. Having said that, I do strongly believe that when you find what you truly love doing professionally and your heart is in it, the chances of making a difference or of creating something meaningful, are much higher than when you are doing something just out duty or necessity.

**What does it feel like when your hobby becomes your job? Do you still love it as much as you did before?**

That's a very interesting question and I'm happy that you asked it! When I was still in college thinking about choosing a career, I said to myself that I loved art too much to make it my source of revenue. I was afraid that if it became a necessity I wouldn't like it anymore. I decided that I would make a living in finance and art would be my secret garden. It takes a certain level of maturity and experience to be able to merge personal and professional lives. Since making that change, I have an endless energy! I have noticed that I am always working or never working, whichever way you want to look at it.

Even if I'm at home reading a book or having dinner with friends, it will lead to an idea that relates to what I do. When I worked in finance, if someone engaged with me about it after 6 o'clock, I would get angry. I only wanted to discuss those matters during office hours. Now, there is no boundary between my personal and professional life. I know firsthand that you'll excel in your career if it's something you love. For example, I was always a bad student who hated homework and authority. But when I loved something, I'd focus on it intensely.

**Interesting, I was the same way in school. A true artist as well as an entrepreneur is always thinking about the next project. What's next for you and TOTAH?**

Yes that's exactly right. Creativity is the motor that keeps me going. Stagnation is my worst enemy, so I always keep my mind and eyes open for a new idea like a stray dog roaming and looking for adventure. Ideas for projects often come from what I read encounters that come my way.

The word, 'inspiration' comes from 'spirit'. I believe in the intimate relationship between art and spirituality. Inspiration will sometimes come to me at odd moments. For example, I'll be in nature and it unblocks something. Occasionally, I'm struck with inspiration while boxing or even while rushing to the gate at the airport and I'll have to stop and write down my ideas. When ideas come to me in dreams, I wake up and write them down immediately. I feel a strong need to write ideas down as soon as I get them. If I don't write down an idea, it will evaporate. If you really want something, write it down. It's the first step to seeing your idea come to life. Everyone gets ideas. The key is to act on them. If they feel right, you need to heed the call, right away.

TOTAH's next exhibition presents the mysterious watercolor portals of the late artist Laretta Vinciarelli, former companion of Donald Judd and much-adored professor of architecture. This exhibition opens June 9th and will be followed by a two-day event on June 20th and 21st, wherein artist Kenny Scharf will paint a custom piece on our front gate. Our "Light" film series will begin in July.

**Follow Zev Gotkin on Twitter: [www.twitter.com/ZevGotkin](https://www.twitter.com/ZevGotkin)**