On relishing a challenge



Artist Dain Yoon discusses becoming a patient person, finding balance for herself, and the lifelong goal of longevity.

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As told to Jun Chou, 1750 words.

Tags: Art, Process, Beginnings, Education, Focus, Adversity, Success, Inspiration.

How did you get into what you do now?

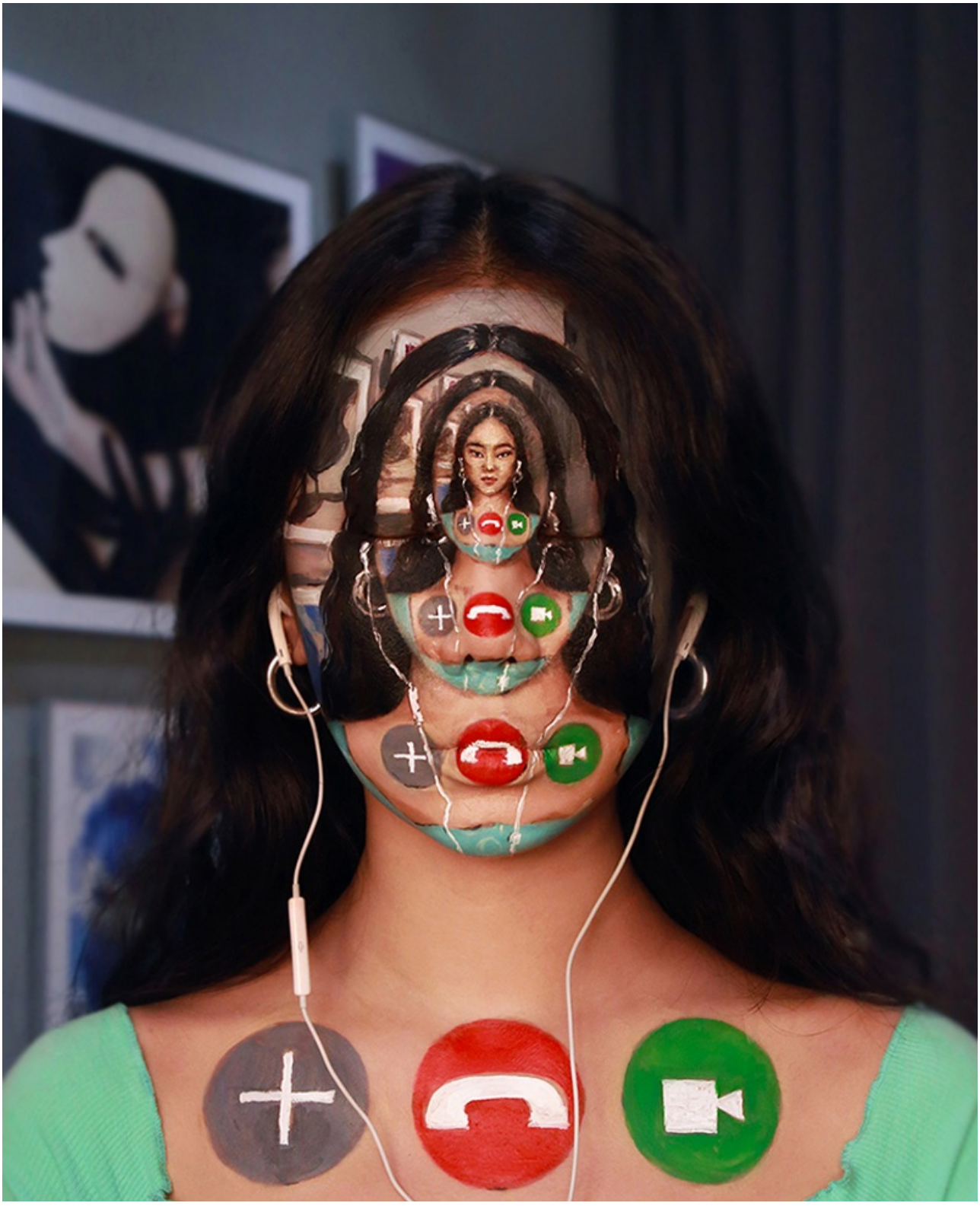
I was born and raised in Korea. I just moved to America five years ago, so I'm still a newbie to living here. Seoul is a very competitive city. When I was an elementary school student, I was a really shy girl. I decided to go art middle school when I was in fifth grade. In that middle school, you have to practice 14 hours a day, every day. I was enjoying that harsh student life. We have to paint like a robot every day, but luckily, I was really good at painting and drawing realistic things, so I always got pretty good grades at the tests. That was the first time I realized I'm good at painting, my first time I got confident in my life. I enjoy a very challenging, competitive life.

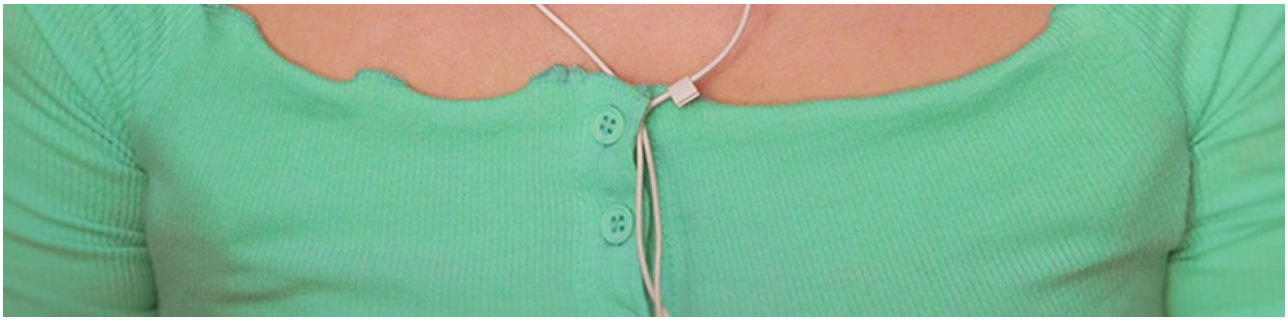
When I got into college, I wanted to become a production designer for movies, because I didn't know what to do as a fine artist. I went university to study stage design, but then the reality was really different. I thought it would be a very artistic environment, full of creativity, but the only thing I did is a lot of physical work—like cutting old boards and moving heavy stuff. I realize now that four years of physical work really helped me to find out what I really want. What I really wanted to do was create ideas and then make them into reality.



When I was in 10th grade, watching the Olympics was really hard for me, because I wanted to get gold medal in

Olympic, but I cannot. I cried so much because I was young. There’s no Olympics in art. I feared my life ended when I was teenager. When I went to university, I did a lot of part-time jobs, such as graphic designer or movie costumes and movie makeup, painting tutoring, modeling… When I was 21, I tried to mix everything I was interested in. I love painting on other actors but I wasn’t happy. They have to stay so long in front of me. For paper, I don’t have to worry about paper’s condition, but if there’s a model or actor, I feel uncomfortable. I could hear their breath and then they get tired, so [I thought] maybe I should try on myself.





I started posting on social media. At that time, my social media was just for me and friends, and I posted little few work. Then suddenly, it got attention. I started to create every day and posted an insane amount at that time. It became my job when I was senior in college, which I feel lucky for, because I always wanted to be an artist. Since then, I have done a lot of painting work on myself, performance, sculpture… Next year is my 10-year anniversary as a full-time artist. Every day is not easy. Because there are no rules, I have to create them. I always feel like it’s walking on the river. Some rocks you can walk on, but I don’t know if this rock is stable. With every step, I have to see if it’s a stable rock or not.

Last 10 years, there were a lot of changes in my life. The biggest change is I immigrated. I went to a lot of different cities and I felt New York was really cool at that time, in early 2018. I felt like, “Wow, I want to live here.” I just decided to move. I went to a random Korean lawyer’s office and instantly started the steps, and luckily, I got a green card in six months. The first few years was really nightmare, searching for an apartment. Like, “Why is everything so expensive?” That was so stressful. After three years, now I am used to it a little bit.

What made you stay?

Even though it’s so stressful and very annoying, still I feel happier living here than Korea. Even though there’s so many annoying things, I feel more freedom.



I love what you said about life as a full-time artist feeling like walking across a stream. When you test out a rock—a new rock—how do you figure out if it's stable or right?

The good thing is, even though you're not on the right rock, there's no choice. I'm the type of person who never regrets anything—because it was my choice and I always try to respect every choice, even if it was a wrong choice. Even if the process is painful, I learn something after dealing with the situation. I try to think like that because otherwise I'll be miserable.

Seeing your career of 10 years from this bird's eye view is always so interesting, to be like, "Everything has led me to this moment."

When I was in my 20s, I was only focusing on my career. Now I know a career is not everything. It's important you have great food, small happiness every day. If I focus on just career, it's endless, unlimited. I try to make some life balance by myself because there is no boss or anyone above me; I have to deal with everything myself.

Family is important, too, career is important, too, and health is important. I’m trying to keep a balance.

What keeps you motivated?

I’m a very sensitive person—not just visually; my all five senses are very sensitive. I feel very happy or get inspiration from having great food or seeing beautiful things. It doesn’t have to be a museum or gallery. If I see any great, beautiful fashion stuff, or great architecture, I get really inspired—like having great coffee, good food.

Do you have the same creative process across your different media?

The main difference is face painting takes three to 10 hours, which is long, but compared to different mediums, like making sculpture or performance or oil painting, it’s pretty short. I can finish in a day, even though the idea takes a long time. Because I cannot sleep with painting for long days.

Other mediums, I have to be more patient. I was used to getting fast feedback over face painting because I can finish in a day. If I do a show or post on social media, you can get feedback instantly, but for oil painting or making sculpture it takes much longer than that. So I was really nervous during creation because I had no idea if I’m going the right way or not. But the good thing is that it made me a more patient person. The process is similar because the most important thing is the idea. Once I’m making an idea, that’s the same step: doing sketches and then making it into art.



How do you come up with your ideas?

The easiest thing to get an idea is from daily life. It sounds easy but difficult, because daily life is very broad. I did a lot of practicing. I divided my brain. Half of my brain just does daily life, like, "I go to a

restaurant," but the other half of my brain is like, "What can I turn into a painting idea?" The good thing is I get a lot of inspiration, but the bad thing is I'm really tired. There's no resting. Even when I go to sleep, [I think about,] "What can be the idea of sleeping?" My brain never stops.

You're absorbing and interpreting at the same time.

Exactly.

Are there signals for yourself when you get burnt out? What do you do when you feel those signals?

There is a notes app where you can put a password. It's kind of a secret diary. I only write when I feel horrible. I started writing [on] this note application in 2015. Whenever I feel bad, I'm writing. Sometimes it is just one sentence, which can be pretty long. Of course, it's not helpful at that time… Being artists, whenever you feel burnt out, it's more unclear what you should do. But when I write, it is a little bit like cleaning the dirt in your brain.

Do you go back and reread it when you feel bad or when you feel good?

At least once every six months, I go back to read.

I feel like when I read my old journals, I'm like both, "I remember that feeling," and, "Oh my god. I'm going through the same thing." I learn a lesson and then I forget my lesson. Do you feel like you have common themes that you're always struggling with?

As you said, whenever I read, [I think,] "Wow, I have been feeling this all my life." But the positive thing is, maybe I was born like this. It's just my natural color, so then I have to figure out how I have to learn, how to deal with it better. I always used to say, "My job is I have to be professor of my major: the Dain major," which is not easy. No one knows how many things there are to figure out and discover and study. I'm still in a doctorate degree, not the professor level. I always feel like my life journey is to become an old professor of my major, then I can do *me* better. [*laughs*]



What makes you feel accomplished these days?

My goal now is I wish I can keep creating when I become a grandma. My standard is really rushed, but it doesn't have to be always fast… I want to be a marathon runner rather than a sprinter.

Dain Yoon recommends:

Act on your ideas before you have the chance to second guess them.

Invest in a high-quality chef's knife. If you like to cook, having a good knife makes cutting more fun and less of a chore.

Keep a favorite cleaning staple on hand: like a lemon all-purpose cleaner with a refreshing scent.

Find something you can love unconditionally, like a cat.

Create a habit of meticulously archiving your creative works. Eventually, this will become your strongest asset.

Name
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Vocation
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