

On seeing what sticks



Artist Evelyn Tan discusses finding the freedom to experiment, the pressure of posting your work online, and how your perception of your work changes over time

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As told to Jun Chou, 2041 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Collaboration](#), [Inspiration](#), [Education](#), [Promotion](#), [Creative anxiety](#).

How did you get to where you are?

I was always very interested in art growing up. My first introductions to it were pretty early. My mom and my dad read me children's books and they're all very visual and very tactile. There was Klimt's "The Kiss" print hanging in the living room, and I would copy my dad when he drew Woody Woodpecker and things like that, like Looney Tunes.

I took some local art classes as a kid, so I was really lucky there as well. Growing up, I never really thought I'd pursue it as a career and really felt more like this fun thing that I would never actually truly go into. I was really thinking I'd go into STEM or law or something like that, and I realized I have no talent for that either.

I got lucky and went to an art magnet high school, and I think that was when I started learning that it was something more viable. I was really lucky too, to have really good teachers there. From there, I went to the Rhode Island School of Design and I majored in illustration. I think at that time, I really started experimenting with what exactly I wanted to do with my artwork. When I initially entered the school, I thought I was going to go in for game design or something like that, like *League of Legends* vibe, which is funny because I don't even play video games! I just thought that was the move. I play *Animal Crossing* and that's about it. I tried everything out. I did internships in graphic design, like typography. I did these avocado toasts, social media, boba vibe illustrations for this alarm clock company. I took courses in children's book drawing. I did some editorial design, also came designs of 3D modeling. I got to explore the full gamut.



Dine With Me

But I was always very stubborn about what I wanted to draw and what I wanted to express. That was really only conveyed through a personal practice. I ultimately ended up pivoting back to painting. But even now, I think my painting is like a cross between illustration and painting. I still love everything, but I am not really trying to do one thing only. I'd love to continue experimenting. But that's how I've arrived at the present moment, just trying out a bunch of different things and seeing what stuck.

Your paintings are universes—they could be video games, they could be children’s books. That’s what’s so lovely about it —it’s so clear you have such a rich inner world, even if it’s not primarily in the subconscious, even if it’s just you experiencing the everyday, I think it’s very clear in your art. You grew up in Vancouver, right?

Yes. I’m actually still here. I grew up in Greater Vancouver, then I moved to Rhode Island for college. After Rhode Island, I went to LA because my old roommate was there. I figured, “Yeah, try it out.” It’s a big frenetic city compared to what I’m used to. I mean, Rhode Island is beautiful and lovely, but it’s small. It’s very much a bubble. The part of Vancouver I’m from is also a very small town. Hopefully, I will be back in LA soon. That’s the goal.



Lady Deludrop

What was it like going from living in these small places to a bigger city? Do you feel like the reason your

painting and your art was so imaginative was because you were in these smaller places, and then you'd imagine more of a hustle-bustle, in-dream world thing? How did it inform living in a small city versus living in a bigger city inform your art, if it did at all?

I like that question. I haven't thought about that yet. I always felt very outcast and very loser-ish as a kid. A lot of the things that I wanted to express ended up being expressed through artwork, which is why I clung onto it so much. It was really my therapy in the world. My style really started to evolve in college. It continues to evolve, of course. But I don't know if it's so much about the city. I do know that my environments do affect me though because I notice that in the winter time, they get more dark and grungy, and in Spring it's all color.

I don't know if LA has influenced me so much in terms of my style, but there is a very lovely, creative, frenetic energy that I really love about the city that I think is sometimes harder to find in smaller cities. Everyone just wants to chat with each other. For me, coming from the smaller town situation, there's a shamelessness I felt in terms of approaching people.

I read in a previous interview of yours too that even your own perceptions change over time in terms of looking at your own art. A "death of the author" element. How do you reflect on that?

At RISD I had really amazing professors and peers, but I got stuck at certain points. Because my work was always a little too opaque, too metaphorical for illustration, and a little too illustrative for painting.

I look back on my work and it's so different. But I understand it was one of those things where it's like, "I needed to try it to see if I could like it." Again, just seeing what stuck.

It's interesting to see the tendencies that I've carried with me. Graphite is a big one. I love graphite, and I love detail and I love texture. Color was a big thing that I had to develop that wasn't super inherent in my earlier work, but I think I always had an inclination to more pastel colors. So there's definitely some constant.

It makes a lot of sense too, when you think about how you were literally playing and forming your identity during that time and finding your style. There's a lot of joy to that too. I've talked to a lot of people where once you develop your style, once you have a brand, then it becomes a lot more restrictive, and then you're like, "Ooh, people expect this from me now." Are you at that point yet, or are you still finding a lot of play and wonder?

I definitely think I hit that roadblock. Now it's so unpredictable being online. I feel a greater sense of fear posting my work than I did. It's like, I should be posting once a week. I need to make reels. My reels maybe need to have my face in it. I don't know.

There is a different pressure that I feel I didn't have in school where I was just playing and playing. But recently, I finally started to allow myself to experiment more again. As much as I still love social media and want to continue posting my work, I've hit a point where the algorithm can be unpredictable and unforgiving. More than anything, it's a disservice to yourself to try and follow a trend. Constantly trying to achieve something will never make you ahead of that curve.

At the same time, it gave me this new freedom to just experiment. I'm at this point where I've done some stuff and want to continue building up real life connections, I want to experiment and expand. In that way, it's been nice. I feel like I have a lot more freedom to grow and experiment. Spending time at home too has also given me that space to really just play around and make ugly things.

I mean, I think that's awesome to hear that you went through that entire journey. The algorithm is such a black box, nobody knows what works. At some point, creatives find they're spending more time marketing than creating and giving into that chaos. It's awesome it's a journey that you've reached the other side of. What does the experimentation look like for you?

Right now, I've been going back down the nostalgia rabbit hole. I think it's a byproduct of living at home. But

I've started these childlike drawings. It's one of those things that I just wanted to do and get it out of my system. I'm also experimenting with Shrinky Dinks as of late.

Part of my little frolicking experimenting journey so far has also included writing. I do not consider myself a writer by any means, but I do my little Notes app poetry. I wrote my first really short story based off childhood, but also tying in other themes that I'm grappling with. That has been serving as a launchpad for the series that I'm working on, and it involves crows and towers. I'm hoping it'll resemble a comic book a little.



Butterfly on my Ceiling

I feel like everybody in every medium expresses something like that. Like, when do you consider yourself a real *anything*? Is it when you're published, is it when you have your own solo show? Is it when you make your own album if you're a musician? There's no metric for this... There's no clear ladder.

Art is just this amorphous thing. The term "artist" is so vague. Anyone can be an artist. There's no parameters, and yet we built them.

Totally. It's a hard thing, I think, for any creative to unlearn, especially if you don't grow up with those role models or those examples when you're a child. I certainly didn't. I just didn't know that you could be an artist, and that was a career.

Art is such a strange thing to navigate. There's a lot of facade happening. It's hard.

Network and luck too.

I got lucky in LA because I knew a couple of people that I could reach out to, and I got to meet a bunch of different primarily creative, really awesome people who aren't necessarily in the creative space too but do fun cool things.

I was literally talking with my friend the other day. Her name's Rozie, and she's a musician. We were talking about this Andy Warhol house that was being developed in his prime, with his artist friends. It was this beautiful space where everyone was bouncing all of these things off of each other. I've been thinking about community cultivation and things like that. Recently, I was invited to this online space actually called MES market. I think the easiest way to explain it is like a metaverse, but just frolic with friends and see the beautiful creative things. A virtual space away from social media, but also just very socially generative.

What are your dream collaborations? What makes a good collaboration?

My favorite collaborations always have to do with clothing. I love fashion, but I'm so terrible at sewing. I couldn't do it, but I could collaborate with someone who can do it. I really like those collaborations because I get to dip my toes into a different medium. I also really enjoy album covers. I love music.

My favorite things are where I can learn from other people and what they're thinking about and we can connect on different things. I guess my dream collabs would involve things where I can experiment and make things that are more immersive.

I love Yoshitomo Nara. There's this exhibition, I think he did at the LACMA where he built these little houses for his little big-headed girls, and it's like you're literally in their room. I would love to do something like that where it's very immersed in that reality. I would love to do a fashion show or something like that. Those are my dreams at the moment.



&& Gallery *In Dreaming* Solo Show Installation

Evelyn Tan recommends:

[Alyce Yang](#)

[Rozie Ramati](#)

[Nhi](#)

[Maggie](#)

[Sahara Clemons](#)

[Name](#)

Evelyn Tan

[Vocation](#)

artist

□

Alyce Yang