

On the tension between determination and perfectionism



Author and illustrator Lian Cho discusses how to break out of a rut when your work feels repetitive, coping with being a workaholic, and how to be kinder to yourself

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As told to Jun Chou, 2623 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Illustration](#), [Success](#), [Focus](#), [Mental health](#), [Time management](#), [Creative anxiety](#).

How did you get to where you are?

I always knew I wanted to study something in the vein of drawing but I wasn't sure what. My first year I went to London and did a foundation year course in Arts and Design. You just study everything.

I hated it. I ended up transferring to SVA. That's how I ended up in New York. I graduated from there and started working on books.

What was your discovery journey?

I was nervous because I was an international student. There's a lot of issues when it comes to international students and getting work after you graduate, a lot of deadlines that you have to hit or you have to leave the country. So I was so nervous that I started prepping early in school.

I put my website up on a directory called Women Who Draw, which was started by Julia Rothman and Wendy MacNaughton. They had looked at all the New Yorker covers and were like, "Why are all of these done by men and why aren't there many done by women?" This directory was where women or women identifying illustrators could submit their website. Then art directors and editors would look on the website to discover new work.

I had a website so I put it up, not really expecting anything. I got two emails pretty back to back from an editor at Harper Collins and an art director at Penguin Random House. Both of them found my website and were like, "We love your work. Do you want to chat a little about what stories you might have?"



I didn't even have a portfolio put together yet because I was still a junior. I hastily put one together and wore my one formal outfit. Then I was ghosted. I was like, "Well, I guess I blew my only chance."

But a couple months later, an art director that works with the editor at Harper emailed me to see if I was interested in illustrating middle grade novels. It took off from there. After I finished illustrating, they gave me their first picture book manuscript for me to illustrate. From there, people saw that I was getting hired for things and it kind of went into each other. I was really lucky I didn't really have to go and query people.

How has your style evolved?

The work I was making was very different. Everything was not as solidified. But the fun thing about working in books is every single book is a different approach. I don't know if I have a style, but people say, "Oh yeah, obviously Lian did that."

Do you have a one-size-fits-all process, or do you vary your process depending on your project?

I follow the steps but it's sort of different each time. I'll start out with thumbnailing and writing, and then go into sketches. I always do research and gather a lot of reference images for my books and for my art. From there, it's a lot of experimenting to see what kind of mediums I want to paint the book in. It's seeing what actually matches the story.

Do you send your sketches for feedback?

I am my harshest critic. I don't need any more cooks in the kitchen, so I don't share it with them. It is a vibe thing. For one of the books I did called, *It Began With Lemonade*, about summer and a little girl selling lemonade, she goes to the water and there's all these animals, and it was bright and summery and poppy and warm and it just

felt right to paint that book in watercolor.



The one I'm working on now is about three brothers that open a pizza joint and they're all round and graphic. I wanted something bright and punchy, so acrylic felt nice for that—felt really goopy and squishy, like the pizzas.

I love that. Squishy like pizza. Do you feel like an instinct has developed better as you've gotten more mature in your career? Is there less experimentation because you have more experience now?

No. I feel like it might honestly be worse now that I'm older. I feel like when I was younger, I had more drive and more excitement for life. I was more excited during the research and experimentation phase. And now that I'm older, I get frustrated quicker. It feels great when it works out, but yeah, maybe it's a sign that I'm getting older.

That's such a familiar thread that I've heard from creatives that you take more risks when you're younger. Once you get to know the industry and the limitations, it's easier to talk yourself out of trying things and playing. People miss the freedom they had when they were students because it was entirely based on play and nothing was real. Do you relate to this?

Well, I was going through all the art I made in school and I was like, "Oh my gosh, she had so much zhuzh in her. Who is this person? This is a whole other person." I don't think I would spend that much time or effort anymore.

When you're young, you have the energy and the motivation but you don't have the means. Then when you get older, you have the means, but you don't have that energy or motivation anymore. It's trying to fight and balance that and trying to stay excited about things and pursuing things that excite me. So I've been trying to develop hobbies.** **I'm trying to do things that I am excited about. I talk to a lot of college students and they always ask, "What do you do if you feel burnt out and you don't want to draw anymore?" And I just say, "I don't draw and just do other things." All of that is going to filter it. It'll inspire you to make work. And if I quit this job and never draw again, I'll just sew clothes or something. That's totally okay too.



Do you have that sense of burnout right now?

I've definitely been feeling a little burnt out over the past couple of years because I've just been hustling since school. I've done 12 or 13 books, I can't remember, but I'm tired. All the picture books, it's been getting a little bit repetitive. That's also why I started my newsletter and doing those comics, because I wanted something that was a little more different and exciting to play around with.

Life is short and I'm still young. I could live anywhere. All the days in New York were just blurring together into one. I didn't know what I was doing the day before. I knew exactly what was going to happen every week. It felt repetitive and burnt out.

Do you think you'll be working during this time or will you be working on personal things, like your Substack?

I have two books I'm working on this year, then I'm free of my contracts. From there on, I have a book idea I'm working on that I want to pitch. I tell myself maybe I'll take a break and chill out and not do anything for a year. Then I never do it. I'm a workaholic, so we'll see. But there will be a lot of fun, exciting adventures happening this year.

What ideally if you didn't work would you want to do?

I don't even know anymore. I just really like to tell stories, My Substack and comics, that's a way of storytelling. Books are a way of storytelling. In school, they were always telling us to do editorial work and single illustration stuff, and that just never clicked with me because I like to tell stories.



Pig Town Party

You mentioned earlier that you are your own worst critic. How do you remove pressures from your work?

Oh, no, I dug a hole for myself. All throughout college, I was really depressed. And I've always been incredibly self-critical. It's part of being a perfectionist. There's a lot of pressure of wanting to make it big and wanting to be the best that I can be, which is on one hand really good because it pushes you to try harder, but then it also leads to burnout.

It's hard to come to terms with accepting things. As I start to approach an age of wanting kids in the future, I'm scared of passing that criticism down to them if I'm self-critical in front of them.

A lot of it is thinking of how I think of the loved ones around me and their work, or just them as a person. I am very accepting of all the things they do and the way they look or the work they make and everything. So I should try to give myself that kind of grace too, and to treat myself like that because I'm sure they all think I'm great.

It is easier to be forgiving of others than of yourself because we have high expectations for ourselves. Do you feel like it's gotten easier throughout the years?

It's still hard. I've been trying to limit being on social media. When you're on that a lot, you see all the other achievements that other people have made. You see all the ways you don't measure up compared to everyone else because all anyone does is just share their achievements.

I need a couple more years and then the age will hit and I'll give less of a fuck. Once I hit 33, it'll be more chill. Because I'm 29, it's like, "If I do something now, it'd still be really impressive." Once I hit a little bit older, it'll be like, "Okay, no more Forbes 30 under 30. It's all gone now. Just relax. You're free. Just do whatever you want."



What's your relationship to social media?

Since I've started doing these diary comics for my Substack and newsletter, it's been kind of fun. I'm seeing a more personal side to people on social media. I started the newsletter because I wanted a way to open up about my feelings and process things. I was coming out of being really, really depressed. I was finally seeing the light and I wanted to practice verbalizing all of my thoughts.

I wasn't sure what was going to happen, if people would even be interested. But people really liked it. And I think sharing a part of yourself makes other people want to share parts of themselves. So that part of social media has been really interesting and fun, to read people's comments and things that they resonate with.

But on the other hand, social media is weird because when I become really personal, people think that they know me, and then it becomes that parasocial relationship that happens with celebrities. It can be a little weird. I did a newsletter post talking about it and told everyone to share their comments so they had to reply to personal questions too. So people were telling me all their personal secrets as well. We had to get the balance right.

You also have a Discord group that you get where you get feedback from your peers. Tell me about that.

Oh, you dug deep. I thought we were a secret little group. I started it in 2021. We've got 40ish illustrators in it. It started with word of mouth; I would invite people and they would invite their friends. It was really nice because it started during the pandemic so we were all really depressed in our homes. We were all working on books and there's nobody to really talk to.

We used to, during the pandemic, do weekly book clubs where we'd read picture books on Zoom to each other. It was a really nice way to build community and feel connected with a lot of people from all over the world.

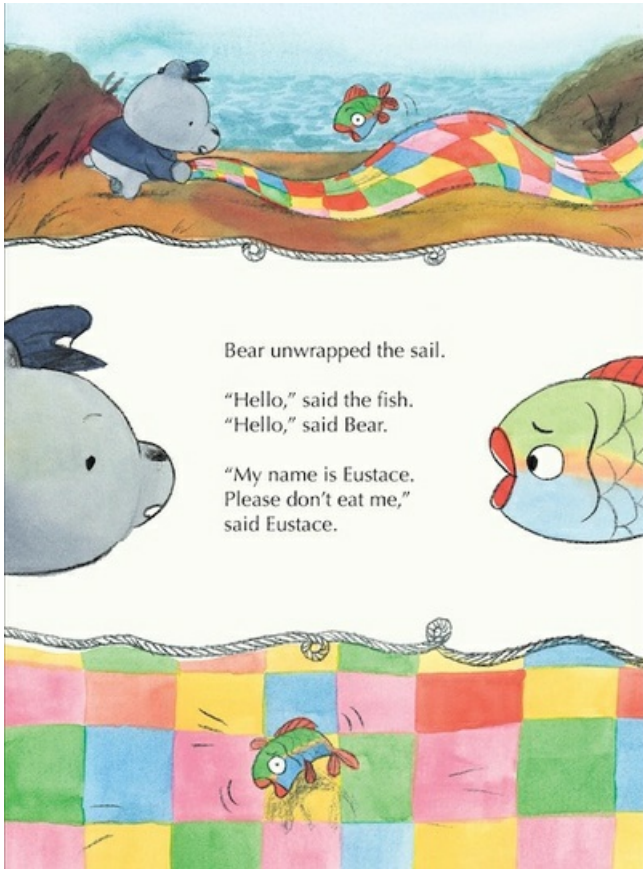
What is the importance of community in your eyes?

We are so isolated that it's so easy for people to take advantage of us. A big thing in our group is we share openly about how much money we're making on projects and how experiences have been. It's essentially a little union that we're forming, which is really important. Because for so many students and people starting out, starting to do jobs and being hired for things means being taken advantage of, burning out quickly and not making enough money and being in predatory relationships. A big part [of the group] is having a community and being open with talking about that with each other.

How is the children's picture book world? Is it fairly competitive?

It's a little competitive, but there is room for everyone. I don't know how things are going to shape up with our current economic downfall. But in the past, there's space for different stories to be told, which is really nice. But as in most industries, there's more men at the top making more money and more acclaim despite there being more women in the industry.

Everyone in our Discord is pretty much female or female-identifying or non-binary. Most people that actually work in the industry aren't men. Sort of like cooks and chefs—all the acclaimed ones are men because it's serious. Whereas with women, you're just a homesteader.



Bear unwrapped the sail.

"Hello," said the fish.
"Hello," said Bear.

"My name is Eustace.
Please don't eat me,"
said Eustace.



"Of course not. I would *never*,"
said Bear as they lowered
Eustace into a large cooking pot.

Don't East Eustace

You're a hobbyist as opposed to taking it seriously. I feel like in most creative professions, that is often the case. Do you have any thoughts, opinions, fears around AI?

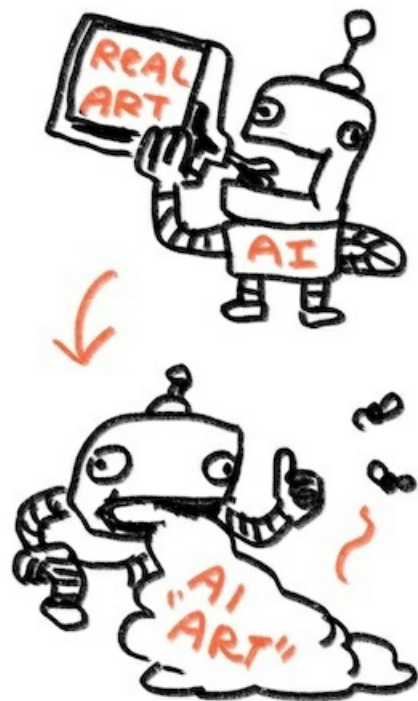
For me, I feel chill. What makes my work interesting are the stories I tell, whether they be about myself or just a picture book story. All of those come from my human experience in a way. If I share a comic about me shitting my pants, no one's going to care if it's a robot being like, "I pooped myself." No one cares. But if it's like, "Oh my God, this happened to a person, that's so embarrassing." That's way more interesting. Maybe I'm being naive, but I feel okay. What's important in my work is the story and the heart, and I feel like AI can't take that away.

FIRST OFF, I THINK IT'S STUPID.



WHY WOULD YOU TAKE THE BEST PARTS OF BEING HUMAN & AUTOMATE IT??

NOT ONLY THAT BUT, AI ART STEALS FROM ARTISTS AND VOMITS IT OUT INTO A GROSS BLEND OF THEIR WORK WHILE IGNORING COPYRIGHT LAWS & NOT PAYING THESE ARTISTS.



I love that mindset. It's easy to be doom and gloom, but like you said, AI can't replicate heart and human mistakes and struggle. Everything you talked about, of feeling comparison and being a perfectionist, those are the human experiences and computers can't replicate that.

It's so funny, whenever I'm trying to learn how to draw, like I don't know how to draw a horse, so I have to look at images of horses and practice drawing that. Now when I do that, I'm like, "I'm training the AI. Oh my God, I'm the AI."

The AI was us all along.

It really hits me each time.

That is so funny. We are pattern recognition software.

Exactly. It's kind of blurred all together.

Lian Cho recommends five of her favorite newsletters she's made:

5 Lessons From 5 Years of Illustrating

Dear New York

I Think We'll Be Okay

All the Hidden Work Behind a Book

Would You Rather?

Name

Lian Cho

Vocation

author, illustrator

□