

On learning how to have a good time



Illustrator and author Julia Rothman discusses the fear of her industry ending, believing in your ideas, and creating lively community spaces

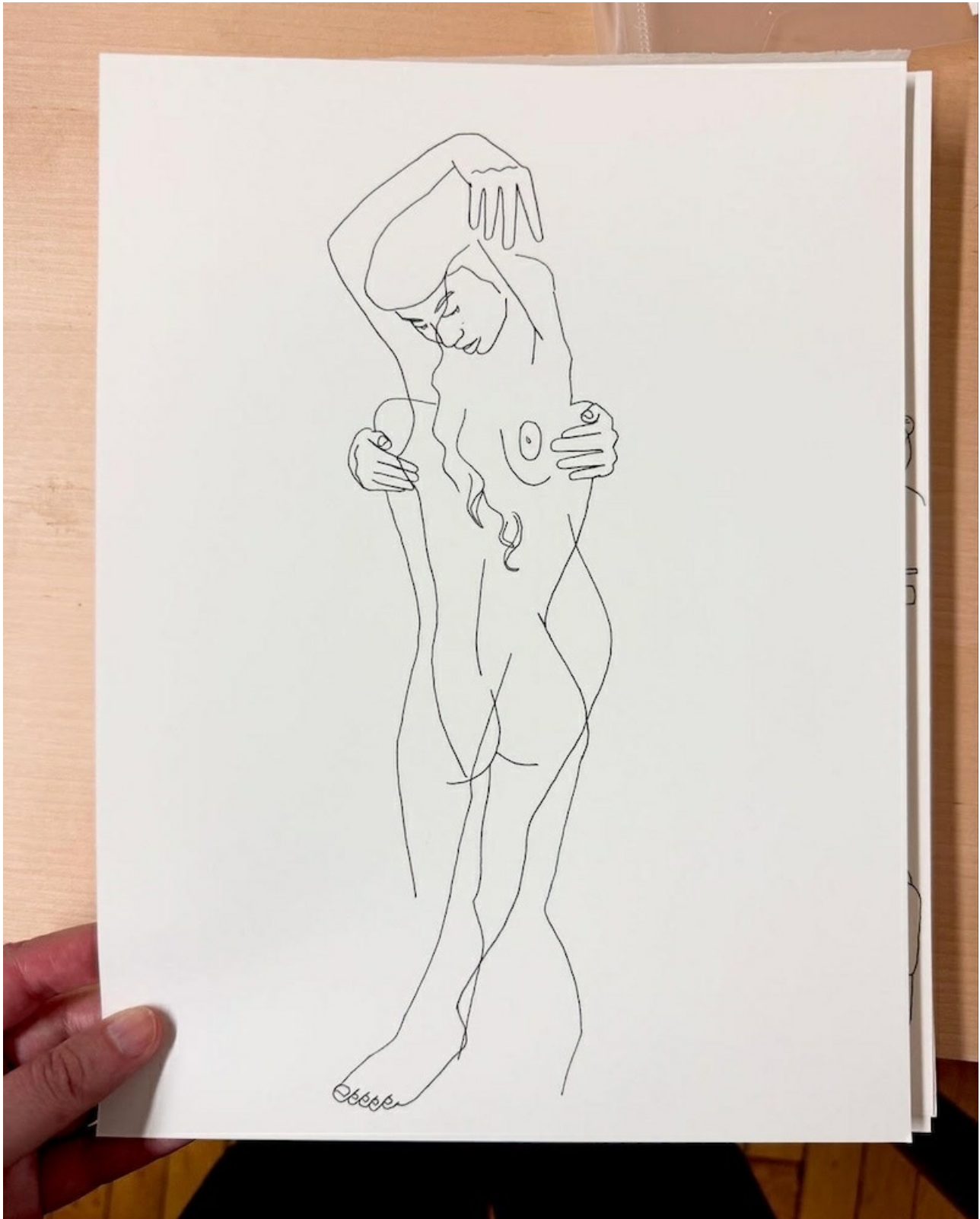
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As told to Jun Chou, 2605 words.

Tags: [Illustration](#), [Business](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Creative anxiety](#).

For your less / more lists, one of the ones that always comes up is community. It seems like you've been doing a lot of work with [The Figure Assembly](#), your studio with James Gallagher. Can you tell me a little bit about how that came to be?

Being an illustrator is a super lonesome thing. I'm a super social, extroverted person, so you have to find ways to see people and make your own community. I have always had this vision of a storefront that would be my studio, a gallery space, a place where I had events and gatherings and all these things. It's been this dream for a very long time. Then, with the political climate, I was like, "Can I do it sooner somehow?" I found a 600-square-foot space and worked there and also led as many community events as I can handle during the month. So, I've been leading figure drawing with James Gallagher for close to two years.



Last night, we had people collage exquisite corpses. We're going to do a speed portrait night twice a month now because it's been so popular. We're doing figure drawing. We're doing a nature workshop, where somebody's going to talk about seed libraries and artists are going to react and make art about climate. Just trying to do really fun things that people come to. I tried to do a collaborative drawing night, and nobody signed up for it. That was

the only thing that didn't sell out.



Was the vision to have a big sheet of paper and everybody collaborate on a drawing, or would it be more like an exquisite corpse?

It was going to be like you start a drawing and you pass it and you pass it and you pass it. Everybody draws on everybody's drawing, so it goes in a circle. I have so many regulars now and I asked them why they didn't sign up for that and they said it was too intimidating to draw. They felt pressure to do a really good job for the next person, which I thought was so interesting because I see it the other way. Nobody's going to know who did what and we can all just go crazy.

How do you cultivate this sense of community within the space? How do you get people to come back?

People just like drawing and they were like me—working at home by themselves. Now they have people they can talk to about this thing they also like. It's kind of a nerdy atmosphere because we're like, "What pen are you using," and, "Oh, I love the way you made that line." It's very easy for us to all chat. It's funny because in figure drawing, there's a real bunch of regulars, and in the intermissions, when the model has a break, it's loud in there because everybody's talking. Sometimes I can't get everyone's attention because they're all chatting, which is so nice.

A lot of the times when you think about those sorts of classes, it's silent. The fact that you have that loud intermission is so lovely.

I used to go regularly to a place for figure drawing and it was such a different energy. It was always awkward. A lot of dudes who had a lot of stuff all spread out, and then when they would erase, it'd shake the whole table. I really wanted to make a space where everybody got the same point of view. We can fit 20 people in a circle, so everybody has the same point of view. There's nobody behind somebody's head who can't see. Everybody can see perfectly. That was important to me because I hated when I was a little bit late and I got the worst seat in the house. The vibe is so different than the ones I used to go to and I'm so happy about that.

Have you found that doing these events has given you inspiration in return and changed your art?

Being around people doing all different kinds of things, you get ideas and you want to try things. There was a guy who was always doing oil pastels and he would do these bright colors on black paper. We started chatting because I had bought oil pastels a long time ago, and I was like, "What is it like to use it?" A few of us were interested in talking to him, and then we all met in the studio and just to hang out, the four of us, to try and test what it would be like to do oil pastels, and he kind of showed us what to do. It was very hard, but it was fun to try it.

It sounds like there's a great deal of play involved.

It's very playful. I just traded drawings with somebody after an event, so there's also a lot of sharing, which is cool. When people do speed portrait night, they get to take home the drawings that everyone did of them. So, they get 11 drawings, or however many people are there, of themselves by all different people in different styles.



That's such a lovely souvenir.

It's been fun. To be honest, we're losing money doing this because the rent for the space is so much money. We don't make very much money because we have to pay a model and buy wine, beer, seltzer. We have to buy all these tables, chairs. But it gives us a studio space during the day and really fun stuff to do three nights a week or whatever. So I've been having a great time.

What was your journey of getting into full-time illustration?

It was pretty straightforward. I'm one of the few people in RISD who majored in illustration who did illustration directly after. During my junior year, I did an internship where they let me do my first illustration. My style was completely different. I started doing published work for them in my senior year and then went straight into freelance illustrating after that.

Do you feel like you came up during a time when the world wasn't as saturated as it is now? Like, right now, there's this sense of balancing the creation and then creating money out of your creations?

Oh, 100 percent. When I graduated, you were mailing out a postcard to magazines you wanted to work for, and that's how you were getting jobs. This is 2002. Before that, you were going in and showing your portfolio, like meeting people and they were flipping through it in person. When I graduated, it was postcards and a website. Then, a few years after that, it was blogs and design blogs, where people saw me on blogs and hired me. Now, it's Instagram 100 percent. That's where everybody sees your work; that's where they hire you from.

As far as saturation, for sure. Because now everybody can see everybody, you can work with anybody around the world. So, it was probably a good time for me to become an illustrator. It's much harder now. Also with AI, forget about it. I feel like it's the end of illustration, which is really sad. In 10 years, this profession won't exist anymore. It's really depressing and there's so many people graduating from illustration, but I'm afraid that there's not going to be hundreds of people being hired for illustration anymore because a machine can do it in three seconds and do it fairly well.

It's a very existential thing facing all creatives right now. It is really bleak. That's why those in-person community spaces are so important. But when your livelihood is dependent on it, that's difficult. I hate to ask the question, but do you have a plan for the future?

The plan for the future is to continue using my hands to make stuff because I think AI probably won't be able to do that for a long time. People will still want things made by humans—art especially. In a magical anything, I want to have a residency for artists to come, possibly in New Zealand where my husband is from, and host them and make art together and live the dream.

Just tend to your animals and wake up and have breakfast with all the artists.

Exactly. And come back to the city often. I was born here and love it, so I wouldn't leave forever.

So much of your work is tied to New York. It's where you're from; it's where you've lived all of your life. How do you still find inspiration in New York?

Oh, that's so easy. Going to a new neighborhood that I've never been to is the best thing ever. If I have to go to a doctor's appointment and it's somewhere I've never been, I'm always like, "Oh, there's so much stuff here I need to photograph because I want to make paintings later." The people, the buildings, the storefronts, all of that, I find exciting still. Sometimes, I go to Manhattan, I'm like, "We did it. We're in New York City." It still feels exciting even though I've been here my whole life. You look out and you're like, "The skyline! It's the skyline you see in every movie." It's the most diverse, amazing place. I am still in love with it.

SCRATCH | JULIA ROTHMAN and SHAINA FEINBERG

A LIST OF ABSOLUTELY EVERY ITEM SOLD AT A NEW YORK BODEGA BETWEEN 8 P.M. & 4:03 A.M.

One night in October, we camped out at 585 Motor Club in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. This is what we saw.

"I've been working the night shift at this bodega for two months now—seven days a week. My grandpa's owned this place 15 years. You're doing O.K. if you make \$2,000 a day. Back in the days, my grandpa would make a lot more—it was better than there's a lot more competition now."

"There's a lot of cheating tonight. I look at the surveillance cameras all night long." —Abhi! Samir, 41



- 34 BAGS OF CHIPS
- 25 SINGLE BEERS
- 21 SNACK CAKES
- 18 PACKS OF CIGARETTES
- 17 SOODAS
- 16 JUICES
- 16 DELI SANDWICHES
- 14 WATERS
- 13 SIX-PACKS OF BEER
- 12 PACKS OF COOKIES
- 11 PACKS OF GUM
- 11 COFFEES
- 10 ATM USES
- 8 GATORADES
- 8 ICED TEAS
- 7 BAGS OF NUTS/ONION FRUIT/SEEDS
- 7 CANDY BARS AND BAGS
- 7 HOT TEAS
- 7 SELTZERS
- 6 PUFFINS
- 5 HALF-GALLONS OF JUICE
- 5 PACKS OF CRACKERS
- 5 ENERGY BARS
- 5 NUTRITION SHAKES
- 4 CASES OF BEER
- 4 ENERGY DRINKS
- 3 THINGS OF RAMEN
- 3 SIX-PACKS OF HARD SELTZERS, ETC.
- 2 GALLONS OF WATER
- 2 NEWSPAPERS
- 2 LITERS OF SODA
- 2 GINGER SHOTS
- 2 GRANOLA BARS
- 2 GALLON OF MILK
- 2 LIGHTER (YELLOW)
- 1 LIP BALM
- 1 PAIR OF HEADPHONES
- 1 PACK OF ADVIL
- 1 ICE CREAM POP
- 1 STICK OF BEEF JERKY
- 1 COCONUT WATER
- 1 PAIR OF WORK GLOVES
- 1 PACK OF CONDOMS

8:29 "It's the weekend, so we're getting together to read books and have snacks. We got 'Doubt' and 'Come here for milk.'" —Ange Perez, 27
"We also bought M&M's." —Iris, 19, Alex, 7

9:00 Big rush!

9:43 "A store like this—it's a very New York thing. Past 9 or 10 p.m. in France, everything is closed. In Mexico, the stores stay open late but don't open early. In New York, it's 24 hours." —John Grech, 30

10:03 "Today I was at Medford Times doing a holiday lay, but now I'm working I work from 3 to 11 p.m. with people who have cashed pay." —Jesse Dyer, 31

10:25 Another rush! Two cops come in to check on Abhi. They say they like the bodega because it's family-owned. They don't want to give us their names. One is a Trump supporter, and the other is 15 minutes before a meeting about politics.

10:44 "It's freezing outside. I came in to find food, but I couldn't find any. And the cop was like, 'Put some legs on your legs! What?'" —Liz Harlan, 22, from America's next Top Model

1:14 "I just went to a bar, and now I'm here for a little sandwich, beer, egg and cheese. You headed to California tomorrow morning, because I'm a professional waitress." —David Cohen, 28

1:31 An affable drug dealer comes in and offers us many varieties of marijuana. We demand the leaves and come back a few minutes later to see if we've changed our mind. We haven't.

1:46 "I just got off a bit of trash. I've been working for an entertainment company for 10 years. I married a girl in dance. There's a lot of new dance music. I learn on TiPDA. I learned the Wind and the Milky Way." —Tracy Moon, 32

1:48 Short but heated debate about whether cheese.

2:43 A drunk man orders a chicken-salad, mid-birthday here. He requests the order three times. Times at top volume.

3:05 The drug dealer returns! But it's just to buy a coffee.

4:03 The day's bread is delivered in two big boxes. Abhi pays \$39.80 for it.

What is your process for any new project?

I want to turn everything into a book all the time. Doing this figure drawing, I was like, "I need to do a book about figure drawing." I called my agent about it and she was like, "It's kind of niche. I don't know."

Was that kind of how The Exquisite Book came to be? You're like, "Oh, these exquisite corpses are amazing. I want to get them together."

That was a crazy, crazy hard organization project. I feel like I was a lot better at confidence when I was younger, where I was like, "I can do anything." As I've gotten older, I'm less like that, though I still get to do things I want. I just can't believe I pitched that to a room of Chronicle editors when I'd never done a book before, and it was a very hard layout and format, and they were like, "Okay." That still amazes me that that worked.

I do think if you go in and you believe in your idea so much, other people will believe in it too. That is why things happen. Somebody's just so excited about something that you can't help but get excited, too. People are like, "If she's so into it, we should do it."



Passion and excitement are so contagious. That's actually something I noticed within your less/more lists. You want more joy, like physicality, community, and less comparison, insecurity, materiality, and anxiety. So, what are your best antidotes now for that sort of overthinking? How do you still get shit done?

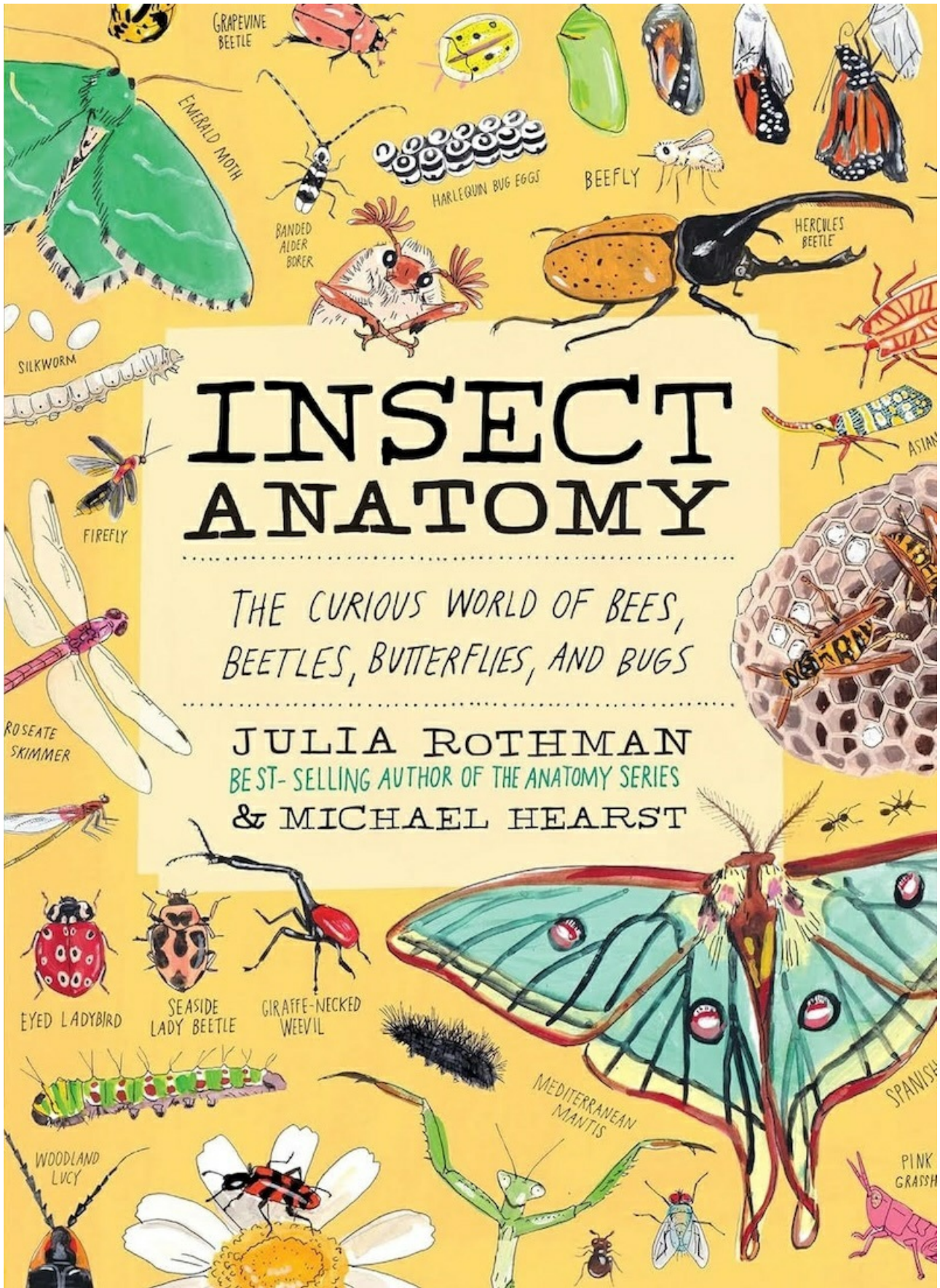
My joy is coming up with the ideas and getting excited about making the thing. I am a person who sits and has 20 ideas at every moment. The finishing is less exciting. The actual making of it is such a long process.

But I guess your question was, how do you not compare yourself? I don't know. I still feel jealous of other people's projects that they accomplished and wish I had done them or wish I did more or feel anxious that something's not good enough. So, I don't have an answer for that except that it's less than it used to be.

Something I like to say in private is: No babies are going to die if you don't do a great job or finish or do this on time. I take it so seriously that I get so worried or anxious or feel the need to do the best I can and I overextend. Then I'm like, "If I don't do that, no babies will die." So, you can just relax, the stress is off. Everything's going to be okay if you don't finish or you hand it in late or it's not exactly what you wanted or you have to change the paper stock because they couldn't afford it or whatever. It's fine. No babies are dying. Stop taking it so seriously. We are just having a good time.

What are the ideas that you're percolating on right now?

I'm thinking about doing a book about dogs. I just finished a book about insects and I'm doing one about birds right now. I have this other idea where people get to fill things in themselves. I did this guest check print, where I had people customize what they want inside of it written. So, it could be their favorite order or it could be a memory from a restaurant or anything. People really liked them. I thought a book of things like that would be really cool, like a guest check. I did one about a mix-tape so they can write the songs they want on the thing. So, a book of things where you can fill it in yourself, but it's prompted by old ephemera.



INSECT ANATOMY

THE CURIOUS WORLD OF BEES, BEETLES, BUTTERFLIES, AND BUGS

JULIA ROTHMAN
BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF THE ANATOMY SERIES
& MICHAEL HEARST

It's kind of random. I'll make something, and then you see the response and then you're like, "How can I make this bigger?" That happened with [Scratch](#). One of them did really well, which was the one that was during the pandemic where people were talking about how they got by. That was one of the most popular columns. That's how we were like, "Maybe we should make this into a book." That became [a book](#) with people's stories.

That's how you met your husband, right?

Yes.

What's that story?

I watched a film on HBO called *There Is No "I" in Threesome*, which was him documenting his past relationship. The ending has this twist and it blows your mind a bit. So, I found the filmmaker and wrote him a message on Instagram. And then we chatted. Then we were like, "Should we chat again?" And then kept chatting. He flew from New Zealand to New York during the pandemic to meet me, which everybody was like, "That's insane. What if you guys don't get along?" It worked, and he never left.

It's like the two furthest places in the world, New Zealand and New York, where two people met and now they have to spend time on two opposite sides of the world together. It just shows how much the world has gotten smaller. People fly places to meet people, which is crazy to me. I used to think, "If you live in Bushwick, that's too far. I can't date you." And now, I'm like, "Oh, you live in New Zealand. That one's fine."

Yeah, an inter-borough relationship is a long distance relationship.

It really felt like it. I remember dating and being like, "Oh, God, he lives in the Upper East Side? Forget it."

Julia Rothman recommends:

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Care for a [Ric Rac Cactus](#)

Name

Julia Rothman

Vocation

Illustrator, author

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