

On the importance of failure



Puppeteer and mask-maker Yuliya Tsukerman discusses the beauty in flaws, the creative benefits of world-building, and the dilemma of dealing with real life.

October 3, 2023 -

As told to René Kladzyk, 3103 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Craft](#), [Process](#), [Failure](#), [Money](#), [Success](#), [Mental health](#).

Can you tell me about what you're working on right now?

I come from a puppetry background primarily. Puppetry by way of being a failed playwright but trying really, really hard to be a playwright, and my brain not being able to do it. So I started making masks about a year ago and I got really into it. I've been making a [video series](#) featuring these masked spirits: "lesser gods," creatures who are delivering these transmissions to people. And they're sort of these bewildered, largely powerless deities in animal form, trying to understand what life is all about. In conjunction with that, I'm making a series of 12 books—one every month—and they're called [Blessings from the Ancient Forest](#). There's a book of blessings for every month that these spirits are themselves writing. I'm not involved at all. They're doing everything.

The spirits are?

Yeah, they're doing it.

Okay. There's a lot more I want to ask you about this project, but before I do, you mentioned being a failed playwright. Can you elaborate?

Of course. I think my journey as an artist has had a lot to do with trying very hard to do things that weren't natural to me and seeing it as a massive failure that I couldn't do it and then looking for something else. So I went through classical guitar to screenwriting, to playwriting, to puppetry, and then over time making peace with the things that my brain can't do, which includes things like writing plots, raising the stakes, creating conflict, all of these things that are sort of foundational to dramatic writing. For a very long time, I experienced it as a massive failure that I just couldn't get it together to make it happen.

How did puppetry end up emerging out of that? Had you always done visual arts or sculpture?

I hadn't. I did the Science Olympiad in high school—it's a science competition that has a bunch of different events. When I was trying to be a writer, I saw a [St. Ann's Warehouse Puppet Lab](#) performance, which is a puppetry residency here in Brooklyn. I was like, "Oh my gosh, this is Science Olympiad theater." All of these little mechanical inventions, and depending on the kind of puppeteer you are, there's a spectrum of the degree to which you're a mechanical inventor. It turned out that what I didn't like about theater was that so often it's an unnecessarily staged sitcom or TV show where it's like, "Why did you bring me out of my house to watch people talk?" Puppetry is such a collaboration between the performers and the audience, where the audience is the reason that thing is alive. I saw that performance, I was really excited about it. I ended up doing the Puppet Lab twice.

Can you talk about how you view failure now, based on the journey it took you to get here?

I don't know if this is true for most people, but failure has been so important to me. I think because I wasn't trained in any particular craft. If you're the kind of artist who really is impressive in a craft, you always have that to come back to even when the subject matter that you're working with isn't exciting for you. I kept coming up against this barrier of, "Well, my craftsmanship, whether as a writer or as a sculptor, or illustrator, it's not going to impress anybody." That was very painful for me for a very long time. I very much wanted to be impressive to people, and it took me a long time to just sort of think through, "Well, if that's not going to happen, can I enjoy that?" Or even celebrate that my art has more to do with being just like everybody else who is struggling and not perceiving themselves as special or excellent or fascinating or any of the other things that I used to think were the mainstays of being an artist.

What I make now is foundationally about not succeeding at being impressive. For me, it's interesting to think about the ways that I'm just like everybody else—that the artist isn't a person who stands apart or has a relationship with success, but is in the muck of feeling like a failure, just like most people are in the muck of feeling like a failure.

It seems also part of what you're saying about the value of failure is the way it forces you to take stock of your own limitations, but also the tools at your disposal. And there's a humility in that.

It's extremely, extremely reluctant. I would've loved to have just exploded at 22, made it. I was not shooting for humility. But one thing that I comfort myself with is that when I was younger, I really wanted to have a style—to be recognizable as yourself and not derivative or copying. But it really helped me just start thinking of that as having a lot to do with what you can't do.

There are a lot of artists who make their style out of blind spots or a lack of skill or just sort of accepting what your brain likes to do and does naturally, and what you feel excited about.

You're reminding me of how the limitations of different media are often the thing that people end up having nostalgia and love for. Like the sound of a cassette tape, for example. The things that are the limitation of the format can end up being the things that people enjoy the most about it.

I love the comparison with a tape because I think for so many of us, it just feels like we have to be excellent everywhere in every way. To me, with this analogy, it feels similar to digital overwhelm, where I still feel so lost all the time because everything is available. I really feel for younger folks starting out because so much is available, that it's just so hard to have any kind of container for experimenting with who you are. The container is just so big that you're flopping around. Something like the quality of a tape, you could say it's standing in the way of the music sounding perfect—a lot of us really like that quality of things being specific and bounded and flawed in some way.

I do want to talk about your current project and undertaking though, because I'm so curious to hear about some of the behind the scenes stuff. Okay, you're doing this project, Transmissions From an Ancient Forest. In giving voice to these lesser gods, can you tell me a little bit about what you find compelling about writing from that voice and/or how you receive these transmissions from those gods? Depending on how you want to choose your own adventure with that response.

I sometimes want to really go all in on the lore, and say that I'm not involved, but then that just sort of makes me tired to be consistent with that.

Maybe both things can be true. It can both come from you and not from you.

Yes, I love that, because one thing I get excited about when I'm working solo is that I just don't care about internal consistency. And that's fine for me.

The way that I write for this project is that typically there's something that's really, really bothering me. Typically it's something on the slightly existential side of the spectrum. I'm just extremely bothered about

mortality. I can't get over it. I don't get a minute when I'm not bothered about it. So usually when I'm thinking about something like that, I'm just writing down what I'm upset about. In that moment I look for a thread of either hope or resolution—something that feels true that isn't as dark as the dark thought. There's a James Wright poem that to me is such a template for my brain of a certain kind of poem.

Do you know what the line is off the top of your head?

I will misquote it. It's something like, "And if I stepped out of my body, I would break into blossom." It's about an encounter with these horses at the side of the road. It's very quotidian, and ends with this sense of, 'Oh, we've just been in this very gentle, small moment, and that gentle, small moment is the essence of transcendence if you choose to take on that perspective.' It's not something that I do naturally. I struggle a lot with feeling hopeful. So for me, doing that work feels important because I really need it.

Can you share more about the emotional impact of making art?

For a very, very long time, making art was quite painful. My relationship to it was primarily that I felt like I had something that wanted to come out and I didn't have a language for it. One thing that I followed is that I've always had a sense of flow in making things with my hands. I've always had that lose-track-of-time feeling. When I stopped trying so hard to be a writer and I mixed it with a process where I was hand-making, that loosened things up for me a little bit, where I wasn't so consumed with what I was making and was just able to follow that tactile path. And now I feel like I found a balance that I really, really like.

So I make these paper mache masks, they're really fun to make. They're low stakes. The materials are super cheap, which helps. It doesn't feel like a big deal to make one. And then I film and edit videos myself, which is also something I really like to do. It can feel like you're going in without very much, and then you can shape it and it gives you something. And the writing that I'm doing has a place where not everything is riding on it. So for me, finding that balance of different practices— I'm not particularly skilled at any one of those crafts, but it's really interesting to find those juxtapositions and intersections. And for some of us, that is so much of what the craft is. It's like, "What if I put this next to this?" Maybe neither one of those things on their own really shines, but just the fact that they're there together is something sparkly and fun.

Transmissions from an Ancient Forest feels like a world-building project to me. If you agree with that, can you comment on the value of building a world as an artist?

I love that question because I always wanted to have that as a component of my work, but it just never clicked. And I don't know what it was with this project, because when I started making masks, it was for a different project. I had one mask in a solo puppetry show I was doing that I didn't make very well at all because I didn't know how to make masks. I started making them just as an experiment. And then I was really bothered that I had made all these masks and I didn't know what they were. So I just spent a very long time just putting them on and being like, "What do I do? What is this? Why do I keep making rabbits?"

Very slowly, it felt like the masks were speaking to each other. It felt like, "Well, they're coming from the same place." And very, very slowly it started to feel true that this was a place. Then I was like, "Ah shit, if this is a place, then there's going to be a map." I was so excited about doing your standard Tolkien, or actually to be honest, Winnie the Pooh, map. Once I started drawing that, I took all the poems that I had written and anything that could have been a reference to a place, and made them places on the map. That was just so fun.

Like once you have a logical framework for how this world operates, it tells you what you need to do?

Yes, totally. I think getting to that logic is really tough, but once you have a little seed of it, it's incredible how nice it is to be like, "Well, I'm not working in this world. I don't have to worry so much about being successful or making sense or operating under all these rules that we operate under as people." It's like, "I'm just operating by Ancient Forest rules. There are only three of them, so this is easier."

I'd like to switch gears and talk a little more like brass tacks. You're publishing a book a month. Have you been

doing that all year?

I just started. I'm doing it on [Patreon](#). I think it might be a terrible idea. The first month was August. I like to trick myself into doing something that turns out to be a large scale project by actually doing a bunch of small projects. But it appears to be a lot of work.

Can you tell me about some of the practical challenges of the way you have set about making this project?

I'm terrible at money making schemes. I was like, "Starting a Patreon seems like a really nice way to have some money coming into the practice." Because I don't make any money off of my work. I just work jobs and then put that money into the work. So I am writing and illustrating, they're basically children's books for adults-like illustrated books. I want it at the end of the year to be kind of an almanac of blessings. So they're connected to the seasons. I've done some of my own illustration work before, and I've worked a little bit in design where you lay out the book. But laying out the books so that they print correctly and also getting my printer to behave, and then I've been hand sewing the bindings, and watching a lot of X-Files and Matlock.

Do you have helpers?

I'm doing everything. I think as artists, one of the lessons is that if you actually asked for the amount of money that the work actually costs, people would laugh because to them it would be so incredibly expensive, but it's actually how long it takes to do things.

I'm surprised to hear you say that you make money elsewhere, because looking at your volume of work, I just was like, "I think this is probably her main job." Do you have another money job?

Oh my gosh. Okay, that's something I've been thinking about as something that bums me out. I think so many of us have accidentally created this illusion of thriving as artists. It's almost a function of just posting work. If you have time to make work, that means that you're making work as your job. I don't like that I've created the illusion that I figured out how to make money doing this because I haven't at all.

Do you have a separate full-time job?

So right now, I got a grant that is providing most of my income for a couple of months. But I nanny part-time. For the past couple years [I] have been a teaching artist in public schools. I've also worked at a lamp factory. I've worked at a carousel. Gosh, what else have I done?

Wait, at a carousel?

It is a true sensory nightmare.

Do you have any tips for managing work and life? How do you set boundaries?

I think it's all pretty horrible, to be honest. I just have not made peace with the fact of capitalism at all. I can't keep a job to save my life. I'm really bad. I'm always looking for jobs. I'm always failing at interviews. I'm just constantly trying to figure out what I'm supposed to be doing with myself. Within the ancient forest that I've created, that work I can do. But in terms of work that is valued financially by people, I can't figure that out at all. I think if you have access to a skill that people agree is valuable, go for it.

I think when you're an artist, it's really easy for real life to be your enemy. To feel like, "Oh gosh, if only I could get rid of that real life nonsense and just focus on my art." That might be true, but it's really painful. I kind of wish every artist who shared their work was also sharing how much they hate working at the carousel.

Is there anything else you'd like to add that has been an important lesson for you?

I don't have a soundbite, but I feel like there's something. If making your art feels miserable, it's all right. It's not a sign of anything. You know what I mean? So many of these conversations are like, "Making my art is healing to me." And I get so nervous about that because while true in part, it's also labor. It's labor that we're all squeezing into our lives that sort of haunts us all the time. Maybe for some people the making of it is a little breezier. But there are so many pain points and it is such hard work and it typically feels like you're not giving it enough and that you have to keep feeding some sort of machine that is either external or internal. And I don't know what to do about that, but I think probably people are more miserable than they seem.

Yuliya Tsukerman Recommends:

Children's books with world-building and maps: *Winnie the Pooh* (the Russian language book/cartoon is what's planted in my brain), James Gurney's *Dinotopia*, Tove Jansson's *Moominland* series.

Lynda Barry's Making Comics is the most helpful book about the creative process in the whole wide world

Merlin Sheldrake's Entangled Life

My favorite place in New York City is Governors Island, which feels like a storybook world with its derelict buildings and wild birds and flocks of sheep

My favorite book is The Little Prince by Antoine de Saint-Exupery. I buy a copy in a foreign language anytime I travel, and I now have a small collection of little princes I can't read.

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Vocation

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