

Shantell Martin on finding self in drawing



October 25, 2016 - Shantell Martin is a British visual artist living in Manhattan. She describes her work as "a meditation of lines; a language of characters, creatures, and messages that invite her viewers to share a role in her creative process." She draws at public events and in private, and has collaborated with a variety of people and brands. She's a visiting scholar at MIT Media lab, a professor at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, and a fellow at Columbia's Brown Institute for Media Innovation.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2827 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Writing](#), [Technology](#), [Process](#), [Identity](#), [Independence](#), [Inspiration](#).

You have a freeform approach to drawing. You've said you let the pen guide you, then you go back to fill-in details and flesh things out. Have you ever approached a wall or piece of paper and found the pen not guiding you anywhere? If so, how do you work through that?

There's a balance. Yes, you are drawing spontaneously and intuitively, and it is about trusting the pen and allowing the pen to unfold in the way it wants to; but the flip side of that is that we've also practiced and have a process. So, you have this fine line between practice and process and being spontaneous and intuitive, and there are those moments where you go to draw and nothing happens. Or, you go to draw and your mind is completely blank and the pen is blank and in those moments you build up a practice or a process to deal with those situations.

For me, if I'm drawing live, I can't just stop and walk away and take a break. So you'll see these moments sometimes in my work where it's almost like a squiggly, circling, spirally place where it's like your mind is trying to spin around and it's taking a break and then it spins out of that.

Drawing is like meditation.

Then sometimes, when I'm creating the drawings, I may have no idea what I'm doing, so you'll see these little dashes. Those dashes are almost like when you're talking and you say "um," you know? They're these moments when you fill that space, but that's also a part of the work itself.

Have you ever gone to do one of the live drawings and found yourself unable to do it at all? Or is there always a way with these techniques that you can get yourself through the creative blocks?

You know, typically I like to draw when I'm in a good mood. It's difficult for me to start a drawing when I'm not in a good mood because my work, in its essence, is very free and very light. For that to take place, you also have to feel quite free and quite light.

For me, lines and words are the same thing.

But what I've noticed is as soon as you start drawing, if you are in a bad mood, and you're at an event, you don't want to be like "Sorry guys, I'm going home." What happens, is as soon as you've got that pen down on paper and you're drawing for a couple of minutes, it brings you into a good mood, it brings you into a good space.



Drawing is like meditation. So even if you come to it and you're not in a mood to do it and you come to it and you're not in the right space, as soon as you put that pen down it brings you there and it brings you into that space. Then from there, because it's almost like meditating, you can't even remember why you were angry or not in a good mood beforehand. It puts you in the perfect mood for it.

Your drawing is almost a kind of handwriting—it's seemingly so personal. Have you ever thought of it in that way? As a combination of writing and drawing?

Yeah, a little bit. For me, lines and words are the same thing. We tend to think of these as separate entities, but for me they're the same. I lived in Japan for five years, and living in Japan you see people around you trying to master something. There it's more common to see people devote their life to a particular trade or craft. Living in Japan I remember thinking to myself, "What is one thing that I could master? That will become mine and will become something that I could own and something that is recognizably me?" And I thought, "Well, the most simple place that I could start would be a line. So if I can practice and master a line and make this line look like me, then that is me kind of achieving something in this life."

Being an artist is quite difficult, unless you come from a privileged background. You're struggling from the beginning because you're attempting to make a life and an income from drawing or painting or being creative.

And, you know, fast forward eight years, 10 years, and you can look at some of my lines and be like "Oh, that's Shantell Martin." It could be words or it could be lines, but it's highly recognizable in that sense.

You do have a distinctive style that's easy to identify. Recently, Lane Bryant used some of your design work without asking permission.

Yeah, I've been talking with Lane Bryant. It's all been pulled offline on their part. You know, you see that in certain situations, where someone is learning to draw or they're interested in drawing and they scour the internet and find something that they're inspired by and copy that until they finally find their own thing. That's one thing. But when you see bigger companies that do that, maybe they have young designers or even big designers that scour things and are inspired by them and then take them and use them... to be honest with you, it doesn't feel so good because you know it's so easy for people to call you or to email you or to ask you.

Also, being an artist is quite difficult, unless you come from a privileged background. You're struggling from the beginning because you're attempting to make a life and an income from drawing or painting or being creative, and it's not the easiest thing to do. A lot of artists, like myself, have struggled for many years to get where we are. So, to then see our work used, and to understand that the use of that work means it's furthering artists not being supported and the artist not being paid, doesn't feel good at all.



Shantell Martin, 25 Mercer, by Roy Rochlin

Artists that live in these big cities have to pay a lot of rent—we have to pay for studios, we have to pay for a lot of things, and we need that support. We need that support from people, we need that support from big companies, we need that support from collectors. So, it's disappointing.

My response to [the gallery system] was, "Well, if you're taking me out of the equation, I'll take you out of the equation, and then everything is my canvas."

And there's no real system in place. It just takes someone inside to plagiarize, or copy, or think it's okay. And in a lot of kinds of industry, there is a system in place, you know, literature and these kinds of things, there is a system in place to make sure that that stuff happens. But what we are seeing now is a result of there being no system in place within these companies for them to double check and make sure that A came from the legitimate channel, and B wasn't too inspired from someone.

What do you think it is about your work that lends itself to being on different surfaces and paper as well as clothing, among other things. There's something about it that seems highly transferable to a variety of objects.

I've always strived to be outside of the box. That's with regard to categories that people put me in personally, as well as where my work goes. I've had the tagline for many years: "drawing on everything." That was a reaction to moving from Japan to New York and realizing galleries wanted nothing to do with me because they hadn't heard of me. So my response to that was, "Well, if you're taking me out of the equation, I'll take you out of the equation, and then everything is my canvas. I don't need your gallery walls, I'll draw on cars or I'll draw on people or I'll draw on shirts and I'll draw on shoes and I'll use what I have access to and I'll do that and I'll do that and I'll do that and then that access will lead to visibility." And visibility leads to people seeing it and eventually caring about it.

So I think just through the method of me drawing on everything over the last few years, and not wanting to put myself in a box, leads to a body of work that also wants to do the same. It wants to be translated onto walls and shirts and cars. And also, because primarily, most of that work is black and white, it lends itself also to being applied to different mediums.

Has this approach been freeing? You've had gallery shows and have shown work and that kind of setting, but you've generally existed outside of gallery culture.

You know, it's not a choice. It's not like you're trying to exist outside of that world. It's more like you are an artist, this is what you do, this is what you have to do, this is what you naturally do. And you're going to do that in any way that you can. So what you end up doing is if certain doors are closed to you, you find other ways of making work and sharing work and applying that work. All you're trying to do is do what you naturally want to do and you're naturally inclined to do, which is make art and share it.

What's been the difference for you between moving from Japan and moving to New York? How has New York, kind of shifted the work itself?

You know, like I was saying, when I was living in Japan I was a VJ, so the work was a lot more in clubs to music. Most of it was digital. Most of it was very temporary. And then I moved to New York in early 2009 where that really wasn't happening. And then also I moved to a city where no one knew me so no one cared about me. So I found myself starting all over again and, like I said, because of not being able to work with galleries at that time, not having the freedom of already have built up a fan club here.

The only way you can create your own opportunities is by using what you have access to.

I completely struggled, and the idea evolved because it took me a long time to realize, but I was like well, what can I do here? Because everything I did in Japan doesn't exist here, and it comes back to that idea of being resourceful. And not waiting for opportunities, creating your own opportunities, and the only way you can create your own opportunities is by using what you have access to.

And for me, I had access to markers, you know? Markers are relatively unaffordable, you can borrow them from people. And then at the time I didn't have a studio, and so it was like well what can I draw on? How am I going to be able to satisfy this need of wanting to create? And its like, well I'm going to use whatever I have around me. That was drawing on people, that was drawing on myself, eventually in 2012 that was drawing on my bedroom wall that ended up being on the cover of *New York Times* in the Home and Garden section there.



Shantell Martin, "Come Home," by Paul Barbera

So what New York did, in a funny way, was make me de-evolve and leave the digital world behind and go back to drawing and go back to this very simple way of pen and surface.

In New York there's so much graffiti. Do you think of any overlap with what you do and graffiti culture?

Not really. Before I went to Japan I lived in London and I did graffiti there—I tagged. I went out at night and in the early morning, and I wrote on walls and whatever I could get onto. But that was a moment in my life where I was doing graffiti because I didn't like London. And I felt repressed in London. You know, you're from a working class background, you feel very restricted and un-included in many things and I felt like that was a way of me getting back at London, or something. My tag then was called "hangman." So I was getting back at London.

Then I moved to Japan and Japan, of course, had never done anything wrong to me, so I went to touring because I didn't feel like I had the right to go and tag the walls and get that frustration out in that way. By the time I moved to New York, I had gone from tagging in London to drawing in Japan and then going to New York which, you know, is a city that has a huge graffiti culture and history. But I wasn't on the streets anymore, I wasn't on the walls anymore, I was more concerned, personally, about the meaning of my work and the analytics behind my work. And the question of what uniqueness means and figuring out ways of trying to answer that.

Good Shantell Martin background reading:

[Elle Canada piece](#)

[GeGeGe no Kitarô](#)

[Monkey \(Zodiac\)](#)

[Thamesmead](#)

[Stream of consciousness](#)

So I guess my work became more performative and the questioning behind it became more heady, versus just trying to get it out and on the street. But saying that, for maybe a year, I repasted and put up my "Who are you? You are you. Are you?" questions on the street in London and in New York. Which is maybe something I'll do in the future, but as more of an appropriate evolution than going out and drawing again on the streets.

So you see your works are getting, as you go on getting more cerebral as you're saying kind of universes like in anger or sort of getting back to something more, just developing the process of more about the drawing itself? Versus tagging a city or tagging a space or whatever, and more about focusing on the development of the art itself?

Yeah, you know I'm not saying that you can't be cerebral to graffiti or being out on the street, but for me I spend a lot of time with my lines, I've spent a lot of time with my drawings and as a very questioning intuitive person, I want to know what does it mean? You know, if I create a drawing, what is this line? And why is it uniquely me? And if I create a drawing, how fast am I creating that drawing and how long is that line and is there a relationship between that line and other lines I'm drawing? I want to understand more of the analytics of my drawing because I feel like that will help me understand more about myself. Because its not essentially about the drawing, its about the self within the drawing.

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Very recently I started to make music and started to tell stories. And I started to notice, "Oh wow, there's patterns within the music that I create." And there's patterns within these spontaneous stories that I'm telling and there's these patterns or kind of reaffirming things that are also within my drawings and so its not really about the medium, its about the self and the self within that.

Very recently I started to collaborate with a couple of PHD students at MIT focused on brain and cognitive sciences, so BCS, and we're asking this or that question of what is uniqueness. We're using my drawings and certain kind of ideas through my drawing to begin to answer this question.

Sarah Schwettmann, my BCS collaborator, and I are looking at this question from a drawing perspective. But as it goes on, we're bringing in different aspects. At a show we're doing around it, we're going to allow the audience to have input because we also have questions of this idea of being unique has to compare you to the population. We want to start experimenting, or gaining information from the audience themselves. We'll be presenting it as a concept and as a question.

Note: As of publication, Martin is still in talks with Lane Bryant regarding their use of her art without permission.

Name

Shantell Martin

Vocation

Artist, Storyteller, Collaborator, Musician

Fact

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Photo: Catalina Kulczar