

On not overcomplicating your process



Visual artist Nadya Isabella discusses recreating and processing memories, working quickly and the importance of humor.

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As told to Lauren Spear, 1979 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#).

Your work seesaws between drawing from the personal and the imagined. To me, on both ends of the spectrum, you capture the uncapturable and have the ability to prolong the life of things that are fleeting. You once said "The birthday cake usually only lasts as long as the birthday song" and that's why you wanted to paint it. Can you talk about this desire?

I've just always loved birthday cakes and staring at them. When I do work from photographs, I use pictures that were taken really quickly. I look back to what I have and when I see something that is special to me I paint it as a way to materialize it and re-experience that specific moment. It's a way of processing the happenings in my life through my practice.

I have one painting called *Dynamism of a Broom*, which is based off of *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash* by Giacomo Balla. I love making parody paintings, and that was one of them. At the time, I was cutting a lot of hair collaboratively with my friend Olga Abeleva and we had to sweep a lot of hair because of it. Because of this I thought painting a broom in motion would be a great idea.



Baby's Cake, 2021, oil on canvas 12 x 9 inches



Dynamism of a Broom, 2020, oil on canvas, 12 x 16 inches

I feel like so many of your paintings have a humorous tone to them. There's a painting that you did called *Home* that to me, is reminiscent of Picasso's Blue period. At first glance, the figure you have depicted seems very morose but when you see the dog behind the wine glass, everything changes. What role does comedy play in your practice and your work?

I love seeing funny paintings. I often approach painting by not taking myself too seriously with it. I make sure that I'm content with how it looks, but I like when my painting has a lightness to it. I think humor has this immediacy, which also creates this timeline for me of wanting to finish it as quickly as I can before the joke gets old in my head. I'm attracted to humor and the way it brings people into my world and that is why I paint it.



Home, 2020, oil on canvas, 36 x 24 inches

Do you think photos taken on a phone are elevated once you commit them to canvas?

I feel like in the past, when you take photos you would develop them. It's kind of something you don't really do anymore. I would love to, but I just haven't printed photos to actually have a photo album. Sometimes I feel like

painting is me trying to recreate that.

When I paint people, who are almost all the time one of my friends, I draw from my camera roll. Because of how inconspicuous a phone is nowadays I'm able to capture them in a relaxed state. They're not really thinking about the photo being taken. They're not posing and I think that this reveals their character in some way.

Your use of perspective helps me as a viewer enter into your world. In your painting *Donut*, it feels like you're sitting across from the person that's blowing up the floaty. Is that something that you've orchestrated or are intentional about?

It is not always intentional but I do think about it. When the image source is from my phone it inadvertently has a very specific point of view, which is mine. In certain paintings where the subject is of a friend of mine, the viewer is invited to be in that position that I was in.



Donut, 2021, oil on canvas, 16 x 16 inches

Some of your paintings feel so mysterious to me. In *Smoke Break*, for instance, I feel like your title gives me a hint at the story, but doesn't give everything away. What is your process like for choosing a title?

I think that my titles are all really straightforward to me. Often I don't really title them until I have to for an exhibition. I think that the image itself already says what the title is. When I start a painting, in my head I'm thinking, "I'm painting flowers. I'm painting this person. I'm painting my hand." My line of thought for titling paintings is a continuation of this directness. In this sense , my titles are descriptions of what they are.



Smoke Break, 2021, oil on canvas, 12 x 9 inches

In your work, you have dedicated a number of your paintings to a character called Todetta. Where did she come from? Do you see any of yourself in that character?

Todetta started when I followed this Instagram page a few years ago called [@lowrespets](#) and there was this photo that featured a toad at the bottom of the lake reaching out for a hug. It was a really weird freaky image and it did not look good in any way but as I kept staring at it, I was like, "Aw, it's kind of cute. It's so ugly, it wants a hug." I just really wanted to paint it and was like, "What if I added lashes and lipstick and blush," as a split second decision near the end when I was finishing the painting. Which I did end up doing. I thought it worked perfectly. After that I kept on having ideas of what scenarios to paint her in next and that's how she evolved into a recurring character in my practice.



Toadetta, 2019, 12 x 16 inches



On Repeat, 2020, oil on canvas, 48 x 36 inches

I feel like toads are commonly anthropomorphized figures and are really easy as a form to paint. I like working with her because she's acting out these different scenarios that are almost movie-like or just really fun. The idea comes to me in spurts where I have thoughts like "Oh, I think it'd be really cool to paint a dramatic car scene" and it would be perfect to have Toadetta star in it instead. Since the toad isn't really anyone specific, it also becomes a possible entry point for people to project themselves into the scene if they relate to this glam femme toad character.

Do you relate to her at all?

I wish I was her! For the car painting which is titled *Summer Presto*, I had just gotten back from LA and thought "I wish I knew how to drive and also I wish I was driving a convertible really fast," which was the inspiration to paint Toadetta in a car.



*Summer Presto**, *2022, oil on canvas, 64 x 48 inches

I love that painting. In a talk, you said that the music that's featured in that piece is by Vivaldi. Is that an actual score that you can play along to?

I painted it because I was really obsessed with that song. It's so high drama! At one point I was like, "Well, this would be really crazy to drive fast to." I wanted to insert it. I thought it would be cool if someone could read the music score and recognize it.

What are you working on right now?

There's this painting that I started, but I stopped working on it for a month because I had to finish this other painting. I wanted to paint something where it feels as if you were laying down on a field of flowers and you're looking up at the sun in the sky. I'm making a painting of that right now. It's in a good place right now, but I'm trying to add a bunch of bugs to it. I love painting bugs, they can be so pretty.

Do you take breaks from paintings often?

Most of the time, I would say I paint really fast. I think that I have a short attention span. If I work on it for too long, I feel like the feeling of me wanting to paint it and connect to the image changes. I try to paint things quickly before I'm bored of it. I find it really hard to create a whole body of work at the same time. I make something and then it's done, then I wait until something else comes up. It's never really planned. So to answer the question, when I'm working on a painting I don't really take breaks that much. But I do take breaks that last weeks when it feels necessary.

Is there anything that you wouldn't paint?

I think that I would paint anything that I have a personal connection to. If the right time comes for me to paint something I've never painted, then I will paint it. Which I guess means that I wouldn't paint things that I don't feel any personal connection to.

What is the significance of the installation to you? Do your paintings feel different to you in your studio than as opposed to in a gallery setting?

When it leaves the studio and enters a gallery space or is hung somewhere else, it's given the space to be looked at. It becomes less crunched in with the other paintings that I'm working on and it makes me see it in a different light. Literally and figuratively, my studio lighting isn't the best. For instance, I remember I had this large painting that I didn't like anymore and struggled to finish it. But my friend really liked it, so I gave it to them. They hung it in their home above their fireplace and it actually looked really good there. I stopped disliking the painting. Sometimes when I come back to it after some time away I'd think, "Oh, it's not as bad as I thought it was."

With install, it's nice to see how each work interacts with another in an intentional way. When they are placed in proximity with each other it creates conversations with another. How I create the order of things is also a way of narrating my work. I also take into consideration how the paintings interact with the space itself. If I construct it in a way where the viewer can't see everything at once, an element of reveal is introduced. For instance, if there's a really small painting at the end of the room, the viewer has to move closer in order to see what it actually is. I like how thinking about the way a viewer will navigate the space affects the way that a work will be experienced. I find installation really fun. It's actually one of my favorite things to do—to play with the space and see how the paintings take up space.

In the gallery setting, do you see your own evolution?

Because a lot of them are based on my personal photo collection, I feel like every time I see a painting, I'm kind of like, "I remember when I made this. I made this when this happened." With my paintings, I can kind of pinpoint where I was in my life when I painted it. That in itself is seeing an evolution because time has passed.

Nadya Isabella Recommends:

Eating pho

A good couch

Watching horror movies in theaters

House slippers

Long walks

Name

Nadya Isabella

Vocation

visual artist

□

Lauren Spear