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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2334 words.

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On finding the right vehicle

Artist and filmmaker Narcissister discusses how by putting on a mask she was finally able to be seen

You're a classically trained dancer. For a lot of dancers I've spoken to, the path after you finish school involves either auditioning to appear in other people's projects, or creating your own work to appear in. How did your path lead to creating Narcissister?

I moved to New York City the day after I graduated from college. I went to Brown. I got a scholarship to City Dance at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center. I studied there for about a year and a half, and then I started dancing professionally. I loved dancing so much, but what I learned very quickly is that although I was a very gifted dancer, I didn't have that cutthroat competitive spirit that one really needs to survive in that world. I just enjoyed movement, moving my body to music.

Something that would happen to me so often, is that I would close my eyes during class or during rehearsal when I was performing with smaller companies, and the choreographers would always say, "Open your eyes! Project!" There's this thing about dancers, especially in the Ailey company, about using your face to emote and project to the audience. I just wanted to go internally and feel that. So I feel that that was one of the early stirrings of Narcissister—it was about me wanting to be a dancer, wanting to still move my body to music, but also wanting to do it in a way that preserved my private experience, where I could close my eyes if I wanted to. Wearing this mask certainly facilitates that.

So I stopped dancing. I wasn't competitive enough. I started getting injuries. I had started working as a commercial artist. I already had a visual art practice that I've had since I was a child, and I also did a lot of art when I was at Brown. The commercial artwork led eventually to Narcissister. One of my clients was Agent Provocateur, and I was the window display designer there. The women who worked there were into the rockabilly scene, and started inviting me to come to their burlesque shows.

I remember going to shows and seeing The World Famous BOB and other people performing burlesque. I wasn't interested in burlesque so much, it didn't feel radical or political enough for me. I was, however, into this idea of just creating these short performance works set to pop songs. At a certain point I realized I had everything that I needed to do my own work. I had dance training. I had these ideas around visual art and around the politics of race, and the body, and gender, so I could incorporate all of that into my own project.

Around that time I had this commercial art practice building vignettes, doing set styling, working with mannequins. So I realized I had everything, all the materials I needed, to start my own performance art/burlesque project. So I followed the burlesque model. I picked a name. I performed pop songs, but in other ways. Weirder. I moved on very quickly from the burlesque scene. The mask that I wear also emerged directly from this period and the commercial artwork I was doing. The mask itself is a repurposed wig form. When I was working as a window display designer, I saw these objects all the time in the display rooms and they were holding the mannequin's wigs. They were designed by a female entrepreneur in Los Angeles and the company that made them was very old. And because the objects were old, the plastic fronts were starting to pop off of the styrofoam back that actually held the wig. I just saw them as masks, so that's how I found this face. It was through my window display where I put my commercial artwork.

There are obviously a ton of performance artists who rely on the idea of a persona or character to function as their mouthpiece and way of communicating to the world. How did you arrive at Narcissister as the vehicle for your ideas? And do you remember when it first started to feel like Narcissister had taken off, that she had developed a life of her own?

I can't think of a specific moment, but again, I had been working on my visual artwork for quite some time, and was supporting myself by doing commercial art. It was rough. I was getting frustrated and discouraged by how little attention I was getting for my visual artwork. It was almost as if I had to stop performing as myself, as Isabelle, to make something happen. I was doing this identity work, doing self-portraiture, dressing up as Isabelle, and doing these drawings. They were okay, and I was getting some opportunities as an artist, but not at all what I was hoping for and envisioning.

It was only when I just adopted this whole other character and another name, and extended my practice beyond this idea that, "oh, I'm just a visual artist"—meaning that I take photos or I do drawings—that things made sense. I realized, "Wait a minute, I have this dance background. I know how to build sets." When I brought everything to bear in this one project, and again, changed the face and the name of it,

that is when it started to happen. I had to literally step outside of myself in order to express myself. And after that everything for Narcissister started clicking immediately. I can do things, express things, as Narcissister that I would never be able to on my own, without the mask. It really was sort of the perfect vehicle. I started getting opportunities and interest almost immediately.

If you live in New York you can almost take it for granted that, as an artist, you can find these pockets that can serve as incubators for your work. There are plenty of places where you can just get on stage and do something weird and people will watch it, giving you a space to work out whatever it is you're trying to do. What were the best resources for you in that sense? You've performed in almost every conceivable kind of space—from nightclubs and bars to galleries and theaters and museums—what were the best places for you to work out what you were trying to say in front of an audience?

I mean hands down, the best resource for me has been The Box, which is a club I work in here in NYC. I started performing there within months of starting the Narcissister project. The Box show is five nights a week. It really was my bootcamp for becoming a performance artist. The shows are so late, and there's so many of them. It really was an opportunity to hone my craft, so to speak, and just get into the skin of this character in Narcissister.

They always want something new there, so I was forced to be prolific. It was essentially an opportunity to workshop my material in front of an audience. So I feel like The Box has been the greatest supporter of my work. Performing in nightlife is pretty wonderful, just because of the flexibility that one has to have to be walking into different performance environments, different scenarios, in front of different audiences. You learn to be adaptable, to think on your feet, and you can't be self-conscious. I think just having an array of performance opportunities was the thing that really helped me get this whole thing going and to feel comfortable doing it.

You often get described as a performance artist, but your work also encompasses a lot of different things, from puppetry to sound to film. Do you have a regular studio practice? Is that where things usually begin?

Yes, I have a studio. I used to work from home. I used to think that the whole dream was the live/work situation, but I realized that it's so hard for me to work efficiently at home. So when I started getting into studio programs it was such a gift, because I started to realize, "Oh, having a separate space that's dedicated just to these creative pursuits is really the answer!" I would love to hear from anyone who feels that live/work is really productive and a happy situation because I just don't know how you do it. When I worked from home I would routinely still be in my pajamas at 10:00 pm at night.

Having a studio space is wonderful. It's where I rehearse. It's where I sew my costumes. I still use the same '70s-era sewing machine that was my mother's when I'm sewing my costumes. I had to learn that it's okay to go to my studio literally to just sit there. Sometimes I need to go to the space and just be there. I don't know what that is, but some people call it just being present for their muse, or feeding the muse. But sometimes I just go there, and I sit and I eat my lunch. I'll maybe make a few performance notes. But I learned it was important to take away that pressure that my time there has to always be super productive. Sometimes just being there is helpful.

Over the years you've received a lot of institutional support from different arts organizations and museums. Did it feel like it took a long time to be recognized in that world, or for people to understand what you were doing in a fine art context?

To some extent I feel I've gotten some great institutional support. Creative Capital are an incredible organization and they are basically the reason why I was able to make my film. I've gotten into some great artist colonies, like MacDowell and Yaddo. I did the Whitney Independent Study Program. I mean to some extent I've gotten a lot of institutional support, and to a great extent I absolutely haven't had institutional support. That is something that I struggle with and I feel I have to... to be honest, I have to look at my own issues and tendencies around my work and my own feelings of competitiveness and insecurity.

Like, I would have loved to have been in the Whitney Biennial and I have some peers who were in it and they said, "You should have been in this. Why weren't you in it?" And I'd think, "I wonder why I wasn't?" I would have loved presented a performance at MoMA or at MoMA PS1. Those are all local institutions and I've been doing this project for so long, and I have gotten a certain amount of press, and again, notoriety and recognition in some ways...but why not these others?

I realized that I can't continue to wait for those curators to come to me to find out what I'm doing. That I have to be adult enough—even if it pisses me off that they haven't reached out to me and it doesn't make sense that they haven't—I have to be adult enough to write to them. I have to put my feelings aside and be able to say, "I don't think you're aware of what I'm working on these days. I would love to show you what I have that's new. I would love to show you this film that I made." I realized that it's on me at this point to make those contacts happen.

You recently premiered your first film at Sundance. What was the genesis for turning your performance work into a feature film?

I started to get commissions to make evening-length shows. The first one was at The Kitchen. Then I was invited to make an even more elaborate show of that work that I presented at Abrons Art Center. I did a Kickstarter campaign around that show, which was really helpful in making the show possible. Then, from Abrons, I had another commission to make a new evening-length work, and that was the original "Organ

Player" piece. That work was made in what ended up being the last six months of my mother's life.

At the time I wasn't thinking that the piece was about me processing my relationship with her, or my grief over her illness. Then, after she died, my grief over her death. After I finished the show I put it all back in storage and I took some time to reflect on it. I just knew that there was something about the time period in which I made that work, that made it actually an especially fertile piece. I wrote the Creative Capital application for the award grant based on that idea.

My idea was to remount this evening-length show. I wanted to capture it on film, and I wanted to use it as a springboard for processing basically the story of my family, and how my family impacted me. I wanted to focus in particular on how my relationship with mother impacted me, and how it has informed my work as Narcissister. I got the award grant from Creative Capital—I received \$50,000 from them—and I started making the film. Otherwise, I don't know exactly how I would have done it. Through Creative Capital I met the programmers at Sundance and when I was ready, when I was almost done with the film, I emailed them. Then I was lucky enough to get into Sundance. I'm working now with a playwright on a commission that will hopefully premiere in late 2018 or early 2019, so my creative energies are about to go towards that work, but my hope is that the film will be able to travel around to many festivals and have a whole life of its own. Narcissister never rests. She just keeps moving.

Essential Narcissister

The Puppet

Changes

Mannequin

Winter/Spring Collection

Upside Down

Name

Narcissister

Vocation

Artist, Performer, Filmmaker

Fact



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