

On the discipline and patience it takes to make creative work



Musician and artist Lido Pimienta on the power of being organized, art as resistance, adapting her live show to a virtual world, and why she needs to keep her house clean.

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As told to Max Mertens, 3110 words.

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What's it like releasing an album you'd been working on for several years?

There's a different range of emotions. Sometimes I don't even think about it because I am someone who is always working on the next thing. I'm writing new songs already for my next one, and I'm kind of letting go of the album. But it's also an emotional thing because it's a lot of work, it's a lot of effort, it's a lot of community effort, a lot of collaborators, a lot of things in my life that had to happen for me. I'm just thinking about life right now and trying to accept what's going on, and accept that I can't be on tour, everything is shifting and I just need to be able to adapt, because there's no other way right now. I don't want to get frustrated, it's only going to lead to a dead end. I'm always working, I'm always making art, I'm always creating. That's what's happening right now. Creativity never stops for me.

The album was done around seven months ago. In the middle of the recording, I went to Colombia to shoot the videos because something in me told me, "Don't wait until your album is out and then go film the videos, just have everything done or as much as you can done." It's funny because there's so much planning behind all of that goes behind music. I just know that when I have an idea, and I know that it's a good idea, it needs to happen. I just have to do it, and then everything will fall into place. You just have to be organized about the way that you do it.

You've been doing livestreams lately. I've seen you on [Instagram Live](#) painting and creating art. What are some of the challenges you've faced adapting to these different mediums?

I don't mind showing a quick time-lapse, or even doing a Live where you can just see me or my hands or a close-up of what I'm working on painting, but it's really strange. For me, it's very strange to go from a live show to a virtual show. I'm still trying to figure it out. A lot of people feel very comfortable with putting themselves out there in the comfort of their own home, but because I like to have context and put things out in a beautiful, well-directed way, it's very hard, like "How am I going to make my living room nice?" I don't want to show my life, I don't want to share my chair or my desk, I just want to put my art out there. So I'm working on it.

I know you've been playing some of these new songs live for awhile, how do you choose what songs you keep and cut?

You gotta try them out to see if people like it. There's actually two songs that didn't make it to the record. The two songs that didn't make it, and "Nada," were written after I gave birth. When I came back to Toronto, Prince Nifty, who worked on the last stages of the album with me on the production side, [helped me build] a

studio in my house, and we worked on the album together and invited all the musicians. All of that stuff happened postpartum, so that was out of control. I was on tour through all my pregnancy and then I gave birth to the baby, and then have to give birth to this album, because it took like nine months to put it all together.

So now I'm thinking about those songs that didn't make it to the album and actually they belong in the new stuff that I'm writing now. This is a constant conversation that I have with myself—what makes sense, and giving things time to mature and work. It's a really good thing to perform a song live because that's the real, absolute test, when you're presenting these songs to an audience and seeing how they react to it.

You're very hands-on when it comes to the accompanying visuals, you're directing the music videos, painting the vinyl jackets, designing other merch. How do you keep these different components organized?

First of all you have to make sure your house is very clean. I need to clean the entire place so that I can be inspired to create something new. If there's clutter, I cannot function, it stresses me out. I definitely have a very handy calendar. All of our crew has access to it, and my management makes sure I know when things are happening. Every day is slightly different, but you have to be organized. When you have a discipline like mine, or there's a lot of things happening at the same time, you really have to be organized. You also have to work with people that are reliable, people that communicate clearly their needs, people that respect you. I have a small but mighty crew of people I trust, and because of that, I'm able to make all the ideas that I want happen.

What's your earliest music memory?

The earliest musical memory that I have was when I was about five years old, there was a blackout in my city of Barranquilla, and whenever there was a blackout, all the neighbors from the apartment complex would come to our apartment. Our apartment was the cool one with the cool parents because my dad was a huge artist lover; he wasn't an artist himself, but he was definitely eccentric. And he would have me and my sister sing ABBA songs to the neighbors. We were on-top of a little stool so that everyone could see me, because I was so tiny, and we were singing "Dancing Queen."

What did your parents do? Do you come from an artistic family?

Yes. My mother's side is Indigenous from the Wayuu territory of Colombia. It's a family of very skilled weavers, and that runs through my veins. Singing and dancing and everything is more on my dad's side. On my mixed side, there's a lot of troubadours and a lot of singers and accordion players and percussion players It's very artistic, folkloric, very traditional. I'm really the only one who's doing this weird stuff.

Has it become easier over the years to explain to them what you do after you won the Polaris Prize and all the success that you've had since?

There's no explaining, I was a precocious kid, always painting, always drawing, very eccentric. I never slept on my bed, I always slept in the living room. When I would visit my grandmother I would just sit down and weave with her while my cousins were playing at the beach. My interests were different.

The evolution of my project, it's something they don't really understand, it's like "Oh you're singing, that's so cute!," "That's so nice," "Oh, girl, you look good in that video," but that's as far as it goes. My family, they're more concerned with me owning land and taking care of our ancestry, and being a mom. That's what we talk about, taking care of the kids and being happy. If you were to interview my grandmother she'd be like "Um yeah, she's talented, I'm talented so, of course, she's talented."

Motherhood is a huge theme on this record. What's been the biggest lesson that you've learned from your children, not just about making art, but also about celebrating and appreciating art?

Patience. Anything that's the best that comes out of me is because I put a lot of effort and time into it. When I make art, there's a big part of my brain—or a big part of the extension of my thoughts all the way through my

hand of what gets put on a piece of paper or whatever surface—that's stream of consciousness and practice. There's a discipline that comes out of repetition and patience. You really have to have patience and then things will make sense. If you just do something, and you don't put a lot of effort into it, then you're going to have to justify it. And, to me, that's the worst thing for the artist, to have to justify something.

When you see a work of art, when you hear any composition, you have to feel something. You don't necessarily have to think the same thing the artist was thinking about when they were making the work, but you definitely have to think something that relates to the feeling that the artist had when they were making the work. That's where my visual arts practice comes into play when I do the music.

In the past, you've performed at different cultural spaces like the MOCA in Toronto and the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit. Why is it important for you to perform in these non-traditional venues and do you approach playing these shows any differently than say a festival or a bar?

In an ideal world all of these *Colombia* tours would happen either at a theatre or an art venue. The work that I do is very much a continuation of all of the art disciplines that I have, sometimes it's hard to come up with a show that's as visually compelling and interesting as the music, so that's a battle that I have to fight with myself. For example, for the *Miss Colombia* show, I wanted it to be a drag show meets theatre, but how am I going to do that at some bar? I had to get creative so that's kind of where I'm at now with that. I love art venues, I can make the stage what I want. When you go to a regular venue or a regular festival, you are limited to whatever conditions they give you. I'm trying to be smart about how to keep true to my aesthetic for the shows without sacrificing my idea fully.

Was there a concert or art show that you attended which was really formative to you in terms of thinking about how you approach performing live?

For music shows, of course the mother of all the freaks of the world is Björk. I've seen three or four of her shows from different eras—those shows gave me an education in arranging music so that it stays true to who you are in the present. I see a lot of music. It's very hard to pick one [show], especially the live shows in Colombia for Afro-Colombian music, those shows are mind-blowing. More than anything I've ever seen at any mainstream festival, going to Colombia and going to Afro-Colombian dance anything, those shows are beyond.

You frequently use social media to talk about political issues that are important to you, whether it be the Wet'suwet'en solidarity protests or what's happening in Colombia right now with water rights. How do you think people can continue to organize and protest right now when we aren't able to physically gather?

Send money to the people directly. Give them the support. Donate to all these organizations so that they can afford the lawyers. That's where the money goes. It's in legal fees because most of these issues that we deal with is stuff that's handled at court, and if you don't have a good lawyer, you're going to lose. I can use social media all that I want and I can share pictures and things all that I want, and that's fine, but if we can we should give them the money so they can continue to operate.

People wrongfully will call me an activist, but I don't think I'm an activist. I am a citizen of two different countries that have a lot of different issues, and I hurt for the people in both countries. I am a guest in Canada, and I need to respect the people that this country was built upon, on their pain, on their disappearances, on their murder, on their violations to their rights. I need to support them. They're doing all the marching and they're doing all the suffering—my resistance is through my music.

And, if I'm getting money and have any kind of advantage through my platforms, then that's what I'm going to do. If I can't take a plane and go there and march, I can possibly click some buttons and send money so they can pay for legal fees.

Was there a particular moment when you realized you were starting to have a bigger platform to do things like that?

When Black Lives Matter took over the police station a few years ago here in Toronto, I went to the march with my son, and I kept looking at the signs that people were making. People were writing short words like "strike," S-T-R-I and then the K and the E below it on a big piece of Bristol board, like "How did you not fit the whole word in?"

This is a problem with marches, we need to up the game, we need to up the game on our propaganda. I was like, "You know what, I have all this material, let me go down and make an activity with the kids, and make more of this." I made all these illustrations and all these quotes and I gave them to people, then all this press took photos of it and were publishing the work and they called it "The art of Black Lives Matter," which to me was silly. I don't represent anything, I don't belong to any institution, I represent myself.

But then I understood: "Oh okay, I don't know if it's because of me or because of the art, but I am my art so I need to keep making it." That was a big moment for me, just a couple of posters and it's giving them more attention. Protestors they have a bad rep. I believe in protest with whatever means necessary, but I also know art is very effective, so that's what I did.

What other tools and texts do you use to teach your children about activism and protest?

I use myself as an example. The trips that we take to Colombia when they meet their cousins who live in the desert and don't have access to water. They know from life, selflessness is very important. My son, he's not a kid that cares about brands or stuff like that, he appreciates art and if he asks me for anything it always has to do with him being able to create something. He understands that art has more longevity than a t-shirt or some crap that you can buy at the store. I talk to them about privilege and sharing, and being there for people in a meaningful way.

They know my life story. I come from a very difficult, complicated place. I'm from a very difficult, complicated family. So they understand it.

I haven't seen my son for three and a half weeks because he's isolating with my mom in London. We made this pact that when he's there, he's only going to speak Spanish to his grandmother, because it's important that he's able to go to Colombia by himself and communicate with his family there because he's Colombian, too. The baby, she's too young, she's not even two years old, so everything belongs to her and she's the queen of the world, but soon we have to talk to her about life. A movie we love in this house is Matilda. I showed it to my son when he was about four, talking to him about how girls are really smart, and he's like "Yeah, girls are more smart than boys." And I'm like, "Yes." Just stuff like that. We're big on Roald Dahl over here.

What else do you do to avoid creative and physical burnout?

I don't know, clean the house. I'm a creature that is very unique, I don't like to sleep, I don't like to not do anything. I really take joy in working. But the breaks that I take are for my kids, so to relax I just sit down and watch any Studio Ghibli, any Studio Ghibli documentary, anything [Hayao Miyazaki]. Because my daughter's been hearing the soundtracks to all the Studio Ghibli films, she has an affinity to Japanese, so we sit down and just play the A-B-C songs and the animal songs and the days of the week in Japanese. That's relaxing to me and then I go back to work. After I gave birth, I think I took a month off and I was dying, I was like "This is too boring."

What do you think musicians can take away from this pandemic?

I think that musicians and artists at large should appreciate the time we have now to not take up all the space. There's something so beautiful about just working in silence, and not constantly posting and publishing and talking about what you're doing. This need to be out there all the time really is a sickness of our generation. It's almost like we can't believe that we have the internet yet, and we need to get good at it, and we really need to put ourselves out there all the time. I feel like half of the people are taking it really well and then the other half of our group are just losing their minds. It's kicking a habit of constantly displaying and putting your life out there. People just want to show others how exciting their lives and how social they are. In

an ideal world we would just appreciate being home and not consuming crap, and we'd be consuming beautiful art and beautiful culture.

Lido Pimienta Recommends:

I've been into two things when I'm not making my stuff. The first one being this novel by Katherine Dunn called Geek Love. I'm going through a little bit of an obsession with clowns because I'm doing research for this storyboard for a music video that I'm working on.

I'm also watching, mainly hearing, the soundtrack for the movie Valerie and Her Week of Wonders, which is a movie from 1970 created in the peak of Czech film. It's beautiful visually and the soundtrack just hits me so hard because it's the music that I want to make.

Name

Lido Pimienta

Vocation

Musician and visual artist

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Daniella Murillo