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March 1, 2022 -

As told to Evan Nicole Brown, 2674 words.

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On finding freedom in experimentation

Musician and multidisciplinary artist Kilo Kish on juggling multiple projects, avoiding boxes, redefining perfection, the importance of honesty, and why pushing yourself creatively is scary but worth it.

I want to ask about your process and how you navigate an assortment of projects and passions. You're able to move fluidly through different artistic mediums—music, design, performance, film, et cetera.

For me, it feels stressful internally. I'm glad that on the outside it looks like it's all coming together, and I'm able to do these things semi-seamlessly. But I just wake up in the morning and try to stay as organized as possible.

I like to work in chunks. Usually, if I'm working on a music project, a music project would entail me doing all of the creative, overseeing merch, doing music videos, and obviously the musical part, like conceptualizing and recording music. And then I think: What is the conceptual idea for the project, and how do I want that to flow down through costuming and what I look like, and what the live shows are? So it's a lot to think about, but I tend to try to just do it one step at a time.

Because there are so many projects within me specifically and I have that perfectionist personality type where I just want it to be perfect the first go round, I don't want to do [something] unless it's going to be exactly what I first saw in my mind when I began the project.

But now, the older I get, the more I'm learning that completion is perfection. It's art. At the end of the day, it's a take, it's a moment in time. There's really not a chance for it to not be perfect. After that, you're doing different chances over and over and over again. So I try to think about that now when I record. I try to think about that now when I design, and make it less about perfection and cleanness, and more about moments.

How do you prioritize your ideas? Since you have so many, and they all showcase different facets of your creativity, do you have criteria for choosing what deserves your time, your money, your attention, and your effort in a particular order?

It's a hard thing to do. I think I prioritize what's already moving and working, but I guess the older I get the more autonomous I am and in control of what I want to do at any given moment and my ability to complete projects. I'm not really relying on anybody to say when or how or what needs to be done. I'm the one that's pushing that narrative.

I prioritize music-related projects as number one, because I think that's the way that people see me thus far, mostly. They know me from music. And music is easy to prioritize first, because it has such a schedule. You drop an album, then people will expect another album, or they will expect another EP. The music industry has its own cycle that you adhere to yearly, so I tend to try to get a project out every year. Or I tend to like to do shows yearly, every year. It's that kind of thing.

I tend to also want to do like a solo show or something in the conceptual art space at least once a year, too. I try to knock out some type of studio practice and musical project each year. And then the way everything else works is, I'm working on other brand projects or other creative ideas that I have [in between].

I'm learning to not be so precious with my ideas and my projects. When I first started making art and music, I learned relatively quickly that if you say that you're going to do something and you don't actually do it, someone else could just come along and do it. And there goes your idea. It's already out in the world. Even if you thought you wanted to do it, somebody else can just do that idea. And there's no merit in just thinking things up.

When your music career began in earnest with the release of your Homeschool mixtape in 2012, I'm sure there was an element of experimentation in finding your sound at that time. How did you develop the courage to trust that music was a worthy pursuit? And how did you navigate creating for an audience that didn't necessarily exist yet?

I think it's just being young. Any idea that you have when you're young, just try to do it because you're not going to have the balls to do it again. I think the more knowledge and understanding of people, places, things you have, the less willing you are to step out of those constructs.

I think it's being young, but also... I'm never sure. I think that's the misconception sometimes with artists, that we know everything while we're doing it. For the most part, I'm scared. Every project I release I think is going to be the project that nobody will [like]—that they will never look at me again because of this project. That's what I think every single time, whether it's warranted or not. It's because I'm taking risks every time and I'm trying new genres that I haven't seen people that look like me try all the time. I never really have examples for my personal creativity. I don't have somebody that does all the things that I do to look at and say, "Oh, this is how they did it. Let me just follow that path."

It's very scary. I think it's mainly being scared but being more curious than afraid, if that makes sense. I just want to see what happens more than I want to give up on it.

It seems like you've mastered leaning into that curiosity and just letting a project be what it's going to be and hoping for the best. This is just my own analysis, but to me it seems like our society sort of rewards specialists—people who pursue one thing deeply and become expert at it, that's sort of glorified. Did you ever worry about being too much of a generalist, or that being a multidisciplinary artist would work against you?

Yeah. I worry about it all the time, and it does work against you because I think that people, especially in entertainment, they're like, "What's your thing?" That's what people want to know, and they want to know specifics, too. Even just within music alone, I've traveled through so many genres since I began. I started in hip-hop and rap working with a lot of rappers and hip-hop artists, and from there I've done an industrial electronic project, I've done an indie pop rock project, and so many other kinds of styles of music since then, [but] I think a lot of the time, I still get labeled as a rapper. I still get labeled as, "Oh, well she's alternative R&B" or whatever.

I think it does work against you because people like to put people in boxes. So that's one of my major adversaries: Boxes. They are tough because they limit what your potential is and what people think you're capable of doing. They put a limit on your exploration and on your imagination because then you start to believe that that's all that you're capable of doing.

For some reason we say jack of all trades and master of none, but I think it's possible to master [lots of things]. It's just a different form of mastery.

Since you've operated in so many different musical genres and artistic mediums, do you see your projects as independent creations or as all in conversation with each other?

I guess I look at them as all going a step toward learning more. Actually, I do think of albums specifically in conversation with each other. The album that I'm making now is similar to Reflections in Real Time [Kish's 2016 self-released debut album] in that it has a complete theme, versus with my EPs sometimes, which are just explorations of different types of musical styles. They don't always have their own full conceptual body behind them necessarily. Sometimes they're just a quick collection of a few songs, and those I see as exploration pieces.

The thing is, I think a lot of people say artists are trying to get to their sound or they're trying to find themselves or figure out who they are, but to me, I'm just exploring different things. I'm not trying to stop ever. I'm not trying to settle down into something. I'm just finding inspiration, trying what I'm inspired by, and pushing myself on things that I didn't know that I could do or finding my own interpretations of genres, finding my own interpretations of styles, and trying to build visual worlds around that test.

It seems that you move between digital, tech-based work and working with your hands to create more analog pieces of work pretty effortlessly; you've made props for your music videos, risograph printed tour posters, and designed digital zine booklets for your new music releases. Does toggling between these two modes help you explore new horizons?

Yeah. I just started doing things super DIY because when I started, I didn't have a budget to do things. It essentially started out as me trying something out before I paid someone thousands of dollars to do it for me. I end up trying it out, and then I either will continue forward or hire people that know more than me to help with things I don't know how to do.

If it is something that I am interested in learning then I will usually try to make the time to learn how

to do that and go forward. For example, for REDUX [Kish's latest EP, released in 2019], we made a lot of posters and prints and things like that, and I went to college for textiles, so I did know how to screen print. But I had to go back, re-learn how to do that, and then I printed those myself.

A lot of times, I just like to do it. I like to get dirty. I like to go to the art supply store. I like to go to Kinkos. I like to print all these things out. For me, I just find it fun because it's figuring it out along the way and figuring out what works and getting to that fabric store and seeing something that you didn't expect to see and coming up with a new idea.

I have a question for you, particularly about your experience working as an independent artist who is also a Black woman. The basic question is: How do you ask for support? You touched on this a little bit but I think oftentimes, since Black women have been taught to be so capable of looking out for ourselves and so in control of the way we emphasize personal and professional strengths like being hard-working and self-motivated, that a lot of the time people get this idea that we don't need help or don't need to be advocated for in certain ways. I wonder if you've ever dealt with that and if that has made it difficult to ask for support. And once you do ask, how you're able to relinquish control and let people in to help you sometimes, even when it's hard to.

Of course. I 100% agree with everything you just said. I do feel like I ask for help often, I just feel like nobody gives me the help that I ask for, so I end up doing it myself. I guess on a personal level, I'm a workaholic for the most part. I have trouble with sitting still and not doing something.

I think, at least what I've experienced in the music industry, is that people consider me one of those self-sufficient artists. I'm not going to be wasted at my show. I'm not going to show up late. I'm going to show up on time, I'm going to show up prepared. I'm going to be ready to go, but I think a lot of times when you are so prepared and when you are always giving everybody everything that they need, I think that a lot of times people get lazy and they assume that you have everything all together, when I think internally, we may be hurting a lot more than we let on.

It's a sexism thing, but it's a racism thing for sure, and all of these have nothing to do with what we are individually doing and making, but that's an added thing that's going to create tension. I'm learning to ask for more help from Black women that have gone before me because nobody else is going to know what I'm going through, to be honest.

In response to what you've said about solitude and making things on your own, I know that you have also collaborated on a lot of projects in the past, and still do. I'm curious how you—especially as someone who has historically felt like a loner and has gone her own way—found a trusted network of people who you felt actually got you and whose visions aligned with yours?

I don't know. I don't know, really. Generally, it's really a way of thinking and of questioning. What I can think of in regard to the people that I've worked with, is that I think we question things a little bit more—and differently. I guess for me, creatively, I try to go about things in the most honest possible way, and I try to hold artists and creatives to a standard of trying to find out new truths or open up doors and new spaces. I'm not really concerned with re-exhibiting myself the same ways over and over and over again. I want to see what else there is always.

So I like to work with people that are looking for futurism in everything. I work closely musically with my boyfriend, who helps me to produce my music, and we're not bound by genre, we're not bound by, "Oh, I've never seen anybody make this before." We're not bound by questions like that. We're not bound by thinking about money or thinking about how much it's going to sell. We're holding ourselves to a standard of, "Let's just make something that's new and interesting and that excites us."

I love what you said about futurism and the art that grows out of exploring different genres, because I think it is pretty tough to categorize your work, which is refreshing. How do you balance making work that doesn't fit conveniently within a single label, while also making sure that your voice is consistent, both thematically and aesthetically? How do you make sure that new work upholds your "brand" while still allowing it to be completely different than your previous projects?

I think that's the question that a lot of progressive artists try to figure out. I think what I'm learning is it's really not even about balancing as much as it is about honesty in whatever space that you're in at the moment. I love so many things about different periods of art and design. I love minimalism, but do I want to always be minimalist? Sometimes no, the work doesn't call for that. So I try to be honest, too, and it sounds super hippie-dippy, but I just try to be honest to whatever the project calls for and bring myself up to a level to be good enough to facilitate it.

Kilo Kish Recommends:

Camp Lo - Uptown Saturday Night

bell hooks - All About Love

MoMA free Coursera classes (gave me something to do during the beginning of Covid-19)

seed kits + home gardening

a fresh box of crayons

Name

Kilo Kish

Vocation

Musician, Visual artist, Performance artist, Director, Creative Director

Fact

courtesy of Kilo Kish

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