

On the burden of choice



Painter and photographer Rebecca Storm discusses contemplating impermanence, letting work come to you intuitively, and the social pressure of choosing work, career, or family

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As told to Lauren Spear, 2331 words.

Tags: [Painting](#), [Art](#), [Adversity](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Family](#), [Focus](#).

How is your day going?

It's okay. I met my friend who's here from out of town for coffee, but there was nowhere to sit at the coffee shop, so we sat outside. It was so cold that it completely zapped my life force.

Winter has arrived in Montreal. It reminds me of that photo series you did for [Editorial Magazine](#) a while ago called "Miss Winter." I feel like you perfectly personified the season:





Can you talk about your relationship with this magazine?

It was originally my friend Claire Milbrath's project. She was really into photography at that time and doing mini fashion editorials and wanted a place to share her work and the work of friends and other artists. Eventually, it evolved from an online publication into a print publication. Olivia Whittick stepped into the editor role, and I supported in that area as needed. I took on more photography work for editorial projects, handled assignments from Claire, and developed and pitched my own creative stories.

A number of years ago, you had a photo series that documented the "filth in your life." In response to this collection, you said, "I think struggling financially and mentally was a big catalyst for me to start documenting things that caused me stress in an attempt to control them." Do you bring this same mentality to the work you're creating now?

I was really into flash photography of shitty Montreal apartment landlord fixes and filth. That's an interesting question because I probably still do that to some extent. In terms of painting, much of the work I've been doing lately has been more centered on grappling with existential crises and grief. Grief feels very out of control to me.



I know you've always been a painter, but you seem to have really taken off in that medium over the past couple of years.

I was working as an editor and photographer for a tech company for a few years, and at the end of 2017, I had two pretty severe concussions back to back. At the time, I was like, "Well, that's shitty luck." But from a practical standpoint, I found it hard to look through a camera or focus my eyes, so photography became uncomfortable. Having a concussion is such a trippy experience—the weirdest things are excruciating, like tying my shoes or sometimes even making eye contact with people. I had to take quite a few months off.

At that point, I hit a wall and thought, "Well, this is it. You got your degree, you have the salary job, you're paying off your student loans. What more to life is there?" I thought, "There has to be something else because this isn't it for me." During the pandemic, I decided to give painting another try, and since then, I have just kept at it.

You referenced one painting you did during the curfews in Montreal. Can you talk about this painting and what was going on for you around then?



I had recently gone through a breakup with a really long-term partner, moved out on my own, and then had another breakup, so during the curfew I was doing a lot of processing around being alone, independence, loneliness, and feeling very disempowered. I think we had to be home by 8 p.m. I was watching a lot of movies and got really into Krzysztof Kieslowski and was moved by *Three Colours: Blue*. Though I can't totally remember the plot, a woman is navigating some big changes and dealing with loss and grief and I remember relating to the wish to be floating in

water. It was the first film still I ever painted, but I try to avoid that now.

In this painting, you don't see the figure's face. I've noticed in many of your paintings you depict someone either wearing a mask or covering their face. Can you explain the significance of this recurring motif?





I've been thinking a lot about disconnection from self or loss of identity, not necessarily with others but through yourself—not feeling recognizable to yourself or not wanting to be perceived. There's a certain quality to a disguise or anonymity that is more relatable in a way.

In an interview, you mentioned, "I think objects provide a more compelling narrative about people than a portrait does." That idea really comes through in your painting *Wait*, where the imagery paired with the title is deeply evocative. Do you envision the story behind the painting before you start, or does the title come to you after it's finished?



Sometimes, I sit there for hours, thinking, "What will I paint? Why am I painting this? What's my reason? What's my concept?" That must come from being art school-pilled and needing to have a little bit of a speech prepared for when the teacher calls on me in class. When I talk to other friends who are painters, I realize it's actually okay to just start painting something because you want to, and then the answers come. The title just comes to me intuitively now. If I'm thinking too hard about it, it doesn't feel right.

Can you talk about the title *Eldest*?



I was just thinking about being the eldest, the stereotype of having to hold it all together and be responsible. Sometimes, that means being burdened with a bag of trash that isn't yours.

The dress is so beautifully painted. I've noticed your attention to texture across your photography and your

painting. A while back, you created a series focused on photographing slime, and now, in one of your recent paintings, you've depicted velvet. Could you share more about your fascination with texture and how it shapes your creative process?



I think what it is about those things is their luminosity and just the way the light catches and plays. Maybe it's overly pathologizing my work, but I feel like a part of me is searching for spiritual significance and trying to find the light. I'm also a physically sensitive person and I love smooth, silky things and exploring textures. I am drawn to those things because it's comforting.

Do you feel like you are comforting yourself in the images you create?

Yeah, maybe, definitely. Painting is pretty cathartic for me, it makes me feel good. Even in moments of frustration it helps me to feel connected to myself and to my body.

Many of your paintings capture fleeting moments, like ice melting or a flower in bloom, evoking the symbolism often seen in still-life art. Memento mori, a Latin phrase meaning "remember that you will die," comes to mind. Do themes of impermanence, death, or grief intentionally influence your work?





I feel like I can't get away from thinking about that. Over the past few years, I've been trying to get more comfortable with the idea of impermanence. I think I used to be really, really afraid of death, and I still am. I guess to cope with that fear in the context of my own life, I've just started to remind myself that nothing lasts forever and slowly that's become comforting in a way as well.

I think when you're going through a pretty dark time or you can't get out of it, there's some reassurance in reminding yourself, "Well, this isn't going to last forever and I don't know how it's going to unfold, but it could get better." I feel like it's helpful for me to really try and stay present and grateful for times of bliss as well. It's pretty haunting, or just a nasty feeling to look back on something and feel like you took it for granted. My work has been returning to that a lot, trying to create an appreciation for impermanence or trying to understand or just respect the fact that endings have to happen, and something new will always begin.

For me, the egg paintings *Violet* and *Choose* symbolize new beginnings. Is *Violet* named after your cat?





Violet is named after my cat. She sits on the window while I paint, and sometimes, when the light's coming in, her ears and fur have a pink glow. When I finished the painting, I was like, "Oh, maybe I've just painted you." I've been painting eggs a lot and they represent choice to me and the burden of decision. When faced with an egg, you have to be deliberate with what you want to happen to it. Do you want to eat it? Then you're going to have to crack it open. Do you want to let it rot? Do you want it to grow into something entirely different? It's about both the burden of indecision and the burden of choice.

Being in my mid-30s now, I feel my biological clock ticking which is such an intense feeling to normalize every day. It's not really so cut and dry to be like, "I want to have kids," or "I don't want to have kids." There's so much surrounding it that I don't feel like we are really socialized to understand or talk about. It feels like there's also a pressure to choose either career, love or family, and I'm like, "Well, can I have everything? What's going on here?" I was thinking a lot about those things, and Violet, my current roommate, is my everyday family. I love her, and I like the idea of creating the type of home life you want to have.



You said some of your paintings are going to Miami. How do you feel when your work travels without you and when you sell a painting, and it lives in somebody else's home?

I think it's really cool to sell a painting, well, for obvious reasons, but also, there's a part of me that's so finished with it that I'm shocked and delighted that it resonates with someone enough for them to want to have it around. Because painting can be really humiliating and frustrating, sometimes you get to a point where you're like, "I hate you." I am usually on good, or at the very least peaceful terms with all the work I exhibit, and at that point we usually have nothing more to say to each other and they're onto a new adventure with someone else.

What are you working on right now?

All the work I sent to Miami was mostly still life. I was thinking a lot about how the material world seems feeble in the context of grief. I wanted to focus on that feeling when you're going through it, and if you look around you at all of your possessions, it can feel almost disgusting. When you're like, "Why do I have all these little things that I bought when I was feeling peaceful or joyful or that I thought would improve my life in some way?" All your little objects reflecting you and staring back at you. The material world can feel so meaningless when your internal world feels overwhelming. But it's a nice way to reassess your attachment to your external surroundings, and remind yourself that there can still be comfort there, too.

Right now I'm working on a series for a group show in Madrid. I've been thinking a lot lately about how I'm trying to hack an existence that falls outside the traditional heteronormative markers of success, and I feel lucky to be able to explore that creatively, in a more fantastical way. Part of me wants to be a painter who can be visually frank about documenting their lived experience and surroundings, but I'm always pulled back to elements of fantasy, which I guess in some ways is still illustrative of my lived experience, just not the part anyone else can see. I think fantasy is a helpful vehicle for grappling with everyday emotional experiences that I don't necessarily know how to visually isolate otherwise. Almost like an optical euphemism. I guess you could argue that's what art-making is, but maybe because of my photography brain it feels newer to me.

Have you ever abandoned a painting?

Oh yeah, definitely. Sometimes I have to paint over something and I'm just like, "You are a curse, but thanks." I don't feel sentimental about that because it always teaches me something, and I see it more as me abandoning my execution of something, or being able to accept that I failed. Then I get to try again.

Will you ever open the egg?

Maybe. I was considering painting a cracked egg, and I'm like, "I don't know if I'm ready for that." Too much.

Rebecca Storm recommends

katjes sour red currant candies—please send me some

["Love Remembered" by Wojciech Kilar extended remix](#) on youtube

starting the day by drinking a liter of warm water

facing your fears (in the case that they are also desires)... especially if you feel sickened by the internal feeling of resistance

[dekalog 1](#)

honorable mention: living with a cat

Name

Rebecca Storm

Vocation

visual artist, painter

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