On finding freedom in your creative identity

Visual artist Jessie Edelstein discusses breaking out of conformity, archiving ephemeral art, and embracing and criticizing the internet.

February 9, 2024 -

As told to Mira Kaplan, 2696 words.

Tags: <u>Art</u>, <u>Identity</u>, <u>Income</u>, <u>Creative anxiety</u>, <u>Money</u>.

How did you come to paint faces? What was the beginning of your artist awakening?

Well, everything before age 18 or 19, I don't count. I had no sense of self. It wasn't until my senior year of high school when my AP Lit teacher put on a Ted Talk about how the American public school system stifles children's creative talents that I woke up.

Growing up on Long Island, it was a privileged upbringing that I recognize and I'm grateful for but in terms of my own development and socialization, it was difficult. It was a very conservative environment. Me being queer and being more creative was very looked down upon. I forced myself to conform to what was expected of me by my town and by my school for many years.

Public or private?

Public. Mariah Carey did go there. She also hated my school.

Not kind to creatives, more college prep oriented?

Kids in my grade would cry if they got a 99 and not 100. They had a wall of scholars of the top 10 students per year and kids would fight to death to get on the list.

Before that moment senior year I never had a critical thought about my own experience. I had all these flashbacks to my elementary school teachers yelling at me and ripping my drawings out of my notebook. I constantly got in trouble for being creative and for being myself.
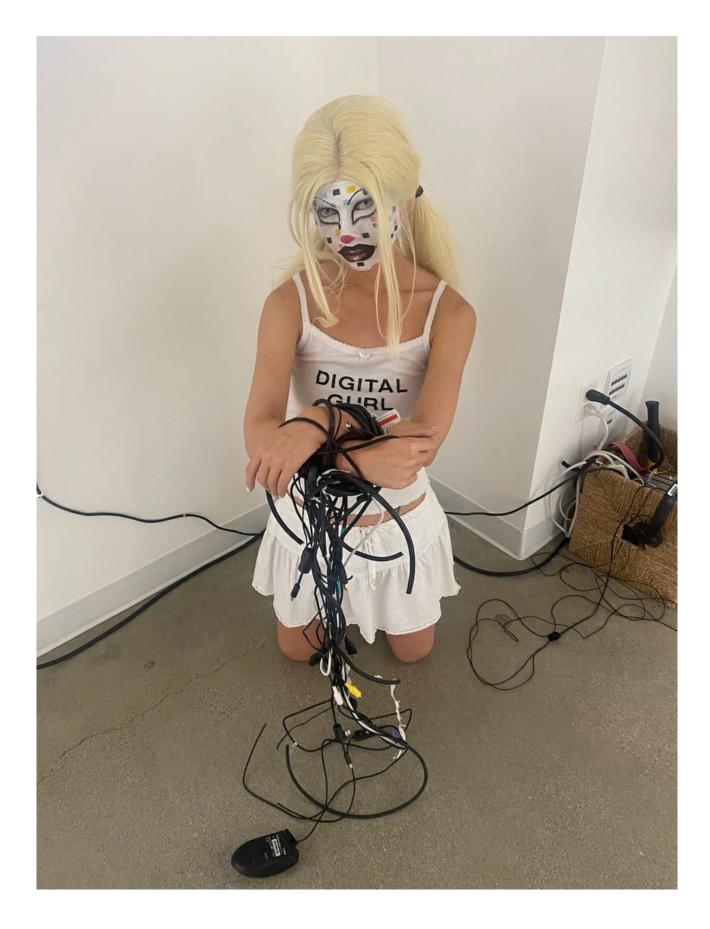
I realized I wasn't doing what I was supposed to be doing just taking all these AP classes and not the stuff I'm naturally really good at. I started taking art classes outside of high school which put me on a track to study it.

Of course the US school system stifles creativity…America seems to hate funding and supporting the arts.

A lot of time people want to applaud artists and they think that doing creative stuff is so cool but when it comes down to it only a very few percent of creative people actually make money off of their creative work. Their lives are not funded by that.

That leads to a topic people love to call out right now, nepo babies. You've mused on that culture in LA on social media.

In LA, my first big eye opening wow moment was seeing that certain people I looked up to had extreme familial wealth. LA seemed to be a hub of all these creatives who are really established. But after actually meeting them and learning different stories, you learn that they aren't transparent about what's funding their lifestyle. Or on the flipside, it's a lot of people living way above their means in order to "flex" a certain lifestyle. It's a very show off-y culture out here.

How do you deal with that?

I deal with it by recognizing it and not comparing myself. You really have to force yourself to not aspire to be them and to be grateful for what you have. It makes me really want to build up my body of work and continue to develop myself as an artist.

Do you think it's a privilege to be creative?

Yes, I do. I want to say everyone can be an artist and do it. But even me being able to go to art school at a public college, that was a privilege.

Not many people own or acknowledge that.

It also ties into virality which is something I've come to analyze. We live in this immediate feedback culture where people aspire to just put stuff out, go viral, and then get X, Y, Z opportunity, but I think many people don't think about the long term. It's all about the instant gratification which is something I've had to work on with myself. I think a lot of people assume I'm younger than I actually am and that I'm just starting out, but I've been doing this for six years. I see some of my peers getting big opportunities and it's hard. You can't have that instant gratification mindset and compare yourself to other people. It's not healthy and it's not worth it.

Right, how will influencers fare in 10 years?

It's so true. If you study Myspace or old Youtube, anyone who was big on those platforms is no longer relevant. Everyone says the internet is forever, but it's really not. Things get deleted. You can't go to old websites. You have to learn from the past. I'm a big history girl. It seems unhelpful to achieve virality as a number one goal.

What's it like to gain exposure through online platforms you're critical of? What's your offline side?

I've been reading a lot more over the past few years which has really helped me generate a vocabulary to talk about my art. I was going by my drag character "Virgo Couture" for a while which is how I gained my following online. I was presenting as a persona and made content as that persona. I was doing the Virgo character and realized it was getting really toxic. I hated having to introduce myself as a character. Virgo Couture was a Paris Hilton bratty drag queen. That is a certain aspect of me, but it's not all of me. I got rid of that character so I could be myself. I go by Jessie now when I'm dressed up and when I'm not. My personality never changes. I talk the same, I act the same. I do act a bit more hyper feminine. It was getting hard to have two identities so now I just have one.

I used to put so much focus on the end product, but now I see my power as an artist is the ability to shift into different forms. Not everyone has the ability to change their appearance and augment how they look at the flip of a switch. It's a very niche ability.

You're not changing, it's just the outside.

The look is always the same. I change the backgrounds, but it's the same face I generated through my drawings when I was 18. In art school, I got a sketchbook and kept drawing this face over and over. I had a fixation on this face. When I started experimenting with face paint, I translated the drawing onto my face and created my drag persona called "Virgo Couture." Drag was always the jumping off point for me.

So, now you're a different character.

I don't call it a character, it's just my look. You know how people put on eyeliner? This is what I do instead, it's just maximalist. What's really gratifying is painting other people or seeing other people replicate my face online. Other people will copy it and tag me. I love seeing their inspired looks. I love turning other people into me. It's my face that I've designed but it's like a fashion design. You don't want to just wear your own fashion design, you want other people to wear it.

Though you're always the same, people must treat you differently. You're naturally brunette, but your look is blonde.

People see me as an image, so they project fantasies on me that aren't based in reality. They're like "she's a clown." But they're not actually talking to me or understanding the root of why I do this. It creates a narrative that isn't true because they want to compare me to something they understand, which is that of a clown, a bimbo, a crazy party girl, etc.

With the term "face production," I get why you wanted to name it. I love how you talk about erasure and building. You've worked with so many different people. Do you mainly freestyle or do commissions?

It depends on the client. I enjoy when people ask me to try something new. When I work with photographers, I prefer direction.

Do you like being in front of the camera?

Yes and no. It depends on the situation and the photographer. I've had to embrace this "model" persona, which is funny because I'm a 5'2" Jewish girl from Long Island. I'm not Bella Hadid. I always need documentation because the medium of face paint is so ephemeral. It's definitely built a relationship between me and photographers, which I understand because they want to get my image, but when it's done in an invasive way it can be anxiety inducing on my end. When I'd go out in New York, I would get swarmed by photographers.

Are your looks only for nighttime? Would you walk down the street?

Oh, I've done it a bunch of times in the day. In LA, no one bothers me which is great. In New York, they'd bother me. I was younger back then, but I would take the subway to Brooklyn from the Upper East Side and I would get so anxious. I'm sure no one cared but it used to stress me out so much. When I was doing shoots, cars would stop on the street. Here they do not give a fuck. I love it.

Let's talk about your eyeballs, you also transform them for your look.

I love augmenting every part of my face. I see the physical body as a material for self-expression. This is why I've been getting more tattoos that are digitally inspired because I believe in the blending of digitization with the physical form.

I also see the eyes as a blank canvas that can be augmented. It's something that feels very intuitive to me, which is why I do it so much. I use a lot of cyber contacts because it correlates with my whole digital vision. I'm really interested in the intersection of plastic surgery and technology, which I think is the future.
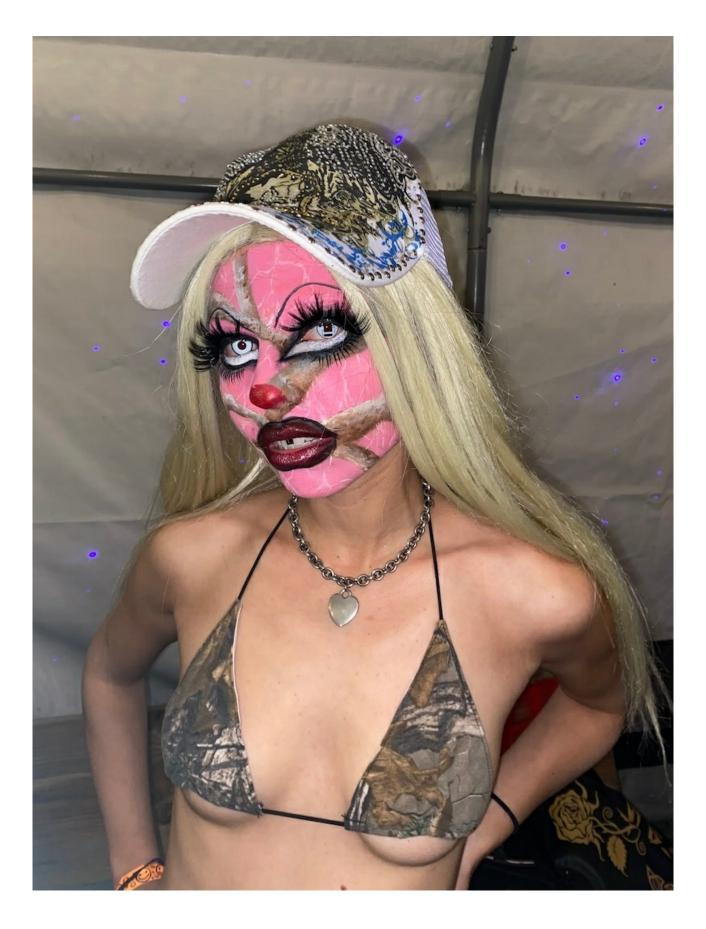
What are those?

Micro chips or computer chips.

In your eyes?

Yeah, I've been putting costume contacts in my eyes since I first started.

I don't think many people realize that when I'm in a look it's *painful*. I'm in pain a lot. It's very physically demanding. Only drag performers can really understand the level of physical discomfort you're in wearing a look. When I put in contacts they make my eyes burn and I tear up. I have to sit and stare at myself for hours, which requires a lot of concentration. I glue down my eyebrows and then basically redraw my entire face from scratch. Then I do the wig and the lipstick so I can't really eat or drink. It inhibits you. It's hard to function normally when I'm dressed up which sucks because I love the look but when it comes down to it, it's not super functional. But, I think it really shows how much I believe in what I'm doing because otherwise I probably wouldn't be doing it too much.

What else have you put in your eyes?

Just contacts. Do you know what scleras are? They're contacts that cover your whole eye. You have to roll them back into your eye to get them in. It's like level two contacts. Sometimes people will ask me to do like seven looks for a brand or a shoot or whatever but it's because they don't realize how much effort goes into a single look.

How much time from start to finish on average?

Usually two to three hours. If it's an intensive paint, three or more hours.

What type of paint and tools do you use for your face production?

I primarily use Mehron paradise paint. It's a water-based face paint that works best for me. It's similar to a watercolor. I like the pigmentation and I have a bunch of different colors. I don't really blend so it's more like a collage. I'm really into colors. I organize compositions based on colors.

What's your favorite color to work with?

Blue's my favorite.

I ran into you at my friend Hadley's "Glitch" show where you performed "user_manual_01." Can you talk about glitch culture?
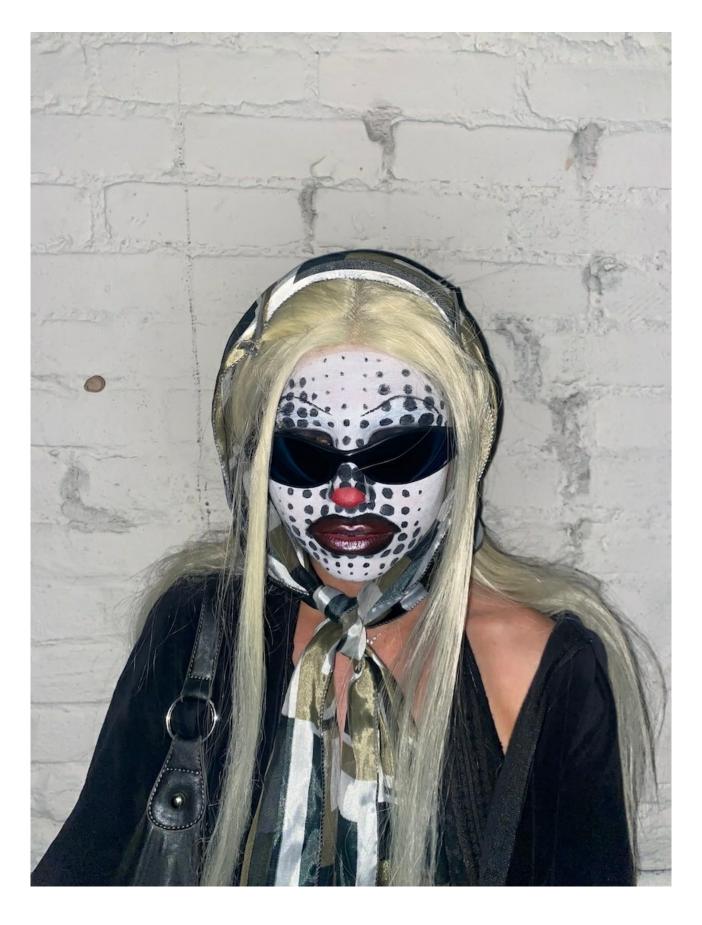
I love the idea of a glitch as a basis for identity. I read _Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto_ by Legacy Russell a few years ago, it's a cyber feminism text. The author talks about existing as a glitch. Especially how it relates to queer people since the straight world isn't really set up for you to exist in. Now that I'm doing my look outside of queer club space more and more, people don't associate it with my queerness even though I always see it ingrained in what I do. Glitched bodies disrupt the idea of normative bodies, it's a disruption of what's expected. It's really funny honestly because I feel like most people "glitch out" when they see me in public like their brains can't process me.

Like hyper pop? You do some sound-based art as well, is it glitchy?

I kind of hate the term hyper pop because it's sort of a throw-away term people use to describe a certain sound. I love PC music though. It's a record label from the 2010s created by A.G. Cook. He was a big pioneer in utilizing computerized sound and creating pop music in a conceptual way. He also worked closely with SOPHIE, one of my biggest creative inspirations.

Back to augmentation and surgery…go off.

I've always had this deep fascination with plastic surgery since I was young, especially people who have "extreme" looks, like Amanda Lepore. She would be at the parties I went to in NY. Since the 90s, she's been getting plastic surgery and now she has a huge butt and crazy boobs, a very severe Jessica Rabbit hyper femme look. One of my other big inspirations is Pete Burns. He's a pop singer from England who got a lot of plastic surgery as well.

Cosmetic augmenting isn't a bad thing?

People see plastic surgery as a bad thing because a lot of people do it from a place of insecurity so it's pretty widely demonized by the culture. Not many people view it as a creative tool for self-actualization. In Pete Burns' memoir, he talked about feeling like he had a face underneath that was covered by film. When he got his surgeries, it was like peeling off the film to reveal what was always there. That's basically how I feel when I do my look.

Of course, that ties into drag and queerness, the inside not matching the outside.

Exactly, like I haven't gotten any plastic surgery, but I feel like my paint serves as a form of visual augmentation, even if it's not permanent. Reading Pete's memoir was really eye opening for that.

What about having to take it off? Is it sad?

It is sad, but it's something I've had to come to terms with. As long as I have photo evidence it's OK. Documentation and image-making is just as important in what I do.

I like how you embrace ending and restarting. Like Virgo Couture and Jessie.Mp3. What's to come?

I'm always doing a lot of things at once: face painting, video editing, collages, drawing, conceptualizing performance ideas. Creating music and sound design for the Jessie.Mp3 project is something I'm super passionate about but I also never want to forget my face painting roots. I've recently been experimenting with using my medium in new ways like painting text or imagery on people that's different from my usual look. I actually call it face production. It's nice that I now have the vocabulary to explain that to people.

Jesse Edelstein recommends:

Glitch Feminism by Legacy Russell

Freak Unique by Pete Burns

SOPHIE's _Boiler Room set_ from 2014

I-Be Area by Ryan Trecartin

Going to the park to sit in silence and read

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