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As told to Jess Shoman, 2543 words.

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On learning about yourself through your creative work

Visual artist Nicolette Lim discusses examining queer identity through her work, embracing unconventional beauty, and how confidence has made her work more powerful.

What inspired you to start making art? Do you feel like there was a specific path that you went down?

I don't know if there was any specific thing that inspired me to start making art, but as a kid, I think making art was definitely an outlet to create narratives. I was definitely a kid that played pretend a lot or had a lot of ideas about what I wanted to be or what I wish I could be—a lot of dreams. I think making art was definitely an outlet for that, to make what I had in my head solid on paper.

Do you feel like your art helps you discover more about yourself as a person?

Yes, absolutely. I think without art, I wouldn't have discovered or had the outlet to really introspect that much about myself. A lot of the art that I made growing up was drawings of entwined friendship between girls, very similar to the subject matter that I have now. Basically, a world that I really wanted, but I guess I didn't really understand the compulsion at the time and what that meant to me. Over time, and even now, I still learn so much about myself, and as I grow to understand more things about myself, I feel like my work also informs that, and it feeds into one another. I learn about myself through making work, but as I learn about myself, my work changes.



mottled peach skin, crushed spider eye, do you know the smell of your own skin?



face full of hurt, bonneted hag, do you know the touch of your own hands?

Yeah, that makes sense. Art is definitely a good tool for that. At least for me, I don't know any other way.

Exactly. To explore those things. To process those things.

You said you started off with drawing, but you explore so many different mediums [illustration, printmaking, animation, sculpture, candlemaking and, most recently, tattooing.] Is it important for you to have a variety, depending on what's going on in your life? How do you decide that you want to explore certain things at certain times?

Drawing has always been the foundation of where I came from, but a lot of what I'm interested in is world building and a more holistic approach to storytelling that's immersive. Going through art college really helped expand that by giving me space to experiment with fibers or sculpture or stop motion. Having different outlets to build that world is important to me, but also the specific things that I use to create those worlds are also important to me. Fibers and crafts, and pulling from things that are more accessible to domestic spaces is really important to me—like candlemaking even. I've never really explored painting, for example, because it just didn't seem right for my work.



tender house



ritual punishment 2

Fiber art and candlemaking allow you to use the resources you have around you?

Exactly. Certain things that I gravitate towards are very domestic or considered traditionally feminine works and I think that adds to the tapestry of my work in some ways.

A world is a combination of so many different things, so it makes sense that using all that you have around you lends itself to building an entire world and narrative.

Escapism was always very important to me as a kid, so being able to fulfill that as an adult is kind of cool for me. Even in my space, like in my apartment, it's like me fulfilling the fantasy of that.

Would you say that the idea of playing and allowing yourself to explore things in an uninhibited way is something that's important to you?

Oh man. I wish I could explore things uninhibitedly. In some ways I want to have fun with my work, and candles are a great outlet for that because they're more craft-based and more fun for me to do. Same with baking. Baking is a fun activity for me that I can be a little bit more loose with. So in some ways it's important for me to have certain things like that, but with really meticulous things like drawing or

sculpture, and especially with tattooing, I'm pretty strict about the process. I'm strict about perfectionism in my work, which is something I try to break out of and question myself about. Having certain outlets and crafts that are more fun for me is important. Candlemaking and baking and playing with polymer clay. That's super fun.



birthday candle for Aki



birthday candle for Mort

I feel like it kind of massages your brain or something, and resets you in a certain way.

Yeah, exactly.

You mentioned you're very meticulous about your tattooing, and I have gotten a couple tattoos from you, so I know the amount of detail you put in is amazing. How do you feel the relationship between your illustrations and your tattooing fit together? Was it hard to translate one practice to the other?

I thought it would be harder than it was. I mean, it's still a really difficult process, of course, not to be like, "Yeah, it's super easy," but it reminds me a lot of printmaking in the way that everything has to be done in a certain way, but then you have the added pressure of doing it on somebody's body and there's no way to go back. It's really important to understand the tools that you're using and also to accept that things are going to look different on skin than it's going to look on paper, and having your expectations

managed in that way.



You tattoo a lot of queer and trans people, how does that feel for you? I'm sure it must feel good as a queer person.

It does feel really awesome. Well, I started tattooing myself, and the feeling of having agency over my body and having something on my body that I know I wanted there, and that I put it there, feels really good. Being able to give that to my community is really nice. It feels really good that other people feel that way about my work and that it makes them feel a little bit more at home in their bodies.



I feel like the time and care that you put into making the whole session comfortable is another form of art in itself.

That was also very important to me. When I decided to start tattooing people, I didn't want to recycle the same sort of sterile, awkward experience. Tattoo bros can be a little bit rough and uncomfy and I wanted to make people feel like they can say, "I want to move the stencil one millimeter." or "Oh, I want to have a snack now." or "Oh, can you give me a blanket?" I want to be able to be like, "You good? You want a blanket? You want a snack? You want different music?"

I'm curious if you have an ideal world in mind when it comes to the queer art-making community? What would you like to see?

Honestly, in some ways, I feel like I am living in a very ideal queer community, or in my mind, ideal within my friend group. We take care of each other and we support each other in our different interests. We are able to be there for each other. Obviously my friend group doesn't represent the larger queer community, but it would be cool to extend that to people. I want the whole queer community to have that, just people supporting each other and calling each other out on their shit. That's one of the reasons why I insist on keeping a sliding scale for the trans community, because I want to be able to extend that care to other people. If they want to feel good in their bodies just for a second with a tattoo, I want that for them.

Queerness is a major theme throughout your work. The girls that you draw are very specific and very intimate, and I know a layer of your work is in the context of anti-LGBTQ attitudes in Malaysia. How does your lesbian identity inform your work?

The anti-LGBTQ attitudes where I grew up in Malaysia was definitely the reason why I felt a need for escapism throughout my childhood. The current gender structures are put in place by our white colonizers, but that has been forgotten, so we just continue this violence thinking it is part of our own history and Malaysian identity.

Let's talk about the girls. They have been a constant, and throughout my visual language, they've always been there. For me, one of the ways of processing my identity and the way that I want to present myself, or how I feel internally, or how I present myself in my gender—I process that a lot through the girls, and I think that's why they all have similar faces, because I do base a lot of their expressions on pictures of my face.

With my lesbian and gender-fluid identity, I guess I think about these girls as hags. The hag imagery is so important to me because with lesbians, or I don't know if I'm allowed to say dykes. Honestly, I have a hard time with the word lesbian, but I do strongly identify with the word dyke or hag because it's sort of this feral, primal being, who lives outside of expected gender chores. But also she's sexy and sexual, but it's selfish and devious, but also she's not sexy, which makes her a hag. Being selfish about your own gender and sexuality, is very haggish and devious, and I like claiming that alongside being a dyke.



worry



Strange Harvest show title piece

I've never really heard "hag" as a descriptor for a dyke, but I have an image in my head of what that looks like. How would you describe a hag?

In my mind, the word lesbian feels like it could still be expected to follow cis/heteronormative beauty standards or whatever, but a hag and a dyke—that's true sexiness to me. Because she's a fucking hag, she is unafraid of looking however she feels most fully realized. I don't know. She dresses and presents herself as whatever she wants, regardless of whatever is expected of her. She could wear a lace bonnet and she could wear a little fucking negligee, or she could wear fucking anything.

She's just a hag.

She's a fucking hag. She doesn't care. She's here to fuck, but also to make candles. Yeah, so they're hags to me because they are still sexual beings, but they keep that to themselves almost in a selfish way. They are selfish.

Do you feel like that's an inner power type of thing?

It's an inner power, but it's also this grotesque beauty. Selfishness is synonymous with haggish-ness because a hag extends care and pleasure to herself without the intention of continuing the cycle of reproduction.



it was humid and you smelled of palm oil

I feel like the way that you describe the girls that you draw makes a lot of sense, and coming from a place where that wasn't always accepted, it makes sense that you naturally went down that route.

I think when I was drawing them as a kid, they were very much how I would think a sexy person would present themselves, not conventionally pretty, but pretty in a way that I find interesting. The hag imagery is really important to me.



Forever Friend

You moved from Malaysia in 2014, and you went to school in Kentucky, and then you moved to Chicago, where you live now. Do you feel like your work has changed being in situations where that might not have always been accepted? How do you feel having that sort of freedom to explore more changed the way that you make art?

Yeah, it's definitely changed a lot. I think looking back at my old work from middle school and high school, it's definitely more repressed lesbian, "Oh, this poor girl, what are you doing?" But since then, obviously my skills have improved. I'm able to draw things that I actually want to draw and edit myself better. Those are things that just come with growing up as an artist. The subject matter has definitely changed, because it does reflect my understanding of myself almost.

Earlier on in my illustration work, you can tell that I was more concerned about drawing things that are subjectively pretty and beautiful. I like beauty in my work and I love ornateness, but I think now I am more interested in depicting things that are pretty, but also still representative of things that are unconventionally pretty—facial hair or bodies with bruises or mottled faces and being okay with deviating from the very illustrations that I started with earlier on in my artistic career.



Perempuan Minyak

That must be cool to see the progression of you changing as a person, and how your art has also changed alongside that.

Being more confident in my own body allowed me to be more confident in depicting things that aren't conventionally pretty.

I think hags are so beautiful and sexy, but they're not conventionally beautiful and sexy, but I don't even know what that means anymore. What is conventional beauty? Maybe my mind is so warped in thinking that old saggy, sexy bodies are cool and awesome.

What has been the most rewarding part of your creative process and getting to the point where you are right now?

There's so many. One of the things is being able to know myself better and being able to have an outlet to introspect. But another thing is being able to tattoo people and making them feel more at home in their body. That makes me feel really, really good. I mean, it feels good to tattoo myself, but it feels amazing to be able to give that to other people. Getting to that point, being able to have the confidence to say, "Yeah, I want to tattoo myself, and other people, and feel good in my body, and unencumbered, and have agency over my body, and allow other people to have that too," is the most rewarding thing.

5 things Nicolette Lim recommends to get into the mindset of a Hag:

- + ancient yearning
- ♥ candles in place of overhead lighting
- ✧ decadent personal meals
- ★ staring out your window and making sustained eye contact with passersby
- ♠ moments of unbridled rage and love

Name

Nicolette Lim

Vocation

visual artist

Fact

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