

Dear Ms. Sterling,

My name is Ashley, and I am an art student at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. I was recently given an assignment in which I am required to contact a contemporary artist that I admire, and interview them. I discovered your work several months ago, and you have since become one of my favorite artists. When I was given this assignment, you were one of the first people I thought of interviewing. I know you are a busy woman, and I don't want to take up too much of your time. I'll list my questions below, and if you could find the time to respond at your earliest convenience, I would greatly appreciate it.

Thank you very much.

1. Why do you make art?

Many reasons why, the most important being that it satisfies me in a way nothing else does. I enjoy the process... although it can sometimes be tortuous... it's challenging and physically/emotionally demanding... but if you create something that you think is any good... it's very rewarding. It's an added bonus if anyone else responds.

2. When was the first time you realized you were creating art?

I've told this story many times, but it's my earliest memory and a good one. Do you still have that toy "Lite Brite?" It was a light box covered in a grid of small holes. A piece of black paper covered the front and the idea was to insert these clear small 'bulbs' in different colors into the holes to create an illuminated picture. (It was really cool.) I created a turtle in nursery school on a Lite Brite and won a competition. I was 3 or 4.

3. Your imagery is very emotional. Why do you use the imagery you do?

I'm fascinated with personality, with interior worlds, hidden strengths in people and things. I've been told my imagery is very dark, both figuratively and emotionally... and I think since I was a child I've been naturally drawn to darkness... both in music and art. So I guess that is what I know, and what I like to try and create.

4. Where do you draw inspiration from?

With every series it changes. I'm lucky enough to have met some incredible people in my life and in the modern portrait series I'm inspired by each subject. For the architextures series I was inspired primarily by the Frank Gehry structure while it was in the process of being built in downtown L.A. (it's now the Walt

Disney Music Hall.) Sometimes I'm inspired by music as well. I always listen to music when I work.

5. Who is your favorite artist?

I can narrow it down to four. In alphabetical order, Francis Bacon, Edgar Degas, Vincent Van Gogh and Francisco Goya. My favorite female artist is Alice Neel.

6. What was your first widely recognized piece?

A lot of people responded to the piece Rapid Transit. But my work hasn't exactly been 'widely recognized' yet.

7. How would you describe your art's evolution over the course of your career?

It's difficult to express the evolution. Each piece is a challenge. Once that challenge is met, I'm done with the challenge, and so I want to challenge myself in a different way with the next piece. At the same time, I look at earlier pieces I've done and wonder if I've lost some worthwhile innocence along the way. I don't think it's been a linear evolution although at the risk of sounding arrogant I know I've gotten better at working with oils.

8. Do you work in other art forms? (music, etc.)

I don't work with music (although I played classical piano for 14 years) but I am a huge collector/archivist of music and I'm always going to shows. I also enjoy writing and plan on trying to compile and maybe eventually publish a series of emails I wrote while I was living in Madrid. And my day job is a graphic designer, although it often feels more like sales than art.

9. Do you teach? If not, do you ever hope to?

I taught English during my year in Madrid and really loved it, although it was exhausting. Ideally I'd love to go back to school to get my MFA and teach art at a university. That's one of my dreams. It's an old cliché but I found while teaching English that you really do learn as much from your students as they learn from you.

10. What was your proudest moment as an artist?

This is the hardest question so far. I'll name one and then I'm sure a bunch of different ones will vie for its place but... I had a painting professor at Berkeley named Wendy Sussman who sadly died of cancer 5 or so years ago. I was a great

admirer of her work and loved her critics as they were thankfully devoid of competition (well, mostly...) and she didn't have an ounce of bullshit, though she was tactful. When it came to my turn she started just giving me praise, and everyone was praising what I had done... but then she said, "Mila, you've reached graduate level with this work, so I'm going to give you a graduate level critic now. Is that OK?" To this day, I remember everything she said, almost to the word, and I still apply it to most of the work that I do now. I feel privileged and yes... proud... to have gotten that from her. I was the only student in the class that did. Later there was the scholarship, the first sale, my acceptance to an English grad school, etc... but that was the first that came to mind.

11. You said about your ancestry series "...I felt like a voyeur making an analysis of a fascinating private world I wasn't meant to be involved in." Do you not get along with your family on some level, or was that simply a feeling you experienced while looking at those photos from so far in the past?

I get along with my family... but I think parents often like to hide their wild or misguided pasts so as to be good 'role models' for their kids. My late grandmother somehow metamorphosized from the sexy, rebellious artist in the photos to a mother who only let her daughter wear pink, navy and white... and then finally to the only form of her I knew... an adorable, fiery old lady with a horrible case of osteoporosis, a smile that could melt an iceberg and a masterful talent at Scrabble (and a card game called Spite and Malice). I related to her as the artist in the pictures but of course it wasn't my world, she probably didn't want me to know that world, and therefore I felt like a voyeur getting a thrill out of those old photos. It was almost naughty.

12. Do you always draw out your ideas before you paint them? How important is drawing to your work?

I almost never draw before I paint... but I really like to draw. Figure drawing classes are incredibly helpful as an emerging artist.

13. Do you have any artistic family members, or are you the only one?

My grandmother was one of the original animators for the Betty Boop cartoons... in her later life she painted landscapes with oils and became quite good at Chinese Brush painting. My father was a jazz pianist who later became a successful character actor. My mother is a classical pianist and piano teacher... and is also a talented amateur writer and a killer cook. Neither of my parents ever had office or 9-5 jobs and every day I go into an office I feel like I'm going against my true nature... but hey, you have to pay the bills. And I am somewhat good at what I do for a living.

14. I love your revisions pieces, because I love to see how other peoples ideas evolve. Did you create the revisions pieces because you like to watch the evolution as well, or was there some other reason?

Yes, that evolution was fascinating. It was also just plain fun to see how the same pose looked so different in the varying mediums I used. Each facet of the final whole felt like a surprise. I LOVE that sense of surprise when you're working.

15. On average, how long does it take you to complete a piece?

I've finished pieces in 2 days and others have taken 2 years. But usually they take weeks or months.

16. Do you have any advice/ words of encouragement for young aspiring artists like myself?

Don't self-censor, and work as much as you can. Try and be honest and not make something because you think it's cool... although there's nothing wrong with being cool, that won't help you grow your own voice. Don't be concerned with being derivative but do try and add a different flair to a piece that's your own, even if it's unsuccessful. Stand behind what you set out to do in crits but also listen to what everyone else has to say.

17. You seem to often paint from photographs. Is there a particular reason why you prefer to paint from photos as opposed to from life?

I love to paint from life, but I paint when I want to, and I can't rely on a subject being there at my every whim. My studio is small as well and I like to have a lot of room to move. I don't like to bring all my materials outside except on occasion. Beyond the practicality though, I also really like to see the sense of emotional depth I can get in a painting that doesn't come through in the photograph. Recently I was commissioned to paint a portrait from a photograph of a woman I had never met before, smiling in her wedding dress. It was incredibly challenging as I only had this very flat, one angle photo to draw from... as I always have seen or know my other subjects and like to somehow bring another aspect of how I see them to the finished piece. Amazingly the woman who commissioned me said I had really captured the subject, expressed who she really was. I knew I had created something real from that photo, but I had no idea I was being accurate. It was almost spooky.

18. In addition to painting, you also do design work. How do you balance design and painting? Which do you enjoy more?

Balancing the two is a constant struggle, as they're both very solitary conceits, and I'm a social person who needs to have a life as well. I get a different feeling out of both of them... art is earthier, and relieving, and very personal (which isn't always easy). Design can be exciting and fun, but also monotonous and frustrating. It depends.

19. Is there a particular message you want to express to your audience?

To my general audience, buy my work! Ha ha. But seriously, to you I'd like to say your questions show that you get it, you get art and you get my work to an extent. Keep working. Work as much as you can, whenever and wherever you can, even if you don't feel like doing it. And to all art lovers and viewers, it's not what I want to express that I'm interested in really. I LOVE when people interpret the work and get something entirely their own from it. Keep looking.

Thank you for your time.

Thank YOU Ashley, that was fun. Keep in touch if you'd like... and let me know how the assignment goes.