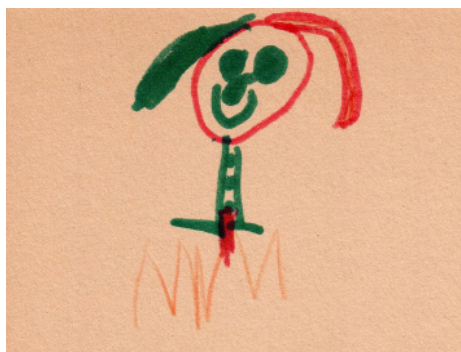
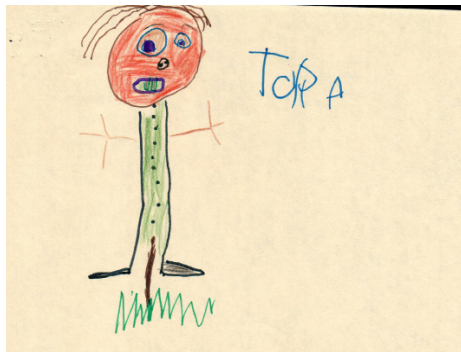


TORA LOPEZ



I met Tora Lopez in 2009 after responding to a Craigslist ad that she posted, which stated that she was a fashion designer and artist looking for studio assistants. After that initial meeting, I began working with Tora immediately, and apprenticed with her for two years. She has since established herself as an emerging sculpture and performance artist whose body of work includes performative confrontations of binary gender norms, the commodification of the female body, as well as explorations of the nature of sexual and romantic intimacy. During our recent conversations, I have been returning to the philosophical question of where one draws the line between ordinary reality and Process Art. When is the moment that the creation of one's art begins? In attempting to understand the many recurring themes of Tora's life (and my own), I find myself drawn to the explanations given by Alejandro Jodorowsky in his book, *Psychomagic*:

"...reality is not rational, no matter how much we want to believe that it is to reassure ourselves. Human behavior is in general motivated by unconscious forces, those to which we can attribute rational explanations later. The world itself is not a rigid place but an amalgam of mysterious influences."

If we allow ourselves to continue this metaphysical line of thinking, it may be that (in a manner similar to the practices of psychomagicians as described by Jodorowsky) the romantic, humorous, and symbolic "therapies" of performance artists such as Tora and her collaborators can indeed have curative powers. It's not just spiritualists and hippies who have considered the healing potential of art: in his book *The Birth of Tragedy*, noted grump Friedrich Nietzsche famously concluded:

"Here, when the danger to his will is greatest, art approaches as a saving sorceress, expert at healing. She alone knows how to turn these nauseous thoughts about the horror or absurdity of existence into notions with which one can live: these are the sublime as the artistic taming of the horrible, and the comic as the artistic discharge of the nausea of absurdity."

In ways that I have long admired, and some that I'm still uncovering, Tora's work seems to serve this purpose.

-- T. Eliezer

MOMMA TRIED: What was your childhood like?

TORA LOPEZ: My parents were hippies, and very young. My mother is 20 years older than me, and my adopted father is just 15 years older. We lived in New Orleans until I was about seven. My mother and her older brothers followed a local psychedelic guru named Bodisala. My mom describes New Orleans in the 70s as a ripe utopia. One year, fifty-thousand hippies came and camped in City Park during Mardi Gras. I don't remember much from that time but flashes of Sufi dancing, playing with the Dearie kids on Short St., Rae Rae's long amazing hair as she prepared iced coffee for her guests, and of course that thick, specific New Orleans air.

Then we moved to El Paso for a year while my mother studied midwifery at The Maternity Center. It was a unique place to study because women would cross the border from Mexico to birth their children in The United States. The mothers often arrived with little to no prenatal care, physically and sexually abused, drug addicted, cigarette smokers– it was a vertical learning curve. We lived in the birthing center and I would often push a chair up to the window of the birthing rooms to watch. It was captivating. Life brawling death, the fluids, the placenta, the very human, honest, unadorned act of giving birth.

Finally we ended up in Santa Fe. I grew up with a mountain as a back yard, living adjacent to a reservation. We were poor and struggled a lot at that time but it was also extraordinary. We grew our own food, our Native American neighbors taught us how to eat a nutty, leafy weed that grew everywhere, and we had no television. We made everything: cloth diapers, furniture, parts of our home, beaded jewelry, clothes, god's eyes for holiday gifts. And great 70s records were in constant rotation.

MT: Your mother seems like she was a formative source of inspiration for you. What was it like growing up in such a creative household with a mother who is a midwife?

TL: Being in a home of perpetual creation (they were making a lot of babies too, I am

the oldest of four) seemed perfectly normal. I don't remember conversations about a creative voice or being an artist. The focus was on spirituality: god's voice versus personal expression. My father was a staunch Sufi, if there can be such a thing, which is likely how I ended up an Atheist.

My mom birthed all my siblings at home. The last two being some of my most potent memories. When my younger brother Sky was born, I was nine years old. Her labor lasted over 17 hours. She was a beast, squatting and pushing by candlelight and incense. I never left her side, and followed her around washing her forehead with a cold cloth. After her water broke and my other brother nearly fainted, she invited me to put on a glove and put my hand inside of her to feel my little brother's head crest against her pelvic bone. I distinctly remember her head straining to see around her giant belly as she described what I was feeling. Afterward, she sautéed the placenta with onions.

MT: It's fascinating that from your very early childhood you had access to understanding bodies and the process of birth in such an intimate way. Looking at the childhood drawings you've shared with us it seems like these portraits include something along the lines of genitals or maybe afterbirth. How old were you when you drew these, and do you remember what these depictions were?

TL: It seems these drawings depict an early interest in the intimate body; and that curiosity is what provoked me to push my chair to the window and watch the births, not the other way around.

I don't remember drawing these. My mom said I was four when I drew them. They pre-date the midwifery school. When I asked her what they were about, she said I always followed her into the bathroom, and that my brother Troy, who is a year younger, and I were endlessly talking about the fact that he had a penis and I had a *pijina*.

MT: The genitals of the costumes you designed for you and Rya to wear for *Knowing Me, Knowing You* bear a striking resemblance to these drawings. Was this a deliberate reference?

TL: My mom found these drawings after the performance, but there's no mistaking the connection. I oscillated between horror and curiosity when she brought them to me. The similarity is hilarious – that is to say, I've yet to bring them to a shrink.



Knowing Me, Knowing You, Pulse Art Fair NYC, 2012; photograph by Ariane Rousselier

The drawings illustrate my fascination with biological function. Being tethered to a body with a trajectory of set expressions, those inherited, provoked by lifestyle behaviors, hormonal influence, evolution, social expectations, how the body is represented, used, shared, pleased, humiliated and reproduced are all points of entry into my performances.

MT: Speaking of costumes, how did you decide that you were going to pursue fashion design? Were your experiences apprenticing with Oliver and designing for the Shim Shamettes part of this inspiration?

TL: I had wanted to be a fashion designer for as long as I can remember. Growing up off the grid, removed from the spectacle of glamour,

I hid the desire from my family for a long time; the pursuit seemed incongruous with my hippie life. I tried, fruitlessly, for many years to teach myself to sew and finally after moving back to New Orleans in 1997 I met the magnificent Oliver Manhattan who I apprenticed with for two years. She was a generous teacher and mentor. I'll never forget when she taught me how to tie a knot – something I assumed I knew – but, in the long tradition of apprenticeship, first you learn how to sweep the floor, and then you work your way up from there.

At the time Oliver was designing costumes for the Shim Shamettes, a burlesque troupe known for restaging historical performances. Oliver brought an inspired eye to the troupe. What stood out was her use of found and dis-

carded materials and that she never wasted anything, all cutoffs were eventually used. She would sew cardboard and plastic and always manipulated materials before using them. She never worked with fabric just off the bolt or trim straight from the store. She dyed, shredded, and exaggerated all materials so that every element had been touched by her hand. Maybe I'm romancing the 90s but this approach is still very much a part of my process.

MT: It seems like a pretty major shift to go from working with artists and performers in the underground burlesque scene in New Orleans in the 90s to designing for L.A.M.B and having your dresses worn by people like Paris Hilton. Did you feel in your element in the world of corporate fashion, or did you feel like something was missing?

TL: Definitely something was missing! But great moments can be found in feeling out-of-step. I moved to New York in 2001 to study fashion design at Parsons, which at the time couldn't have been more of a dream come true. My first job out of school was in socks, working for the giant mass-manufacturing company H.U.E. It was not what I had in mind, but I remained optimistic. Then I landed a hot job at the time, working as an assistant designer for Gwen Stefani's line L.A.M.B. It was exciting, a high-profile project with one designer and myself creating the entire first collection. After that, I worked for the bespoke tailor Craig Robinson. This was when I really learned to sew and the experience cemented my devotion to process. Learning tailoring was one of the most brutal things I have ever done. For one year he constantly made me take out my stitches and do it again and again. It was maddening, but one day it clicked.

After that I shuffled around in freelance, Old Navy, Nautica, Target, some shitty bathing suit company I can't remember the name of, all the while designing for private clients such as the Olsen twins. My last real participation in the fashion industry was as head designer for Pencey, worn by Paris Hilton, Victoria Beckham and the like. Quickly I began to feel it was much ado about nothing. Conversations within the office centered around "cute" and "not cute." It was tedium followed by disillusionment. Tens of thousands of my designs were being manufactured, individually wrapped in plastic and shipped around the world. Fabric treatments, dyes, and finishes are created with brazen disregard to health and environmental concerns. I felt sick and utterly lost because the one thing I had always pursued was crumbling. I would send my as-

sistant out on a task and crawl under my desk unable to work. At the risk of being dramatic – it was an existential crisis. And then I went to New Orleans for Mardi Gras, took acid, came back to New York and quit my job.

MT: Existential crisis sounds like a totally reasonable response to that lifestyle! During that time were you able to find any sort of creative outlets?

TL: Probably the most formative outlet of that time was performing with *Parthenogenesis* at The Box in 2007. Friends, members of the DUMBA art collective and Mary Jordan, invited my friend Kate and I to attend a performance. We were backstage hanging out before the show when two performers didn't show up. Mary insisted we get in costume and perform in their place. With a nudge and a bit of peer pressure we took to the stage. After that night I performed with them for the better part of 2007. It's difficult to describe what the performances were about. They changed weekly. We explored a host of themes: the rite of spring, queer-everything, global warming, necrophilia, and spectacle. It was absurd and incredible. I never imagined myself performing, it had never even occurred to me, but it was fantastically liberating to be so raw and unscripted, with an astonishingly creative group of women, on stage and in drag.

MT: It's interesting that after this first taste of being a performance artist, you found yourself working in sculpture and installation art before returning to that medium. Were you still living in NY and working in fashion when you collaborated with Emiliano Maggi to create a satellite installation for KK Projects during the 2008 Prospect biennale? Was the project a catalyst for you transitioning out of your life in NY at that time?

TL: The Box was a source of inspiration during a bleak time. Still, I was fixed on the identity of being a designer. It was a time of experimenting or floundering, or maybe both. I participated in every creative anything that crossed my path in an attempt to find something to sink my teeth into. Sculpture and installation are arguably closer to dressmaking which is likely why I gravitated to them first.

Prospect. 1 in New Orleans was a catalyst for many transitions, as was the financial crisis of 2008. It was a perfect storm. I learned of KK Projects and asked, more like pleaded, to participate. We didn't get physical or fiscal support, but we did get an awesome forgotten corner within the ruins of an old molasses

factory. The installation, *Modern Witchcraft*, was an urban altar made of found wood from the property arranged into a massive wavelike form meant to harness and amplify atavistic instinct and ritual.

When I returned to New York everything was grinding to a halt and freelance work evaporated overnight. I was broke with no work in sight. Everyone around me were losing their jobs. Eventually, I sublet my apartment and slept in my studio, and when I couldn't afford that, I gave up my studio. I was trying to figure out a way of sharing a short-term one room sublet with a friend. We were desperate, in a bad way, and only between the two of us did we have enough for a cup of coffee – we compromised on the milk.

Then my friend Stacy said I must come to New Orleans for the closing of the biennial and offered to underwrite the ticket. I jumped on the plane to escape miserable February, came back to warm arms, generous spirits, and stayed for three years.

MT: What were the highlights of your return to living in New Orleans?

TL: I laughed for five months straight when I returned. New Orleans has the best sense of humor. Play aside, I did manage to work like mad in those three years: teaching cooking classes for the kids of St. Roch with Life is Art, running *Darn It!*, my performative tailoring gig at the R Bar, creating the graffiti street installation titled *Pale Green Pants With No One Inside Them*, making costumes for Katey Red (a dream come true), designing costumes for The Baby Dolls, and working out of my rad studio on the third floor of The Ark, overlooking the Mississippi River. It was also a brutal time. I was changing rapidly which is not always the kindest experience to those around you. Everyone bared witness to my pushing and pulling of the self. If I could describe that time topographically it would look like Iceland – not as important but equally dramatic.

MT: Although *The Pearl* and *Fetish Number 1: Heaven and Earth* sculptures that you made during this time are distinctly contrasting to one another, they both seem to reflect the same motif of defense and protection. Were these pieces meant to be in conversation with one another when you created them?

TL: Yes, those works were made back to back and each referenced issues on the forefront of my mind. I had been sickened by objects, waste, manufacturing, consumerism and my active participation with them – clearly none



Fetish #1: Heaven and Earth, installation detail. Life is Art Sonoma, CA, 2010



Two Cheers for the Bundle of Sticks Metaphor, 2012



Panties for Diamonds: A Psychodramatic Audition for Love in the Age of Abandonment, Honey Space, NYC, 2011; photograph Nina Mouritzen



Total Body Burden, MONA, The Museum of Old and New Art, Tasmania, AU, 2014

of which can be remedied by sculpture.

The Pearl was made during an experimental residency in the massive steel, glass, octagonal, pyramidal structure that used to be part of the Eiffel Tower. We (Life is Art Collective) lived there, without leaving its grounds, for thirty days. During this time we invited artists from around the globe to make works that would permanently populate the space. On day one I removed all trashcans from the premises and asked everyone to collect, clean, and categorize all debris. Glass bottles were repurposed into drinking glasses, organic matter was composted and the remaining: plastic, paper, string, foil, fingernails, hair, etc. was consumed by *The Pearl*. Each day I broke down and rolled the detritus into a twine-wrapped sphere. It was finished in a coat of plaster, mica, and salvaged paints. *The Pearl* was made during the Deepwater Horizon oil spill and was intended to be a looking glass to how we live and make art. We humans are big shitters.

Fetish Number 1: Heaven and Earth was made during another experimental residency a few months later on a medicinal marijuana farm in Sonoma, California. For this piece I wanted to use only materials found on the farm. I used abandoned stakes, an old bamboo curtain, and twine to make the foundation of the spires. Then, in New Mexican adobe style, I finely sifted clay that was abundant on the property, mixed in hay, and coated and baked the spires in the summer sun for weeks. It was tedious to get the mixture right, and moving the 10-foot spires of earth into an erect position was next to impossible. I lost about half of them doing so. The serene beauty of the area brought to mind the ways in which we make sense of nature's wonders and the stories of origin that dominate our world and provoke many conflicts. This led me to consider one of our original fetishes: heaven and earth.

So far, I haven't been much concerned with the permanence of my sculptures- I suppose they are performative in that way. *The Pearl* is likely to crack under its own weight or by the heat of the materials inside breaking down. *Fetish Number 1* lasted just a few weeks, longer than expected, pummeled by rain and wind as it disintegrated. As the spires fell apart they began sprouting plants. Rogue seeds must have made it into the slip.

MT: It's fascinating that there are such clear recurring themes in your personal narrative. The meditative process of creating *The Pearl* seems almost like a healing atonement for the traumatic degree to which your previous career was wasteful and toxic, and the acceptance of impermanence in your

work as a whole, but particularly with *Fetish Number 1*, seems to parallel Mr. Robinson's tailoring lessons of being willing to remove your stitches over and over again, or in the case of *Fetish*, to allow the piece to disintegrate and remove itself.

TL: Impermanence penetrates these projects because it penetrates my life. Nothing is permanent or arguably real. Ideas excite me. Sometimes it's necessary to leave behind an object to cement an idea, but often it's superfluous.

MT: What was the spirit with which you and Rya Kleinpeter began INNER COURSE? Were you responding to some aspect of your lives, or just being spontaneous? Can you describe the first few performances for us?

TL: Returning to performance with the inception of INNER COURSE was spontaneous. Rya and I have known each other nearly 20 years. We met working at a Middle Eastern restaurant on the Upper Haight in San Francisco. After work we would drink wine and prank call friends and boyfriends with a menagerie of invented characters and jungle animals. We were particularly fond of performing a crazy Italian dominatrix named Nadia in a forest of monkeys and parrots. INNER COURSE picked up where we left off 15 years later.

Our first performance as INNER COURSE was *The Many Rumors Of Renni Esruoc*, for the 2011 grand-opening of MONA, the Museum of Old and New Art, in Tasmania, and was performed in three parts.

In Part One: Red Telephone, a rotary phone rang in the gallery of the museum and guests answered calls from the United States and Australia. Callers were responding to personal ads, posted online inquires, and statements. The number was toll-free, and the conversations were anonymous and not recorded. *Part Two: Blood + Guts* involved nine Tasmanian women, ages seven to 65, singing rounds of folk songs within the machine room of the museum, amid the hum of the state-of-the-art equipment. *Part Three: I Want Your ESP* was performed within the inner walls of the museum, down a 40 foot long corridor, where Rya and I received calls in response to posted inquiries. The viewers watched from afar and our conversations were amplified throughout the corridor.

Our characters were developed by entertaining each other, essentially prank calling ourselves, abasing our seriousness and the constant self-reflection inherent to being an artist. Such earnestness deserves a good poke. We were also playing with the vantage point

from which some people viewed us and our work. Doug MacCash, art critic for the Times -Picayune, often wrote about our projects, which involved many women, as "slumber parties," and commonly asked questions like, "Is this about fashion?" if fabric was one of the mediums. His approach to our work was fodder for some of our early performance material. Doug aside, sexist tropes shadow all of us in day-to-day and professional spheres. The costumes I designed for each of the INNER COURSE performances echo these relentless reminders that don't let you forget what is between your legs.

MT: Do you think callers were at all aware that they were participating in an art piece?

TL: Because the calls were not recorded, I don't know what people spoke about on the red telephone, beyond rumors. It's likely that some museum guests told the callers, but I cannot be certain. We did invite a few friends to call in, but most of them were given the red telephone number in the main gallery to insure we weren't just play acting with our friends.

MT: This approach of designing interactive situations where your viewers became active characters within the performance art continued with *Panties for Diamonds: A Psychodramatic Audition for Love in the Age of Abandonment*, and later performances. Did you and Rya have specific goals in mind when you first started designing the moments of vulnerability and intimacy that you were creating for participants, or was it more of an experiment to see what would happen?

TL: Our goals were specific but in performances of this nature, when you invite viewers to become active within the work, it is impossible to rehearse and there are always many unknowns. In *Panties For Diamonds*, the journey was designed to be long so that an ultimate exchange between the Self and the Other could occur. It's difficult to go from zero to sixty with a stranger, you need a spark to ignite an exchange. The stages of *Panties for Diamonds* were meant to be that spark. We placed *The Softing* room before *The Audition*, priming participants to share their lives with us, as we did with them, and to set a precedence of openness, vulnerability, play and empathy. We made considered choices so that we were not haphazardly experimenting with people. We recognized the responsibility of creating a space that invites people to open up and share their inner emotional self. Afterall, we are not licensed therapists.

This work, and the ones that followed, were adjusted slightly once they began. Sometimes it is simply an issue of traffic flow and how to move people through a space, but commonly there are issues with how wording is used and when. For example, INNER COURSE performed a piece, *Knowing Me, Knowing You*, at Pulse Art Fair in 2012. We set up an installation as art studio and guests could come in and collaborate on a work of art. Once the work was complete the boundaries of authorship blurred as attendees were asked to reckon with the worth of their piece by purchase or barter of goods and services. This was a cautionary tale of art and commerce, set within an art fair environment. Yet, we found peoples' feelings were hurt after sharing the experience of making art and then being asked to buy it with a song, a yam, a metro card, cash, or whatever they had on hand. I don't believe that art is supposed to make you feel good and not hurt your feelings, however, we chose to adjust the piece because we found that the macro subject money and the micro subjects art and commerce were being overshadowed by the affronting surprise. We adjusted the work by simply presenting the caveat to guests when they entered the room. Some found it a bit mannerless, which is inherent to commerce in general, but all gladly participated and we were able to get on with the conversation at hand.

MT: On the subject of art that isn't meant to simply make people feel good, can you tell us a bit about how your video installation *eat(shit)* came to be? Also, all of the locations that you filmed at seem to be part of an overarching concept of drawing attention to social and economic inequities - was that part of your intention with this piece?

TL: *eat(shit)* was inspired by the work of another artist, titled *eat(installation)*. I was asked to produce the installation and after witnessing gluttony in its conceptual and professional execution, I became sickened by the whole thing and found myself depressed on a couch for a month. To process the experience I had to find a thread of humor, an action, to get me off the couch. *eat(shit)* was a therapeutic digestif, pun intended.

I wore a Cajun Carnival mask while eating a mixture of instant mashed potatoes and chocolate syrup. I wanted it edible but also disgusting so not to fake nausea. I filmed in locations around NYC, where institutional gluttony has affectively marginalized vast members of society. The project also came on the tail end of months spent helping an older

eccentric friend get dentures for all but three of his missing teeth, navigating medicare and food stamps. I am troubled by the fine lines of luck that separate some from health and homelessness. Without support, basic challenges can break down a person's physical, mental and emotional health, leaving them ravaged and eating shit.

MT: That same year you built the sculpture *Two Cheers For The Bundle of Sticks Metaphor*. Was this an extension of your mindset after *eat(shit)*?

TL: Yes, a troubled mind is a burden. That experience was hard on me and in processing it I became disgusted by the repetitive thoughts and the looping that occurs when all you can think about is how you feel. I had become a burden to myself. Bundles of sticks have been used for fire, shelter, tools and in this way represent some of the oldest burdens. Using only base materials: found wood, tinted beeswax, and tinted twine, paired with an incredibly laborious process, was a way of acknowledging and celebrating an ancient human companion – burden.

MT: In recent years some your work has had a cheeky tone, particularly with *INNER COURSE vs The Wombat Witches*, and to some extent, *We Couldn't Remember What We Came To Forget*.

TL: Cheeky? Yes! Humor is an evolutionary survival trait and on a personal note it is paramount in comprehending my surroundings. *INNER COURSE vs The Wombat Witches*, 2014, (with Rya Kleinpeter, Emiliano Maggi, and Daphane Park) was a performance during the Hobart International Open Women's Final. You have major-tennis-stars about to play their final games and in between the doubles and the singles we did a short performance match with no balls on the court. There's not much that happens in the piece, a bit of clowning, but what makes it is potent is the unexpected interruption of a classic, serious space.

In *We Couldn't Remember What We Came To Forget*, a collaboration with Lisa Lozano for the Pulse Art Fair in 2013, we framed the performance as a corporate sponsor booth. Our nonconsensual sponsors were Evian and Purell. Everyone flocked to the Purell station, very happy to sanitize, and then met us lounging in beach chairs, staged as hired models, wearing bathing suits I designed with the chakras represented down the front made of generic images of objects found on the internet. We had printed pamphlets with every

known social media icon included, installed a scrolling sign, a propaganda video collaging great escape commercials, fake palms, and audio of steel drums and people playing in the water. Lisa and I were responding to the prevalence of corporate identities and force-fed escapism propaganda. I find it curious that we are seemingly comfortable with this relentless mental penetration. Where are the protests? The performance required a closer look to understand it wasn't real. It was cheeky for sure, but it was also dark.

MT: What's your most recent project?

TL: I recently did a performance called *Hangers, Hot Dogs and Cigarettes (An Existential Autoimmune Disease)*, which was a collaboration with Cat Glennon on Governors Island, NY. The piece was inspired by the *WomenAgainstFeminism* tumblr feed. It was troubling to read, the young women seemed to reject the important strides the feminist movement has made in what is still very recent history, yet at the same time it expressed a fresh disinterest in binary gender issues.

For the performance we chose everyday objects and created a revolving impromptu script built around their factual statistics, misunderstandings, misuses and historical relationships to feminism. We included text from the *King James Bible*, excerpts from *Waiting for Godot*, definitions of circular logic and navel gazing, anti-feminist texts, and a scene from *Mommie Dearest*. Some of the objects were obvious in their significance, while others held hidden meanings. Threading their history with existential dilemma, colorful anecdotes, bible verses, and precise dimensions of objects like the *Venus Of Willendorf*, was meant to highlight the cacophony of stern positioning and polarizing issues.

MT: Within your performances, rigid formality and protocols don't seem to be part of the experiences that you are creating. How important do you think it is to have a sense of humor or an openness to discordia built into the pieces that audiences are expected to engage with?

TL: Rigid formality and protocol are not a part of my personality or upbringing which is why you don't see it in my work, but I'm ever changing and they could, at some point, become important. I am attracted to the tension of levity and weightedness. For me humor and play are king – I don't know any other way.

MT





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Momma Tried is an ad-free conceptual nudie mag exhibiting literary and visual arts, subversive humor, and non-heteronormative perspectives on sexuality.

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