

Embrace your demons

1. Hi Yayu, how are you? How were these last couple of months for you?

Hi Alessio, I'm well, thank you for asking. The Covid-19 pandemic and quarantine have made the last couple of months extremely rough and difficult to cope with. And has unexpectedly impacted my creativity. But I can't complain, I'm grateful that my loved ones and I are safe and sound.

2. Would you like to tell us a little about yourself?

Sure, I'll keep it simple and straightforward. I'm a first-generation Chinese-American who loves reading gothic literature, contemporary novels, ancient history, and graphic novels. I graduated college with a B.A in English Literature and Fine Arts. I am mostly self-taught and began investing in my art career in 2017.

3. What's inspiration for you? How do you deal with it?

There are too many to list, so I'll pin it down to a few. Most of my inspirations come from my love for reading and creating stories. Fiction to non-fiction, from history books to poems, articles to novels, famous quotes to music lyrics, anything with words, it'll find a way to inspire me with its story. I absolutely love the romantic tragedies and godly heroic legends from Greek mythology and the ghostly tales and cosmic love from Chinese folklore. Lastly, and quite unbelievable to many, my dreams fuel a lot of my inspiration. I suffer from frequent sleep paralysis, which often leads to my lucid dreaming. They're really frightening, nightmares that my body can physically feel— numb and prickly, on rare occasions, even weighted. (It makes me feel like the sleeping maiden in Fuseli's *The Nightmare*!) These feelings are then followed by hallucinations, where I see irregular figures and shadows while my body remains paralyzed. The moment I wake from this horror, I

write it down in my journal. And as I'm documenting my dreams, I gradually turn them into stories, and these stories transform into ideas. These ideas are then illustrated.

4. What does stimulate your imagination?

Solitude and emotional beauty. I dedicate a large amount of time to spend on my own. In my studio, I would lie down on my rug with my eyes shut and let my mind roam freely. Usually resulting in a reflection of distant memories, revisiting dreams, contemplating about the future, and questioning the philosophy of life. It's very similar to meditating, only my thoughts are constantly flowing through my mind. Visually and emotionally, I'm very sensitive to beauty. I can find almost anything beautiful. Particularly in nature and art. Surrounding myself with the lush scent and tranquil sounds of nature are like medicine to my soul. It's able to transport my mind out of reality and into a realm of visual serenity. In art, I'm naturally drawn to emotional paintings and sculptures of figures, often surrounded by nature. Falling in love with sculptures by Gian Lorenzo Bernini or diving into a Caspar David Friedrich's painting can easily stimulate my imagination, because the beauty of

emotional art are strong narratives with stories of human philosophies. Exposing myself to beauty and combined with creative meditation are the secrets to stimulating my imagination.

5. What process do you follow when you want to transform "idea" to "product"?

When do you understand if an idea is worth working on? To be honest, I don't have a process from "idea" to "product". I don't put too much effort trying to think of a worthwhile idea, it can feel limiting to my creativity. I allow myself to sketch freely and it gradually becomes an idea once the sketch is complete. Reflecting on all my works, they revolve around the same ideas: romance, eroticism, and ghostly spirituality. And these are naturally occurring. The main driving force is

my sensitivity to beauty and the way it affects my emotions. And I illustrate those emotions on a blank canvas.

6. How does your environment influence your art? How do you combine your daily life with the fact of being an artist? How much does art influence your life and what does it add to it?

I work from home all the time, so I make sure that my environment feels and looks clean and beautiful. My home decor is very minimal and nature-inspired with soft, muted, and neutral colors, to create a tranquil surrounding. A peaceful surrounding allows more space for my thoughts. My work continues to have a huge influence on my personal life, in fact, art is what I dedicate most of my time to that I barely have time to do anything else; even my meals and exercise routines are built around to benefit my work hours. I've set up a strict schedule of 9-12 hours a day, 6 days a week; 1-2 hours of reading right before bed. When I'm not creating a product, I spend the time to study and sketch. Because of my rigid schedule, I take 2-3 international trips to broaden my mind, culturally and creatively. Creating art is always on my mind!

7. Have you ever felt like a work of yours was not given the right significance?

As a matter of fact, often, though I take no offense. My recent works within the last couple of years are heavily influenced by ancient Chinese aesthetics, and many of my audience believe them to be Japanese inspired. (In the past, my works were inspired by East Asian aesthetics, and I was unfortunately mislabeled as a Japanese artist).

8. How do you deal with failure?

Failure can be devastatingly heartbreaking and counterproductive. It's a struggle I still experience today. It's scary how easy it is to give into failing than getting up and trying over and over again. But I always remind myself that failure is not an option for an artist. There is not enough time in an

artist's life to learn everything they want, so failure shouldn't even be a consideration if the end goal is unachievable. Giving yourself realistic expectations helps relieve the idea of 'failure'. Art is life of learning, and there's absolutely no failure to wanting to learn.

9. Has something changed, in your creative process, since you started getting an economical profit out of your works?

Fortunately, my creative process hasn't been affected by my profit. Clients usually commission me based on my style and if it's something I cannot produce, I'd humbly decline it.

10. What's vocation for you?

Simply stated, creating art and surrounding myself with beauty is my life's purpose. In the past, you said you get your inspiration from asian folklore, greek mythologies and your "very vivid" dreams.

11. Has something changed? Did you find new sources or those are still your go-tos?

My seek for inspiration continues to broaden the more I travel, exposing myself to new cultures and their history. 2 years ago, I visited Italy, and today, it's still one of the most memorable trips I've ever taken. To sum it up, when I saw Michelangelo's Statue of David, I instantly fell in love—he was the most beautiful being I've ever laid my eyes on, he felt otherworldly and godly and I was overwhelmed with a sensation that I've never felt before. Since then, I love including masculine figures in my illustrations. When I'm exposed to new art and new feelings that has a lasting impact on my emotions, I always find a way to add it into my existing style.

12. Is there something in particular you want to communicate with your illustrations?

Love, with all its facets, is the main theme of your illustrations. Another one could be the relation between the earthly and the ethereal, often represented by a human being and a demon, accomplices of what seems to be a forbidden love, something that is not supposed to happen.

13. What does this mean for you?

Absolutely. I'll quickly summarize it as I don't want to get too personal. Most of my illustrations are a depiction of humans and our relationship to ourselves; the sins that we carry, forbidden lust that we keep in secrecy, and the controversial mysteries of the afterlife. As humans, we are birthed into a world of sin, it's inevitable. And there's a lot of similarities between humans and the portrayal of demons. Across many cultures, stories of demons are almost always depicted as evil, deceitful, and cruel; their behavior and actions are acceptable because that's the state of their nature. When humans behave in that manner, it's completely unacceptable, and there are people like that who exist, if not a little bit in all of us. I've come to believe, perhaps, the image of demons were created based on sins that humans have committed in the past. Unfortunately, there are some sins that humans cannot avoid due to the biological nature of our bodies, the most common one of all—lust. To me, lust and love are connected, lust being physical and love being mental, both necessary to create a state of intimacy. In my paintings, I love portraying women as my primary focus, they are the muses that we cannot live without, and as everyone may know, the original sinner—the temptress and seducer of man. That is why, in my illustrations, she wakes and walks throughout darkness, gradually dissipating as her existence is slowly forgotten. Juxtaposing her earthy femininity with an ethereal masculine presence helps add a heightened level of sensuality and tragedy to the narrative without overcomplicating the aesthetics. The masculine figures are demons; instead of representing them in the manner of how demons are supposed to be portrayed, they are a reflection of humans and our capacity to sympathize, to obsess, to seek friendship and love in an unforgiving state of solitude. Overall, humans and demons are similar in nature, and sometimes, not by choice.

14. I noticed different moods in your illustrations: when it comes to paintings, the mood is romantic, sexual, sometimes erotic; when it comes to comics instead, it changes, often prevailed by a more tender kind of love: shy teenagers, children, motherly love. Is there a specific reason?

This is actually a great question! I've never really thought about it. In general, love is such a strong theme and can easily be illustrated without overemphasizing it. To me, sexual intimacy is the end goal of love between two people, time and struggles that they've already dedicated to get to where they are today; visually, in my paintings, it doesn't take more than a glimpse to understand it. My comics, however, they don't depict any intimate relationships because they all share one thing in common—the coming of age and growth between relationships. This stage is often innocent and tender because children and teenagers do not have the capacity just yet to comprehend the depths of truly loving or falling in love with someone. It takes a long time, along with experience, to develop. And like a story, it takes more than one page to develop.

15. How long does it take for you to accomplish a piece?

All my digital illustrations can take somewhere between 8-15 hours. Though I am a digital illustrator, I paint with traditional techniques, applying light layers at a time.

16. Throughout your artistic career, can you tell us an episode (experience, encounter,..) that gave you something important, something that you still carry with you?

Yes, two things: finding my identity and always reminding strong. These are two important experiences that my friends have taught me, both artistic types. The first one, my friend shared his experiences as an Asian-American artist and how he'd come to realize just how important his Asian identity was to him. In many ways, I understood his struggles as our upbringing were very similar—always the minority in school, kids making fun of our culture; we grow up distancing ourselves from

our culture because it made us feel ashamed. However, that has changed for the better. As I got older, I realized just how important it is to embrace your cultural identity, regardless of what others may think. At the end of the day, that's who you are and that'll become a big influence on anything you create. Secondly, another friend told me something after I confided in him about the hardship of being an artist, and he replied with, "that's what makes artist types so strong. We are constantly being criticized and be being broken down, and yet, we still get up and try again knowing that it'll happen again. And again." The statement is self-explanatory and very true. And these are the two most important and life-changing experiences that has made me who I am today. I'm a Chinese-American woman, an artist, and a hopeless romantic with an obsession with beauty.

17. Give us five rules to be a bad illustrator.

Lack of self-discipline. A lack of self-discipline to learn means you've already lost half the battle.

Narrow-minded. Keep your mind opened to welcome new experiences and ideas.

Comparison. I cannot stress how self-damaging this is. Comparing your work to others is the worst.

It leads to a lot of self-doubt and insecurity, and ultimately, a loss in your own vision.

Quantity over quality. Spend more quality time on every piece you're working on; it's a much better compromise than having 10 mediocre illustrations if you could create one breathtaking piece.

Not taking breaks. Yes, creators love to create, and time is precious. But it's imperative to give your brain a break, to rest and recovery. Burning out becomes counterproductive and can often lead to stress. And stress is not healthy for a creative mind.

18. Three names of artists in your field that you think are worth to see.

I don't know if these artist are considered in my field, but these are some I admire today: James
Jean, Nicolas Nemiri, and Yoshitaka Amano.