Alyssa Landez Exploring The Human Experience Through Her Work

Alyssa Landez

Angela Gomez In Conversation With Alyssa Landez, April 20th, 2021

It's not easy coming up with questions for an artist whose work you've never seen. Upon meeting artist Alyssa Landez however, we both quickly opened up about never having been put in a situation like this and were able to easily collaborate with each other. I soon learned that collaboration is a characteristic that plays a major role in her work as something she's very interested in. Landez is a kindhearted individual who deeply cares about those around her and demonstrates that through the striking themes of her work. The following conversation took place over a Zoom call as the first time we met.

You can find her on Instagram @lyssalandart and more closely view her work and what's to come on her website https://www.alyssalandezart.com.

Would you like to introduce yourself? Tell me about your background and what you're currently doing.

I'm not good with artist statements! I'm a photography artist and I'm also trying to branch out to work with different mediums to incorporate in my photography. I've been in school on and off for the past 10 years and I'm going to be getting my bachelor's next year--super excited about that!

I really like to delve into photography as a way to express a lot of things that I'm going through with my personal life, and my work has to do mostly with my mental health and such. I've also slowly been going in a direction of working more collaboratively with my models. As opposed to just letting them model for me, I've started talking to them, interviewing them, getting to know them, and learning what they're going through. So, I've been trying to branch out more in that aspect as well when it comes to our health and how certain things in our human experience are affected by the things we go through internally every day.

I'm also looking to get a little bit more into my culture which I don't have a strong connection to. Growing up, when I would ask my parents where I was from, they always gave me the awful response of "You're American, that's all you need to know." So, I've had a real disconnection from my culture having grown up in a bubble and want to get into work that has to do with that.

How long have you been working with photography? Or making art in general?

I actually grew up dancing, so I grew up as a dance/theatre kid and I thought I was going to do that my whole life, but I ended up falling in love with art in high school. I started off with basic drawing and painting, so I thought I was going to be a drawing artist, but then I started messing around with digital photography and would take photos during my dance classes. And I really

fell in love with movement and using it in a more artistic way instead of just documenting. I started getting into classes in college and really fell in love with film, and I wanted to do it all the time--rather than digital. And I know it's a messy, long process, but it's what I prefer.

From Landez's series *Ghosts of Myself*

Compared to other photography that may cover similar subjects to yours, what differentiates your work? What makes it feel yours?

Well...I do struggle with that sometimes. It's always a thing with artists where we want to be different but it's hard nowadays. As long as I feel like it's coming from me and my experiences, or I'm successful in helping the person I'm collaborating with and they feel confident in what we've created, that's what makes it feel like it's my work. I don't know if, visually, anybody is thinking "Oh! I've seen that kind of thing before!" But as long as I'm staying true to myself and focused solely on my own work, I'm ok with them thinking that.

It's less important for me to be known for having individualistic-looking work because when I put too much focus on that, I don't feel like me anymore.

From Landez's series *Scars of a Native Warrior Woman*

I know you talked about it briefly, but what drew you to this medium? Why not choose drawing, as you mention?

I think, one, my patience changed! I had a great time drawing and I'm not ruling it out entirely, but my patience for it went out the window. The other thing is, I feel like I have a lot of control with photography--I know you have control of what you draw--but I have better control of my environment and to create *with* other people. I can branch out in more ways where the subject is part of the work with me, rather than just drawing them. Personally, it gets me more excited and gets others more excited to work in collaboration.

What is the most challenging thing about the medium you're using? You talk about losing patience, but using film seems like a complex process.

Yeah! I know it's funny I said that, but I just feel like drawing takes more patience. Although, you'll definitely hear me in the darkroom yelling at my film to get in the film holder so I can develop!

I have a weird relationship with mystery. I like wondering how it's going to turn out since there's definitely a lot of risk in film; it can get ruined, it can get spotty, etc. But I think depending on what I'm doing, I also kind of love that I don't always have control and how that mistake can turn into something interesting. It's a good balance because I have more control over my models and the environment, but less so in the development of the images.

When preparing for your shoots, what does that creative process look like? What are the steps?

I'm an all-over-the-place kind of person! The main thing, before I even do anything: when I have an idea, I'll immediately write it down. I have a little notebook with me, and you'll see me stop everything and write something. I usually don't sketch, but I will if I have a specific pose in mind (even if it looks like crap). After that, I just think "OK, what do I need for this? Do I need props? Do I need to be in a studio? What kind of model do I need?" Once I do that, I start messaging everyone making sure everyone's plans coordinate. And if I can't find anyone--I wing it like nobody's business!

It's just about taking the time. I actually discovered images of photographer Cindy Sherman's notes which were very extensive and that inspired me to take much more detailed notes, so I know exactly what I'm focusing on.

From *Nobody's Puppet (Model Life)*

While you're in this process of setting everything up and then photographing, what are you feeling?

As long as I'm in the zone and as we start shooting, I feel good. But there are days where I'm setting up the equipment--and I always get there early, because I'll feel bad if the model is trying to get ready and I'm still messing with the set--but then I get really nervous! I have to keep busy to distract myself, but once we have a good flow going, everything feels much more comfortable, and I want to make sure my model is comfortable too. I tend to get into my head a little bit where I just hope it turns out how I imagined, and how the model hopes it turns out, since I do take their input as well. It's also about compromise because certain models or artists that want to be a

part of my project want to take photos for their own portfolio as well--which is no problem since we all need and support each other!

When you're thinking about these different poses and scenarios, what aspects of your personal life play into that? Who/what are your influences and how do they translate in your work?

One of my biggest influences is Imogen Cunningham, and I always get people saying, "Don't you get tired of looking at the same 5 photos?" But, because of my dance background, I love the work that she did in collaboration with dance choreographer Martha Graham. Not just the movement, but the emotion she puts into the photos, I've always looked to that as a basis for my own work and what I'm looking for in terms of facial expressions, movement, or simplicity. Sally Mann is also someone who has inspired me in her methods of observing her subjects and telling them to hold still when she sees the right moment to photograph them. That helps me when I can't get out of my head. If I'm getting really elaborate and I want to work with color, even though she's not a photographer, I always look at Yayoi Kusama because she works with a lot of color and pattern that stems from her mental disorders. So, working with color is also something I'm trying to branch out into since I've strayed from it.

I'm a fashion buff so I love color, I love pattern, I love mixing patterns, and I like the idea of assigning colors to different models to convey different meanings. So that's also part of working outside of just photography and doing things like tapestry or 3D work and incorporating that as well.

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When viewing your art then, is there a certain message you're trying to convey? What do you want people to take from it?

Oh, man! I don't know, we do critiques pretty often in my classes and I always just go in thinking "Let's see what they say!" Rather than having something in mind already--positive or negative. I go in mostly wondering what they think it'll mean or if they will understand what I was going for. Often, they even interpret it in ways I had never thought of, which I love. People's interpretations are always really interesting to me because it stems from their own personal life. There's no specific message because we all have different lives, so however they interpret it is important too. I do hope that some of my work, especially relating to mental health and disorders reaches people who have experienced similar things, but they are going to interpret it according

to themselves. In the end, I hope people see I'm trying to do something good as someone who identifies deeply in their work.

What are you working towards now? What are your goals for the future?

It's kind of weird. My ideas may change later on, but I've always said I want to work in collaboration with publications like *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*. I've also thought about working in the actual film industry as a behind-the-scenes photographer since they also work closely with actors and other artists who know about emotion and how to work with certain subjects. Alex Prager is someone I'm looking to in that aspect. She started off working in the film industry and now works closely in collaboration with artists and actors, which I really admire. I want to work with people who are extremely dedicated to their acting craft. I'm not tied down to one method, I don't really see myself as a gallery artist, so I want to find ways to explore other industries.

What's your philosophy or ethic as an artist?

I do carry a quote from one of my past professors, and I kept it because I'm a very sensitive person, and I go through a lot of emotion. His quote is: "As an artist, you need to have the heart of a poet, but the skin of a rhino." And I keep that with me all the time, it really gets me through a lot.