11. REFLECTION BY EMILY STRONG

EXCERPT FROM INTERVIEW REGARDING HER PERSONAL ARTISTIC ENDEAVORS AND SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENCE.

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One of the biggest issues was, I kept pushing my boundaries and vulnerable things and I realized, ok well I've gotta start going after the big boss I guess. It feels really vulnerable for me to do the disability and sexuality series, but it's something that's never talked about. It was more of a proclamation of sexuality. I'm like, 'Surprise! Disabled people have sexualities. No matter what type it is, it's there, because we're humans', and that's when it kinda all blew up."

Were people taken aback by it?

"No, that was the first time there was a lot of the weird feeling of this shouldn't be so inspirational to people. That was the first one that I was like everybody is so glad that I posted it, everybody thinks it's so beautiful, they had no idea that these were issues. It's the first time it's on their radar or they've ever thought of these things. None of it is on anyone's radar. They felt like I was airing out this big issue, when it's always been there, and I was left to sit with the discomfort while everybody was just so excited about the project. That's just what happens with social issues, though. The people who are doing the work get the weird feelings about it and everyone else gets to learn. But, it was good, there were overwhelmingly good responses, which was awesome. It was more than I thought it would be. So that day, it was great, then the next day was like the hangover."

FULL INTERVIEW:

Age 28
Assigned Sex Woman
Pronouns She/Her
Gender Identity Woman
Race White

What is your gender identity? And can you describe it, please?

I'm a cis woman, I'm on the binary

What does femininity mean to you versus masculinity? And how do you relate to those?

Femininity… I feel like you have to have both - everyone has both. Femininity to me is very resilient and warm, and depends on whether is about aesthetic or if it's a feeling - but warm resilience often makes me think of the people who identify as women/femme in my life and femininity; a lot of people thinking of femininity as fragile, but I think it's actually very sturdy and caretaking and unconditional. So that's why a lot of it identifies with mothers in my opinion and that it's kind of an overlooked strength, because it's not the macho type strength, but it's actually one of the more useful types. It's endearing, its loving, its tolerant. When it comes to aesthetic feminine things I think there's so much more of a dynamic range than with general masculinity, because femininity can be so many things and it just depends on the person.

Masculinity I feel like is a lot of- it's hard! You need both.. I think I have to come back to masculinity - what *does* that mean to me? I know for me it comes into protectiveness- but that's not exactly true, because that's also like a mama bear… I don't know, it's all a blur. I also just think of what we're conditioned to put in each category and how it doesn't even- that's not necessarily true things either, so it's hard to say what it means to me when I'm noticing that I'm gonna say things that are in the ways we've been taught that we are.

I can find femininity in the curve of a man's collarbone or masculinity in a woman's strong jawline. I find femininity in the skirt anyone wears, or find masculinity in the combat boots I wear. It all depends on each person's perception, although we all have ingrained bias. Perhaps if we started to describe things as a feeling rather than a gendered trait, then we would have more of a chance to embrace both femininity and masculinity in all genders and beyond the binary.

It sounds like with femininity, you're talking a lot about the women in your life.

I think that's probably why it's harder for me to think of masculinity, because in the people who identify as cis women or femmes in my life and myself, I see the femininity as strong and the stereotypical masculine traits in those people, so I don't know how to differentiate traits as easily compared to just visual things.

How do these concepts impact the way you present yourself, if they do?

I guess - this is a whole unveiling of social structures. I like what I like and they tend to be stereotypical feminine things. They just stay in line with my binary gender. I don't know, I'm not high femme, but I love red lipstick, so there's little things that I associate with femininity that I have a lot of. But, I don't wear a lot of jewelry, but I wear red lipstick and I like black leather and stuff like that… it's hard to explain.

So, it sounds like your decisions aren't consciously gendered, necessarily

I'm not like, 'I'm a feminine woman, so I'm going to wear that because that's what I'm supposed to do'. It's more just that I like that thing and I also happen to feel like a woman and that's just what I'm doing simultaneously. It's not necessarily a conscious decision most of the time.

What is your racial identity?

I'm - I mean I have different white ethnicities, but German, Irish, Finnish mostly, but I'm just White, just very White.

Have there been times in your life when your race has influenced the way you've been treated?

Of course, I'm much safer and have been helped more than others who are in this society because I have white privilege.

Have you felt pressured to change your appearance by close family or close friends?

Not the people in my life, not my inner circle.

What about acquaintances or business associates?

Yes, because within workplaces you can become more conscious of the way you dress because of professionalism, or I've had bosses who were old White dudes who get uncomfortable, or they aren't used to different bodies and things like that. I'd say in our inner circle we're focused on interactions, then with anybody outside of that - whether it be work or social environments, or public - I become more hyper-focused on environment than interactions.

Can you tell me about any specific examples?

I had a shirt that said, 'F— cancer' once. They didn't like that. Once, one of my managers made eyebrows at me when I wore short-shorts. I'm a small person and my clothes are going to be small. Just things like that. People keep a general distance, because they don't know how to act around me sometimes, but that's a normal thing, so of course that's going to happen in the workplace.

I can just tell when people are figuring out their comfort level in how to interact with me, so they get kind of standoffish or they just kind of hesitate with conversations or being in a physical space and proximity sometimes. I'm pretty good at disarming that usually. Unless I don't care about that person, like my old bosses, then I'm like, 'Yes, stay away'.

Does that happen often?

It's very subtle, but usually. I've been trained to see it, basically, so it's not a big problem, it's not a scene, they barely notice that they do it, but it's there.

Have there been times in your life when you felt insecure about your appearance?

Yes and no. Mostly insecure about how people act around me more than anything, because that's the majority of things are interactions with people. It just can get tiring or I have to manage other people's reactions/emotions, and then my own.

Have you felt pressured to change your appearance by the media? What aspects of the media has impacted your self-perception the most? Commercial? Social? Other?

Absolutely; everybody's pressured by the media, and disability is one of the most under-represented different presentations of a person. It's the least talked about subject/minority group and to have anybody that is even on an intersection is very rare, too. It's just kind of unheard of. There's plenty of examples now, but you can make a one page list of the examples compared to countless examples for other people/topics.

Better than it was, but not where it should be.

That's the biggest problem, that's why I do the things I've been doing. I'll put my — on the internet if it makes somebody else comfortable. It's representation no matter what the art is or form it is.

You can't control the larger media, but you can use social media

Social media is the larger media now, in a way!

Do you do anything to alter your natural appearance? (tattoos, piercings, hair dyeing, makeup, etc) If so, why?

Yeah! So, piercings, tattoos; they weren't as commonplace as when we were 18. I feel like it was more taboo, so I was like, 'I'm going to get my nose pierced, I'm going to get a tattoo'. I remember showing my first tattoo to my grandparents and they were like 'That's cool!' I was like, 'I thought you were gonna be mad!' I was mad that they weren't mad. After that, I just got them because I wanted landmarks for different parts of my life, to make my body a journal. But, I don't have that many tattoos, because…money.

I used to dye my hair quite a bit, but I'm just too low maintenance now. I also cut my hair every year and a half to donate it, because it grows really fast, so I've just been letting it do whatever it wants. Otherwise, I'll dye it darker brown sometimes, since it's just fun to change things, I don't really have a reason for any of it. I can do it, so then I'm gonna do it (if I want).

What makes you feel beautiful? What makes you feel empowered?

When I feel very comfortable doing whatever I'm doing, looking however I look; not thinking about how any of us look feels awesome. Like, laughing or dancing and only being concerned with how it feels. If you don't have to think about it, you're just having a good time AND you feel like you look good. That's the goal.

How have your family and close friends been supportive of your appearance and self-perception?

If I'm having an illogical thought, they squash it. We are tough-love people. Growing up - I realized later when I was in college and stuff - that me and my family don't really talk about appearance. It's just not a thing, we don't care, like we've never talked about it. In some cases, yeah, especially if we're just being bullies to each other as siblings.

With my mom, it's just never even been a topic, because it was irrelevant. I think that helped a lot with - if somebody would bring something up or mention something that had to do with looks, my reactions would always just be like, 'Why are we talking about this?' So, that helped a lot with formative years anyway. And now at this point I feel like people - my close friends and family and stuff - just supporting my vulnerable work really helps, because as I do more and more things on the public internet, I'm working through any of those things on my own, but support to keep doing that is really helpful.

Has the response online been mostly positive?

It helps to hear that the things that I do, the representation, has helped some people or it's kind of shown a mirror up to some people about their ableist mindsets or something. So, that also makes any thoughts about appearance kind of irrelevant. Which is also the goal.

It's really impressive that you're working through these things on a public platform.

It's been a process.

Has there been negative feedback or rude comments or have people mostly been supportive?

Mostly really supportive, every now and then there's some trolls, which is why I ended up making merch anyway. Somebody was like, 'You're just ridiculous and skanky' Like, that's not the insult you think it is, I'm gonna make merch for it!

Someone else was like, 'You're just half naked on the internet for attention!', and I asked, 'Have even you read any of my posts? Do you know what I'm doing at all?' or the fact that I didn't even want to do this to begin with, but here I am and now I don't care. There were some other similar responses like that.

I was just thinking, 'Who do you think you are? What are you trying to do? I don't care what any stranger has to say (that isn't constructive), so what's your goal here?'

And eventually, I finally put it in my bio that, 'I'm not your inspiration', because I've gotten so many of those comments. It's not exactly always negative, but it is if you know why it's an 'inspiration porn' thing. So, I've tried to have many conversations about it to explain to people that you need to figure out what the difference is. Is it because I'm disabled? Or because I've actually inspired you to do something different? That upsets people, because I'm implying or

straight up saying people have bad intentions when they don't even know they do, so there's backlash from that. If you would just give it some thought though, you'll find out I'm right. If you REALLY really mean it in the right way, awesome. But 90% of people don't.

Or I'll get creepy comments or people in my DMs, but that's just a swift hit of the 'delete' button.

You said you didn't want to do this in the beginning, so what brought you to doing this very vulnerable exploration of intimacy and the self online?

I guess it wasn't fair to word it that way, because I did want to do it, otherwise I wouldn't have done it, but sometimes it feels like an obligation at times. If I post something and I get a lot of support, I have mixed feelings because I'm like there shouldn't be such a reaction to this cause it shouldn't be an issue. But it is, so it's a big reaction from people - whether it's good or bad - it just shows me that there's so much work to be done. It's exhausting being vulnerable all the time. And it can make you feel gross. But then it's great, so the benefits and the impact are well worth feeling gross or the exhaustion from it. The fact is, if anybody has been helped by it, which they have been, I'm gonna keep doing it.

It does feel a little bit like an obligation, just because I feel like I am willing to do it, where some people can't or they would never feel comfortable. I am apathetic about being naked on the internet. Well, not naked, but you know what I mean. So, if I don't have social anxiety, and I have the tools, and I know marketing or the platform well, then I should do it. Where some people don't know social media, or have social anxiety, or aren't photographers, or aren't good at networking. I do things that are easily digestible, like photography, modeling, and writing, so I have these skills and tools to give messages and representation. So, if I can do all this and I'm just annoyed sometimes because I feel like I shouldn't have to do it, because it shouldn't be an issue, then that's just — privilege.

I'm always going to do it, but there are bubbles of weird feelings. I think the reasons I started were more about pushing boundaries and being more vulnerable. I was focusing most on vulnerability and that's why it started. I was just doing a trade with another photographer. They photographed me and that's when I started modeling. I was more so just showing up in an unapologetic way, just being like, 'This is what I look like, I'm giving you permission to look'.

That's one of my main things: if I'm posting a photo of it, you can be curious, and it is an attempt to remove the side-eye stares. Online, I'm just letting you fully stare at me. You do it on your screen - you're good; you get that out of your system and then we can talk about it. I'd rather have it all out in the open together to destigmatize, than have whispers in the grocery lines or kids staring across the street. If we had more representation, it wouldn't be so weird when you see people that look different. I started because of those types of things, and after that I kept doing more and more with that and disability representation, and I decided I should just keep doing more with this then.

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of a proclamation of sexuality. I'm like, 'Surprise! Disabled people have sexualities. No matter what type it is, it's there, because we're humans', and that's when it kinda all blew up.

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Do you mind saying what disability you have?

There's one that's basically an umbrella term for any birth defects that usually happen in one, which is called VATER, but I usually don't mention that because it's so vague and irrelevant. But, scoliosis and a radial club hand/arm.

It looked like you have some scarring, have you had surgeries?

I've had about a dozen surgeries, some on my arm and some on my back. Also, because of my scoliosis, I also have a smaller lung capacity. In college was the fourth or fifth time that I got hospitalized for pneumonia, so I had too much scar tissue and have to have oxygen full time now.

Is there anything you want to add that wasn't covered already?

Bodies are bodies, bodies are cool!