

14. PLURALITY BY EMILY STRONG

EXCERPT FROM INTERVIEW:

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FULL INTERVIEW:

Age 40

Assigned Sex Male

Pronouns He/Him/She/Her/They (any)

Gender Identity Question mark? Bi-gender is probably the closest I guess, but I've never really been that concerned with putting a name to it or a classification. It's just who I am.

Race Caucasian

Okay. So when you say bi-gender is that like, is that similar to non-binary or identifying with both, like gender fluid?

I have, pretty distinctly, one masculine and one feminine identity, and they don't really bleed into each other. Some days, I'll wake up and feel one really hard, and some days I'll wake up and feel the other one really hard. It usually comes in waves. I'll go through spans of time where I identified much more with my feminine side, and then spans of time where I'm much more identified with my masculine side. Sometimes, it's context dependent based on the things that are going on in my life. If there are things going on that require more masculine approaches, quote unquote.

For example, we're remodeling most of our house and that's, like, power tools and all that stuff. I like to build things and stuff like that, but it's all a very masculine energy that I feel like I, in order to tackle these kinds of projects, I need to kind of lean on. But then there are other times when I don't have to worry about that stuff and the more feminine side comes out and needs to be expressed.

But it sounds like you're pretty much equally comfortable with leaning either way.

Yeah, I mean, it's a process. It's taken me a long time to get as comfortable as I am now. Like any person who struggles with this kind of gender thing, it's always a journey, never a destination. So, I feel very fortunate to be where I am with it now and the support that I have of my wife and my good friends and this expanding circle of people who know the totality of who I am, but it's still not always easy.

So, the parts about it that are hard work; is it difficult in terms of how other people treat you or for your own self-identity?

I mean, a lot of it is being still afraid of what people will think or say, or I don't really ever go out presenting being feminine. I've done it once or twice for photoshoots, which has been a trip to do that, but it's still really something that I kind of do in my private time or with close friends. It's just a lot more comfortable for me to do it when I know I'm going to be around people who are comfortable with it, and accept it, and embrace it, and support it rather than just throwing on makeup and a dress and going into the store. That's still a big step for me to do, and part of me isn't sure that I need to, because it's like, who am I trying to prove something to? I'm not trying to prove to the people at the store that I have a strong feminine identity. That part of me is for me and not for the world. The people who I let into that circle is up to me, who I want to be there.

When you did go out dressed in a more feminine-presenting or more feminine way for those photoshoots, did you find that people were approaching you differently, or looking at you differently?

I mean, I just got a lot of looks, for sure. But, most people just kind of viewed it as, 'Oh, okay. Cool', and walk by.

My friend is a photographer and we were trying to do some fashion shots, because I was trying to, at the time, put a book together. It's a whole long story, but there was a possibility that I was going to try to actually get hired by an agency to like, be a real model. So, my friend who lives in Portland, Maine, was like, 'Yeah, we'll totally do that'.

So, I went up there, and she was like, 'We're gonna go down to the coffee shop and I'm gonna shoot you there', and I was like, okay. It was February of this year. You know, not long before COVID really hit. I was wearing a top with a sweater and a short skirt and little booty heels or something. You know, everything- makeup, my hair done.

If you've never been to Portland, Maine, it's a very weird town. You know, no one really bats an eye, but it's a very cool place.

So, we went into the coffee shop. I'm trying to play it cool, like, I'm not trying to look around and look at all the people who were there and be like, are you looking at me? Are you looking at me? And I remember there's one guy, he was a black guy, he was looking at a wall of mugs and stuff

and he was like looking at those, then turned around and saw me and he gave me a look up and down, and he was like, 'You go, girl!' and I was like, that's awesome.

With the duality of your gender, what pronouns do you prefer? Or does that change with how you're feeling?

So, much like the 'what is your gender identity' question, and 'what are your pronouns' question, I don't really worry about it. What people call me is not my concern. I know how I feel at any time and there are people who refer to me as one or the other, both depending on the situation and any of those things. I don't really worry about it.

We already talked about the first question, which is, what is your gender identity, but moving into the masculine and feminine, what does femininity mean to you versus masculinity as general terms? And how do you relate to them?

The best way to phrase this, you know, there's the traditional dichotomy. Masculine is strong and brave, the defender, and viewer, and master of their environment, and that kind of stuff. And then, you know, the feminine part of it is that nurturing caretaker, soft and all those kinds of things. And they're not really accurate, I think. I mean, in some broad terms, they kind of are, but there are different kinds of strengths. There is a masculine strength and a feminine strength; they're both valid and useful, depending on the situation. I just feel like I have a lot of both of those kinds of things in me, and I don't ever really just settle on one. I feel like I'm totally rambling.

So, even when you're in a situation where you feel like you're really engaging with a more masculine side, you don't feel like you're strictly within that box? You always feel like you're engaged with the whole?

Yes, and no. I feel like it's not like a dial. There's always one that's kind of at the forefront, depending on what's going on, and there are certain things that I may be doing that are masculine driven, or whatever that means. That's just the side of me that's active and engaged in whatever is going on, and the feminine side is kind of, I don't want to say set aside, but clearly becomes secondary to what's going on. I'm not necessarily thinking about the nurturing things, or whatever, when I'm tearing a kitchen apart, remodeling my house. That's all the brute strength force in that part of my brain, my psyche, but there's always a balance that has to be maintained.

So, when I go through these experiences, or situations, or whatever, where I have to be nasty I guess, it'll always kind of snap back, and then I'll have a period of time where I'm a lot more feminine-focused. It's just kind of like a pendulum or a metronome or something; always to the one or the other. And then sometimes it's kind of in the middle, or it's a lot more extreme one or the other. You know, it all kind of just comes and goes with what I'm primarily feeling at a particular time, if that answers your question.

Expanding on that, do you find that that affects the way that you're presenting yourself? Like, if you're feeling like you need to call upon your feminine side, is

that when you feel most inclined to present femininely with things such as makeup, or feminine clothing? Or is it just in a modeling situation?

Oh, yeah, 100%. When that feminine part of my psyche is kind of at the forefront, that's when I'm most inclined to want to do my makeup and wear feminine clothes and bring that outward physically a lot more. Having a masculine body means that when I feel masculine, it's just always that, there's no getting away from it. So I feel like, the flip side of that is, then when I feel a lot more feminine, I have to do a lot of the - I don't have to, but I feel the urge to - do a lot more of the explicitly feminine, exterior type of presentation to see that part of me looking back in the mirror.

That's one of the big things that modeling really did for me. For a long time, and I'm sure this is true for a lot of other people who have different gender identities, but to feel that you're a certain way on the inside that you don't see on the outside. For me, it was years and years and years of not knowing how to do that; how to bring that part out in a physical manner.

I remember the first time I got edits back from my very first shoot that a good friend of mine set up with one of her friends. She had become kind of like my fairy drag mother. She was a burlesque dancer and a model herself, and so she was one of the first people to really teach me about makeup and we would go shopping together and all that stuff.

So, she set up this photoshoot that she and I would do with her friend. I remember getting those first edits back, and I kind of assumed it would be a one-off. You know, we'll just do it, it'll be fine, and that'll be it. But, I remember seeing that first edit that the photographer sent to me, and it was the first time that I ever really saw on the outside what I felt on the inside. Like, totally changed my perception of who I was when I saw that, cuz for the longest time I thought, you know, I'm just a guy in a dress, that's all it is, but she captured something in me that I didn't know was really there, I guess. And even though I always model with my beard on - I never take it off - but despite that, I could see that feminine energy was there, was on my face, and in my eyes. It was this radical experience for me to see that. So, I don't even know why I started talking about that, but that was one transformative moment of my modeling career.

Had you experimented at all with wearing feminine clothing or presenting in a feminine way before that?

Oh, yeah, quite a bit. I mean, since I was a kid, and it wasn't until I got out of college and had my own apartment that I had the space to kind of really try to figure it out. But, not having grown up learning how to dress for my own body, like what kind of cuts of dress will work on you, is something that girls learn when they're growing up. It's not something that I ever learned, or like, what's your skin tone? You know, are you a blue undertone? Or whatever.

When I learned this stuff - because as we've established, I'm very old - when this happened, there was no YouTube. Back then, there was not that kind of stuff. There were message boards and stuff like that, and that was it. So, there was a lot of trial and error and a lot of really awful mistakes that I made, but eventually I kind of started to figure it out.

I eventually got to the point where I felt comfortable enough that I didn't want to keep that part of me strictly a secret anymore. I felt like she needed to be shared with other people. So, I started to pick out very specific individuals and kind of roped them into what was going on, and they would all kind of give me their own wisdom about how to dress your body and how to do your makeup the right way, and all this kind of stuff, and eventually, through a lot of practice and trial and error, I kind of figured it out. I guess.

So yeah, it definitely wasn't my first rodeo, so to speak, but there's a difference between looking at yourself in the mirror and seeing that and having someone take a picture of you that other people can see and also see that in you as well. I feel like that was a big part of what made it, because it's not just that the photographer took this picture and sent it to me, and I was like, 'Oh, my God, look at that'. And she was like, 'Yeah, it's fine', you know, she was like, 'No, I see this too' and then people she showed it to also saw it, and it was the thing that gave me that sense that I wasn't totally crazy, I was just a little bit crazy in regards to how I saw myself.

You mentioned that you keep your beard, even when you're modeling in a very feminine-presenting way. Is there a particular reason for that?

Well, the first reason is that my chin is ugly. It's, like, really terrible. I mean, ever since I actually grew facial hair, I've had this in some form or another. It's just, it's pointy, and you could, like, land a plane on. It's too much. But, the other reason is that when I started modeling, I took this as a chance to try to bring those two sides of myself into a balance, or some kind of acceptance with each other. This facial hair is as much a part of me as any other part is, so if I'm going to try and bring the two together and kind of reconcile them with each other, there's no reason for me to not leave it.

Have you ever had a photographer and artist ask you to remove it?

No, not yet. Thankfully, most of the photographers I've worked with, well, I mean, all of them are really into it. They think it's interesting, so maybe they want to be a part of it, which is awesome. I don't know, I mean, working in the relatively small art photography community, you're gonna find a lot of people are like, 'That's totally cool'. I'm sure when, or if, I actually did more commercial work, that might change. Or it might not, I don't know, but up to this point, I haven't worked with anybody who has said that what they're trying to capture is different than this. I'm not sure I would do it if they said this isn't what they wanted. I might say 'Thanks, but no thanks', because I think that would be disingenuous to myself. Especially for doing art modeling, where it's about expression and communication and getting the viewer to feel something, like, this is who I am. There are plenty of other people who look good in a dress who don't have a beard.

Have you ever felt pressured to change your appearance by friends or family, whether that's your more masculine appearance, or your feminine, or anything in general?

Like I said before, I'm usually pretty selective about the people in my direct life who I kind of lead into this little world that we've got going on here. Instagram is a different story, you can be whoever you want on Instagram and it doesn't matter. There have been situations where I've done

things that are more feminine in appearance that I haven't changed, per se, then I've gotten some pointed questions about those things. Like, if my nails are still painted, or when I started to get highlights in my hair, or like, those kinds of things, I'll get some questions about that sometimes from family members, or what have you, but not too bad.

Are there some family members you have that you haven't let into that?

No one in my family knows. No one.

Do you think you would ever tell them? Or do you think they wouldn't really get it?

I've considered it many times. It will probably never happen. I don't want to give you the impression that my family is full of bigots, because it's not. They're all very loving, accepting people, but I think - and this kind of goes back to something that I felt when I started telling people - it's easier to tell someone that you barely know, because you don't have a history of a relationship that will be turned on its head by the news.

So like, if I have a friend who I've only known for a year, I tell them about [feminine identity name], and it just becomes part of our relationship. To tell the best friend that I've had since junior high, or to tell my mom, there's so much more history and that kind of stuff, that to tell them... that is going to result in a much more drastic realignment of the relationship.

That may or may not be true in reality, but that's how I've kind of felt about it. So, it's been really hard for me to tell people I've known for a long time. There are some people that I have told that I've been friends with since high school, but only because I know that they'd be on board with it. I'd have a real hard time telling someone I've known for that long who I wasn't sure about, because what does it gain me? I feel like there's a lot of downside and not necessarily a lot of upside. That part of me is not necessarily improved by this other person knowing.

It seems like for someone who is strictly trans, it can be very important to have that outside affirmation of their identity, but it seems like for you, that's not quite as necessary, at least right now, to have both sides acknowledged in that kind of way. Is that correct?

It is correct, but it's also not 100% accurate? I am aware that I've told you two different things and two different answers about this, so it's totally on me. There are definitely times and situations where I feel like that part of me really needs to be acknowledged, and then there are times when I feel it doesn't. They can come and go a lot, and again, are very context dependent. Like, after that first photo shoot that I did, I was suddenly very interested in getting that acknowledgement, because it's like a little kid getting a puppy. You want to show everybody your puppy. You're so excited, it's a totally new thing and you want everybody to see it and know how great your puppy is, cuz it's the best puppy in the world. But you know, that eventually wears off, and everyone's seen your puppy, and your puppy is getting old.

My wife is looking at me, like, 'Where are you going with this analogy?' I'm not sure yet. We'll see when we get there.

So, you know, there are times when it just doesn't seem important. When knowing that I'm in touch with that part of me and that I have my wife's support, and the support of my close friends is enough, it's not a big deal. But again, it oscillates. There are times when I feel like I really need that validation, and then other times when it doesn't seem important.

So, modeling helps you to bring that validation in, even if it's not from everyone in your close circle?

Oh, yeah. I mean, you post something and you check it, you know, 30 times a day. Every time that number goes up, you get a little dopamine hit. There's definitely that.

The blessing and the curse of it is modeling gave me an opportunity to get that kind of appreciation and affirmation, like, gangbusters. You know, like trying to drink from a firehose. But, there's a dark side of that, where if you're not getting as many likes as you used to get and people don't see it as engaged, you start to question yourself and what am I really doing here, nobody really cares that, you know, spiral and, you know, close your, you know, suspend your account for a while, which I've done several times.

It affects you so deeply that you felt like you had to take a step back?

Oh, yeah, like, two or three times I've done that. I'm actually kind of doing it now.

I hadn't seen you posting for a little while, but I wasn't sure if it was just COVID related or something else.

Well, part of it was my wife and I had our first child in April.

What crazy timing for that.

Oh, it's so weird. What a trip. I mean, in some ways, it's actually been amazing, you know, because we can't go anywhere, really. So, we can both work from home, so we're not missing any moments with him. We're gaining so much time with him that we wouldn't have gotten otherwise, but on the other hand, we're not exposing him to the same level of socializing that we would have wanted to by this point.

So, it's a double edged sword, but there was too much going on and I did feel like people weren't really engaged in what I was doing anymore. And, I wasn't shooting with anybody, so I didn't have any news to share with anybody. So, I don't have anything to say, seeing all these other people with things to say makes me depressed. So, I'm done for a while. I've only recently kind of started to go back on just to kind of reconnect with some people, not necessarily to post or scroll, or whatever. It was quite fortunate that you messaged me when you did. It was, like, two days after I reactivated my account just to pop on.

It sounds like social media, and media in general maybe, does play a role in how you perceive yourself. When you see a lack of engagement, do you feel pressured to change the kind of content you're doing, or the way that you're presenting yourself?

No, because I'm very obstinate. If you don't like me this way, you can't have me, I'm deactivating my account. If you don't like it, you don't deserve me, goodbye. I get very defensive about it. You know, I'm not one to be like, 'Oh, well, let me change so that I can be the thing that you want'. I'm just like, 'See ya, middle finger, bye, call me when you appreciate me'.

It's only very recently that I feel like we've seen more representation of people that are LGBTQA+ or present differently from their assigned sex in media. Do you feel like that has affected the way that you view yourself or the way that you want to present yourself?

I don't think so. For better or for worse, what I'm doing is, I feel like, purely an act of self-expression. You know, trying to use this medium as a way to sort some stuff out about myself and maybe show some people some things they haven't seen before I made them think about things a little differently. I'm not necessarily trying to make some grand statement about this or that, there are plenty of other people who are making those statements far better than I ever could.

I view it as a much more personal journey that I'm trying to undertake here. I think there's certainly tremendous value in that kind of greater representation, especially in the world of photography, which has forever been dichotomous. You know, male photographer, female model; that's a very rigid thing. That is becoming less rigid and there's more diversity, both in photographers and models, and that's all good, but I don't necessarily see myself as motivated by that, or that's not my goal. I didn't set out to increase diversity in this medium in that way. I was just, like, a sad guy in a dress who wanted to be beautiful. I've come a long way since that, but there were definitely a lot of those times for me, for sure.

Did you ever feel insecure about doing that? Or your appearance in general?

In what sense?

Well the question is, have there been times in your life where you felt insecure about your appearance? But just from the way that you're talking about some moments when you presented more feminine, did you feel insecure presenting yourself that way?

Oh, incredibly. You know, there's always the fear that people are going to, I don't want to say, not take you seriously, but look at you as a freak, or something. Especially being in the modeling world, where there are like a million actually beautiful models, and here I am, trying to be, like, a pale imitation of that. It's hard for me sometimes to deal with and keep centered on the fact that I'm not trying to be them, I'm trying to be me. There may be a part of me inside that is jealous of that, but that's not who I am. I am who I am, and I'm just trying to explore that and come to terms with it.

It's kind of interesting to hear you say that, because just from looking at the way that you do approach femininity, it doesn't seem like you're trying to be the stereotypical model. By making choices like keeping your facial hair, it seems like you're really trying to redefine and make your own category. It's interesting to hear that there are moments where you do compare yourself to that idealized, stereotypically feminine model.

Yeah, a lot. There's that push and pull, that dichotomy of who I actually am and who that part of me inside might ideally want to be, but that's not what we got here. So it's, you know, trying to keep that as my primary focus; knowing that I can be beautiful on my own terms.

I think I think a lot of models, and a lot of people in general, need to hear phrases like that are often

It's brutal. That's one of the downsides of things like Instagram. Again, it's an amazing platform for people to express themselves and show who they are, but it's the human condition to compare yourself to other people, and you have to always want what someone else has and not be happy with what you have. It's easy to really get lost in that kind of cycle of not being appreciative of who you are and always wanting to be someone else, or having something that someone else has. You know, skinnier waist, or prettier eyes, or whatever. I feel that all the time: why can't I have eyes like that, or why can't I have a nose like that or whatever. But, you have to always bring it back to the expression of who you are, because you're unique. There's no one like you, and if everyone had those pretty eyes, or that pretty nose, or whatever, no one would be interesting.

You've got to think there's a reason why artists and photographers are approaching you. When there are so many options for models with social media, there's a reason why someone would work with you.

There are definitely a few brave souls out there are like, 'Yeah, he's just weird enough'.

So I'm curious, you say that redefining and sort of adding diversity to the larger media wasn't one of your main goals, but you said that you were thinking of trying out actual fashion modeling. What made you think that you might want to explore that?

Okay, so interesting story. A friend of mine, who is an actual agency model - not full time or anything like that, she's actually a gender therapist. It was totally weird and requires so much backstory, but it's a weird thing that she and I became friends. Anyway, she knows this photographer. If you remember that gender identity project thing I did with that model where we both wore the same dress, it's like that. So, we did that with this one photographer, —.

It was totally great. She works with him all the time and they're really good friends. We were planning this other shoot, and because they're both in the modeling world, they had this friend who's a stylist come and style the shoot for us. She bought a bunch of outfits and stuff, it was a whole big thing. It was so much fun. But, she kept looking at me when I was modeling and

whispering to [another model] on the other side of the room, and I was like, what are they talking about?

Eventually, at the end of the shoot the stylist came up to me and she was like, 'You have the thing they can't teach. You just have that thing. We could get you signed to an agency, I bet. There's a lot of clothing lines that are starting to become far more inclusive about different gender identities and things like that'. You know, she's like, 'we're right on the cusp of that, you could really do something with this'. And I was like, 'I'm being discovered, oh, my God!' So, she and I got together for coffee later and talked it all out, and she was like, 'So, the first thing to do is put together a book', which is why I ended up in that outfit in the coffee shop.

I hadn't even considered it as a possibility until someone who actually works in that industry was like, 'No, you could do this', like, 'You have that thing that photographers look for'. And that, obviously, blew me away. But then COVID happened, right? So, I have no idea if that's even a thing anymore, or something that we can even pursue at this point. I don't know. So, I thought it would be fun.

I feel like everything that we've talked about has just sort of naturally covered my questions, but is there anything else that you want people to think about or consider when they're looking at the painting of you?

I think, just to keep an open mind about what does beauty actually mean? What does it mean for something or someone to be beautiful? How does what you're looking at jive with what you think that beautiful means? If I can do that, if I can make someone think twice about what it means to be beautiful, then I think I've done my job, so to speak.

What makes you feel beautiful and empowered?

Alright, I think it goes back to the first edit. I got back from that first shoot, and seeing myself outwardly the way that I feel on the inside is what makes me feel beautiful. That makes me feel powerful. That thing is in me, that thing that I want to be in me is in there. That's very reassuring and very powerful in its own way, to know that my own preconceived notions of what is beautiful are also wrong, I guess to put it that way.

Could you expand on that last part a little bit?

Well, there are a lot of reasons that people see beauty in a thing, right? There's a societal aspect, there's an evolutionary aspect, there's all these things, and I'm not immune to those. I am an evolved creature and I live in a society and I have all those preconceived notions as well. But, to look at myself and say, 'Yes, you are beautiful, too', and to know that all those preconceived notions are - they're not wrong, but they're not whole. That there's more to beauty than that, and to see that in myself, because it's so hard to appreciate yourself for who you are.

I mean, this is true for everybody, right? It's so hard to be okay with who you are, and to love yourself, and appreciate who you are for who you are. I feel like when I'm able to do that for myself, you know, like that's, that's a big deal.

Thank you. That was really, really interesting. I do also have one other question that came up after I wrote these questions, but I'm really curious to hear your thoughts on it. I was speaking to an artist who is a photographer, and she does a lot of work based on gender and gender relations. She's from the Netherlands, and she said that gender is pretty much being abolished there. So, on birth certificates, they're not including sex at birth and stuff like that. She was very excited about it.

It's interesting to hear cultures broaching the subject of what are these learned stereotypes about masculinity and femininity, and does it really matter? It seems like, from what you've said, it's still these two dichotomies; it's the duality of it. Do you think that you would be happy if gender was abolished? Or do you feel like you would be more fulfilled just being able to engage with both?

I think the latter, because ... Let me put it this way: in that kind of world or society, yeah, it would be super cool if I felt total freedom to put on whatever makeup I wanna wear, wear whatever clothes I wanted, go to the store, do whatever, and nobody bat an eye. But, you know, is that really what that part of me is looking for? You know what I mean? That part of me is, I feel, very distinct and very feminine, and if there's no such thing as masculine or feminine, then what is the point of, like ... why does she exist?

Yes, I could get to a place where there was this kind of mishmash of both, but I don't think that either part of me would be particularly happy in that arrangement. They both have their very clear, distinct...I don't think personalities - but, their essences that I don't feel can really be mixed to get ... like you mixed together two colors, but you don't necessarily get a better color out of the two of them. They might have been better as separate colors next to each other on a palette, and then swirled together.