

15. SEEK BY EMILY STRONG

EXCERPT FROM INTERVIEW:

What makes you feel beautiful, or what makes you feel empowered?

"I close my eyes, because it's all internal. It's a connection you have to yourself, and my connection that I feel with Earth, and the universe, and my faith, and my guides. All of that empowers me; feeling that support, feeling my ancestors behind me. And also feeling safe has a lot to do with being empowered; finding people in your life that love you in all shapes and forms. Being able to decide that it's your sovereign choice to show up how you want to, and that if people say something about you, it's not personal.

But I've also noticed, so much of my power has been taken away by my perceived thought of how other people would perceive me. So when I'm able to get past that, I think I'm in an empowered place. I think it's less of what you need to do to feel empowered, and more like what you let go of, because I think we are all empowered people that have been taught to not act that way and not carry ourselves that way. I think that's our base vibration. If you strip away all the experiences, like, if I even think back to when I was a kid, I would play with the makeup and I would do funny, crazy poses and be silly. That's kind of who we are and how we show up to the world before we're told how to show up. So, when I feel safe to invite that version of me forward, that's empowering."

FULL INTERVIEW:

Age 22, almost 23

Assigned Sex Female

Pronouns She/Her

Gender Identity Female

Race Half Caucasian, half Vietnamese

Could you describe your gender identity a bit further?

I've always identified and felt comfortable with being female. Although, I've thought deeply about my essence, and my soul, and my relationship to that with energy work. It came to me in my adolescence when I had a few friends come out as transgender; I realized that I believe my soul, I don't know if everyone feels this way, but I believe my soul is androgynous. It chose a female body to come into form to express itself in this particular life, but when I leave this life, that same energy could be either. It's allowed me to feel comfortable expressing myself in both masculine and feminine ways. But, I feel grounded in the fact that I came this lifetime to be a reflection of the divine feminine.

So you talked a little bit about expressing yourself in a feminine or masculine way? What did those terms mean to you? And how do you relate to them?

I think of masculine and feminine energy more in how you go about your life, rather than how you express yourself physically. So, when I think about masculine, I think about action-oriented, getting things done, having a logical perception of things. When I think about feminine, I feel a more receptive energy, more relaxed state, but also a very powerful sort of rest that allows things to magnetize to her.

I think how it's reflected in traditional beauty standards; a woman being more expressive in certain ways. That's why you see more women traditionally wear color, or makeup, whereas men might wear things that are more practical for what they have to do, like pants, and not really worrying about how they look as much, because they're more action oriented. I think that got exaggerated in Western culture, when it was less about... well, it's not that it's less about action, but we have more material items to express that. I guess that's been exaggerated a little bit, but I also feel like because it's been exaggerated, we've been able to play at both choices now, whereas 100 years ago, I don't think it would have been acceptable for you, for example, to try on the other gender's clothes for change.

Do these terms and the concepts impact the way that you express yourself personally, or how you present yourself?

They do. I do feel a hesitancy to show up as a more masculine form. When I initially decided to cut my hair, I thought to myself - which I don't mean it to be derogatory in any way - but, I just thought, 'I don't want to look like a dyke', which I wish I had a better term, but I was worried about that for some reason. But then at the same time, when I cut my hair, I realized that I never will really look very masculine, because I have, I think, a feminine aura. I was also a little disappointed at the same time. It's interesting.

Were you concerned that people would think that you have a different sexual orientation than you do? Or were you concerned that people would treat you negatively if they thought that you were?

I think that's part of it. More of, it's not that they would perceive me in that way, they would just notice a change, and then just be like, 'why?', and then want an explanation. Like when you have to explain to the people in our lives if we want to express ourselves differently, or show up in a different way. No matter the reason; whether it's an intuitive feeling inside, or just what you want to do that day. I find when I'm more comfortable with friends, I feel more comfortable playing with masculine forms, but there's so many other areas of my life where I wouldn't.

This is kind of skipping around the questions, but it's related to what we're talking about. Have you felt pressured to change your appearance by close friends or family? Or to not change your appearance?

I don't think I've ever been pressured to change my appearance. I feel like I've been questioned on how I choose to present myself, if it comes off as too dressy for an occasion, or if it comes off

as, perhaps, provocative. Or, like I said, I haven't even tried on most occasions to be more masculine. Unless I'm just around my closest friends, I wouldn't even try. But, I definitely feel like there's no pressure to change, but maybe I would change more if there was less of that feeling of people noticing and being like, 'Why?'.

Have you felt pressure to change or not change your appearance by people you just know, casually or like in a workplace environment? Or with modeling?

What comes to mind right away is an experience I just had at my job. I work at a Malaysian restaurant and we usually have uniforms, but sometimes I dress a little nicer. But this particular time last week, I dressed up in traditional Asian dress. And the reason was, honestly, I ran out of clean laundry and I just thought I could get away with wearing that. But, it also felt good to wear, because otherwise it's in my closet until next Chinese New Year. I figure I work in a place where it's accepted anyway, so why not express myself in that way and rest instead of forcing myself and having that masculine approach to get all my laundry and things done when my body is asking me to rest.

It did happen that my workplace was kind of like, 'Well, why?' Instead of, 'Oh, you look nice'. They're like, 'Why? Why are you dressing up?' You know what I mean? So, I felt pressure to almost defend myself and I felt a notetaking of like, okay, I guess you can overdress here, you can look too nice. My tables and the people I interacted with that day gave me a lot of compliments and were delighted to see that. My employer and coworkers, they didn't say I couldn't do it, but they just, like I said, that 'why' that made you feel kind of weird for doing it.

Is that kind of traditional garb usually reserved for more special occasions?

I guess it could be considered formal wear. I don't think that it's against the culture to wear otherwise. I mean, I would wear it on a garden walk, or something of the sort, but I guess they just don't wear it other than for celebratory reasons, and then I would have to adhere to that. Maybe if I was in a strict Asian family structure, they might have the same reaction, but I don't feel like it's wrong to like our culture, to wear it outside of the New Year.

Could you talk a little bit more about your racial identity?

Sure. So, my mother is a mix of all different kinds of white. My great grandmother's Sicilian, my grandfather's parents are French, and my grandmother's father was German. There's some Pennsylvania Dutch in there, too. So, I never really got much of any of that culture, because it was so skewed by the time it got to me.

My father is Vietnamese. He immigrated here around my age and has been here ever since. Although, my parents split up when I was two and I've lived with my mother, so I didn't really get any of that culture, either. So, it was interesting growing up, and I hear a lot of my friends that are also Wasian feel the same; that they're too white to fit into Asian culture, but also too Asian to fully fit in white culture. I haven't been to Vietnam, but I guess it's big when you go to other countries, it's kind of like that; they notice that you're mixed and that you're not fully Asian.

I never really thought it was a problem, but in school, they would call me 'ching chong' and 'lingling' and I kind of just felt alone, because I was one of five and went to predominantly white schools. I never really thought it was a problem, but now looking back, I wouldn't allow that. So, it's just this weird feeling; not belonging, feeling like I have a sort of look, but I don't have the culture to go with it in either way. Feeling disconnected from both sides. And then, you get asked things like, 'Oh, do you speak the language?' No.

Although, it's also at the same time connected me with my more Caucasian friends in a way that I could connect with them and show them new things. More so food, like, I'll introduce new foods to them that they had never heard of, or a new fruit, or show them how to open a jackfruit or something like that. So, it's also kind of become a part of my personality, mainly because I do have some differences.

Do you think that working at [Malaysian restaurant] has helped you reconnect with some of that?

A little bit, I feel like it definitely has awakened a lot of connection to Asian culture that I missed out on by not being an active part of my father's household. He lives in Florida, so I see him once a year. I go there and live in a traditional Asian household for a period of time. It's different from up here. So, working in [Malaysian restaurant] has helped me, obviously, specifically connect to the food, which I'm really grateful for. And it's helped me have a place to wear the dresses. So, I'm grateful.

You talked a little bit about your peers bullying you when you were younger. Have there been times in your life when you feel like your race influenced how other people treated you, either in adulthood, or when you were younger?

With [Malaysian restaurant] fresh in mind, I definitely feel like it was easier for me to fit in there, because of my race. It's kind of like a family environment. I've been there for three years now, so I feel like they're more apt to treat me like that.

As far as my friends or people more casually, I don't think so. Although, I feel like it piques people's interest, if that makes sense. Like, asking where you're from, or anything like that. I've gotten asked my racial identity a lot growing up, because, well, it's that whole, I don't fully look one way or another. So people ask me about it, but nothing's really bothered me but that underlying feeling of, where do I belong? I guess.

And then there's also been some times in my life when I was with my mother and people would ask if I was adopted. Which is weird and kind of made me sad, probably, as a kid. Because, almost as a whole other thing, but I don't know, sometimes I felt like it, because my mother never really recognized that side of me in the culture and didn't really make an effort for it to be part of my life, or make an effort to think about what I might want to eat differently, or how I'd like to live a little bit different from her.

So you've had to seek that side of yourself out independently?

Yeah, in adulthood. I eat completely differently in adulthood than I did growing up and that I was exposed to in my main living situation. Of course, I had the food when I visited my father and a few times growing up at different family events, but other than that, yeah, I was stuck eating Caucasian food, which my body doesn't align with.

And a lot of Asian culture, I think, comes back to food, but it's also their relationship with food. I don't really know how to explain it, but it's the intention going into eating that's a little bit different.

It seems like there's more of a connection with the ingredients and with every step of the process, whereas in Western culture, it's a lot of processed foods and sort of a disconnect. People don't always even take the time to eat together.

Yeah, I think in Asian culture, it's always a group effort. And I really, really yearn for that. I live alone, and even just how much it takes to prepare a traditional meal, peeling and all the little things. I do feel a yearning to connect with some sort of structure that we work together to create a meal with intention and enjoy it together.

Do you do anything to alter your natural appearance, such as tattoos, piercings, hair dye, makeup, etc? And if so, why?

I have two tattoos. My first tattoo, I got when I was 18. It was a graduation gift from a family member. And I guess I had a lot of ideas for tattoos in my adolescence, I just always thought it was a beautiful way of expressing yourself. Although, I will say I'm really glad I was not allowed to get one until I was 18, because looking back, my ideas don't align with who I really am. So, I have this one, which honestly, I feel like, I didn't get it because I don't think either one of my tattoos I got because I was like, 'Oh, yeah, I really want that'. I think it was just, 'I'm eighteen, it's time to get a tattoo finally'. And the other one is matching with my friend. My friend asked if I wanted to get a matching tattoo, and we came up with a really cute idea, so on my back is a lifecycle of an avocado.

This is the one I decided to get when I was 18, which is Sanskrit. To translate: 'All beings everywhere be happy and free, and the thoughts, words, and actions of my own life in some way contribute to that happiness and freedom for all.' So, it's kind of like a mission statement for me. And it's on my right side, so the right represents masculine, giving energy.

So yeah, I was introduced to yoga when I was 5 and when I was around 11 or 12, I was introduced to traditional Raja Himalayan yoga form, which starts with 30 minutes of philosophy, and then the movement, and then chanting and meditation. So, this is the chant we would always close with, just the mantra that aided me through anxiety attacks. I used to say it cured me of anxiety, now I feel like that was a little bit of my younger ego. Now that I'm older, I don't say that, although I used to have horrible anxiety attacks, like, almost blackout sort of thing, and I just I really believe in the vibration of mantra and how it redirects your thought patterns and changes your vibration and could take you from one course to a completely different one. It's worked in my life.

So, I don't regret it, although I don't have that itch. People are like, 'Once you get a tattoo, you'll want so much more', but I feel like I can even do without the ones that I have. But, I also have a perception on tattoos that, if you believe in multiple lifetimes and choosing your soul family before coming here, it's a way to identify people. Which just goes a little bit deeper, but my friend wrote a book when she was younger. She wrote about people that had specific tattoos, and I introduced her to the people that were characters in her book that she wrote when she was younger, that had the tattoos that she wrote about. So, that just concreted my idea that it's a way of identifying. When you do feel called to get something like that, an expression like that, it's your authentic self showing up in a more defined way.

That kind of trickles out into hair. For me, my hair's been a wonderful form of expression for the transformation I've been going through in the past year and a half. I look back at all the different things I did with my hair, and it was like a different season of my life. The hair also represents your aura and energy. I definitely feel a difference every time I change my hair and how I feel and how I show up. Not even how I look, but I just feel different when my hair is different.

As far as piercings, I have belly button piercing, and ear piercings. Like most young girls, I got my ears pierced when I was super young. My belly button was kind of that adolescent, 'I want that, I can get that. It's something I can get before I'm 18, let's do it'. I think that was just probably more shallow, just, like, I wanted it. I did have my nipples pierced, but I made the decision to take them out, so I was more comfortable wearing a bra and less noticeable through my clothes. That kind of goes into what we were talking about earlier, feeling pressured by other people. I feel like if everything was fine, I'd probably still have them pierced, but I'd rather take them out and feel more comfortable not wearing a bra, than to have them in and then feeling like I have to cover it.

As far as makeup, I used to really rely on it in adolescence, so when I came into adulthood, I felt like it was an accomplishment, not wearing makeup a lot. Now that I'm in a kind of second wave in adulthood, I realized that it's really a beautiful way to express yourself in highlighting certain features and even emotions and states of mind that you're in. I really still only wear makeup for shoots, and it's not fully because I wouldn't be confident without it - it's because it's an outlet to express that. I feel like I have a need to express that and sometimes be dramatic, but then if I did that on a normal day, there would be the underlying 'Why?' You know? So, I think that anything you do to make yourself feel good, and if you have that intention behind it, positively affects how you show up. But, it can also be from a place of lack, too. It's not how you will to yourself, it's the intention of why you want to.

Yeah, so you talked a bit about makeup being a comfort and a way to feel better about yourself. Have there been times in your life when you felt insecure about how you looked?

Oh, yeah. When I was a teenager, I would be late to class in school, because I would show up and I wouldn't even go to my locker, I would just go right to the bathroom and finish my makeup, usually because I woke up late, or something. But, I mean, there's been times where I've done my makeup in class, like, there was just a time where makeup was so important to me, I could not handle the fact that I woke up late and I couldn't put it on. I would bring it in, I would put it on, it

would need to be a certain way for me to feel complete, and if it wasn't the way that I wanted it, I would be distraught.

There was one time when I was getting photos before my last dance recital. For the photos for my last recital, I couldn't get my makeup the way I wanted it. So on the way there, I cried it off, and I just didn't get photos that year, because it wasn't the way I wanted it. So I had that like all-or-nothing, either the way I want it, or not at all. There's been family gatherings where it didn't matter, it was my family, and I couldn't get it right, so I just wouldn't go.

It very heavily had an influence on how I felt about myself, before. It's kind of because it has such a high emotional charge. I felt like it was very spiritual and freeing to just never wear it. But I feel like it's kind of switched, because now I feel insecure wearing makeup sometimes. Now, I feel like what's the point? Or feeling like I'm over-dressing for an occasion or something like that. Or is it just scared of being teased? Or even maybe it goes into being scared of being seen? Or as maybe, you know, I don't want to capture anyone's attention. So, it's interesting how it's flipped and now I have more insecurity wearing makeup, whereas before I had more insecurity not wearing makeup. It's hard to find that balance with something that's that emotional.

Was makeup a big deal for your mom, or your friends when you were younger?

No, it really wasn't. My mom never really wore a lot of makeup. I mean, my grandmother and my mother would have their basics; they would want to put on foundation and mascara or something like that, but not anything more than that. I remember being young and wanting my mom to let me play with her makeup with my friends and having that yearning to wear makeup. Probably influenced by, I don't know if it's the media in general, but YouTube, especially when the makeup tutorials were all new and so popular. I would watch them and crave to know how to do that.

But, even in childhood, there was an interest in expressing yourself in that way. Almost like that meant you had grown up in a way and was in a rush to that, to reach that, for that to be okay. For it to be okay to have my own men, like it mattered, and there was a race to it. And then of course, dancing makeup was a part of my life's a tough spot because for the recital, like once a year, you'd get crazy blue eyeshadow, eyebrows, and red lips. Even as a kid, that was what it was, so you can be seen on stage. So then, I had that experience with makeup, that it was put on to be seen.

In my adolescence, I probably wore it with the thought of having an unfulfilled need or needing to be seen so badly, and now I'm in adulthood. Now, I don't want to be seen.

You're a bit younger than me, so you were exposed to social media, YouTube, all that kind of stuff, at a younger age than I was. So, I'm curious how that might have influenced what you were pressured to look like, or feel like, or how you present yourself?

It's funny, because the first thing that comes to mind ties into what we were talking about, about my racial identity. A lot of the videos I did watch were Asian women and how they would do

their makeup. I feel like reflecting now, probably why I wanted to wear makeup a lot was to kind of look more like them. I guess I felt more Asian if I had a cat eye, for example. I feel like it would just almost be more like me. During that time, I don't really feel the same now. I mean, cat eyes are kind of all over the place now, but when it started out, I think it was more predominantly worn by like Asian women, because of the shape of our eyes.

But, I don't remember social media influencing me in my adolescence as far as, like, Instagram and Facebook; comparing how I looked to my peers, I don't think that's influenced me as much honestly. Maybe it influences me a little bit more now than in my adolescence. I think it was more in the media and my young perception of how a woman is supposed to look. And then also how a woman could look with some women who wanted to challenge beauty standards, like Lady Gaga, and dramatic looks. I think it's made me put into boxes what's normal, normal expression, and what's eccentric expression. When I was younger, I think I wanted more space for eccentric expression and felt like I couldn't or didn't have an outlet, besides dance when we would do funky concepts.

So, if my frame was to do normal beauty standards, I set a bar and I said, if I couldn't meet it my day was ruined. I wouldn't want to be seen at all, if I wasn't seen in that frame. That was it. And that was all based on what I saw in the media. I created that idea of, when you're done with makeup, or how it should look, and that perfectionism off of media, and that was maybe as young as 13.

It's interesting how these things get tied to identity. What makes you feel beautiful, or what makes you feel empowered?

I close my eyes, because it's all internal. It's a connection you have to yourself, and my connection that I feel with Earth, and the universe, and my faith, and my guides. All of that empowers me; feeling that support, feeling my ancestors behind me. And also feeling safe has a lot to do with being empowered; finding people in your life that love you in all shapes and forms. Being able to decide that it's your sovereign choice to show up how you want to, and that if people say something about you, it's not personal.

But I've also noticed, so much of my power has been taken away by my perceived thought of how other people would perceive me. So when I'm able to get past that, I think I'm in an empowered place. I think it's less of what you need to do to feel empowered, and more like what you let go of, because I think we are all empowered people that have been taught to not act that way and not carry ourselves that way. I think that's our base vibration. If you strip away all the experiences, like, if I even think back to when I was a kid, I would play with the makeup and I would do funny, crazy poses and be silly. That's kind of who we are and how we show up to the world before we're told how to show up. So, when I feel safe to invite that version of me forward, that's empowering.

You talked about building a support group in terms of the people you surround yourself with. How have your family or close friends been supportive of your appearance or empowerment or self-perception?

I have wonderful friends that love to complement each other. We love to build each other up and have a lot of love for each other that we can share. In terms of internal and external beauty, we all understand that we make an effort to throw that at each other, because of the social climate of our world and how difficult it is to maintain confidence.

As far as family, I get more compliments and am uplifted from my Asian family when I go to visit, and it's almost like they're reminded of what I look like and that I'm beautiful. I don't really have the same relationship with my Caucasian family. It's not that they wouldn't, they have just a very sort of conservative vibe. Like, we don't really make an effort to speak of how we look. Or my family doesn't really address that a lot. I think there's almost a lingering shame on that side of the family when it comes to looks. That side of my family, the women and men, has struggled with weight, so I think purposely, the way we look isn't really talked about.

So, it's not that I felt unsupported by them, but I think that part of me might have dimmed myself over the years, or I hid my expression. Like, if I was going out with friends, I would want to not be seen on my way out, because of that, 'Why? Why do you look nice?' It's not, 'You look nice'. It's almost weird, because they're acknowledging that you look nice, right? But, they're making you feel kind of bad for it. Almost like, 'What are you trying to do? A woman looking nice is going to get herself into trouble'. That's what I felt like, you know, if I wore a cropped top that hit at the midriff, my mom would be like, 'Where's your clothes?' I'm like, my – and boobs are covered, but my stomach is sexualized?

We're back at the gaze, at, you know, drawing attention to yourself and being sexualized as a woman from a young age.

Yeah, yeah. I really like that concept, because I feel it. I feel it all the time. Even when I'm alone.

Have you had any positive experiences with casual acquaintances? Or like in a workplace or with modeling the impact of yourself percent in a positive way?

I think in terms of more casual experiences, it kind of doesn't have a long-term impact. If I get a compliment when I'm out and about, or working or something like that, it sparks joy in the moment. I mean, it definitely brightens my day to be seen positively like that, although I don't think it has any lasting effect on my confidence, because I think that it doesn't really matter at the end of the day. I mean, you hear about it all the time, like the beauty queen being the saddest, or it doesn't matter how many likes you get or praise if you don't like yourself. So, for my personal experience, it'll feel nice in the moment, but it's kind of like a thick substance of some sort that'll secrete hormones, but you have to do the work to sustain that, and receive that for yourself. It doesn't matter what someone says about you if you don't feel that way. So, yes, no, yes. Short-term, long-term.

Was there anything else that you particularly wanted to say or share or want people to think about?

I just feel like when it comes to how you want to show up, it matters how much you're willing to let go. I think showing up authentically is something that happens internally first, before it actualizes

in the external world. I think masculine energy has been pressured on to women in their form of expressing feminine energy, that action-oriented, how you look, how you dress, putting on makeup, all of that is a more masculine approach to looking feminine. So, in my experience, the more I release and receive myself and tune into how I want to show up that day, what's true for me, that makes me feel the best.

But, just because I do that and I feel like I'm in that authentic expression, doesn't mean I feel good all day. I'm confident because I know it's true for me, but I don't always feel confident, because it's active work to go against that conditioning. Letting go doesn't happen in an instant, it happens in multiple experiences over time. So, when I challenge beauty standards, or when I challenge letting go of the days where I challenge people wondering why I changed the way I look, I don't think it feels as good as when I have that mask; that approach of putting on perfect makeup, wearing traditional, maybe even provocative garb, but underneath those uncomfortable feelings, there's a connection that I wouldn't trade, because I know that I'm showing up as who I really am.