

2. GESTALT BY EMILY STRONG

EXCERPT FROM INTERVIEWS:

What does femininity mean to you? Masculinity? How do you relate to these terms? How do these concepts impact the way you present yourself?

(Model 1)

So, I think that the easiest way for me to explain that is through painting. I feel like the feminine in me is painting with my hands. Feeling the materials and the pigment and everything on my fingers, smoothing it, and kind of carving it with my skin, feeling it on me. The masculine of that is using a knife and carving it in with an instrument. It's sort of more removed and more aggressive.

So, that's kind of all-inclusive in that, because I do present myself in my paintings also, but in my body; I guess I sort of have more feminine movement and my garments are more masculine. I wear mostly men's clothes, I like that they're more forgiving on my body. Function over form.

I associate my femininity with my intuition, my empathy, and my motherhood. My power. I associate my masculinity with the aggression and the fire that fuels my motivation and confidence, also with sidewalk stomping. Interestingly enough, I associate my shaved head more with my femininity. It allows me to fully embrace myself, with surrender and openness. The stereotypically "masculine" brutality of my short hair is something that allows people to see my soft face, and allows me to feel the most confident. Confidence fuels self-acceptance, and acceptance of my whole self is acceptance of femininity, too. This is rambling and not linear, but that's sort of on brand with the nature of the question.

(Model 2)

"I'm cloaked in tremendous privilege given that I'm a middle-class, White, straight-passing, cisgender male ... so I don't normally *have* to think about it. If I'm wearing hot pink sandals, or painting my nails, or wearing my wife's robes, the truth is no one's really going to call me on it. I wouldn't care if they did, but most people wouldn't say anything. In general I think society's baselines of 'feminine' and 'masculine' are limiting garbage anyway, so they should be ignored.

I would say that I identify personally as masculine, I think that there are feminine attributes that a 'traditional' idea of what a man does and says and acts like that I just don't align to and I don't really care about it. It's whatever masculinity means to me. So yeah, that's how I identify."

FULL INTERVIEWS:

(Model 1)

Age 27

Assigned Sex Female

Pronouns She/Her

Gender Identity Female

Race White

What is your gender identity? Please describe

I identify as female! I feel very in touch with my womanhood, I am an Art Mami.

What does femininity mean to you? Masculinity? How do you relate to these terms? How do these concepts impact the way you present yourself?

So, I think that the easiest way for me to explain that is through painting. I feel like the feminine in me is painting with my hands. Feeling the materials and the pigment and everything on my fingers, smoothing it, and kind of carving it with my skin, feeling it on me. The masculine of that is using a knife and carving it in with an instrument. It's sort of more removed and more aggressive.

So, that's kind of all-inclusive in that, because I do present myself in my paintings also, but in my body; I guess I sort of have more feminine movement and my garments are more masculine. I wear mostly men's clothes, I like that they're more forgiving on my body. Function over form.

I associate my femininity with my intuition, my empathy, and my motherhood. My power. I associate my masculinity with the aggression and the fire that fuels my motivation and confidence, also with sidewalk stomping. Interestingly enough, I associate my shaved head more with my femininity. It allows me to fully embrace myself, with surrender and openness. The stereotypically 'masculine' brutality of my short hair is something that allows people to see my soft face, and allows me to feel the most confident. Confidence fuels self-acceptance, and acceptance of my whole self is acceptance of femininity, too. This is rambling and not linear, but that's sort of on brand with the nature of the question.

What is your racial identity?

White. My mom is Italian and Catholic, but we're not really very Italian and they're not really that Catholic. It's more something to bring people together, but I don't really care about it. I'm definitely not Catholic and I don't really see myself as that Italian. I just see myself as....suburban I guess.

Have there been times in your life when your race has influenced how others have treated you?

I can't imagine there have been many moments when my race hasn't influenced how others have treated me. I am privileged in many senses. For example, I grew up with very little money in a very rich neighborhood. I was White, so I was often more readily accepted than those with more money and darker skin. I was allowed to skip classes and not turn in my homework and make familiar, sarcastic remarks in school. Similar behaviors were presented by children who didn't look like me and they were awarded with detention or worse. Things like this happen every day.

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

Yes. I choose not to shave my body hair and have been frequently pressured by family members to reverse that decision. I find it silly and uncomfortable and unnecessary and wasteful. They find it unattractive. It used to bother me, but why does that matter? I'm not trying to be attractive to them. I don't care anymore.

Have you felt pressured to change your appearance by people you know only casually or by business associates?

It seems strangers feel very welcome to remark about the hair on my head. I shave it, and during the off times when I let it grow out, I dye it. I don't like my natural hair much. It's boring and expressionless. So, I color it! Strangers love to put their two cents in about why the color is wrong or right. My neighbor absolutely strives to tell me every time I see her how she prefers my hair long and blonde. It's maybe sweet, but mostly annoying.

I often don't wear shoes outside. The other moms at the park (when such a thing was available to us) always loved commenting about my bare feet and it certainly was bristling at first. I always keep shoes in my bag just in case, and I remember almost taking them out to put on before walking into the playground, but I never did. I think there are people who have never encountered me wearing shoes. I like it that way. Foot freedom is an incredible luxury.

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

Yes, I have struggled since childhood with my body image. I have suffered bulimia, and restrictive eating for years. College was probably the worst time for that. But I do have a vivid memory of clothes shopping for my sixth grade graduation ceremony and having to look at women's clothes because juniors never fit. I was much fuller than my classmates. I cried in the changing room with my mother when she suggested I buy a girdle. I ended up buying something I didn't love, but felt maybe okay in. Afterwards, a friend of my older sister said that I should have 'tucked in my fat'. I have never forgotten the devastation I felt when I heard that. Since puberty I have struggled, but after the birth of my daughter, I am learning to embrace the differences and beauties of my body. The miracle of it. The wonderful miracle of it.

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?

Um, yes. Who hasn't? Girls are tortured from childhood to look like bodies that do not exist in real life. Even the thinnest of celebrities are made to look smaller in advertisements. It's — disgusting. Probably as a child growing up, it was magazines and Hollywood and things like that which affected me the most. Social media wasn't a thing like that until high school for me, and even then, it was unflattering MySpace pics. Instagram models didn't affect my perception until I was old enough to know that it was a lie.

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

Yes! Many things! It's fun!!! I love changing my hair. For me, my hair holds emotional weight. If I need to let it go, I chop it. If I need to change it, I color it. I love getting tattoos, to adorn my body forever with beauty and artwork. To me that's so — romantic. It's just the most sensual thing, making your body into an altar. I also have piercings but I rarely think about them. Makeup is a fun way of helping me to feel productive. I wonder if that's because it helps me to feel like I've made an effort...or like I need to feel 'made up' and pretty in order to feel like I have made my day worthwhile..... hmm. I may need to rethink this. Anyway, it's fun.

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

Glitter. Glitter makes me feel beautiful. Shaving my head makes me feel empowered. I am showing my face, myself, to the fullest and truest extent. It is scary and exhilarating.

I also feel empowered through creation. Making art is an act of love.

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

My partner is unreal in his acceptance of me and my expression, my choices, my goals, my work, my life. It's just actually almost incomprehensible. My sister shaves her head too, and I have had to do a lot of work to not compete with her anymore. We shared a room for most of our lives, it was impossible not to look at my incredibly thin and beautiful sister and feel lesser. She never wanted to make me feel those things, and frequently felt lesser compared to me, though in different ways. It's been an incredible evolution to learn with her, and discuss and heal. She helps me to feel accepted and loved and worthy.

Have you had any positive experiences with casual acquaintances or business associates that impacted your self-perception in a positive way?

While working on my collaborative project SKINS- where I create wearable paintings and my partner and I shoot photos and videos of models wearing and interacting with them- I have spontaneously posed alongside a model. It's always an incredible experience. It feels open and freeing to express myself in a space I create with loved ones and strangers, making art that is honest and weird, being authentic and naked and curious. It always makes me feel so alive and beautiful.

You mentioned a couple times that you've been dealing with chronic illness and Has that changed your relationship with your body?

So, I have Hashimoto's Thyroiditis, which is hypothyroidism. It went undiagnosed for a while, I don't know how long. They found it when I was in college at peak bulimia time. It makes you sort of gain weight, so that was definitely changing my body in a secret way that I wasn't sure about. I didn't know why it was happening so much, especially when I was doing so much to go the

opposite way. It was really unhealthy and it was a super bad time emotionally as well. Then, they made adjustments which sort of fixed it and I started losing weight, and I kind of settled down with my eating disorder.

Then, I got in a bad relationship and it super sped up my eating disorder, which actually then did what I wanted it to because my thyroid wasn't broken. It was weird looking at pictures of my body at that time. Like, wow, I was a lot of bone. That all sort of makes your skin dry and ashy, your hair falls out, you feel slow. Your thyroid sort of regulates everything in your body. I felt bloated and full, and feeling full is not a great thing for me, so it was just a constant fullness that I was unable to deal with.

Now, I'm dealing with Endometriosis and something called Adenomyosis which is related to tissue growing outside of my uterus. It's similar to the Endometrial tissue; it grows outside of my uterus, which is Endometriosis, and then Adenomyosis is when it grows inside the muscle wall surrounding your uterus and they can't take it out, so their only cure for that is a full hysterectomy. So, that's my future, I guess. I don't know when that's going to happen, but I'm assuming at some point that's what I'll decide to do. It causes constant pain, and for a year they didn't know what was going on. They were like, 'Oh, you have IBS' and were very dismissive. Especially with gynecological pain in women, it's like, 'Oh, that's normal, oh you have cramps'. Except it's every day, regardless of my menstrual cycle. I feel like I have an ulcer, I feel like I'm having internal organs rupture, and it causes cysts. Really terrible pain.

So, I was sort of being dismissed for a while and it's difficult to feel good in my body when I'm constantly thinking that my body is not good at being a body. I have long medical histories, it's sort of been one thing after another not functioning. That was difficult when I was pregnant, because the whole time I was like, 'I'm never going to pull through this, my body can't do this', and then it did and I was like — yeah! Finally, we got it, our baby's good, everything's fine. I totally pulled through - my labor was super easy. It only took 30 minutes, which was crazy!

So, that was actually a miracle and now that I have all this other stuff, I don't even know if I'll be able to have another child. It's just internalized failure, which kind of goes back to the eating disorder. It relates in a different way, constantly feeling not good enough, not working well enough, and then it's externalized. The inside of my body isn't good enough, why would the outside of my body be good enough. It's difficult to feel beautiful when you're rolled in a ball just trying to breathe and live your life. It's definitely a process.

(Model 2)

Age 39

Assigned Sex Male

Pronouns He/him

Gender Identity Male

Race Caucasian

What is your gender identity? Please describe

I identify as male. Not much to describe there!

What does femininity mean to you? Masculinity? How do you relate to these terms? How do these concepts impact the way you present yourself?

I'm cloaked in tremendous privilege given that I'm a middle-class, White, straight-passing, cisgender male...so I don't normally *have* to think about it. If I'm wearing hot pink sandals, or painting my nails, or wearing my wife's robes, the truth is no one's really going to call me on it. I wouldn't care if they did, but most people wouldn't say anything. In general I think society's baselines of 'feminine' and 'masculine' are limiting garbage anyway, so they should be ignored.

I would say that I identify personally as masculine, I think that there are feminine attributes that a 'traditional' idea of what a man does and says and acts like that I just don't align to and I don't really care about it. It's whatever masculinity means to me. So yeah, that's how I identify.

You mentioned when you speak, maybe you come across as having feminine attributes in the way that you live your life or your interests, etc, so you don't shy away from presenting that to other people?

No, I really don't care what they think about it. I'm openly bisexual. I talk about it openly at work, in my personal life, my family knows. This is who I am and that's just how it's going to be. It took 33 years to get there.

What is your racial identity?

Ye olde Caucasian. My family is mostly Dutch. There's maybe a yearning to identify with that maybe? But it's not something I've ever acted on. It's mostly hearing my dad talk about my grandfather and how they would go to the Netherlands and pick up dutch speculoos cookies, but we don't have windmills and clogs in our backyard.

Have there been times in your life when your race has influenced how others have treated you?

I know I've been given more than a fair shake in situations by other white people who probably wouldn't extend the same courtesy to a person of color. And I've been acutely aware of people of color being uneasy around me or simply taking longer to get to know me given I'm white. And that's 100% understandable given our society and the way it treats people of color. It just means I work harder to earn a place in their life.

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

Not in any way I've taken seriously. And I wouldn't have changed even if they *had* pressured me. Life's too short for that —.

Have you felt pressured to change your appearance by people you know only casually or by business associates?

The odd comment here or there. Again, nothing I've taken seriously.

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

At certain points in my life. For a long time, I was pretty underweight. Now I've kinda gone a little in the opposite direction with pandemic snacking [haha]. But by and large I've learned to love my body for all its oddly-proportioned glory.

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

I mean there's always the subliminal 'ideal male' image – burly muscles, nice tan, clean shave, all that. But I realized a while ago that prioritizing the effort and upkeep in reaching some weird bygone Greek ideal would mean deprioritizing things in my life that actually matter to me. So society can try to sell me on being a bronzed Adonis. It certainly tries. But I wouldn't say I care that they're trying.

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

I've got some ear piercings I don't pay attention to very often. I would say the most time I spend on grooming is around my beard. Tattoos are a thing I've always really wanted, but I'm also ridiculously specific so haven't settled on getting yet.

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

A random stranger's smile. My kid saying, "Daddy you so pretty." Holding my wife's hand on a walk.

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

By letting me be who I am. And that extends to everyone in my life. My friends, certainly. My wife and daughter, unquestionably.

Have you had any positive experiences with casual acquaintances or business associates that impacted your self-perception in a positive way?

Random compliments are always nice! "Hey, that's a cool jacket" "You look nice today!" That kinda thing.