

### 3. SHADOW BY EMILY STRONG

#### **EXCERPT FROM INTERVIEW:**

#### **What makes you feel beautiful/handsome, describe what makes you feel empowered?**

"Somebody asked me this a few years ago and I think it still stands; do I prefer to be called beautiful or handsome? I think beautiful is such a cool word - like, what it invokes I really enjoy. So yeah, what makes me feel beautiful? I think when somebody gives me moments.

This just happened to me recently. I went to Miami to celebrate my friend's bachelorette party and I only packed really loud, queer, outthere outfits. Which is fun, but then once I got there and I opened my suitcase, I was like, 'Oh, wow, I'm really gonna be out here in these streets'. My housemate was one of the people that went with me and she was like, 'You look so great, and that's all people expect from you,' and then she paused and she's like, 'But wait, I know you do have that experience of going back and forth, so was that hard for you?' And I started to explain, like, 'Yes, that was really hard for me', because there's a lot of like, masculine, really buff, tattooed guys that were just looking me up and down all weekend. So, I was like, 'Yeah, it was really hard'. And she just paused, she's like, 'Oh, wow, I just need to add that to what I know of you'. I felt so beautiful and seen.

Sometimes, it's just hard to know what's happening for people behind the exterior they present. So any moment I get for someone to witness and recognize my internal experience makes me feel so, so, so, so beautiful."

#### **FULL INTERVIEW:**

**Age** 27

**Assigned Sex** Male

**Pronouns** He/Him

**Gender Identity** Queer

**Race** Black

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

Yeah, my gender identity - I identify as genderqueer. I don't usually say genderqueer, I think I just say queer. I was thinking about it today, and honestly, I think that the word queer for me offers enough space to show up differently in each space that I show up in. I think even for me, as a Black man, growing up, my dad was a pastor of his own church and I went to Christian schools from seventh grade to my junior year in college. I went from spaces like that to moving to Brooklyn and having an opportunity to be a part of that amazing queer nightlife scene. My gender identity really does kind of change depending on who I'm around, or what the context is.

So, I feel like queer gives me enough space to show up in a space and ask myself, 'How comfortable am I presenting this way, or wearing this, or wearing that?' And I don't feel like I have to prescribe to anyone. So yeah, I feel like I changed a lot, honestly.

**So, would gender fluid also feel right to you if you were describing yourself?**

I think so, and I love the imagery of the word fluid. And I think that even speaks to how I adapt in different places and check in with myself. So yeah, for sure. Gender fluid.

**So what does femininity mean to you versus masculinity? And how do you relate to those?**

I relate to both of them. I like to think of femininity and masculinity as different kinds of energy or energy expression. As I've gotten older, with femininity, I've definitely been thinking of it in terms of reclaiming. When you think about the different rejected parts of ourselves that we have in our shadow-self region, femininity is definitely there for me, just having been socialized as male.

There are times when, as an example, I started to explore my gender presentation by taking pictures of myself in all kinds of different fabrics and stuff in my parents basement under the cover of night. So growing up, I really would only explore gender and play with it between the hours of, like, 2 am and 5 am. Even now, as an adult I have the freedom to go out in the world and present however I want, but there's still that insecurity, and I wonder if during the day I should present more heteronormative? And then at night, or under the radar on the club scene, I can be a little more [explorative].

I'm in the middle of trying to reclaim my femininity, if you will. Even just growing up in my house, we were big into sports, so we were always a big, macho sports family. So, in my head, masculinity has always kind of been assumed. I know how to play the role. Even though I'm a queer person, I still am a cis male, so I have to answer for my male dominance in the world. So, I think I'm a little more critical of my masculine energy now and am trying to embrace more of my feminine energy.

**It's so interesting that that was how you first delved into getting in touch with your femininity. You're talking about the shadows of your subconscious and how femininity was back there and you're literally invoking that in the shadows of night. The term witching hour kind of comes to mind when you're talking about doing it, too. There's all these layers to this that are really interesting.**

I don't know if you're into astrology, but I'm a Cancer Sun and Cancer is ruled by the Moon. My Moon and Sun in my chart are directly opposed 180 degrees, so I'm always contemplating this dual thing and what I show people versus what's under the radar; what people don't see. So, I'm always trying to confront that and negotiate that.

**Do you find that with modeling you're able to express those dichotomies that you're feeling?**

Definitely, and it's funny because I started just as a self-portraiture artist. So, there's certain things I allow myself to do, the shapes I allow myself to get into, or things I allow myself to try on. Still to this day, if I'm working with another person in a live session, and I'm not behind the camera, I feel kind of clammy and I have to kind of warm up to just being natural and expressing myself, because then there's another person in the room. So there is that idea of being seen and expressing yourself and being visible at the same time, which can be hard for me sometimes.

### **What is your racial identity?**

I identify as Black. Sometimes I struggle with the difference between racial identity and ethnic identity, but I think because I'm a Black American, they're probably the same thing...I'm guessing... But yeah, I just identify as Black. I know I have some Native American Cherokee in my heritage that shows up because my grandpa - his mother was 100% Cherokee Indian, and they lived in Texas. Still to this day, he is walking around in, like, 'gator skin cowboy boots, a large three piece suit, and a cowboy hat. Like, it's a whole thing.

### **Oh, that's so cool. Are you in touch with that side of the family?**

No. It's very unfortunate. My family's very religious on my dad's side, specifically. Although there's so much rich culture that I want to dive into, I feel like - at least right now - in order to do that, I would have to also speak the language of what they believe in - that religiosity. I don't know if I'm interested in doing that right now. Maybe one day, but I am hoping for a day when we can all - me and my extended family - meet in the middle and have conversations solely from the heart, and not necessarily from belief and thoughts on theology and all that. Just share stories. I want to hear the stories of my elders.

### **You talked about ethnicity versus race. Is there a way you differentiate that when you're thinking about yourself?**

I think I differentiate when I'm talking to other people, honestly. If I'm trying to get to know their cultural background, it's good to know what they would answer for both their racial and ethnic backgrounds. I think it's kind of tricky for me, only because my family really doesn't have a rich, ancestral history that we talk about. We're just Black. I think that's the extent of that.

### **Have there been times in your life when you feel like your race influenced how others have treated you?**

Yeah, 100%. I think when you think that people are treating you a certain way, you also start to move through the world without as much freedom as you could have. Sometimes, I'll just get stuck in these assumption loops, like, 'Oh, if I do this, this will end like that, so, I shouldn't do that', instead of just taking a moment to be like, 'You don't know that these people think about you this way'.

So, regardless of what my assumption is about how people perceive me, I'm learning just to lean into what my wildest dream for a moment would be, versus trying to just be cautious and respect all the assumptions that are in the room. But, I went to predominantly White schools all through

middle school, high school, and college, so I think there was a lot of tokenism there; being the only Black person. I would have friends at this Christian university I went to and I was literally the first Black person that they had met in their life, or at least had conversation with and been around enough to actually get to know. Which was cool, but also really draining because then it felt like anything that I said would be the standard of the millions of people that are also Black. So yeah, I don't know if that has to do with how I was treated. I guess feeling like a token and feeling kind of objectified at times is definitely a part of my racial experience, I would say.

### **Being expected to represent a whole group of people and educate people on that is a lot of pressure, I would think.**

For sure. I remember it was really hard to be Black in 2012 when Obama was being re-elected. I was at a school at that time on a super Conservative, predominantly White campus, and that was really hard - everyone was really tense. So, I was feeling extra Black during that time. It's funny being Black in political spheres, because you're assumed to believe one thing. You're assumed to be a Democrat, you're assumed to not want this and that. There are a lot of assumptions swirling around, even when you walk into a room. Especially if it's one of those presidential election years - it's kind of a thick feeling in the air.

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

100%. It's one of the main journeys I'm going through right now that I want to be aware of and pay attention to. I think of it when I go back to visit my parents and brother in Columbus, Ohio. Whenever I fly back to Columbus, I dress differently. Sometimes without even thinking about it; I will just wear different things around their house if I'm staying with them. When I'm out in the streets of Columbus, I'll wear totally different outfits than if I was here in Brooklyn, so I have recently just started to be more curious about the why, like, 'Why are you doing that? Who are you changing for?' That's been a big thing for me. I think I have a tendency to shrink. So, if I feel a little pressure or a little heat about my queerness going back home, then I will wear things that aren't as loud or I may not be as expressive as a way to get through with as little bumps as possible.

I can't say that my family has ever pressured me specifically, but I have noticed over the years, they have been trying to come to grips with my queerness and my gender expression. How I dress has also been kind of hard for them at times. But it's cool, because my family and I have had a beautiful process together. We've had some hard emotional moments, but we're usually really open, like, 'This is where I'm on the journey. I'm not here yet, but this is where I'm at'. So, they've never pressured me, but I think a lot of the time it's that assumption, 'I'll just play it safer so it feels a little safer'.

I think there's another question that you're going to ask about strangers or acquaintances. I tend to be a lot more [adventurous] like I was when I first landed in Brooklyn. I loved going to a club or a bar by myself and just mingling among strangers and dancing and just feeling so free and like a little fairy, because a lot of times I feel pressure that if somebody knows me, then that means they have an expectation for me. So, I feel free from expectation when I'm interacting with

strangers. And love it because they're trying to take the load off, too, so there'll be extra fun. We'll both go home to our own things later, but for now, yeah.

**It sounds like it's sort of what you're expecting people to expect of you, more than what they're overtly verbalizing to you. Is that correct?**

Yes, and I'm finding so much freedom in my life now just by questioning that. I'm like, 'Oh, is this just a feeling? Or is it true that they think this? Or are you...?' It's good to check in. You save a lot of mental space if you can get rid of some of the low moments.

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

At every stage of my life, there is definitely a voice that I have to tune into, or pay attention to. My weight fluctuates quite a bit, so if I start to see something in the mirror, then I'll kick it into overdrive. I'll start eating healthy and working out every day. I just realized recently, as I'm getting older, that if I'm going to be doing fitness and nutrition, I want it to be for longevity and wellness. I realized a lot of times, I would kick on those wellness things just to change the shape of my body. I think to myself, 'Interesting, this is supposed to be for wellness, but you're just doing it so you fit into a certain container'.

So, there's always been, and I think there always will be (insecurity) to some degree, because our beauty standards and stuff are pretty extreme. I'm glad I'm having an open discussion with myself now about how I feel about my body. I think because of those beauty standards, insecurity will always be there to some degree, so it's good to be aware of how you're feeling about yourself.

**That sort of ties into the next question, which is about how the media may have affected your self-perception and whether that's more from social media or mainstream/commercial media?**

For sure. I will say, because of something that came up for me working on this with you, I think skin is a specific thing for me. I do have a lot of blemishes on parts of my body that, if I have clothes on, you don't see. Like, my back and thighs. That's been hard for a while, because that's the first thing I look at on social media. When people are posting and posing and stuff, everyone has beautiful, glowing, luscious skin a lot of the time I'm like, 'Oh, damn, I don't have that'.

I heard a sexologist recently say that social media has been good for us in a sense that it's opened us up to more beauty standards. I think fat people are able to get on social media now and speak on what beauty is for them. That lens has been really yummy and juicy. I love seeing fat, queer folk just being in their essence and their power, and I don't know if I would see that in a commercial between television shows. So, social media has also shown us all the different ways that you can be beautiful and find a community to speak that language with. That's been really nice. That's why I really enjoy even just what I do on social media, posting myself, because it feels like I am a part of a conversation of all of the different intersections. And then if you take a picture of yourself, it's like, 'This is how I chose to be seen today, so watch me just standing in my own self', which is nice.

I will say one thing, that along with the body, and your experience with the body, and how social media plays into that - I feel like queerness is kind of hard for me sometimes, because on social media, there are a lot of queer people in their power. But, I don't know if in those quick social media moments you really get to hear what their journey is like. Especially on Instagram, your brain starts to believe that because you see such a yummy picture of someone that that's what their life is like. I would love to see these queer images, but also them giving their secrets of survival at the same time, because if I'm not careful, I'll be like, 'Oh, I don't feel that glamorous about my queer life'. I'm like, well, they have moments where they don't either, but they're doing this dope picture just for the moment.

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

Yes, tattoos were the first one. When I was in my little Christian high school, I got a tattoo a few days before I graduated. At our high school you aren't allowed to have any tattoos, so I had a few days of being a rebel. That was my first one, I have nineteen now. I've kind of slowed down on it. What's funny is that when I went to that Christian university, I was there for two and a half years. Both summers, I would go [get tattooed] when I was home. I literally got seven tattoos in one summer. I don't know why, I just went so crazy, and it would be shocking for people when I would come back, because I would have these fresh tattoos.

I think at the time I felt like, 'This is how I preserve my own identity', and it was kind of a way to rebel against all the other influences there. So, I think I got tattoos during times where I felt like I needed to make a statement to myself and I'd be like, 'Nope, this is who you are. I'm going to give you a symbol on your body so you can check in with yourself'. I want more now, but for a few years I didn't really want them, because I was okay not having them. There was a time where I felt like I needed to get tattoos. It's cool to look at them now, because I'm like, 'Oh, I remember what I was going through when I got this'. It's cool to see a little relic that you gave to yourself. They feel like little love letters to myself. Little time capsules.

My ears are sensitive, so when I pierced them, they started to bump up. I probably won't put it back, but I love the look of having a bunch of earrings down the ear. I think my ears might be too sensitive for that, but I keep trying to make it happen. I have 'ear loves' in my life. Like, if I'm on the subway and I see somebody with amazing hoops and cool little metal, it's my favorite thing. I think earrings are my favorite accessories in general when people have a lot of them. So, I try to mimic it, but I probably will just be an enthusiast from here on out.

I feel like all of those different decorations, all those little adornments - tattoos, hair color, piercings - are just such a quick way to throw somebody, especially strangers and people walking by, some energy and a little zest for their day. So, I always appreciate seeing it. I used to do hair color, too. I've done pink, green, blue, purple, everything. But then again, it can be damaging, so I was like, maybe I'll just be an enthusiast.

### **I love the description that it's a little bit of zest for someone else's day seeing you. I've never thought of it quite like that.**

It's been my favorite thing about moving to New York. My morning can be starting out really rough on the way to work and as soon as I get in the subway, I'll look up and there's just somebody that's so uniquely themselves. Like, thank you. That's what I needed.

### **What makes you feel beautiful/handsome, describe what makes you feel empowered?**

Somebody asked me this a few years ago and I think it still stands; do I prefer to be called beautiful or handsome? I think beautiful is such a cool word - like, what it invokes I really enjoy. So yeah, what makes me feel beautiful? I think when somebody gives me moments.

This just happened to me recently. I went to Miami to celebrate my friend's bachelorette party and I only packed really loud, queer, out-there outfits. Which is fun, but then once I got there and I opened my suitcase, I was like, 'Oh, wow, I'm really gonna be out here in these streets'. My housemate was one of the people that went with me and she was like, 'You look so great, and that's all people expect from you,' and then she paused and she's like, 'But wait, I know you do have that experience of going back and forth, so was that hard for you?' And I started to explain, like, 'Yes, that was really hard for me', because there's a lot of like, masculine, really buff, tattooed guys that were just looking me up and down all weekend. So, I was like, 'Yeah, it was really hard'. And she just paused, she's like, 'Oh, wow, I just need to add that to what I know of you'. I felt so beautiful and seen.

Sometimes, it's just hard to know what's happening for people behind the exterior they present. So any moment I get for someone to witness and recognize my internal experience makes me feel so, so, so, so beautiful.

### **How have your family and your close friends been supportive of you? How have they been supportive of your appearance and your self-perception?**

I think family-wise: space. I have something that feels unique and really cool, where my parents are constantly transforming and discovering new things about themselves, and then me and my brother do the same. I don't feel like my family ever really approves or disapproves of who I am, even if things make them uncomfortable. I feel like we all kind of respond more with curiosity and we're just curious to be a part of the journey. It doesn't feel like an approving / disapproving thing.

So, I think they support me. That's the tricky thing about identity, too: a lot of times we're just experimenting. There's something that is drawing us in a direction, whether it be clothing, whether it be a person, or a space, and we have to go in and interact with it. Then on the outside, people will be like, 'Oh, this is your identity', or, 'This is who you are, this is what you're doing'. I'm like, 'I don't even know what I'm doing'. So, it feels good that I don't have to think about whether they approve or disapprove. I can just be curious. They may have a reaction, but even that can change over time. So, that feels good.

I live with a bunch of fairies. I am so blessed. I live in a house - it's me and four other people and we're all queer, we're all artists, and we all work in art spaces. So, I think just even watching

them transform and then move through the world brings me a lot of my own freedom, because I feel like if I see somebody doing something, that it gives me permission to do it. So, I feel like we all want to support each other in that way, when we are just out in the world being brave.

### **That sounds like paradise.**

It's actually really hard work. I won't lie, we always have house meetings to come back together. I'll say, it can be dramatic, but it's also magical.

### **Have there been any positive experiences you've had with more casual acquaintances or even work associates that impacted your self-perception in a positive way?**

For sure! Especially moving here to Brooklyn. There would be clothes I had only ever worn in the house to try it on and play around and then put back away, but I really challenged myself when I got to New York. I put on the most daring outfit and then went out to different bars at night. The reception was insane. It was nothing I ever expected, because it would be hard to just feel good in my own skin getting to the venue. But once you're there, you find a lot of people who are feeling the exact same way and who also take the time to affirm you. That's been my experience with the nightlife in Brooklyn.

So yeah, casual acquaintances don't even feel like acquaintances as much as they feel like friends. I feel very much connected to a lot of people that I've bumped shoulders with, because you see a lot of the same people. Especially if you go out multiple times in the week, you'll see some of the same people giving looks and wearing the coolest stuff. Even just dancing with people on the dance floor, they recognize you're there and then give you space.

And again, even as I'm talking, I hear myself with my male experience. I have had quite a bit of autonomy and have a little safety bubble going out. Just to say it out loud, because I mean, that may not be the case if I didn't have this very large Black male body. Maybe folks wouldn't let me have that much space. But yeah, I have had a really positive experience, just being out with strangers in Brooklyn specifically.

### **Is there anything else that you want to express to people, or want people to know, or think about while they're looking at the painting of you?**

Yeah. I think specifically with the work that you do and a lot of the portraits I've seen of yours, I think what drew me to want to do this with you is that this might be the first time I haven't felt like a persona, or like there's a persona that's going to be painted of me. So, I don't have to consider identity, it really was just about texture and finding different information on my body that could stand alone. Even just taking the [reference] pictures was a totally different experience. Super liberating and super freeing. So, I appreciate the experience you offer to models. When you look at this portrait of me, just think that this human was excited, for the first time, to not have to think about his persona. Look at his persona-less skin and just know that he felt free when he took those pictures.



