

8. DUCTILE BY EMILY STRONG

EXCERPT FROM INTERVIEW:

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

"Everything starts at home. Being raised by my grandparents, an older generation, coupled with the fact that my mother didn't have me till she was 40. You have someone who came up as a young woman in the 1940s, compared to in the 2000s. There's definitely, 'No, there's only one way to be a woman and that is to be skinny and quiet', which I had never been either [of those]. That did not go over well with my grandmother, and we're both Pisces, so we're both very emotional and would cry at each other a lot about, 'Why are you like this?' Both of us asking that question and both of us thinking that was a very justified question, I think.

I remember my mother, may she rest in peace, generally was just like, 'Yep, you're tall and you're thickly built, it is what it is', because she was also on the taller side and kind of thickly built. Once she died, living with my grandmother and then with my aunt who, much like my mother, came into being a young woman in the 60's. So, there was a lot more positivity on how you present yourself, but still with a lot of the weird diet culture still ingrained. Probably more so than ever, just because I feel like in the 40's, there wasn't a name for it. It was just, 'Don't eat much, woman'. Whereas diet culture starts becoming like a —ing competitive sport by the 60's.

So yeah, I remember my aunt always doing diets and hearing her talk about these things and being like, 'Should I be conscious of these things?' I don't know. And then Nana being like, 'You should eat less'. So, family pressure has been real."

FULL INTERVIEW:

Age 32

Assigned Sex Female

Pronouns She/Her

Gender Identity Female

Race Caucasian

Could you describe your gender identity in more detail, please?

Sure. Really, no exploration. Assigned female, haven't really felt a draw for anything beyond that at this point. You know, occasional tendencies that are assigned as 'masculine' because of our ideas of what these things are. But generally, what is here is what needs to be here.

So, in terms of femininity and masculinity, what do those mean to you? And how do you relate to those terms? Do they impact the way that you present yourself?

I don't know, this one's kind of hard. I know that there are feminine traits and there are masculine traits. The idea of 'You better do what you're supposed to do, or else'. Which, I feel like I generally do. Not necessarily on purpose, but out of ease, maybe.

I'm currently working for a Ford dealership and there's definitely a lot of perceptions of, 'Here's a girl calling me about a truck'. So, some days, I know that I need to have a firm tone with men, and I've learned through working in sales, that sometimes it works for getting you what you want. Other times, I have to just say, 'Oh, I know nothing about this truck. That's a man thing, let me go ask a man', and sometimes that has gotten something done that I need to, so that I actually get paid for doing what I've done.

I don't know. I feel I just kind of vibe, personally, at whatever I'm trying to do, but I feel like this usually affects me more so in a professional way. Just because, I have a really open-minded friend group that I immediately surround myself with. They don't give a — how you're presenting anything. Nothing needs to be gendered if it doesn't need to be. But yeah, I would say more so in terms of sales, professional type work, there are certain times you've got to act more 'feminine' or 'masculine' to bend someone to what you're doing. So sometimes, I need to be mean to a man, and sometimes I have to act stupid to a man.

Usually with women, it's way easier to just come at them the way they come at you and you can get on fine. Which is great, because I've always done very well selling things to women, Woman to Woman, because they can trust me. There isn't a weird ulterior motive. I hadn't really thought of it that way... Well, I have thought about how sometimes I need to sound sexy, or mean, or stupid to a man, but yeah. God, I hate trucks.

What is your racial identity?

I am extremely Caucasian.

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

Undoubtedly. I definitely do recall at one point, I had an interview for the shoe repair place on —, and I know that I came in right after a Hispanic girl interviewed. I ended up getting the job. Later in the backroom, the owner had some weird old, like, 'folk art' with a caricature of black people. I was like oh, god, this is really weird. This is also probably why I got the job. It was deeply weird. I quit after a month.

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

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emotional and would cry at each other a lot about, 'Why are you like this?' Both of us asking that question and both of us thinking that was a very justified question, I think.

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In terms of close friends, not so much, thankfully. I think a lot of us were raised by people who went through the whole 'diet culture as a competitive sport' thing. So, we've heard — at home. A lot of us don't necessarily present the way a young woman or young man 'should'. So, I feel like because of that, it is less pressured, but I do know in the back of a lot of my larger-sized friends' heads, there's still the, 'Well, maybe I should be doing something else'. And you know, we have a few cocktails and talk about how self-conscious we are living in this world. We do our best to ignore it, but it still does weigh on you.

Do you feel like having a friend group like that has been helpful?

Yeah definitely, and working through some of that trauma of other people and putting pressure on them. I mean with — and — specifically, because the three of us are all kind of larger and have always been kind of larger. So, you know, there are days where it's just like, '— the world, let's get drunk and eat'. You can have those nights with, you know, smaller people, but then you're like, 'Oh, they only had one or two pieces of pizza and I want to eat half of a pizza'. So, then it's just like, 'Well, —, maybe I shouldn't eat so much pizza'. I think you can have more cathartic moments about how you feel expressing it. There's less self-consciousness and moments like that, which makes me happy. You know, some days you just want to be fat and sad. And it's good to have friends that are also fat and sad, so you can all be fatties together. Misery loves company....and pizza.

Sometimes, I just need to eat too much, and this is what will get me to feeling better, so that tomorrow I can eat better things for me. So yeah, there's a lot of good old bargaining with yourself when you're fat. So, that's fun.

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

I mean, growing up fat, there's always going to be the weirdo in the hall that's like, 'Hey, you're fat'. And yes, thank you, I've noticed. You know, the whole joke of: you don't know what it means to be unattractive until some random kid comes up and says, 'My friend likes you' and the

friend's like, 'Oh, gross!' So in that way, in society, there's always some random — who has something to say. Something to voice for whatever reason. God gave them too much confidence.

From work, I don't think so much. That is something I have been thinking about recently. My current manager...I don't want to say she has an eating disorder, but she definitely seems too conscious about her consumption. I've described it to other friends, and they're like, 'That is the voice of disordered eating'. And I'm like, you know what, yeah, this doesn't seem great. So, I always try to, when I can, say positive things about ingesting things that are healthy for us, but also that we shouldn't punish ourselves if we don't immediately do that 100% of the time.

So, that has been kind of stressful, since I have been trying to pay more attention to what I am eating. I try to make better choices when I have the option and the motivation to. I've been trying to go to the gym. So, you know, balance, moderation, a little bit more health. Also, trying to see if I can ever rebuild my lungs from 15 years of smoking and possibly having COVID. And then I go to work where my boss is like, 'Well, guess what I have for lunch? An apple.' I'm just kind of like, 'Oh God, is there no way to happily live healthily in any way?' That's always annoying. Like, I want to say it's annoying, but I just kind of feel bad for her. Like, do you realize how you sound? I don't know, you have a young daughter at home.... What is she picking up on? How do you present this at home? Do you present like this at home? Is this just a weird thing you do at work? I do wonder about that. Everyone at my job does.

When I described that to my one group of friends, the one had... what's it called? Exercise anorexia or something? You have to balance your calories with exercise, and she had that for a while. She's the one who said that it sounds like disordered speaking, and you know what? I thought, yes, you are absolutely right. And you more so than a lot of people can say that.

So you kind of talked about this a little bit already, but have there been times in your life where you felt insecure about your appearance?

Oh, absolutely. Who doesn't? There's always a moment of doubt, which may be more or less lingering depending on how much doubt society's whispering back to you. Like I said, I've always been overweight. I've always been tall-ish. Not as tall as you but, you know, I've been like 5' 7" since I was 10.

So, you sprouted up early.

I hit my height immediately, so you know, in middle school all these other dudes came up to my elbow. That would be fun sometimes. Ya know, just growing up being a larger person is always something that people will comment on and the media of course affects it. I had all my little Seventeen Magazines. I don't recall those to be that awful in terms of, like, 'You're fat, stop that', but there is a lot of, 'Look at these cool girls in on-trend clothing that doesn't come above a size large'. It's wanting to belong, to an extent, while realizing that without some kind of cataclysmic shift in your ability to absorb calories, it is what it is.

So, I try to be in a society that is more accepting. I'm a goth, right? I think after a point, unless you do fit into a certain mold, you've got to pick what you're into. So, I'm a spooky kid

associating with a group of people that, I want to say, have less rigid boundaries on what is acceptable; what is attractive. I think it has definitely helped, too, the older I got and the more settled into that I became. It's like, '— yeah, I don't have to be what's in Seventeen Magazine. I'm just gonna wear too much eyeliner and be cool'. I have been running with that for quite a few years now.

Do you want to talk a little bit more about how the media has affected your self-perception and whether that is more from social media, or mainstream media, commercial media, etc?

Oh, I mean, it's all media. Coming up in the age where you go from a lot of circular print media to the internet, especially getting the Seventeen Magazine and Entertainment Weekly, and kind of seeing these are the things that are popular, these are the things that everyone likes...Then the internet exists, and you start with Xanga, but that was all words. Xanga was a great place for people who love words and don't necessarily need to be looked at. Then you get into things like Myspace, and all the different social media, and dating apps, and —. Much like existing in the real, flesh world, there's a lot of, 'Here is the 75%. This is the bubble that you're supposed to be in'. Just seeing that and thinking, 'Is this something that is attainable?' No. 'Do I want it to be attainable?' Not really.

I'm blonde now. I've never wanted to be blonde, but blonde is always an acceptable thing. So, by breaking it down even further, you're just trying to find the: 'Okay, this is the 'yes' column, this is the 'no''. Then it's like, 'Okay, what is a 'yes' now can also be a 'yes' for you when you're normally in the 'no' column'. So yeah, I have accepted that I like having a tan, I like being blonde. These are weird things when you are a plus-size person who only wears black. I think you're seeing it more, which is nice. Especially because...I don't know...is it appropriate to bring up the fact that 'we' are now allowing people of color to be goth?

Even in alternative subcultures, there's still discrimination.

Yeah, you think, 'Here's where you can look different', but then it's like, 'Oh, well, you're not pale'.

Yeah, it's different from mainstream, but still, you have to fit into certain categories.

It's good seeing more people with different skin tones and different hair textures in the goth community. It's like, okay, good, let's open this up!

Everything is just some hellscape Venn diagram into each other. Where everything links, and yet nothing links. Everything is acceptable, but nothing is acceptable. Keeping up with it is —ing exhausting. So after a point, it's like when do I just delete the internet? But I could never go off the grid. I love electricity. We love the grid, we hate the grid. We are stuck.

So, you talked about going blonde. Are there other things that you do to alter your appearance, your natural appearance, such as tattoos, piercings, makeup, etc? And if so, why?

Yes to all of that. I have tattoos and piercings. I think they look cool. I wish there were a deeper answer than that. I don't have any cultural significance for my tattoos or piercings beyond the fact that I think they look cool.

Makeup, yes. I have always had terrible eyebrows. I like that it is now very in vogue to imagine your best brow and so I'm making my best brow. I love makeup. I love looking like I have spider legs for eyelashes. Again, I love having on way too much highlighter. I like my face a lot when it's kind of, like, teetering a little bit toward uncanny valley; almost to kind of bring it full circle as, like, a play on what you are supposed to present as a woman. Like a caricature. I'm supposed to wear a blush, I'm going to have purple cheeks. High cheekbones? I don't have them naturally, I'm going to cover them with glitter. My eyelashes are going to be like Aeon Flux. I'm going to catch flies with them. I'm going to have the sharpest, most imaginary brow. I'm going to look like Maila Nurmi. It's gonna be great. I'm going to be the woman that I want to see in the world.

It's funny, because I feel like that is common in the goth community - to be sort of a caricature, sort of a cartoonish imagining of what a human would look like. But also, it's like drag. That is also very much like a caricature of a woman in some ways.

Yeah, all my friends are some kind of queer, LGBTQ, etc. I have friends that are gay men who do the same with their makeup, whether as presenting as 'I'm just a man that likes wearing a lot of makeup' or 'I am a man presenting as a drag performer'. They always have the best tutorials on eyebrows. I have always loved drag. I've always loved some theatrical —, and that is peak theatrical —. Not in a bad way. It's just like, 'You want a woman? I'm gonna give you a woman. Get ready'. It's like, threatening levels of femininity. Like, fine, base level wasn't enough. You don't like this man as just a man? Get ready. He's putting on six inch heels and is coming to your brunch.

What makes you feel beautiful and what makes you feel empowered?

Teased hair some days, depending on the level of energy I think I'm going to have later to undo it. Aggressive highlighter, really aggressive golden highlighter. Aggressive highlighter makes me feel powerful and beautiful. Fresh roots make me feel fresh. Sometimes, freshly grown out roots depending how grungy I'm feeling. Sometimes looking like I'm in disarray makes me feel cool in a fun artistic way. You know disarray, when you want disarray. Like the French, 'Oh, I'm falling apart. Oh, my pompadours, no!'

Yeah, those are things that make me feel cool, and sexy, and fun. Sometimes, my brain will do something cool. I feel like I have not been creative lately. You know, I used to work on music, I haven't in a million years. I got a new computer so I could and you know what I did? Very little.

Sometimes I feel sexy and powerful by just turning a fun phrase. I'd like to think that I generally have a good way with words. So, that helps. Sometimes, sexiness and power is a brain thing. It can be a physical thing, and sometimes it's not.

How have your family and / or friends supported you in your appearance and the way that you present yourself?

My friend circle is generally supportive. There have definitely been some bad dye jobs where they're like, 'Really?' But usually, those are also ones where I look at my own dye job and I'm like, 'Really?'

Yeah, I want to say, by and large, my friends have been supportive of how I portray myself. Which is nice because, again, I have friends that are larger women. I have friends that have alternative subcultures. So, again, Venn diagrams of overlapping things, which is always nice. So, I feel like usually, there's at least a handful of people who are like, 'Okay, you're doing something cool'.

Family-wise, I think it's taken them a while for what is left of my family to support me. I think a lot of it probably comes back to watching me grow up and be — weird as a teenager, where it's like, 'Okay, are you just going to be weird forever? Will it be okay when you're older? Or are you just going to be a weird adult?' And it's like, 'Yes, I am a weird adult', but it's become a lot easier to be a weird adult. You're not just, like, some creepy secretary in the back anymore when you're weird. You can be the fun weird alt who is doing a gallery exhibit, or the cool travel agent.

It probably comes back to media stereotypes and what you see in movies and stuff about how the weird adult comes out of the weird teenage years. There's a whole world out there of what I get to be. There's options for us now, it's great. But yeah, I think my family has kind of accepted, '—'s never going to be a size four. —'s never going to be into wearing Macy's clothing. She's not shopping at the Gap anytime soon'. And I feel like they've accepted that and they know that you don't have to worry. I feel that is a good thing. I think generally they have accepted that I'm going to look 'weird', but they know that my headspace is generally good. Better than it could have been, and I think that is nice.

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

Hmm. I mean, you always get the random person that comes up and is like, 'Oh, I love your outfit', or, 'I love your hair', or, 'Your makeup is really cool'. That makes me happy.

In my last job in travel, there were a lot of 'meeting your colleagues' events, and I feel those were always good. Travel attracts a very varied group of people to work in it. You know, you have your Abercrombie-wearing, normal looking, business-khaki-Polo people. You got your fun, preppy sorority girls. You got your burnouts. You've got your moms. Just like everyone else. It's a varied group, which I thought was fun.

So, I was thinking of a trip we did to St. Lucia. We were waiting for the one resort to get ready to tour us around. It was the second day staying in the same bungalow, and you might have introduced yourself to just a few people in the group. So, we're waiting for the resort to get their – together, and the leader of this group was like, 'Well, let's go around and introduce ourselves'. And of course, I was the second one to come up. I said, 'My name is —, I'm a left-handed Pisces'. And of course, everyone else in that group then introduced themselves with I am blank, I am left or right handed, whatever their sign is.

I was like, 'You know what, I'm kind of chaotic, but I think people like that, and this inspires me to keep being kind of chaotic'. Business trips are ultimately all business. Even if that means walking around a resort and being shown 80 different room categories, or being given a coconut full of rum, or being shuttled off to the next one to do two more hours of that. That's why I liked that industry to start with, because that's what you were doing. So, being able to bust out a little bit of silliness...that's less of a physical, 'You're awesome', and more of a personality-wise, 'You're awesome', which made me feel fun and special.

Is there anything else that you want people to think about while they're looking at your painting or anything else that you want to add that we didn't really cover with the questions?

I didn't use my phrase of the year, my phrase of the lifetime: *The human body is a scam*. It is the worst computer. We've been working on it for thousands of years. The survival rate is zero. Everything that can go wrong, will. The viruses. I've been thinking a lot about how awful the human body is at even just getting you anywhere, but it's all we have, so we have to remain positive. But, that has been my overwhelming thought lately, and about how I want to go to the eye doctor. Yet another way we're all getting failed.

The human body is definitely a scam. Life is just a series of —. But you gotta play the game, so you might as well have fun. Have fun and be silly. Talk about being a left handed Pisces to strangers on business trips. Don't forget to drink enough water.