

Transmutation

2024

EXCERPT FROM INTERVIEW:

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Age 25

Assigned Sex Male

Gender Identity Non-binary, but still figuring that out

Pronouns He/They

Race White

Could you describe your gender identity?

I don't really know. The problem is, I just don't really see myself in any role. I'm kind of just experimenting with whatever I want to do, whether that might be more feminine or masculine. I just feel like it's just me. I don't like labels, really.

What does femininity mean to you? Or masculinity?

I don't really understand them that well. All I have to go with is societal norms of female or male, masculine or feminine roles. I guess it's just kind of two different facets of human nature that is developed into roles? I don't know. The obvious answer would be masculinity is the macho... Actually, I don't know. I don't think I have a good description.

Do you feel like those concepts - whatever you have in your mind about them - impact the way that you present yourself? Or do you relate to either of those terms?

It definitely impacts how I present myself, because there is a pressure to be masculine for male-presenting people and vice versa. Just from society, but I don't think that effects - well...

I feel like masculinity used to dictate entirely how I presented myself, because I was trying to fit a kind of like standard, but as I learned to let that go, I think I wanted to connect more with the feminine. Kind of just in general, I wanted to connect more with that side of myself, I guess. So, yeah I feel like those are just two ways of existing, that you can exist in both and one or the other. That's as best as I can answer that.

When you talk about pressure to conform to masculinity, do you feel like that was mostly coming from people in your life or more so media...?

Media, definitely. Growing up, as I gain more of a sense of self, I'm less influenced by standards from media. However, my immediate family is fairly religious and kind of traditional in that sense, so that's mainly where pressure comes from now. Like, I don't think my parents really like it if they see me with painted nails or wearing a dress and all that, which is fine. They don't really understand it. But that does apply a pressure - just the perception of others in general. I feel like when you're doing something that's not conforming to the norm, there is a pressure - not necessarily negative - and if you're not prepared to deal with that, then it can be... it's just pressure. It could be negative, it could be positive.

Yeah, and even perceived expectations.

Right, like, everyone you know in your past will have a perceived expectation of you based on how you behave, and if you change that, then that raises eyebrows, that makes people ask questions.

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It was like night and day. Like, it was so crazy. And I was with two of my friends and I pulled them to the back and I was like, 'I think - am I gay? I think I'm gay. I don't know what's going on.' I was, like, screaming at them - well, it was loud there - but I was really, like, screaming. Well, I was really, really high at this moment, I will say.

Yeah, but sometimes that's what you need, right? To remove the inhibitions and take you out of your normal state of being.

Yeah, it just kind of shifted my mindset and allowed me to realize I had just been not really thinking, ever.

Do you feel like, now that you're sober again, you still feel like you carried a lot of those questions with you and you're still trying to figure out what that means in your normal daily life?

Definitely. I didn't realize anything in that moment, to be honest. Well, I did, but like, not anything deep or life changing. I did realize that I had a realization, but I didn't decide anything.

It was more of a breaking down than a building back up of your identity?

Yeah, I was broken down in that moment, and then I left, I went home, and I asked questions to myself. And I still don't know any of the answers, but at least I'm questioning now.

Did you talk to your parents? Or did they just sort of notice that there was a change happening?

I don't have the closest relationship with my parents. I don't really think they would ever understand. To be honest, I haven't brought it up with them, they've probably just seen the changes in the way I present myself. My dad called me 'confused' once, and I was like, 'Whatever, man.' I'm moving out soon, anyway.

Do you mind if I asked what religious background they have? You said they were very religious.

Yeah, so this is a whole can of worms. Have you heard of the Unificationists? Or the Moonies? It was a big cult in, like, the 80's. The leader was from Korea. My parents got into that in the 80's. They did the mass wedding. So, that's what my family was raised in, that whole thing, and then it kind of collapsed in the 2010's when the owner - or the leader or whatever the term is - died. I think his name is Sun Myung Moon.

So before that, my whole life I was in those spaces where, how do I describe it...my whole early childhood from as soon as I can remember, we would end each day and start each morning with the whole family lined up and we would recite this pledge and bow to this guy. It's crazy. So like, I'm still unpacking all that. I think that has also had a lasting effect on me. I don't know. But so, now that it's, like, collapsed, I feel like my parents are kind of in a limbo state, because they don't want to acknowledge it, cause they'll realize what they devoted their entire lives to isn't real. Or, I'm not gonna say isn't real, but was corrupt and taking

advantage of them. So, that's why I've just kind of stayed away from opening that can of worms with them. They're old, my dad's, like, 70-something now.

Okay, so they had you when they were older?

Yeah, my mom was 41 and I don't know how old he was. Must have been, like, late 40's. Yeah, because I was the last. I have four older siblings and then there was a seven year period, I think my mom had a few miscarriages in that time, and then I was born.

Wow. That is a lot to unpack.

It's an interesting way to come up. I think another reason that had such a lasting impact on me is because, in that church, they believe if you were married, or they call it the 'blessing marriage', those mass weddings, then your children are born without original sin and they're considered 'second generation'. And they didn't say this, but it was kind of portrayed upon us that we're different from everybody else. So like, they would just send us off to public school, while also telling us that we have no original sin, that we're different. I feel like that is an unhealthy thing.

Was it hard for you to relate to other kids?

Yes. I didn't think so [at the time], but I'm realizing now that I didn't really ever connect with anyone fully. I was always just kind of walling everyone off and then, like, putting on an act. With everything. Everything was like an act, even when I was at the church youth group events, and they would do a lot of stuff that would try to get us emotional, like, crying a lot and stuff, I felt like I was also putting on an act there to be emotional, because I wanted to fit in there, but I didn't [fit in] there, either.

That must have been pretty isolating.

I didn't think so at first, but I guess it really was.

Was there a certain point where you started questioning those teachings and started figuring out your own belief system?

Yes. Well, the crazy thing is, I don't even know what I believed before, because what happened was a couple of years ago, I realized – and this was a different realization other than the one from before – but I had realized I was living on autopilot. I don't know why, but since then, I have been constructing my own beliefs. I don't really align with anything. I don't like organized religion, but I do enjoy some teachings of some stuff. So yeah, I think down the line I just started to – like I said, I'm still doing it – but just deconstruct what I know and find what makes sense to me.

Is there anything that you feel has been helping you to deconstruct things in a healthy way? Like, you mentioned being around certain communities being helpful?

Yeah, I think actually just pursuing art has been great for me and the community and friends and spaces that come with that. And also the mindset that making art puts me in, I feel like there is a lot of internal-thinking mindset and I think that has helped me a lot.

Do you think that exploring self-portraiture in art has been an important part of your identity forming?

Absolutely. I really like self-portraiture. Especially when it's from a mirror. I find that it's – maybe even subconsciously – it's an exploration of my own internal concept of who I am. I want to do a lot more self-portraits very soon. And actually, I've got some plans for some that I want to do. That was a big reason I was excited to do this interview, actually. I wanted to learn things. I thought maybe I would learn and just keep an open mind for it.

Self-portraiture and also fashion has been big. Really big. I'm super into thrifting. That's a great way to explore my image because in a way, it's just adding things to your image that I might see that aren't there in my physical form.

Yeah, trying on different identities engaging with different identities in a way that's very fluid.

Definitely.

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

Pressured by my family, yes definitely. I wouldn't say pressure to change to be a certain way, but there's subconscious pressure. Just every time I would do a little change, I got made fun of. I got my ears pierced and then my sister was joking - like it's a joke, but she was like, 'Oh, are you gay?' I don't know exactly how she said it. It wasn't malicious, I don't think, or like at least not intentionally. But that in itself puts a pressure on me. Just me piercing my ears is changing people's perception of me and I feel like that in general is scary and that is a pressure to change back.

Like you're signaling something to people, intentionally or not.

Right, and that's when I realized that changing myself is a communication.

My friends don't pressure me to change my appearance, I don't think. I have pretty good friends, they're pretty supportive of me. And I think that comes with the times, too. I feel like, especially since COVID, it's a lot easier to express yourself and be a little weird or different. I just feel like the cultural landscape is a lot more accepting of that than it used to be. It's still not great.

Yeah, I never thought of it in terms of COVID being the catalyst for that. I mean, I've noticed that younger people, like people your age and younger, seem to be a lot more open-minded in general, but that's interesting. I hadn't thought of it in terms of, like, going into isolation, coming back out and being more apt to express themselves in certain ways.

That's what I've noticed.

I mean, it was a time of self-reflection. You were stuck with yourself for a long time.

I feel like everyone was just finally doing things that they wanted to do, because they had nothing else to do. I think that just was a cultural shift. I don't realize it all the time, but like, society is so different and it will never be the same as it was before all that. For better or worse. I think it's for the better, but there's also a lot of issues now. I don't know.

Have you felt pressure to change your appearance by people that you only know casually, or acquaintances? Or even people you've worked with?

Honestly, probably now that I think about it. I think the pressure is there and I just kind of have learned to ignore it. People are always going to have a judgment or thing to say and, whether or not they mean it, there is added pressure from people's perception. But I don't think I personally have been like... Nothing, like, crazy.

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

Absolutely. Yes. That's about my whole life. I was insecure for a long time and only very recently have I become more secure. But, I don't know if it was anything out of the norm of just adolescent angst or something. But no, definitely I have and I still do every now and then feel insecure.

Was it about anything in particular, or just general?

A couple years ago, I was super into the gym because I was super insecure about being skinny, and I remember that was because my family was always saying, I need to, like, put some meat on my bones. I mean, it's just family. I don't think it's malicious. That's just what some people do. But that gave me some body dysmorphia. I was taking a lot of supplements and hitting the gym, and I did gain muscle, but what I realized was, because I was feeding into this insecurity, no matter what I did, I wasn't where - in my mind - I would think I needed to be. I realized that was toxic, so I stopped doing that. And now I've gotten security after that, because I was like, 'Oh, I can just exist and it's fine.'

Do you think that feeling more in control of the way that you're presenting yourself in terms of your fashion and just your look in general has been helpful in terms of feeling more secure?

Absolutely. Once I got the notion of, like, I don't have to appeal to any standard or norm, that is where the security came in. Because, the only opinion that counts is mine. That was all I

needed. When I realized I could do what I want to do, look how I want to look, that's where the security came from.

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

Yes, I do. I have one tattoo that I got recently. I was spending time at a block party, and they had tattoos there and I got one. But yeah, I have my ears pierced. I have my bellybutton pierced, and I bleached my hair recently. I don't know if there's a reason for it other than I think that it looks cool and I just wanted to do it. Like, being able to do that gives me more direct control over my appearance, which is just good. I like having control and being able to just, if I want to do something, do it.

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

What makes me feel beautiful, honestly, is just dressing up, like putting on clothes. I feel like it's almost a decision, like I could manifest that feeling for myself with just setting intention, putting on nice clothes, taking care of myself, like doing skincare, sometimes I'll put on some light makeup. Investing in my image does make me feel beautiful. I'd say that's what helps me.

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

My close friends have been very supportive. They will always hype me up. We have a group chat where we can share things. A lot of people would share their outfits and we compliment each other. It's nice.

My family has not been supportive of that, but to be honest, I don't look for that there. So, it's not an issue for me. That's not where I go if I need support.

But yeah, my close friends have been very good. And they are inspirations to me. I have a lot of friends who are very fashionable, and I can see how they dress, or I'll go thrifting with

one of my friends. They helped me learn how to shop in the women's section at the thrift store, which was freeing to do, and that was huge for me.

Have you had positive experiences with more casual acquaintances, like people you work with or strangers, that impacted your self-perception in a positive way?

Absolutely. Just walking around, sometimes I'll put on, like, a crazy outfit. And then sometimes – this usually happens in bigger cities where it's crazier out there – but I'll just be walking around the subway in New York City and then some random person will come up to me and will say, 'You have a cool outfit' It's really great. Or even just yesterday I went to a big sale of stuff from the Lehigh kids and I was shopping there and like, I met this guy. He just liked what I was wearing. He's like, 'Oh, you found that here?' and I was like, 'Yeah', and then we just ended up complimenting each other's outfits and like, that's like so great, because that makes my day and I'm sure or I made his day too. But yeah, that's just a good experience to have just from random people.

That almost seems more meaningful than getting a compliment on your physical appearance, too, because it's the appearance that you're creating.

Yeah. And I like it, because you have control of that.

Okay, switching gears a little bit. What is your racial, or ethnic, or cultural identity?

Um, yeah, I am just white. My mom's from England. And then my dad's family was in America for a while, but I don't really know the roots. But yeah, my mom's from England. But yeah, I think that's about it. I don't really identify too much with any of the cultural parts of either their backgrounds.

It seems like more than anything, the religious community that they were a part of, maybe was more influential.

Yeah, definitely. I think that would probably be what my cultural identity would be. I mean, I'm so far removed from it now. That was like, my life for a long time.

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

Definitely. Tying into the Unificationists, absolutely, because there is a very high percentage of an Asian population in that church, and depending on what area you live in, just not being Asian is a very othering experience.

And not in, like, a bad way. It's just because of the culture. Like, there's so many unspoken things about someone's culture that you cannot understand, unless you're raised in a family that is part of that culture, so when you're in spaces of predominantly another culture that might be very different from yours, there's a lot that you don't understand.

Do you feel like you notice that from a pretty early age?

Yeah, definitely. I don't know how early, but definitely. Well, I just kind of ignored it for a long time, and when I got older, I became more self-conscious about it. Yeah, but it's not like a bad thing, it just is what it is.

So you said you had three older siblings?

Four older siblings, two sisters and two brothers.

Are you pretty close with them?

I'm not really that close to them, because they are just a lot older than me. There's a big divide there. By the time I was reaching my formative years, they had all moved out and, like, were in college, so they had a lot on their minds. Which, I don't hold that against them, it's just that I'm not that close to them.

And you said that they haven't been particularly accepting of the changes that you've been making in your life?

I wouldn't say they haven't been accepting. They just don't understand it. And not in a negative way. Other than maybe on my Instagram stories, I don't think they even see what

I'm doing. And I don't think my brothers are even on Instagram. But yeah, just sometimes, like my sister will send me a message on my story and will say like, 'What does this mean?' Or something. And yeah - not even like they're being critical, they just don't understand.

Is there anything else you want people to think about while they look at the painting of you?

I don't know, I think that covers it!