A Portrait of the Artist

As a Young College Student

Rihm
If you ventured into one of the dorms at MIT...
On the East side, third floor...

You'd find lots of...
Strange Things
This place is my home.
Traces of the Stories and Spirits of those who lived here before us appear in every direction.

And late at night, when I'd wander and stare into the murals,

I'd wonder about the silent tales of mischief and woe they hold.
I could sit with the walls forever, immersed in a rich lore I will never fully know.
Murals both reflect and affect the cultures they exist in, as well as the artists who made them.
They hint at how every creation, on some level, encodes all the experiences that led up to its making.

One Day:

That cardboard box makes such a sad body pillow! Here, let me see your Sharpie...

*Draws on "Body Pillow"*

"WTF, it's so spotty!"

"Next Day: several fresh units with the fangirl body pillow ass:

Our Glorious Leader"

Hierarchical Bella the Cat

"...sigh..."

"...so fast!?!"
Here's a story of the flaming, firespinning foxgirl mural I painted my first year at MIT.

Simultaneously a manifestation of art's role in my life,

a celebration of my experiences in my weird and wonderful living community,

and a foreshadowing of an element of expression I'd develop the following year.

Part 2: Becoming an Artist
Growing up, like most children, I'd dabble.

Dancing to the "Little Mermaid" Soundtrack with our stuffed animals,

Covering the page with crayola,

Drawing Geometric Princesses,

Secretly authoring potion books.
For one reason or another, I settled into drawing. I remember truly investing myself in the 5th grade.

My friend, Toya, would draw anime.

And of course, I thought I could do better.

An apprentice of the internet,

Youtube was my primary teacher. Online tips/tutorials honed my skills and lurking on Deviantart expanded my artistic vocabulary.

Even though I took those high school art classes,
I saw myself as a "Self-Taught" Artist.

Armed with the simple tools of a pencil and paper,

I could create anything.

mwa ha ha!
But... I was also shy. Drawing was comfortable since it was easy to hide.

I'd practice, door locked or when my family was asleep. Judgement terrified me. My work had to be good and finished before another pair of eyes could see it.

I would use 3x5 index cards.

- Small
- Unintimidating
- Easy to fill up
- Ubiquitous
- Hide well in notebooks or behind pencil cases

I'd practice all the time. When I wasn't doing academics, I did art.
Art served many intertwined purposes. My skills became interdependent with my emerging self-confidence and image.

Teachers are contractually obligated to love their 7th graders’ bookmark “business,” secretly a front for me to use art as a fundraising tactic, excuse to interact with friends/teachers/strangers, and ambitious activity to dedicate lunches and weekends to.

My artistic affinity made me my school’s point person for design throughout middle and high school.

- Half a notecard, laminated in packing tape
- Face paint
- Social event decor
- Commission
- Album cover for English teacher’s band
- Flyers + graphic design
- Club T-shirts
- Vending at festivals/conventions
- T-shirt window murals
- Posters
- Let’s Love NOT Hate
In high school, I relied upon art to breach the barrier between imagination and reality.

But in college, I was amazed by the earnest practice of different sorts of magicks.

Social convention, fear, and "I've-never-done-this-before" were never barriers. Maintaining a purpose and staying safe despite difficulty or danger seems to be a hallmark of my immediate future. I felt wildly at home here.
I felt more free and capable than ever before.

Powered by that and a desire to thank the hall in a way most natural to me, I began my first official wall mural, located by the kitchen entrance. However, before I could finish, in the Spring of 2020, everyone was whisked from normality.

Part 3: Displaced
A group of my hallmates and I packed ourselves and our things into two cars and a 20ft U-Haul, then yeeted off to Maine for the pandemic.

I remember the first thing I made the evening we settled into our house.
Art played a role in making sense of everything. But as restlessness and exhaustion of a life online set in, another form of art emerged from dormancy.

A manifestation of a deep desire to actually do the things I imagine fuels by a heightened self-efficacy developed at East Campus: firespinning.
I saw it first at the Olin College of Engineering as a prospective student.

It looked like ~firebeading~

One routine, especially:

Two orbiting spheres of flame, manipulated so smoothly yet impossibly.

Circling and spiraling and dancing like sprites of light. Mesmerizingly revealing a face with a flickery glow before immediately plunging it into darkness. When they move at different radii, they look like celestial bodies in orbit.
I was pleased MIT also had spinners, and I attended their spinjams.

There were many props, but the dynamic one I wanted, with weights on both ends of a rope is called "puppyhammer."

I made my own practice puppyhammer and used it sporadically.

2 tennis balls

rubber bands

Home Depot Gold & White rope

coins
I only really practiced in my quarantine bubble in rural Maine, after two housemates and I built real fire props for a birthday gift event.

Now I had another form of art—spinning, or "flow art". It was physical, performance, exercise.

Once I got the basic moves down...
Kinesthetically inept, I felt awkward at first, but I kept the attitude I had with drawing—just do and see how it goes.

My spinning was improvisational. I sensed the underlying physics, but intuition was enough to handle it.

When I focus on understanding and completing the moves, I lose any self-consciousness...
I see why spinning is also called "flow art." It can be thoughtless relaxation in a rocking chair or a brain-busting and shin-bruising geometry problem in space. I could see and feel my improvement as moves I couldn't wrap my mind around became intuitive muscle memories.

Truly an example of trial and error, I went outside, sweat and made muscles I didn't know I had sore more often. All under the guise of art.
Location and surroundings became an interesting, new factor in the mood of spinning. And due to the pandemic, I found myself all over. From the flickers of fireflies and campfires in rural Maine, to the neighbor's porchlights in an East Boston apartment. To sunsets by the Atlantic, toes sinking in surprisingly fine sand. To the darkness of the winter skies in a backyard in Cape Cod. Spinning's moodiness is distinct from drawing's.
With drawing, I could use symbolism. Using wall paint over the bright, transient chalks, turning the hallway's rainbow gaze half stormy.

Or, through frenzied motion, with reds and blacks ravaging the page, screaming and bleeding in my stead.
But with spinning, you're literally throwing this object around, generating and releasing this powerful force.

It's cathartic.
The late nights drunk on art
don't look healthy.

What sane person spends hours straining
their eyes in the dark or existing outside in
the freezing cold?

But it's hard to feel sane
when you're boiling inside
sputtering liquid from your
eyes and nose,
gasping at the saltiress and
crying out your throat.

When I feel cornered, art offers an
escape. And of the coping mechanisms out
there, being drunk on art isn't the worst.
When life is disrupted, when people and places change, when I'm far from "home," when I feel alone.

When I need to destress, when I want to introspect, when I wish to memorialize.

When I look in my back pocket for some unique contribution only I can provide, for some excuse to get out and spend some time with others, for that 'lil extra something to imbue into science, electronics, or other projects,

Art is there for me.
When I returned to hall in Spring 2021, the place had existed in my memory longer than I have lived in it physically.

My mural seemed to meld into the lore of the walls. It gained an inexplicable new meaning for me, and I was ready to take authorship over it. After a few touch ups, I stamped my signature on it and on other murals I had laying around my hall.

I wouldn’t say they were “finished,” but art has value at any stage. I can better recognize when mine are potent enough to be shared.
The week before finals in Spring 2021, the administration sprung the news onto the East Campus (EC) community that our beloved dorm would undergo renovations at the start of my senior year. The community will likely be separated once again, and the new EC, which I'll never live in, will be very different. We will likely not see vertically swinging doors, winch-operated "second floors", or hanging lofts drilled into the concrete ceiling. And our wall murals, with their rich histories, will be gone. But, they will not be forgotten.

Cultural continuity and documentation efforts are underway. And as the pandemic has shown, the spirit of the EC resides within the residents and their stories, no matter where they go.

Photo Reference Notes:
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