Why I Paint

I have always loved making art, from the moment someone along the line shoved a crayon into my hands and said “make something”. At this age, I could make whatever I wanted and it didn’t have to have a meaning or a purpose. I didn’t know it at the time, but art was freeing then. Whatever I made, I liked it because it fully came out of my childish imagination, and my parents would always say it was beautiful no matter what.

At some point, I was given paint. Who knows which kind of paint I touched first? Whether that be watercolor, tempera, or acrylic, this introduction somehow was the spark that ignited what would be a huge part of the rest of my life. Paint was even more fun to me at this age because it made a mess, that is, a mess I didn’t have to clean up. At this age, to paint was to have fun and turn my unbridled imagination into physical, tangible things. I remember one day in preschool, I stayed inside while all the other kids were outside on the playground just so I could paint. One day I painted what I personally thought Elsa and Anna’s dresses should look like in Frozen, adding my own touches (splashes) of detail (blobs) where I saw fit. Another day I painted my dream cupcake with loads of rainbow frosting adorned with rainbow sprinkles.

As I grew up, painting was a defining aspect of who I was, though my perspective on it began to change. Around third or fourth grade, I became a very self-critical, self-deprecating person, hating on almost everything I created because it wasn’t perfect to me. My dad would always say I had a really good eye for art and design, but I think that eye he spoke of led me down the spiral of perfectionism. It wasn’t his fault though, I could see every minor detail and mistake I made; to the point where I would give up partway through most projects I started, simply because it wasn’t up to my personal standards. I remember starting a painting for my mom’s birthday one year during the pandemic, it was of a cactus because it’s one of her favorite plants–her collection is always growing, dominating our front porch. I wanted it to be especially perfect because I wanted her to love it, but the more I worked on it, the more I came to despise it. It was disproportional, the colors looked off, the shadows looked fake, and somehow whatever I did it was always crooked. I never finished it. I never got to give it to her. I still have it in the depths of my closet somewhere, it remains as unfinished as I left it six years ago. I’ll never throw away what I create, but once I decide there’s no saving it, I’ll never touch it again. In this specific instance, I felt so disappointed in myself, I felt like a failure of a daughter and like I should have been able to do better for my mom. The more things I gave up on, the worse this overbearing feeling became.

“You are your own worst critic.”

This phrase continues to reverberate through my brain every time I make a commitment to creating something, and it couldn’t be more true for me. I used to paint things I liked or thought were pretty, but at some point I found myself making only things I thought other people would compliment. This thought process was clearly due to a multitude of factors, but I believe the environment around me was one of them. There was one day in fourth grade art class where a few friends and I were sitting at a table working on the current project. I don’t remember

what this project was, but I vividly remember us all peering around at each other's work and complimenting it repeatedly—like we were everyone else's entourage. Strangely though, this flurry of praise would always be followed by talking down on our own work, discrediting other people's complimentary words in favor of hating what we created. While some of this could be chalked up to children fishing for compliments, it was the atmosphere we were all used to and expected–this was the normal, you were supposed to be negative towards yourself. When we were this young, no one around us really told us this behavior was detrimental, so I continued to fall deeper into this dangerous artist trap, and arguably still haven't come out the other side.

Despite the number of years it has been since I developed this habit, my dependence on other people's validation of my work is something I continue to struggle with today. For multiple years of my life, my opinion of my own work was almost entirely composed of what other people said about it. If they hated it, so did I. If they liked it, so did I—but only to an extent.

"Don't worry about what other people think, the only opinion that matters is your own."

As I continue to do my best at unlearning this habit of self-deprecation and perfectionism, I have found that when I go back to making art that means something deeply to me, I actually care about finishing the pieces. When I paint about my childhood, my insecurities, my opinions, and nostalgia, I care about making the piece look how I want it to. At this point, it has become a physical representation of my swirling thoughts in my own brain, not what people around me expect it to look like. I have an emotional attachment to the paintings and art I create now because I have found the key to cherishing the art form again: going back to being the little girl who painted Elsa and Anna and rainbow cupcakes because that's what she liked and that's what she wanted the world to look like. But instead of painting trademarked Disney characters and colorful baked goods, I paint expressions of my thoughts and core memories I never want to forget, even after I grow old and my internal dialogue changes. I am thankful for the little girl who painted what she loved, because without that, how would I remember today what my dreams looked like at the time and that I was so infatuated with rainbows and the modern ice queen?

As the world continues to shift and advance around me, I began to wonder if the things and ways I once loved creating were still worth the time and effort when technology could supposedly do it too. If my art is going to be a part of me for the rest of my life, following me through my future career paths, should I keep doing it if the entire industry, and therefore my work, could be taken out by an algorithm?

"Why do you even care? ChatGPT could take a fraction of the time and probably make it better than you."

In a world dominated by generative AI, where the process of "creation" has been dumbed down to a short prompt or demand, hitting enter, and waiting for the result; my choice to paint is a form of rebellion. What I create comes from my own thoughts, fears, insecurities, and opinions – a kind of authenticity AI could never achieve through its plagiaristic algorithms and

copy-paste slop “art” style. I will never be constrained by what art already exists in databases that I can throw together in a digital blender and act as though it is my own work, yet my passion is consistently threatened by exactly that: easy-access, billionaire funding, environmental destruction that takes more away from the world than it adds. There exists a constant fear as an artist that our work will be stolen by AI and used forever, because any picture posted on social media, websites, even museum sites can be snatched up by AI without us knowing or consenting. They call it “training”; I call it theft. At some point, the work I made using my own two hands and creative brain will no longer be my own. Pieces of it could be thrown out at any time to arrogant people who don’t realize the gravity of their actions.

Despite the struggles I’ve had mentally with creating art and the looming threat of AI, I will continue to paint. Why? Because I can express myself to the world without having to say anything in words. I paint to capture the beauty of my surroundings. I paint to depict a concept using imagery. I paint because it’s therapeutic and emotional. I paint to capture realism without a camera. I paint to make and prove a point. I paint because it’s what I’ve been told I’m good at. I paint because it’s freeing. I paint because it’s what people expect from me. I paint because I care. I paint because…what else can I do?