

OTHERWORDLY

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AMERICAN ARTIST SHAE DETAR
BY TANIA CONNOLLY

Thanks to her husband's suggestion, Shae rediscovered her talent for photography and as soon as she painted on her initial print, she uncovered a latent passion for artistic expression. Since then, the self-taught, full-time artist has had both her commercial photographs and painted prints published in various publications such as Juxtapoz, 1-d, Dazed, Nylon and The New Yorker Magazine. Shae has also collaborated on advertising campaigns with Free People, Ballet Beautiful, Cosabella Lingerie, and Aritzia clothing, who commissioned her to photograph and paint a huge wrap-around billboard on Broadway in Soho, New York, in 2013. Album covers and fashion lookbooks are also included on her CV. In only the previous two years, her artwork has been exhibited in galleries from New York to London, France, Miami, and an upcoming show in Germany.

I grew up surrounded by antiques, statues, and murals of goddess-like women that had been painted by men. These classical nude figures are very dreamlike and harken back to myths in literature from so far back in time, and it all attracts me somehow. My favourite painters all painted women like this and now I'm just making work that appeals to me.'

Shae Acopian Detar's artwork comprises an old technique that predates colour processing - hand painting or tinting vivid colours over printed photographs. Her models of choice are women representing diverse ethnicities and body shapes. Shae's recent pieces show her subjects posing nude in forests, beside riverbanks, and on barren landscapes. She then transforms these already unique images into ethereal realms inhabited by nymphlike creatures that 'represent something very specific like fear, strength, or vulnerability.'

Hand colouring images is not a process she consciously practised, rather it is one she toyed with from the age of twelve. 'I don't know where the idea came from. I would paint on magazines and collage them and I continued to do this all the way through my twenties.' For years art remained merely a hobby, never an overriding obsession for Shae. From early childhood, she yearned to become an actor. She performed in theatre, appeared in commercials and short films, and studied Shakespeare.

Shae's burning desire for a future in film was unfortunately extinguished when an acting coach observed her struggles in mastering the language of "The Bard". Her instructor argued that if an actor couldn't conquer Shakespeare, then they shouldn't be an actor. A devastated Shae crumbled and lost confidence, lacking the courage to prove her coach wrong. When an agent approached her on the streets of New York City and offered her the opportunity to sign up with a top model agency, she abandoned acting and embarked on a modelling career.

The lithe figure, flawless skin, and youthful glow that once stopped a talent scout in his tracks is still evident as a recent photo of Shae, now aged 37, can attest. Dressed in a mini dress, kimono and knee length silver boots, her enduring love of vintage clothing is obvious. But Shae 'never meant to be a model, really. That was a very long time ago'. Only twenty-two years old when she retired from modelling, Shae then enrolled at Parsons in New York to study fashion design and interned for a major designer, but the stint was short lived. 'I really hated the inner workings of fashion and the mentality people tend to put on in that world.' Turning her back on fashion as a profession, she married Brett, a musician and her long-time boyfriend, and they moved to Los Angeles where, inspired by her affection for all things old, Shae opened her own vintage shop. Six years ago, on the same day her beloved dog died, she closed her store. At a loss as to what to pursue next, her husband encouraged her to pick up a camera again.

With her modelling background and keen interest in fashion, Shae's early photographic shoots saw her models adorned in elaborate headpieces she constructed herself as well as clothes from Lullie Vintage, which can be found on her Facebook page. Vibrant colours also play an integral part in her pieces, 'I'm a very colourful, playful, feminine, and antique-loving person. My husband always says the way I view things in the world is written all over my work.'

She credits her husband, brother, and parents as being the most influential people in her life and her dog, Waylon, as her most prized possession. 'They are always the ones I show my work to first and they support me through the good times and the bad. They have always believed in me. The greatest gift in life is my husband and family. To me, they are life. Without them I literally don't even know what I'd do, I'd be lost. My husband and brother inspire me creatively more than anything. They are both so talented and have such wise words for me so often. In fact, the night my husband met me, I was 19 and my brother's band was opening for Brett's band at the time. I was at the back of the room making art with magazine images I had cut out, and Brett was thinking, what in the world is that girl doing? So he came up to me and we started talking. So that is how I met my husband, seventeen years ago.'

Shae and Brett now live in New York City and she is working on something a little different. 'I'm in pre-production for my first short film. I have been really studying cinematography; shot lists, shooting scripts, what the industry camera movements are called and how certain angles show different emotions. I'm pretty consumed with that right now. I'm also working on some large-scale pieces for a show. And I'm planning my next series, which will be shot in the same place as the short film - out west.'

2016 is also the year Shae plans to attempt acting again, 'something I loved more than anything,' but only as a sideline. If she has one regret, it is allowing the words of that one acting coach to derail her dream all those years ago. She believes it was a mistake to quit acting, and it is one she has never stopped thinking about. 'It is sad to think of it now, to let my fear and insecurity guide my path. Which is why I am now so outspoken about people facing fears and just going for it, because I let that get in the way of something I loved so much. I am stronger now and I don't let fear run my life like it did in the past.'

Social media has provided an ideal platform for Shae to showcase her creativity for a wider audience. The muses in many of her artworks are volunteers who have answered casting call-outs she has posted on Instagram to her 36k followers. She regularly uploads her artwork to Instagram and Facebook where they can be admired, shared, and occasionally sold. Shae invites her friends to follow her process as she posts photos of herself lying on her studio floor surrounded by pots of coloured paint, brushes, and her latest project.

'I plan my photos, then I go home, figure out the ones I want to print, and then just paint in the moment. I never know what will happen. I just experiment and let my mood guide me. I paint small first, large ones are expensive, and if I like it enough to make a large scale one, that's what I do.' She is proudest of her large scale painted works. 'I'm proud of them because it's been quite an adjustment going from 8.5 x 11 inch painted pieces to 8ft pieces. I delayed that transition for years, somewhat out of fear (and lack of funds) I spent six months making mistakes and messing up going big but I figured it out and now when I look at them I feel happy.'

She is not concerned if her artwork is unable to evoke any emotions in her viewing public or start any dialogues. 'The truth is I just make my work and put it out there. If it has some sort of life then great, and if not that's fine too.' Shae's work is created in New York City where she spends the majority of her time. She purchased a tree house in Nashville a few years ago, as a retreat from the stress of city living. She enjoys the open spaces and natural surroundings but admits she hasn't spent more than a few months there. Walking her dog, reading, and watching movies is how Shae chooses to relax. Having recently joined a book club, she also started a poetry night. 'I love drinking champagne or wine, and reading poetry with people.' Wherever she lives, Shae's star is definitely on the rise and wants to leave a legacy.

'I mean I think of how Van Gogh's work and story moves me so deeply. I suppose if anything I make could inspire someone in some tiny way, that'd be cool. But I never think of these things. Van Gogh's mentality was that he wanted to move people, save people through his work and honestly, I don't ever think like that at all. I make work more for myself because I need to. But I love that Van Gogh cared so much about moving people. He was so special. He's my art hero.'

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