

# POLYESTER

## *Rebecca Morgan is Making Artwork Dedicated to the Ugly and Grotesque*



Growing up in the Appalachian Mountains of Pennsylvania without the ease of finding artistic inspiration online, Rebecca Morgan found reliability and ideas through newspaper comics and her rural environment, set far away from any art school. Her work today is an ode to bumpkin stereotypes and a love letter to her younger self - reclaiming inaccuracies via brush strokes and sketches that have been presented in galleries across the world.

While teaching at Bard College, Morgan is exploring different mediums to depict her hedonistic and at times menacing characters - ranging from sketches to sculptures. Often smoking, often nude and often showing a lot of (poisoned) teeth, Morgan's work is instantly recognizable as a rendition of rural Americans that is typically pushed aside and used only for punchlines or stereotypes. Morgan is reminding us that there's beauty in everything, especially in the things that make people feel uneasy. I sat down with the artist for an retrospective of her work, how she maintains creative momentum and navigating the art world in 2023.

*Why do you think it's important to find beauty in the things that are stereotypically 'ugly', or at least are stereotypically depicted as ugly?*

The work that I'm interested in making is somewhere between acknowledging how hard everything is and how sweet and beautiful everything is. What a miracle it is just to get out of bed every day. It used to be just body horror, that type of grotesque, but we're so socially worked up. If you would have asked me that question maybe two years ago, it would have been more on that scale of it.

I'm just very interested in looking at the daily, the softbelly of things and calling it exactly what it is and self acknowledgement of being uncomfortable. We feel so uncomfortable in our bodies, but it's also like, how did we get here? The most beautiful things are so grossly sublime, like a volcanic eruption is so incredible to witness but also like, oh my god, I can't believe that's actually going down. It's actually horrific.

So many of my convos at Bard are just like talking with kids and telling them that they can make work about the everyday, that it's profound enough in itself. We talk a lot about the abject, which is such a kernel in art school. Like, why do we see our bodies and the world around us so socially sickening? We pee, we menstruate, all of that stuff, and that's just so base level normal but for whatever reason it's so crunked up.



*You can see that in your work. The combination between something beautiful and something ugly coming together. And what you're saying about the subject like, we're all just so grossed out about everything. How did we get here?*

The other thing that's really important to me is like this reclamation of this uncomfy stuff.. all of this, this horror around us and our bodies and feeling uncomfortable. A large part of it is making images that other people are like, Yes, I understand that feeling. I've been there. Or even a simple acknowledgement of like, you're not crazy.

Growing up, I had this really thick moustache and unibrow and I was always dragged for it. So in my cartoons they all had moustaches, they all had their little self portraits of all the things that ultimately were really painful. So for me to turn it in a position of power, where it's like, no, actually, that is me. And that's okay. How can I take some of the worst parts of life and funnel them into new ownership?



*How did growing up in a rural area inspire your work?*

I grew up in Pennsylvania in the Appalachian Mountains, the third poorest county in all of Pennsylvania. It was like, if you didn't see something on television, or like in the newspaper, it kind of didn't exist. Being so rural no one ever told me like, oh, you know, all of this stuff around us is designed by someone, you know, like the chair you're sitting in, you could go and do that as a job.

And no fault to my very bumpkin, rural crew. I had no idea that fine art was anything. I was always the creative, talented girl, but it was also like, oh, well, that's nice. You can make a nice drawing or, oh, that looks like someone. That's as far as it ever went back home. Especially if you were a female: you were a teacher, you're a nurse, it was very straightforward.

I was profoundly influenced by the Sunday funnies, things that were just around me, you know, like illustration and comics. I found my dad's Mad magazines way too young, but it was an opportunity to learn. My grandfather was this wild outsider artist, and we were always making stuff together. And he knew it was really important. He was a refrigerator salesman forever, but he would have been wildly successful if he would have been able to go further into art. I don't want to sell refrigerators.



*I read a quote of yours, that your paintings “represent a kind of blissful ignorance: they’re totally fine with looking so hideous and awful; it’s of no consequence to them.” Why is it important for you to evoke this in your work?*

Every time I make something, whether it’s outrightly me or not, it’s always like a self portrait somewhere along the way. People are like, Why do you draw your characters looking almost stereotypically rural? I’m like, well, because I am stereotypically rural. Most of it comes from the therapeutic sense of claiming something. And in a larger sense to turn it into something that’s almost a brand, or an image. Let’s take the things that I’m mercifully railed against and like celebrate it, elevate it, put it front and centre.

*Yes, you can tell that the character design is coming from a place of love because of the level of care and detail that goes into them. They’re not arbitrary.*

Yeah, for sure.



*Your work has nudity but necessarily in a erotic way. What’s the purpose of the nudity in your work?*

At the very beginning I was making these very big naturalistic drawings of myself naked in the woods. I take a lot of reference from historical art rather than contemporary at times, and women didn’t really wear clothes in those paintings. Going to the museum feels super sexualised and idealised, so in the same vein that dudes have been using bodies from day one, that’s also where I come from. It stems from being your most authentic self. I paint myself nude because it’s the barest representation of myself. Self portraiture gets me excited. It’s a daily expression.

*How do you navigate the art world as a traditional artist in 2023?*

There was this moment where I realised that this romantic idea of an artist working in your studio conflicts with having a 9 to 5. I’ve had to sell paintings to pay rent on time when I wasn’t teaching. It’s that idea of how a comic in the newspaper can reach millions of people versus having a show in New York in a white box where a certain few can access it and look at it. I chose to teach alongside making art so I’m not freaking out all the time. Navigating the art world is so much about positions of power and the art world feels so bad so much of the time. Especially for accessibility. I tell my students that they need to foster their community and build that.

Words: [Charlotte Amy Landrum](#)

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