



EMILY GOPAUL

"I am starting to question all the art I ever loved before"

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I log into my zoom at 1:59 pm, revisiting my umm's and aah's, desperately wishing for minimum usage of the word 'like'. That one minute until 2:00pm makes me agonisingly reflect on the circumstances that will shortly lead me to asking a stranger for her consent to be recorded.

Emily is a vision in a yellow Sweater; palm caressed, period mirrors, a high ceiling (seemingly uncommon in London real-estate) with a welcoming smile. Emily's growing invaluableity to world of art education and curriculum reform should come as no surprise; her commitment to reclaiming cultural capital places the often fantasied but systematically dismissed formative childhood front and centre, posing a real threat to the sleepy status quo we've come to expect from the primary education sector.

'Please excuse my nerves', I tell her, as I make a comment about this experience of conducting an interview for the first time 'as an adult', slowing building up to my journey, learning or lack of and vested interest in Art education as an evolving synesthete. Her voice is melon yellow, what I think of as a fitting aesthetic to her calm demeanour as she encourages and subsequently thanks me for sharing; 'I've already learned from you'.

A virtual pep in my step, we fall into an easy tête-à-tête about life in Pandemic, her intent and penmanship in 'Teaching Primary Art and Design', her Indo-Guyanese descent and love for London as she inhabits mostly white spaces of teaching and art. About subscribed art diets, positive art experiences, children in assembly lines, homeschool rebels, lateral professional moves, doodling, seclusion, guilty pleasures, dentist appointments, internal landscapes, the colour yellow and of course...Boris.

"yesterday, I had three things to do- the busiest day I've had for a year. And I was absolutely knackered for the day. So I don't know how we're all gonna go."

1. What's your quick-speak on heritage and Community?

My heritage is Indo Guyanese, but yeah, I was born in in South London and very much sort of feel like a Londoner more than anything else. The Indo-Guyanese heritage, it's there in the less strong ways, it's there in the food that my family and it's there in some of the ways that we speak to each other, or the ways that we kind of celebrate or come together as a family. But it's, you know, as with so many of us, a mishmash of lots of the Indian, the Caribbean, the British..a melting pot.

We discuss the physical manifestation of being a Londoner that reflects in Emily's work and experience as an educator, and it's evolution with regard to her somatic and cultural environment. Emily believes that finding common ground with students is vital to building a relationship, which is a really important part of setting the kind of landscape for for learning in the classroom.

Q: Would it be different teaching in a school in Hampstead versus a school in Willesden?

"My first teaching experience was in a school in an area just on what you'd call the fringes of London, and it was a very white working class demographic there. In fact, the school was in the middle of lots of housing estates and social housing. That was a very specific demographic, Approximately 2% of the parents of that school had been in further education. So as learners, the children, they didn't come to school with a readiness for learning. I think a lot of people outside of education assume that all students come kind of ready, ready to learn. I went from there, and taught at a school in Hampstead, a school called St. Mary's, which is a very small, private girls school, Catholic school. Not only was it primary to secondary, but in all the ways possible, it was an opposite experience. That's that move between those two schools is what kind of sparked my interest in our education because I was seeing such disparity and provision. So this was a private, a primary school where they had a specialist art teacher, I've never seen that in a state school. I got to thinking that if these children who I just left in the secondary school had had this kind of input from primary, how different they might have been as learners, coming into secondary school, in art, but also in all the subjects.

As an art teacher, who's designing curriculum and selecting art and artists, that is something that you're aware of, you never want to lower expectations. If you're teaching at a rural school in Wales, it's not to say that you're going to leave off any black or Asian artists from the curriculum, because that would be wrong. It's finding a way to engage the students based on where they are, and then extending that and introducing them to two other things that will expand their horizons and expand their understanding of the arts as well.

Q: As an artist, what role does physicality play in inhabiting the feeling of home?

I think my work and my ideas are very much my home. I've lived in spaces where the whole flat has been my studio and there are paintings everywhere and I've spread out and I've lived in houses where I've just had my room and that way maybe I'm doing more writing. So the medium, I guess is sometimes dictated by your physical space. It's nice, because I am quite multidisciplinary so I can go from painting to writing, etc. I'm adaptable, as long as I have certain creature comforts, and I have a safe, warm space. Having said that, I'm a homebody as well. I love being cozy. I love being at home. But also, I think as an artist, you have a very, like, I've always had a very strong internal landscape. So I can always withdraw into my internal landscape.

2. What Art do you most identify with?

I mean, you know who I'm gonna say– Frida Kahlo, she's become such a cliché and commodity. A part of me gets very irritated when I go around, and I see her on slippers and notepads. I genuinely did fall in love with her very young age. A sense of 'it's okay to use that in your art'. Her sense of style, her earrings, the aesthetic of her home, her love story with Diego. I just... yeah.

We talk about Emily's practice in placing artists of colour and women at the core, and about how the killing of George Floyd has opened up so much more discussion and debate and awareness around curriculum reform.

I think that especially given the events of last year, I mean, already, there was an awareness that if you were to look in the primary sector, or the secondary, the artists selected for our curricula were very much the 20th century greats. Picasso, Van Gogh... you could more or less go to any primary school and they would have done a project on Van Gogh, some flowers, they would have done something on Monet's water lilies. I was already very conscious of that, and trying to encourage teachers to not focus on this gang of white male artists. What's in my heart is that we should actually centre these artists rather than just having them as a kind of sprinkling of diversity. How about we centre these artists now.

Q: I feel like you're of the very few people doing this. Does this space get lonely?
Fewer references? Lesser existing work?

I think as an artist, I've always felt quite on the peripherals for various personal and professional reasons. So, at this age, I'm quite comfortable with being on the peripherals of things. I'm able to see the benefits of being there. You know, you find your people I think, it might not be one big group of people that are there ready for you to join, but you pool in your differences. That's a really beautiful thing. I enjoy a bit of loneliness anyway.

I've made several decisions in my life, professionally, that on paper would be like what she doing, but they made sense to me. When I was my first teaching job, I got promoted to head of department very quickly. I had a lot of responsibility, I was in a very good position financially, and...I left. I've made lots of lateral moves. I've never been scared to turn things down. I'm not I'm not religious at all, but I have a real trust in the process, which comes from being an artist. I trust the process and the unfolding of my career. Hugely.

3. What's a significant memory of your relationship with art as a child? Labelling you a 'creative one'.

It was a moment in primary school. In Haringey, we had a teacher called Mrs. Suarez and she brought in these different loaves of bread. They had these different surfaces, seeded with different colours. I remember just being like oomph. Time gone. There was me and one other boy and our two pieces of work were like the best pieces of work. Nice feeling!

Q: How have you found your practice shifting or evolving in the duration of this pandemic?

Up until December 2019, I was teaching art three days a week and doing everything else around that, vice versa. And so January 2020, when I went completely freelance, it kind of all coincided. Not only was I in this new way of working, which was freelance not tethered to one school, but with all sorts of different schools, galleries, museums. Then COVID happened. So there was a lot of adjustment happening alongside each other, they did in a way complement each other because I was just beginning to work from home anyway.

Q: Moving into a space with this generation actually coming into (hypothetical) actualisation, what would the next step for educator in art be?

We're coming into a time now if we really acknowledge the role of creativity in our futures. It's huge. If you look at the top kind of desirables from employees, employers want creativity and lateral thinking. A lot of the projects that I advocate are not outcome focused. If we move to a space where students are thinking more about themselves as artists, first and foremost, and what artists do is they work in multidisciplinary ways, they research things that are of importance to themselves, whether that be issues to do with race, identity, ethnicity, family, and that art gives them a voice. Imagine them sharing their work and their ideas with each other, so not only are they creating and expressing themselves, and researching and self motivated, but they're also listening and looking and learning from each other.

In countries like this country, where much is based on the individual, one of the positive sides is that you can design your own learning journey. Be a lifelong learner.

4. Name something you love. Why?

I love my friends and my family. I'm very, very lucky. I have just the best people who support me. Their love and their acceptance of me is part of who I am.

Q: How difficult is it to inculcate in children, the idea of community through a positive art experience, given its facilitated in the primary years?

Well, it's interesting, because in primary schools in the early years, it's free flowing learning activities, they don't have this compartmentalised subject approach to learning, it's very child led then they go into year one, and it starts to get funnelled out. And by the time they get to year six, you know, they might have the occasional kind of collaborative project, but it's very much them as an individual learner in their classroom. Go back to elementary ways of learning. What I usually say to subject leaders in art is that they have to create that environment, they have to bring that environment to the classroom. There are really quite small, seemingly kind of silly ways that you can do that. When you're teaching art, for example- the classroom becomes the art studio. You have to proactively cultivate that feeling of studio space when you're teaching art.

Moving away from the rigid school time tables, Emily coins the concept of parents being home school rebels; homeschool lessons in a youtube format, while schools having real rigour on teaching English, with a deep focus on Latin history, Western centric, Eurocentric history lessons.

Something that came from my personal experience with friends and peers, which is that a lot of my friends who came from white middle to upper class backgrounds, they really had this strong sense of heritage and where they were from. Some of them would even have physical family trees and be able to trace. A lot of my friends who come from immigrant families didn't have that. They weren't able to talk about where their parents were born. Sometimes they weren't able to know, sometimes even their own birth dates, they weren't sure...

I had a conversation with the lady who was living in a flat close by, husband and wife and their two children. I think she's Latvian and English was her second language. And I said, 'So how's it going?' We had one of those socially distance conversations on the doorstep. And she said, 'Oh, I don't know what I'm doing. I can't teach them anything I don't know how to do.' I hear you every day in the garden with them doing gardening. I smell your cooking. I hear your conversations. She's teaching them so much all the time.

Homeschool rebel is both those things, parents as really important educators, regardless of their educational background, regardless of where they are born, or, what they perceive as their academic knowledge, they're valuable.

5. What makes you angry?

Oh, Boris.

Nah.. just general injustice. People being shitty makes me really, really angry, especially when it comes to children.

Sometimes we're talking about things that aren't quantifiable, whereas in the world of school and education, it's all about the quantifiable. Art perceived as kind of soft touch subjects. I had a moment of extreme irritation this week, when I saw that Boris Johnson had released a video. I'm going to try and say this without being insulting; he's inviting children to enter his art competition, 'draw a picture Send it to 10 Downing Street', and he will share it. I felt like this shows a lack of understanding about the importance of creativity and the arts in general, because it's very reductive. If you look at lockdown, and you look at what people did, especially in that first lockdown, people started making, they started baking, they started colouring in books, gardening, basically started tapping into their creativity as a way of survival, as a very natural coping mechanism.

If you're not given a chance to tap it, to find out what that is for you at a young age, you'll never know. You know, I'm really lucky. And I'm sure you are too. And lots of my friends are that we know that about ourselves, we know that maybe we're going to just sit and draw or paint or go for a walk and let our thoughts do you know, we know that. But some people have never really tapped into that and in themselves. And they may never know.

It's a, you know, it's a competition for primary school kids to draw what they're thankful for. It's a past time.

Q: What are your views on assessment in art education?

Whenever I've taught in schools, I've always really stood my ground, I don't mock in sketchbooks, I would never write in somebody's Sketchbook. I try helping them to understand the culture of creativity, the culture of arts, and, and why things like sketchbooks are not the same as the textbook they would be use in literacy or in history. With young children, we can't just say, come in and do whatever, you have to have some boundaries, but it's about having those freedoms within

the school has a method for assessing that they think they can take it from academia and just apply it to art and design, which doesn't work because they're trying to map an art and design curriculum into these very linear strands of progress.

students need to understand that as an artist, self assessment is actually part of the creative process is something that as artists we do anyway, We're constantly reviewing. We're constantly refining. Also peer assessment. If you think about an art studio, where you've got artists popping over and giving each other feedback . There aren't government standards for art. So why do we have to question why are we assessing while we're attaching a level or a number or a grade? Who is it really for?

6. What's your Dream Project?

My dream project is at some point, I've always said this, I want to live a very long life and in my 80s and 90s have a studio overlooking the sea. I'll be drinking and smoking and painting. That's that's the end goal. That's where all of this is kind of leading to.

I quote Ourania Kouvou to Emily, and we move into the nuances of this peculiar thing called childhood. We reminisce the lines before classes and lunch breaks, with the first four falling in line and the rest just spinning around/holding hands... We talk about children's need to express themselves and move their bodies in that way and how it gets squashed out of them.

"Funnily enough, when you look at adults, and you look at mental health and well being and creativity, nature, getting in touch with your inner child, this is something that is spoken about"

In all the Art I loved before, Emily talks about giving herself the leeway of not having the internet and being bound to a limited resource pool.

Q: How has your practice become multi- disciplinary?

Where I'm at now is that I see my teaching my creativity, my identity, as an artist, very much as something that I can't separate. When I'm creating me sources, when I'm interacting with people, it's an extension of me.

Post Covid, I felt that need to help teachers to support teachers. So I quickly just started videoing, learn how to use iMovie and edit. A creative practice in the same way as an artist; if you have an idea, you experiment a bit with different mediums and tools until it gives voice to your idea in the best way.

I have to say that also I meditate. I meditate twice a day for 20 minutes. This is not something I always talk about when I'm talking about my teaching practice, or when I'm giving talks about art education but it's very much a part of everything I do. Gives me clarity. So when I have an idea, I feel I have that kind of clarity around how I want it to manifest.

7. What is the best advice you have ever been given?

Speak to yourself the way that you would speak to someone you love. Never let that internal dialogue be anything but kind, supportive, maternal and nurturing.

Q: This whole idea of calling someone normal implies that there is something that is broken with some people, especially with regard to mental growth and subsequently the mental health of a child. That is extremely problematic because it encourages a subscribed format of being....

These conversations are coming to the forefront. What happens very early on in education is not only that there are ideas about what is normal, but that the children are taught to look outside for rules and guidelines about what is normal. They're taught very early on to look outside to look at the teacher to read the facial expressions, the body language, you know, of the teacher to listen to the words to listen to the school rules. Listen to parents, it's all out there. Yeah, so I guess the normal thing is about looking outside for ideas about what is normal, rather than us supporting children and trusting themselves. I think that's what it is trusting yourself. Learning but evolving past these subscribed ideas of morality.

8. What is the one thing in your studio you cannot live without?

A black fine line pen.

Q: Often, competence and confidence in creating art is derived from lived and experienced knowledge of form materials. What role of material like facilitating a voice to wider, more intangible topics like diversity or inclusivity?

I designed a scheme of Work Project for school at the start of last year, the underlying foundational theme was diversity. The children were looking at an artist called Brandon McCarthy, who makes these really lovely collages with different textures and different colours. She looks at the contours of the face, and she cuts the paper accordingly- very layered, and textured. Children would make their own sort of collage portraits, and although the finished product wouldn't be a self portrait, or even particularly realistic, what they would get is an understanding of, you know, faces are made up of different parts. And that although these, these different portraits made by each of us look different, they might have pink, purple, patterned, different textures, they all have beauty, they all have individuality. And they're all important and, and, and valuable to the class. There's ways like that where you can take concepts and build them into the materials.

9. If you were a new addition to the crayon box, what colour would you be?

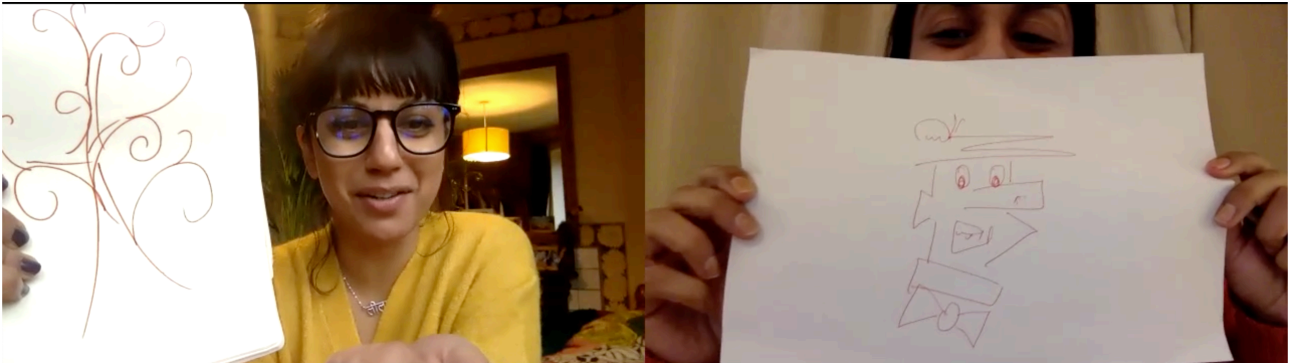
Mellow Yellow is my colour as you can see. Calm, serene, willowy..

Q: On your website, you talk about teaching children to read paintings using visual literacy techniques, they can develop like comprehension skills and be utilised in other fields...

The world that we live in now is so visual, it's imperative to have a critical eye when you're being constantly bombarded with images. Teaching children to how to critically analyse what they're being presented with. In the classroom, and one of the things that I advocate for is read reading paintings, or I call it being an art detective. You can show them the most kind of shocking or most beautiful painting, but the children today seem desensitised. I hide parts of the picture painting and showed just one small part. And maybe it's quite an abstract part. So they have to work out if that's a tail or a snake or a letter or you know, so it's kind of drawing them into the image and getting them to kind of work out what they're seeing. And by doing that slowly, it has a lovely effect in the classroom of actually slowing things down, you know, because the other thing is that we live in a world which is like rush, rush, rush, rush, rush, look at this, look at that, look at that, and if you As the teacher can slow everything down, so you're looking slowly at an image, you're picking out the meanings. As you work more deeply, you can take it apart and look at the setting the characters tell the story of that character, what do you think was happening before this scene in the painting, so just different ways of kind of diving into images and inferring meaning from them. And questioning, always questioning, always being curious, rather than just accepting what you're being shown at face value. I think it's really important.

10. If asked to draw something in an instant, what is your go-to drawing?

(pens quietly scratch, with half a head visibility at our virtual windows)



Doodling is generally associated with a lack of focus or preoccupation. I think, for a lot of people doodling is in some forms, physical manifestations of what they're listening and hearing, not something to be frowned upon or marginalised. One of the things in the last school that I introduced was something called a doodle book. So every morning when they came in, they would just doodle. After break time doodle, those transition times between a lesson and recreation or between lessons even. 'Okay, open your doodle book. And it's a book that's not marked, it's not looked at, you can do whatever you want in it. And that week, had no behavioural incidents registered at all, you know, in any of the classes..'

11. At the very end, can you teach me something in the next five minutes that I don't know?

Oh, my goodness.

Okay, I'm going to show you a breathing exercise. We're going to do Lion's breath. So when you're feeling like pissed off with your course, or whatever, you can do this. Okay? It's really good. It makes you look really attractive. It's great. It doesn't.

So you breathe in. And when you breathe in, you scrunch up your face and you tense your whole body as much as you can. And then when you breathe out, you go...



128 'like's', a lazy conversation about lycra, repartee on guilty pleasures of being tucked in bed at 9:30 pm (and the wild, wild youth), and a cheeky question about how I performed as an 'adult' interviewer later...

Emily seems to have become a mentor, and confidante in a matter of a zoom call. With promises to discuss woes and bond over mimosas at brunch (ah, the wild, wild youth), I am left feeling very yellow and mellow, this strange yet charming Friday afternoon.

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