

4A TALKS //

Mel Stringer in conversation with Reina Takeuchi
as part of 4A Digital

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[Click here to read Mel Stringer's comic, *Sleepless in Seattle*, or to access the 4A TALKS video and podcast interview.](#)

TRANSCRIPT



REINA TAKEUCHI So before we begin this talk today, I'd like to acknowledge that we are gathered today on the unceded lands of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation. I would like to pay my respect to all First Nations elders past, present and emerging as the traditional custodians of the land on which we live, work, and create. I'm here today with Mel Stringer, our 4A Digital artist for this year. And Mel will be creating some very whimsical illustrations for our project. 4A Digital was kind of conceived as a way of responding to this time and making art accessible to everyone as well. So, Mel, I guess, what have you been thinking through and working on for your upcoming projects?

MEL STRINGER I thought that I would create something that was similar to the diary entries that I've been working on for my zines. A lot of black and white. It's digital stuff. But the pens that I've been using have been sort of inky, so it looks like it's drawn on like traditional paper or something. And, yeah, just basically been drawing about having a hard

time in the U.S. and enjoying, like going on walks and spending time with my partner and stuff because there's not much else to do. So yeah, I've just been trying to express it in my diary entries.

REINA TAKEUCHI I think that there's kind of been this real shift towards people examining the everyday and these quotidian moments as well with just observing the small moments that we go through in life.

MEL STRINGER Definitely, there's a lot more retrospective. You know, having a really hard time having to look at yourself for so long because you got nothing else to do. Like the other day, the Internet went out for about 24 hours and I did not know what to do with myself [laughs]. It was really difficult! Like I listen to the radio digitally. You know, I only watch like Netflix and YouTube, I don't have real TV. You know, it was the worst.

REINA TAKEUCHI Just with the nature of your work as well and your fan base kind of contacting you through the Internet. It's kind of the main port of call.

MEL STRINGER Yeah. And talking to family and friends as well. So I dug up a radio that has no digital signal. And I was listening to that and then was just working on my iPad with no other connections for 24 hours. And at night time, my husband and I watched 'Kiki's Delivery Service' on DVD because he found that. I'd never seen it before! I was like, it's Halloween, I should watch it.

REINA TAKEUCHI So you practice up until now has been a lovely range of pen and paper illustrations, capturing and documenting various things that occur in your life. And they're usually drawing from these Kawaii or cute and nostalgic things that respond to popular culture, but also to women and I guess, what women go through, through life. And I guess, your 4A Digital works will respond to this as well, as like a personal diary almost?

MEL STRINGER Yeah. The work that I'm making for 4A Digital is definitely gonna be like my works that I've done for my zines and it'll be like comics. And oh my gosh, I don't know what to say. I feel like you said it all [laughs].

REINA TAKEUCHI It's really nice because people can kind of respond to your works in a very like, "oh, I've gone through this moment."

MEL STRINGER Oh, I know what you're saying. When I'm making that sort of work, I'm expressing what I'm going through. And sometimes it can be very, very personal. And it's kind of thrilling throwing out really personal work, because I know that I can have people judge me very harshly for it, like, "oh, that was TMI" [too much information] or "I didn't need to see you naked" or "I didn't need to see your boobs" or whatever. But then there's people that are like, "oh, my boobs look like that." Or I, you know, "I've cried about being in lockdown." So hearing from people in positive ways is really uplifting. And it's actually probably one of the things that keeps me going. Because I've been thinking about seeing a therapist, about all of the stuff that's been going on in the US, because it's really a lot to have taken on board, especially being away from home. But then I was like, hang on. My audience is kind of like my therapist because I'm constantly telling them all the stuff that I'm going through. And so, yeah, free therapy, I guess.

REINA TAKEUCHI I mean, it's amazing how, I think, especially when you're isolated, that point of contact is so important. Also, for other people interacting with your work and Tumblr and Instagram and these online platforms, I think it's a real comfort to find that unity with other people.

MEL STRINGER Something about the internet that makes people feel connected. It's like the internet is so good for that. Having people know so much about me before they meet me is very strange.

REINA TAKEUCHI Yeah. I can imagine.

MEL STRINGER They'll bring up things and I'll be like, "how do you know that?"

REINA TAKEUCHI Yeah. I think with artists they always traverse these curious lines of being kind of public-facing and having a public profile. But then a lot of the work that the artist produces comes from a very personal place.

MEL STRINGER Yeah. You can't escape it! I even do the same thing with, you know, artists that I like or musicians or whatever. I want to talk about some of the personal things they've gone through in certain songs, "oh I related to that song," or "I related to that artwork" and then I'm like "you don't know me from a bar of soap". You don't want to talk about your breakup or, you know, your dog dying or whatever.

REINA TAKEUCHI Exactly, yeah, it's quite bizarre, really. Kind of very intimate with people, even seeing people perform live as well. They might share things out into the darkness of the audience.

MEL STRINGER It feels like that.

REINA TAKEUCHI You recently started the "Cute Butt Club" on Discord, right?

MEL STRINGER Yeah.

REINA TAKEUCHI Could you talk about that and maybe what it means to you to have started this group?

MEL STRINGER Sure, I got really depressed recently about Instagram because you know how Facebook owns them now. When I post things, not as many people get to see it because the algorithm goes "oh, we want you to pay thirty dollars if you want more than 50 percent of people to see your post." Not even 50 percent, and so, you know, I can get 200 likes on something but I have like one hundred and three thousand followers on Instagram. And it's like, I work so hard for those people to follow me. And so I was talking to a bunch of other people on Instagram about how that was happening. And a lot of other artists were saying how they were getting really down about it and how they longed for the Tumblr days, you know, when things are more linear. You can see, just like scroll through and see things how they were presented or how they were posted from people.

MEL STRINGER I decided I would create a Discord and have people come together on there and be able to chat and share their artwork. I didn't know what to call it. I was just gonna call it like Mel's Discord Server, which sounds super dorky. So I thought, I'll call it something cute. And I have an artwork called the "Cute Butt Club" anyway. So just riffing off that.

REINA TAKEUCHI Yeah, right. Do you guys bring up cute butts in conversation?

MEL STRINGER You know what, that hasn't happened once. I think everyone just assumes that if I'm part of the club I automatically have a cute butt...

REINA TAKEUCHI Well, I guess during this time, emerging from the aftermath of Covid as well, the boundaries between what feels real and imagined and digital has become so blurred. And I guess I was wondering how you felt about making art during this time, especially with your fan base, mainly looking at your art through digital platforms?

MEL STRINGER Making art during this time has been really, really weird, and very reflective. Covid happened around the time that the protests and riots happened. And also my Dad had a heart attack around that time, but he survived. But all of that all at once just was so confronting and so much to handle, as well as being away from home. So my art really reflected that. I was writing comics like "I need something to look forward to" or "I don't know really what direction I'm going in." And I felt a very strong sense of not really knowing where I was going. But I knew that I had to keep going for my mental health. Making art after Covid and during Covid is really weird. And I can't wait till it goes back to normal, but things won't be as normal as they were before.

REINA TAKEUCHI Yeah. One of my friends that I work with has a phrase - BC - "Before Corona" and AD - "After Death".

MEL STRINGER Oh, my gosh.

REINA TAKEUCHI Yeah, it's a little bit morbid. That feeling of, there was before time and there was the aftermath I guess.

MEL STRINGER Things won't ever be the same.

REINA TAKEUCHI Exactly. But I think it's just about having faith and knowing that your supporters are going to be there. And, it might be going out into virtual space but they're going to still be in your corner. And then it's about the work.

MEL STRINGER That's the thing, you're right. I do need to trust more that I'm supported. I guess with Instagram and stuff, we just rely so much on validation. People leaving comments and saying, "oh, I like this". And sometimes I know other artists feel like this. If they don't get enough comments or likes, they go, "oh, well, then the artwork must be worthless" or "I'm not as excited about it as much as I was when I was making it." But I'm trying to get over that.

REINA TAKEUCHI I guess for many artists, it has been a point of reflection and time to sort of think about their practice thus far and where the future will lead from here. And I was wondering if you saw... where you see your practice and your numerous projects going from here and into the future?

MEL STRINGER Good question. I hope that my art will reach more people that are looking to read zines and comics or, you know, autobiographical artworks, because that's how I found a lot of my favorite artists when I was growing up. I could read their stories and relate to what they were going through. And because this is like the strangest time in my life. I really want people to read about it and take the pressure off me, you know, lift the burden a bit. I hope that I can have more time to work on video work, so I feel like people can get to know me a bit better and I can sort of relax a little bit more with being on camera, because sometimes it's a bit nerve wracking. I'm sure you know about that.

MEL STRINGER It's hard to think about the future, while things are so strange and up in the air right now. But I hope that I can have more time to work on personal work instead of portraits. Actually, last year I was working on portraits a lot more and I said in 2020, I don't want to work on other people's work as much. I want to focus on me more. And so I feel like I've done that. The Patreon thing has grown a lot more and so I get a lot more support and a lot more people sort of, I guess, fund that dream of me being able to focus on myself a lot more which is great.

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Feature image: Mel Stringer in her studio, 2020, courtesy of the artist.