



**STIRRING UP
CONFORMITY**

Written by Melissa Caruso



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Often times, artists enter the world with an innate ability to manipulate their surroundings, tumbling inside out conventional norms in order to whisper truths. Childhood experiences can contribute to the creative makeup of the artist, serving as the foundation for life's endeavors. For artist Monica Cook, an act of petty larceny would explain the core of her artistic existence.

“It all started from a story from my childhood, this little stuffed animal monkey that I had. My mother had taken me shopping at a department store and dropped me and my sister off in the toy section as she shopped. There was a monkey there that had a hard plastic face that was dented in, and I, like most children, felt like these monkeys or stuffed animals had personalities and lives that were secret beyond this, and I thought ‘this little guy must have had an interesting life, ‘cause like, he’s got proof of it!’ So then I was worried that he might spend the rest of his adventurous life stuck here on this department store shelf. He was trapped and I had to get him out, but I only had a few dollars, and I didn’t have enough for him, so I found this little pink panther on a surf board and I could afford him. So, I switched the price tags and I bought the monkey.”

Georgian born Monica Cook is an American painter, sculptor and animator, who was already a skilled manipulator by the age of ten (don’t worry, she paid the store back). She had an incredible ability to look past the monkey’s abnormality and rather, find beauty. She was the type of kid who read suffocation on her simplistic dolls with their uniform colors and textures; freeing them by drawing on nipples, moles and eyebrows to express individuality, for she believed it to be the paramount of virtues. Continuing to run deep through Cook as

she attended art school in Savannah, the search for splendor throughout life’s murky waters ran like a thick vein through her. Since then, Cook has established a home in New York, found her niche in social circles, and learned how to appreciate criticism in the 21st century all while continuing to remain true to her core values. She is a refreshing introverted presence in the brimming realm of creativity; improving humanity in a fashion all her own.

From midtown Manhattan, the L line cuts horizontally into the bustling art community of Williamsburg. Musicians in dusty jeans litter the subway platforms as they strum in front of rusted tip cars. Warehouse lined streets sprinkled with DIY music venues and galleries serve to the lot of arty types who work so diligently to make a name for themselves. But for Ms. Cook, that identity came decades ago, supported by the plethora of accolades which dangle from her resume. From sculptors to paintings to animations, she enables the viewer to question the unknown, embrace separation, thus morphing fear into acceptance. If people never take chances, they fail to learn their true selves and what their limitations are. To be impulsive is the only way; a system of trial and errors because what truly should be feared is to live in a paranoid “what if” world. Cook breaks this fear with an ebb and flow ease, where blends of comfort and discomfort, damaged and distinctiveness, living and non-living, nudity and innocence imaginatively share middle grounds.

“I like finding things that make me really uncomfortable or are scary to me and then finding a way to look at them in a new way to perhaps understand them a little bit more.” Cook presents an advocacy to accept our bodies, with all of its flaws and insecurities. Like the damaged monkey in the

department store, an episode of *Ripley’s Believe It or Not* played a dramatic role in her vocation. Magnified dust bunnies caused a stir to a freaked out eight year old. “I couldn’t get out of my skin fast enough once I realized that they were everything and everywhere.” Her mother tried to appease, “Oh Monica, just because they’re such ugly little creatures doesn’t mean that you have to be so scared of them, they’re helping you.” Cook remembers this knowledge to be a huge internal battle: “I had to realize that I was made up of all of these things and to come to terms with it by finding a new way to look at them. Like what my mom said, ‘They have every right to live as you do.’ Acceptance would be a profound theme throughout Cook’s art.

She paints stunning and unsettling portraits of women where gooey fruits, foods and exotic creatures come to life adorning the nude women who act as blank canvases. Offering a universal reflection of humankind, she avoids clothing her subjects or situating them in any type of environment, for garments and surroundings reveal a person’s origin. “As soon as you put clothes on somebody, it’s like giving somebody a name, telling where they came from, who they are and what they are about. For me, it was about them as humans.” Her models, close friends and even herself, are vividly painted, with awe-inspiring precision. Her technique shines in the representation of the flesh (enamored by skin since her first baby doll) and the slipperiness of liquids. We, as viewers, are coerced to decipher her hypererotic portraits—unnervingly—as nudity tends to be categorized as sacred and discomforting. Nevertheless, it is our curious eye which pales the embarrassed rose from our cheeks to understand and appreciate humanity as Cook gorgeously displays it in all of its convolutions.





An initial glance might conjure sexuality or fetish, but the truth lies deeper; those who see beyond a naked pair of breasts smeared in jelly unlock the message, where nudity is “more of a way of innocence, stripped down to nothing.” The feeling she wishes to execute is more of a sense of wonder and play while speaking about the body’s inside, outside and its connection to surroundings.

“The human body is a complicated vessel. We have no idea what goes on inside, and that is frightening,” says Cook, who continues her theme of balanced approval and apprehension. “It’s more about this need as humans to have control and to be able to categorize things and simplify things. The unpredictability of our organs and behaviors are terrifying, but at the same time extremely intriguing. Using food as a theme is more of the idea of our insides coming out. Most of my work in general is talking about what’s inside of us. It’s talking about this inability to control or to understand what we’re given and the beauty of that, but also the fear of that.” The panic of not fully understanding the body would serve as the back bone to her paintings, but because of its limitations, Cook would embark on a more tactile approach found in sculpting.

Like that monkey she boldly saved from the department store, she has created extremely damaged versions of “wolf pup hyenas,” (think Falkor from *The Never Ending Story*) with exposed organs symbolically pouring their vulnerabilities. It is through these flaws which prove someone or something existed. We gasp at the surfer who sports a ten inch scar around his leg from a shark attack, but more importantly, we should honor his survival. Cook adds, “The flaws are to show that they had lived their lives and had been affected by their lives – but not in a pitiful way, because I never saw that little dented monkey as pitiful.” Instead, admiration transpires for the noble kaput. “It is like these creatures were persevering through their struggles and flaws like we all are. In a way I think that makes

us, or makes me, be able to feel more connected to them.”

Likewise, her sculptures are highly linked to her core. Although she has many influences which grace her work, she is most affected by her surroundings and life experiences. To create her sculptures, knickknacks from vacation spots and thrift stores around NYC find their function; fake grapes from the dollar store act as the toe nails of the sculpture or nostalgic phone cords (yes, before wireless) and baby binkies offer its organs. She cares not if they look “pretty” because cold shiny plastic fails to identify uniqueness, and one of life’s most precious commodities is individuality. After months spent creating sculptures, Cook wanted to add movement. Coincidentally, a friend had mentioned a competition in animation, so Cook had two months to submit her creation, but it would take less time for the unfamiliar territory of stop-motion animation to completely captivate her.

Claymation is a branch of stop-motion animation and is the most time consuming project Cook has encountered thus far. Each still is recorded then played back in swift sequence, where roughly twelve frames fit into a single second; for a 30-minute movie, an artist is estimated to stop and change clay figures well over twenty thousand times. Much execution is needed in order to fulfill a plausible demonstration of motion. The process of arranging these subtly changing, fast-moving images is completely up to the artist, which perfectly suffices Cook’s need to manipulate and problem-solve. Optimal results are garnered by consistencies throughout the shooting environment, including lighting and object placement. Imagine molding clay thousands of times a day; I know, *Gumby* was a classic, but even creator Art Clokey required many side orders of tranquility within his work environment.

In her latest claymation aptly titled *Deuce*, Cook illustrates an awkward encounter between a man and a woman which elicits their individual

fantasies. The separation between male and female brilliantly unravels in a naïve storyline in order to balance out the heaviness of their separate desires. From the beads of sweat and quivering lip found on the shy female to the saliva dripping from the chauvinistic male’s tongue, exquisite detail is captured by the novice animator. Haunting world music and thrift store effects added by Martin Capella add a quirky intensity to support the simplistic plot structure. For the production of *Deuce*, Cook spent seven days a week in her studio, nibbling on the occasional apple for downtime.

Although reclusiveness is vital for the inventor, especially in the realm of claymation, Cook, like so many artists can get completely lost in their work, shutting out the world completely. “When I’m working, I ignore my phone and refuse to answer the door.” Like a mad scientist, Cook hides away in her labyrinth, where—save for the light of the changing sun and moon—could spend “seventeen hours straight” on an animation project. She avoids renting studio space even if money gets tight because of the distractions others bring. Like a baby, she shelters and protects her creativity, because once it’s out in the open, it can be influenced by its surroundings. *Solitude* is a precious jewel and highly regarded by the arty type; for Cook, “It’s a complete necessity,” to be wrapped around her own thoughts and environment; indeed a fertile breeding ground for abstraction. “I don’t know how I’d get by if I wasn’t such a loner. I think I like solitude a little too much,” she laughs, but could the lack of human contact have consequences?

It doesn’t seem to be the case with Cook. Ralph Waldo Emerson stated, “To go into society, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society. I am not solitary while I read and write, though nobody is with me,” and this is true for Cook. When she is painting women or sculpting creatures she is around a form of life. Moreover, if one can’t be content alone, then the real problem



lies there. Contrastingly, Victor Hugo acknowledged, “Solitude either develops the mental power or renders men dull and vicious.” Now Cook is certainly anything but uninteresting, and she never gave off the vibe like she needed to be locked up, but just as solitude is “a complete necessity,” so is sociability, even if in minimal doses. Her secret to a collective lifestyle comes in the form of young minds at the New York Academy of Art as she fulfills her role as Professor Cook. Initially when the job opportunity surfaced, Cook was resistant, “I never wanted to be a teacher,” but always intrigued by the unfamiliar, decided to roll up her sleeves. Looking back, she can’t imagine having almost passed up the chance.

“Teaching helps because I have that social day. For one day a week and I can get into the minds of my students and get inspired by their ideas. Just being in that kind of environment is really good for me—to have a break and force myself to be social,” she admits.

Artists create for an audience, sure it is self-reflective, but ultimately, an artist wishes to reveal a moral to the world. Hence, acknowledgment is essential. Of course positive feedback is desired, but often times, it’s those negative responses which strike Cook the most. After uploading her work on the expansive internet, Cook took criticism with a noble prowess. “I like it because I am getting a response.” Since most comments that surface online are anonymous, people seem to grow an extra pair with their two cent opinions. But for Cook, she is aware of opposition, and ironically, embraces it with open arms. “I’m always shocked at what people do see because it’s never what I expect. And you know, everybody’s going to approach it differently, and I don’t think anybody would see them the way I do and that’s fine, I think I’m just happy with whatever way somebody wants to take them.” After her YouTube video for *Deuce* received comments like: “Lock up your grandmother because this is a serial

killer in the making,” and “Whoever made this must have been tripping balls!” Cook was enthralled. “They were just absurdly ridiculous and I LOVED IT!” The message is not so much found in the negativity of the comment, but the beauty of provoking a response. Everything has a vantage point and luckily for Cook, hers rarely sees the dark of day. Like a strong-willed mother, her art is her child which she stands by, even if that child never becomes Homecoming Queen.

“It’s like a mom who has a child who’s really ugly,” she laughs, “and bad behaved, and they love it so unconditionally—they even notice how ugly it is and how unruly it is but still love it.” It’s Cook’s constant acceptance that seems to uplift spirits. The life and nurture each painting or sculpture receives is delicate and strong. As long as Cook believes her “children” are beautiful and well-behaved, she has no reason to be influenced by disparagement. “It doesn’t make me want to try and make my children better, more behaved or prettier.” As long as the artist sees her work for what it is, she can find beauty within criticism, and that is something we all need—to have an opinion of our opinion.

Although never broke and homeless, selling work in NY subways, Cook does admit the shortcomings of the artistic lifestyle. “It is a very difficult life to choose because you don’t ever get a break from it and it’s very unpredictable.” Cook has to have constant faith that she can survive and can continue what she’s doing. “I think I’ve gotten in way too deep and I’ve already invested so much into it, that honestly, there’s nothing else that I could possibly see myself doing.” Her art never atrophies because of the constant chase and inability to stand still.

“I just sort of build on in the next. That’s exciting, to continually figure things out and to learn. The fact that the more you figure out, the more questions you have and it’s never-ending. I like to have a purpose and a sense of accomplishment,” she confesses. The search of bigger, better and

deeper things is a pursuit frequent in Cook’s life. She admits, “I like the chase of it,” and once she understands a piece (contemporaries or her own) she loses interest. Artists are usually the biggest critics of their own work and have difficulty recognizing the significance of what they just poured blood, sweat and tears into. It’s not necessarily lack of appreciation, rather a little voice saying, Well that was easy, what’s next? Intrigued by the future, Cook never holds on to previous works. Instead, it’s time for her to take care of her new children.

When you initially meet Monica, you are immediately enamored by her charisma and charm. Her blue eyes pierce through tenderly, inviting you to share your thoughts both effortlessly and generously. You try to recall if you had previously met her as the two of you break into colorful conversation within minutes. You’re comfortable around her, and it’s because she’s passionate about life. She redefines traditionalism in order to allow viewers to learn to accept what usually is seen as insignificant.

“Sometimes there are questions that I don’t want to confront, and so, in a way, it becomes more interesting to try to make some of those ideas palatable for others; to justify them.” Her “glass half full” attitude is contagious and inspiring her warm soul ceases to age because of her frequent visits to candy lands of innocence and nostalgia, where themes are prolific and profound. The child-like wonder of approaching something for the first time is true regardless of age. Constantly, there are doors surrounding us leading toward uncharted territories; most refuse to question or submit to them out of fear of unfamiliarity, but Cook smashes the taboo. Thanks to the ugly naked truths magnified on *Ripley’s Believe it or Not* and on a damaged stuffed monkey, a true innovator has emerged who has dug, and continues to dig, through the grit in order to find life’s true gems. ■