

# Molly Crabapple: A 21st century Renaissance woman

Olivia Snaije

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*ISIS Run Bakery, Raqqa*

Molly Crabapple is a 21st century Renaissance woman. An alluring combination of an artist with big dreams and an unwavering moral compass, she is also a savvy navigator of the capitalist system and has devised her own 15 commandments on how to be a successful creative person in the Internet age.

At the end of May she was in the occupied West Bank, participating in the Palestine Festival of Literature, the annual literary festival that travels to the West Bank and Gaza, bringing writers and journalists from the US, the UK and the Arab world. The 2015 edition included Francesca Borri, the intrepid Italian freelance journalist who has been reporting from Syria, and US and Iraqi authors Richard Ford and Sinan Antoon.

In April, Crabapple was in Turkey working with Syrian children in refugee camps.

In March, she released an illustrated op-ed video in which she condemned the reasons and conditions for solitary confinement in US prisons.

Called an art movement “in and of herself”, Crabapple is a highly politicized artist and writer who gets around the world of sound bites, producing a new kind of long form journalism.

While she was in the West Bank, besides sketching what she saw, Crabapple, who chose her name at age 19 when she was working as a naked model, was reading from her forthcoming illustrated memoir, *Drawing Blood*.

One might say that 30-something is too young to be writing one’s memoirs, but Crabapple started out early on the path to success, hell-bent on remaining a maverick.

“Since I’ve written my memoir I’ve been thinking back on my decisions and they could be taken as adult and mature or just [those of] a weird person. I think I was just weird,” she said.

Crabapple has always drawn; “when I was in 4th grade I would make pictures of the popular kids so they wouldn’t beat me up.”

She grew up in New York in a household attuned to politics—her father; a professor of Latin American, Caribbean, and U.S. Latino Studies is a Marxist. Before getting into politics, Crabapple struggled to make her living and become an artist. Part of this entailed working as a model on the Internet, then, in a platform conscious age, establishing Molly Crabapple as a brand.

“I went to a shitty school and didn’t have the professional networks. Never having any money, fighting professionally and just to live, especially in New York which is such an expensive city, I had to think of something so that I could at least live in a place with a window. I was a naked model on a site called Suicide Models. I realized that in my first interactions on line I needed to be popular; I had a commodity that was based on my image. So my early experience was promoting myself in an incredibly mercenary business. Once I wasn’t so damn broke I had some time to step back and stop hustling. But I had to

provide my basic necessities first.”

Drawing Blood recounts her artistic coming of age, which involved working as an in-house artist at a New York nightclub, and creating an “anti-art” school and movement in which burlesque dancers, drag queens, and underground performers posed as models for people to sketch in bars—the program now exists in over 100 cities.

Until 2011, her political involvement “meant providing practical help—going to marches or donating money. I was scared to use my art politically, I felt intimidated. But during Occupy Wall Street I got the sense that everyone should be participating in this, including me, and that was when I started using art in a political way.”

Since then Crabapple has never looked back, getting involved in various political strands on the domestic and international front. Internationally she tends towards the Middle East, which attracted her initially by its art, even as a child.

“As a kid I hung out in the Damascus room in [New York’s Museum of Modern Art] MOMA, I loved Islamic art. I saved money and took Arabic lessons. As a teenager I spent time in Turkey, in the Kurdish region, and then in Morocco.”

As a columnist for VICE magazine, Crabapple has covered the greater Middle East, which has involved her traveling to Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Syria, and Turkey.

She went to Guantanamo Bay twice for VICE; the first time for the 9/11 commissions.

“It’s not hard to access as journalist, it’s very censored and unpleasant but I’m surprised at how few journalists actually go there.”

Crabapple uses her sketchbook for reportage much like 19th century newspapers used drawings before photographs; she says that sketching is without question less threatening to people than cameras; it also affords her views that she can edit after the fact.

“In Guantanamo they have operational security which is very specific about what you’re not allowed to photograph. Getting a photograph is like playing a game of Twister.”

She recently completed a series of drawings for Vanity Fair magazine of the cities of Raqqa in Syria and Mosul in Iraq, both under ISIS control. Working closely with a source in the region, who sent her photographs of daily life, she used them as a blueprint for her drawings, which show Raqqa in warmer, yellow shades and Mosul in starker blue tones.

“My source sends me many more photos than what I draw from. I watch videos. A lot of it is a feel for what kind of emotion and color you want. It’s visceral. One of the things that struck me about Raqqa was the clock tower. The base was painted with a revolutionary flag and now it is painted with an ISIS flag and I was trying to get that sense of sadness. A number of Iraqis from Mosul and Syrians really liked them and that’s what makes me happiest, when people from the communities themselves like them... I’m so honored to work with my particular source, I feel grateful every time they choose to work with me. We had been Internet friends for a while and before the coalition airstrikes started, I said, ‘you’re in a place where no western journalists can go.’ We are getting sensationalist images of Daesh [ISIS] and of beheadings, but it’s also a city where people go about their lives and it’s not just these assholes in black cutting off people’s heads. I asked them to take pictures for me. This person is stuck in this city, I’m over here; there would normally be no way we could interface. They wrote things from the perspective of a local.”

Crabapple says that Americans have become numb to the news, and that her objective was “to show this is important, this is worth caring about, when you draw it’s evidence of care and labor and I wanted to complicate the picture, showing people who have lives and raise families and wait on long lines for bread...”

Crabapple’s artistic approach is reminiscent of Syrian director Ossama Mohammed’s method for his at once poetic and



*Reading in Ramallah. Photo courtesy of Palfest*

shocking documentary film, *Silvered Water, Syria Self-Portrait*, for which he sought the assistance of schoolteacher and amateur filmmaker, Wiam Simav Bedirxan, who sent him footage of the siege of Homs. Mohammed also used cuts from films documenting the early days of the revolution and government torture scenes that were shot on mobile phones.

"I think what he did is incredible," said Crabapple. "I don't think there's anything wrong with representing violence in art. Goya's representations of war are terrible and paradoxically beautiful. What I don't like is Americans making violence sexy. Like [the film] *American Sniper*, which isn't real. What's real is immensely valuable."

Crabapple hopes to do more in her series of photographs-to-drawings, and said she would be ready whenever her source was.

Did she ever imagine back in 2011 that she would be interviewed on MSNBC about where ISIS is going? And how to describe what she is doing amidst the general confusion and ignorance about the Middle East that reigns in the US?

"I never thought I'd be on TV at all. Because of people's preconceptions about women and nightlife, a lot of people thought I was a bimbo so I feel privileged to be able to occupy spaces to talk about war and refugees, but it's also really hard. Every time I go on TV, I feel like I've simplified everything, and wonder what a useful contribution is. I ask people I know in Syria, for example, what they think is important for Americans to know. There are many ways to speak about the situation but as an individual I can amplify their voices."

Another person working in a similar vein as Crabapple, combining illustration and politics, is Susie Cagle, who she keeps up with; it's mainly her friends who inspire her. She finds the Brooklyn-based Egyptian artist Ganzeer "endlessly inspiring. I'm plotting collaborations with him. I feel like we're a community of artists coming from an illustration background but we're doing work around politics. I felt alienated from the traditional fine arts world and always felt like an outsider, even if I do genuinely believe that I was born to be an artist."

Feature image entitled "*Inside the Dark Heart of Guantanamo Bay.*"



*Sniper's Son. Tripoli, Lebanon*