

LETA

SOBIERAJSKI

CREATIVE
DIRECTOR
DESIGNER

BY TINA ESSMAKER
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Working independently since 2013, Brooklyn-based designer and creative director Leta Sobierajski has become known for her unique aesthetic, which often borders between the beautiful and the grotesque. Here, Leta opens up about taking the leap into freelancing, embracing vulnerability in her work, the art of negotiating, and what she's learned from collaborating with her life and creative partner, Wade Jeffree.

TELL ME ABOUT WHERE YOU GREW UP AND HOW YOUR CHILDHOOD INFLUENCED YOUR IDEAS ABOUT CREATIVITY.

I grew up in the small town of Jefferson, New York. When I say small, I mean that I went to the same school from kindergarten through 12th grade and played every sport—soccer, basketball, and softball—because there wasn't much else to do.

I was born in New York City, but my parents moved to Jefferson when I was one. My entire youth was spent upstate in nature, and we lived in a very isolated area where you couldn't see our house from the road because we were in the middle of the forest. I was an only child, and I spent most of my days playing by myself. I made my own toys, I read books and made up stories, and I played on a tape recorder—I'd record my voice and have conversations back and forth with myself. (laughing) I was lonely, but I was able to entertain myself that way.

In 1998, we got the internet and it was a portal into a new world. I started to discover other people around the world and I read into anime because I watched Sailor Moon on television. I started to draw my own fan art, and I asked my parents to gift me Photoshop for my 12th birthday. It was the one thing I wanted so I could scan in my drawings, color them, and share them on my DeviantArt account. I posted my work and people commented—that was so exciting for me! There was life outside of Jefferson.

Progressing from there, I explored Photoshop more. Our school didn't have much of an art department, but I did independent study classes. I was very studious and pushed myself. I was a perfectionist, and, unfortunately, I think I still am. I loved writing, math, and science. Before design, I wanted to go to school and major in writing with a side of math—I loved precalculus because it was like figuring out puzzles. But because I took independent courses, I started to make more. I did architectural drawing and worked in Quark to design my senior yearbook. I designed posters, drew images, built websites, and even attempted identities, all of which ultimately put me on a more design-focused track.

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IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU REALLY DROVE THIS CREATIVE EXPLORATION THAT HAPPENED IN YOUR LIFE. DID THE PEOPLE AROUND YOU ENCOURAGE YOU TO PURSUE A CREATIVE PATH?

I'd say that by my senior year when I was 17, I felt like this was the only track I would take. My parents didn't really know what design was, but, thankfully, they're very encouraging (they are creatively inclined in different ways). They've always pushed me to make my own decisions. I think that's why I've over-applied myself in a lot of areas—because I wanted to do it all.

I also had a teacher who was willing to sponsor my independent studies. He wasn't a graphic designer—he taught technology and architectural drawing. Regardless, he was still willing to help me hone in on what I was looking for.

YOU WENT TO STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT PURCHASE AFTER HIGH SCHOOL, RIGHT? Yeah. I didn't know that places like School of Visual Arts or Rhode Island School of Design existed. I didn't know anybody who was on the same path that I was moving towards. My mom works for SUNY, the state university of New York. Because of her affiliation, she got me a discount on my tuition, so SUNY Purchase was a really attractive option. I had visited Pratt, FIT, and Parsons, but it came down to the price tag. We're not a wealthy family and I'm thankful to not have to pay back student loans right now. I can't imagine what that would be like. I'd be hindered if I had to pay back thousands of dollars every month for the education I received.

YEAH, AND I WANT TO TALK ABOUT THAT BECAUSE YOU'VE BEEN WORKING INDEPENDENTLY SINCE 2013, AND DEBT CAN AFFECT THAT. I HAD SOME STUDENT LOAN DEBT, BUT I ONLY HAVE ABOUT \$1,500 LEFT TO PAY OFF— Congratulations!

THANK YOU! I DIDN'T COME OUT WITH THAT MUCH DEBT, BUT EVEN A SMALL AMOUNT PROHIBITS WHAT YOU CAN DO BECAUSE YOU HAVE TO MAKE CHOICES BASED ON YOUR FINANCIAL SITUATION. DEBT TAKES AWAY YOUR FREEDOM TO SAY YES TO THE THINGS YOU WANT TO DO AND EXPLORE. YOU HAVE TO DO CERTAIN THINGS TO PAY YOUR LOANS. SO, GOOD FOR YOU.

I can't imagine what it's like to have that always sitting on your shoulders and to be considerate of taking on a job you might not really love, but it offers heaps of money. The city is expensive and that doesn't help.

IT SURE IS. SO, LET'S TALK ABOUT YOUR TIME AFTER COLLEGE UP UNTIL WHAT YOU'RE DOING NOW. I KNOW THAT YOU WORKED FOR A STUDIO DOING MOTION GRAPHICS STRAIGHT OUT OF COLLEGE BEFORE YOU WENT INDEPENDENT. TELL ME ABOUT THAT. When I was a sophomore in college I got this really fantastic internship at a studio called HunterGatherer in Brooklyn. That studio was run incredibly. I worked for my boss, Todd, who was such a brilliant mentor. He taught me that you don't need to work on a computer all of the time. We had a wood shop at the studio, and that's also where I learned to work a camera and set up lights. We built things to shoot for magazine covers, commercials for brands, and even infrastructure for branding identities. The possibilities of working physically were endless. I couldn't comprehend that way of working before having that opportunity.

I worked at HunterGatherer as an intern for two summers and then I was hired on full-time when I graduated. It was fantastic that the studio was so small because I had my hand in everything that was going on, whether we were sending story boards to a client or brainstorming a new logo for someone like the New York Times.

However, because HunterGatherer was run by one person and I was one of very few employees and I was still learning, I thought I needed to go to a larger studio to understand how something like that operates. So I went to a filmmaking and visual effects (VFX) company called Moving Picture Company (MPC). During my interview, I asked them if they had a photo studio or were doing anything by hand. They said, "Well, maybe." They were obviously trying to give me some sort of allure to work there, but couldn't answer my questions properly. On my second or third day at the job, I sat down and thought, "Fuuuuck, I made the wrong decision."

The people who worked at MPC were lovely, but they were working on these crazy programs like Cinema 4D, Maya, Smoke, and Flame. For all I know, these could have been superhero characters. I didn't know how to use any of those programs. I was designing story boards for commercials, but they were for massive brands who gave the studio shit-tons of money. It felt very soul-sucking for me. I transitioned from such a happy environment to burning the midnight oil to crank out something for a massive sterile brand—there's no heart and soul in that kind of work.

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I WANT TO TALK ABOUT YOUR AESTHETIC. WHEN YOU STARTED DOING PERSONAL WORK AT THAT POINT IS THAT WHEN YOU STARTED TO EXPLORE AND DEVELOP THE AESTHETIC YOU HAVE NOW, AND HOW DID YOU SETTLE ON IT?

Something I had been taught in school is that you need to do a massive range of things so you are marketable to anyone who wants to employ you. It sounds logical, but once I was in a state of independence and scrambling to figure out what could be mine and didn't have work coming in yet, I had to make things on my own. I had to have an individual vernacular to become appealing to potential clients, which is the total opposite of my institution's mentality. There were projects that had been bubbling inside of me for a while. I had even tried to pitch some of them at my jobs, but was often told that the aesthetic wasn't applicable for the client or it was just a little too outrageous for what they actually needed to give. Aside from putting these ideas on paper, I hadn't had the opportunity to make them.

I've always been inclined to build things physically—it feels great. Maybe that stems back to playing in the woods as a kid and throwing sticks around. I didn't know what I was doing, but I had things I wanted to make. For example, I wanted to work sculpturally. I live near all these 99 shops and small odd stores, so I walked in with \$10 dollars and picked things that looked interesting to me—and then I bought a grapefruit.

I came up with this really ridiculous totem that has a grapefruit on top of it. It's one of the first things I did and I'm so proud of it because it's the first thing that became recognizable as my personal aesthetic. It got printed in an issue of Computer Arts a few years ago and that was the first time I'd gotten exposure for anything. I lost it because I didn't understand how people could like it—it was such a ridiculous, unintentional piece of work.

As time has progressed, I've realized that creating things that don't make sense are sometimes the most appealing because they haven't succumbed to the restraints of a client or third party. It feels good to kinda shit something out.