She's Drawing, And Healing Too

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Byline: By Jori Finkel

Body

Four years ago, Chanel Miller, still known as "Emily Doe" in the sexual assault case against Brock Turner, wrote a 12-page victim impact statement so powerful that it went viral on BuzzFeed and landed her a major book deal. It also helped inspire Hillary Clinton's concession speech -- the part where she urged young girls never to doubt their own value.

Ms. Miller wrote the first draft of her statement through tears and anger in one sleepless night in May 2016. But few of her supporters knew that the previous day she had had another kind of creative outpouring.

She spent hours with a black marker in hand, standing in front of three white poster boards taped to a closet door, drawing assorted bushy-tailed, beaked and humanoid creatures riding scooters, bikes and vehicles of her own invention along a circular road. She created this whimsical scene before starting the excruciating process of writing the victim impact statement -- as a way of clearing her head and also reconnecting to a talent that has been a source of strength since childhood.

"Drawing was a way for me to see that I was still there, before I went to a darker place again," Ms. Miller said slowly and thoughtfully by Zoom. "It's like the rope to lower myself is longer because I can draw." She was speaking from her apartment in New York, where she moved with her longtime boyfriend the week before the city issued a stay-at-home pandemic order, giving her more time for art-making.

She made drawings she calls "joyful" at particularly trying moments during the run-up to the 2016 trial of Mr. Turner, a former Stanford student who was found guilty of three felony charges for sexually assaulting Ms. Miller when she was unconscious. He was sentenced to six months in prison, prompting a public outcry and widespread demand for the judge to be recalled. (He was, two years later.)

Ms. Miller returned to drawing regularly after the trial, while writing her award-winning 2019 memoir, "Know My Name." This year, she published pandemic-themed cartoons in Time and The New Yorker, exploring the surge of racism against Asian-Americans and the emotional roller coaster of facing a suddenly empty schedule during lockdown.

Now, she is making her museum debut with her biggest work yet, a 75-foot-long mural marking themes of personal trauma and healing, on view at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco. While still closed because of Covid-19, the museum has installed Ms. Miller's work in its new, glass-walled contemporary-art galleries, visible to pedestrians from Hyde Street.

Ms. Miller, 28, who is Chinese-American and grew up in Palo Alto, Calif., said she was excited to get the invitation from the museum to work in this new space, a part of the institution's $38 million reimagining and expansion by the architect Kulapat Yantrasast.

[Video: Watch on YouTube.]

"I spent the first two decades of my life shying away from my Chinese heritage, trying to be normal, bland and mainstream, like so many kids do," she said. "But this is a chance to embrace that aspect of myself publicly. I also love that they are adding this contemporary wing to address the here and now."

The vinyl mural, "I was, I am, I will be," printed from her drawing, consists of three panels showing a simply rendered character -- she says the perfectly circular nostrils reflect her Asian heritage -- on a journey through physical and emotional states. In the first panel, the somewhat lumpy figure is on the ground in a fetal position, tears pooling. In the center it is in a lotus position and the tears have been transformed into an energy field. Finally, the figure is standing and advancing.

The first image could easily be read as a reference to how Ms. Miller was found on the ground in 2015 outside a Stanford fraternity by two graduate students on bicycles who witnessed Mr. Turner's assault. But she says it's not quite that direct, representing "any state of being resigned," she said. "My drawings are never about the assault but how to live with it."

And the last panel, while suggesting an optimistic outcome, is hardly a vision of unassailable psychological progress.

"Sometimes people put me on a pedestal for the final level of evolution for a survivor: You've achieved what you needed to achieve, you've healed," Ms. Miller explained. "But I want to promote this idea of perpetual healing. You start curled up and might curl up again and again, but you have the tools needed to wobble your way back up."

Visitors walking outside the building -- or circling the open-ended gallery when the museum reopens -- can read the panels in any order. "So yes, this character is on a journey, but I like that you can loop it," she said.

The curator overseeing her project, Abby Chen, said the museum neighborhood is "very diverse and economically polarized, with Thai-American, Vietnamese-American and tech communities all nearby," making the mural's themes of trauma and healing vital. "The idea was to make the artwork visible from the street as a source of warmth or this beacon in the dark," she said, "but now with Covid, I think the city really needs it -- I need it."

Preparatory drawings from 2019 reveal many more creatures -- oppressive characters surrounding a tiny protagonist. The San Francisco Public Library's main branch is hoping to show them in 2021, when it promotes Ms. Miller's memoir in its "One City One Book" program.

If this is her first official art exhibition, she has been showing her work unofficially for years: Her mother, May May Miller, a writer who grew up during the Cultural Revolution and publishes fiction and essays as Ci Zhang, used to install her daughter's work at home, at one point bringing thick gold frames from her job at the Palo Alto shop Frame-O-Rama. She also encouraged her children to draw on walls of their house, and Ms. Miller laughs about "her first commission" being a peace-sign globe, nodding to John Lennon, that she painted in her younger sister's bedroom.

At the University of California, Santa Barbara, she got a job doing illustrations for the school newspaper. But the trauma of the assault the year after graduating, and of being cast in the stereotypical victim role by the media, made drawing feel more urgent.

"The scariest part of what happened after the assault is that this identity was placed on me," she said. "And that fueled me and propelled me, so creating was no longer my little hobby -- I felt I had to do this."

In the summer following the assault, she left for Providence to take a printmaking course at the Rhode Island School of Design, where she created oddball animals like a two-headed rooster inspired in part, she says, by the fantastical menageries of the Canadian artist Marcel Dzama.

"I think of these little creatures as independent of me," she said of her own drawings. "If I'm not taking care of myself and giving them the time and space to emerge, then they have to sit with their arms crossed inside me where it's murky and human."

That summer, struggling to function and sleep, she drew a picture of two bicycles and taped it over her bed "to remind myself that there was a point in time when two people knew for a fact that I deserved to be protected, even if I didn't understand how to help myself." Later, she drew the faces of the jurors who found Mr. Turner guilty as a "way to document these people who saw me and bore witness to my story and spit me out in a place where I knew I would be able to recover."

When writing her memoirs the following years in the Bay Area, she took an illustration class at community college at night, following her therapist's suggestion to allow herself more pleasure. She made lighthearted comic diaries about such things as fostering rescue dogs, as a respite from the book. Eventually, her visual narratives would tackle tougher subjects, too, such as the history of racism toward Asian-Americans.

Marci Kwon, a Stanford professor who included Ms. Miller in her course on Asian-American art, said she found a recent comic strip called "The Dangerous Myth of the Model Minority" that Ms. Miller posted on Instagram to be especially powerful. "She not only captures the seriousness and violence of the Yellow Peril, the Western fear of the faceless Asian horde, but she also adds a moment of levity -- a couple walking away and making ironic comments," Ms. Kwon said. "I'm really struck by the warmth of her work even when dealing with intense or violent subjects."

Ms. Kwon describes Ms. Miller's memoir as a coming-of-age story, a "portrait of the artist as a young woman." Its driving theme is not wanting to be defined by her assault but seen more broadly as a sister, daughter, creator and more, and she resists being pigeonholed professionally, too: These days she shows no desire to stick to one role. On the public-speaking (or now Zoom) circuit, she is regularly introduced as "activist and author" or "writer and artist."

Nor does Ms. Miller seem to be chasing the standard sales-driven successes of the art world. She has no gallery representation and mentions instead her desire to write a graphic novel or children's book one day, and to make artworks for bleak courtroom settings, like the one she faced, to offer victims "nourishment or companionship."

She said her New Year's resolution for 2020 was to fail as much as possible, "making things that are really crappy and undeveloped until maybe they can be good. I'm way too young to confine myself to one lane and lose the ability to openly experiment."

Then, after a long pause, she found another way to describe this sense of natural -- but at the same time hard-earned -- freedom as an artist, more in keeping with the wild and freewheeling creatures that she likes to draw.

"I hope I can be very fluid," she said. "If I were trapped like a little bug, I would try to slip out. I hope that's what I spend the rest of my life doing: just wriggling around."

https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/05/arts/design/chanel-miller-museum-mural.html

Graphic

PHOTOS: Clockwise from top: the artist and writer Chanel Miller

her three-panel mural "I Was, I Am, I Will Be" (2020)

her illustration called "The Road" (2016)

a view of the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco with her mural in the window. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY HEATHER STEN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

CHANEL MILLER

CAYCE CLIFFORD FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

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