ALMINE RECH

Emma Stern
Penny & The Dimes: Dimes 4Ever World Tour

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Emma Stern in Conversation with Shumon Basar

Shumon Basar: What is the first thing you do when you wake up?
Emma Stern: Roll over, unlock my phone, turn on the front-facing camera and say good morning to my assigned National Security Agency agent. (He never says it back, but I know he appreciates the gesture.)

SB: Tell me, who is "Penny and the Dimes"?
ES: Penny and the Dimes is a fictional all-girl rock band I invented. This exhibition is dedicated to them.

SB: There's a wild backstory to Penny and the Dimes. Please share the details.
ES: The idea began when I travelled to Stockholm a few years ago with my mom. Her one request was to visit the ABBA Museum. I have no strong feelings toward ABBA one way or another, but I indulged her. My cynical hunch that the ABBA Museum was simply a tourist trap, or a glorified gift shop, was mostly vindicated. But the good little consumer in me actually loves being marketed to, because it allows for a kind of soothing submission, a diet opioid. I was utterly captivated.

SB: Did you know at the time that ABBA––although disbanded for decades––was on tour again? But with a technological twist?
ES: No, I didn't! And this whole ABBA Museum was essentially a huge infomercial to sell tickets to the new live stage show which consists entirely of holographic facsimiles of the group performing all their hits. There was even a little demo in the very last room of the museum, where holographic Björn, Benny, Agnetha, and Anni-Frid graced my mother and I with a private performance of a shortened version of "Dancing Queen".

SB: And how was that?
ES: Just as good as I imagine it originally was in 1976, or possibly even better? I later learned the effect is produced by an 18th century theatre technique called "Pepper's Ghost," which involves projecting an image or video onto a transparent scrim. It's the same technique used in Tupac's legendary surprise cameo at Coachella in 2012. In my mind, this was such a major cultural event because it was a turning point in turning reality. I believe nothing has ever been the same since.

SB: It's a kind of magic, isn't it?
ES: Exactly. Even with my very limited knowledge of ABBA's history, I knew that Agnetha and Anni-Frid had made a deliberate exit from public life following the group's dissolution in the early 1980s. They vowed never to reunite, despite a billion dollars being offered to the band. And yet, I had just seen ABBA perform again with my own eyes. I couldn't stop thinking about the four of them, about their holographic proxies frozen in time, touring in perpetuity. This was conceptually so very connected to the work I had already been doing about avatars and virtual selves. The idea to do an exhibition about a rock band was solidified in my mind by the time we caught the vattentaxi back to the hotel.
After Stockholm, I spent the following 2 years mentally developing a short story about an all-female rock band whose members get turned into holograms at the hands of a nefarious record executive.

SB: I love this creation myth. You once told me how each exhibition you make is like a concept album. What do you mean by that?

ES: I use that analogy of an album versus “a bunch of singles” as a way to explain that these works—as with many of my past solo exhibitions—are based around a central theme. In the case of my show here in London, it’s a group of characters (in this case my band, Penny & The Dimes) that all have a connected backstory. I figured out what each of the characters would look like before I mentally determined their personalities. This in turn allowed me to create the whole story around them. There’s a lot of back and forth between story and visualisation when I’m in the development stage.

SB: Why are you so entranced by the idea of avatars as muses?

ES: Bodies have always fascinated me. I actually applied to art school as an illustration major, with a focus on medical illustration before switching my concentration to painting. Even then, I was working almost exclusively with bodies in a very formal, traditionally figurative way, using a live model. My Junior year, I got a job at the Cooper Union as a nude model for drawing classes, and found myself quite literally “on the other side of the canvas”. This was a rare opportunity to see myself the way other people saw me; I say it is rare because I can’t actually think of another scenario that affords one a similar experience. I pinpoint this as a moment that truly awakened my interest in the reciprocal relationship between artist and muse. For this body of work, I believe that the concept of a muse and an avatar can function interchangeably.

An interest in avatars and virtual selfhood was an organic evolution of that, because what is an avatar if not a muse? But more interestingly, what is an avatar if not a self-portrait? I have long spoken about this ongoing body of work as an extended self-portraiture project that has elements of fantasy, role-playing, cosplay, and drag embedded intrinsically between the lines. When I made pirate paintings, that was my pirate drag. Working on these rock star paintings, they are my rockstar cosplay. They’re all me.

SB: Is there such a thing as "the female gaze"?

ES: I don’t think there is, but I don’t believe in a male gaze either.

SB: When do you get nervous?

ES: When I have to perform in front of a live audience. I am drawn to visual art because I have the option of being physically far removed by the time anyone else experiences it. Perhaps that is why the idea of creating Penny & The Dimes appealed so much to me, because I can offload my rockstar fantasies onto these proxies without needing to experience the corporeal stagefright.

SB: Charlie Porter published a book called What Artists Wear. What do you wear when you're in the studio painting?

ES: I’m messy by nature, so I wear... rags. A lot of old XXL T-shirts that are either given to me, or purchased in bulk from a by-the-pound thrift shop.

SB: Emma, I’ve been sneaking in some of Andy Warhol’s famous Interview magazine questions during our conversation. The last one I’d like to put to you is: why can't it just be magic all the time?

ES: The thing is, I think it is all magic, all the time! Arthur C. Clark said, “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic,” and I say, “I know that God is real because everything is more beautiful than it has to be.” Those two concepts are connected. It’s hard to explain with words, so I’m trying to explain with paintings instead.

— Shumon Basar, writer, editor and curator