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Our Shadow Selves

An interview with the artist Erica Mao by her old friend, Ife Olujobi

Ife: So, we met in high school. That's when we first got to know each other.

Erica: When we were 14.

Ife: We were 14 years old. Even then, it was very much like, "Where's Erica?" "Erica's hanging out in the art room." That was always the vibe. It felt like this foregone conclusion [that you would be an artist]. I want to talk about this place that we've come from: Clarksville and Columbia, Maryland. You've talked about how wandering around the natural environments there has been an inspiration to different iterations of your practice. Was it always that way? What were you making art about when we were actually living there?

Erica: To put it into context, whatever I was making, I was making in high school. Let's say that first!

[laughter]

I definitely went through my fucking teen angst, emo, whatever phase, and that produced something. [My art] was more of a reflection internally on what that was like. A lot of it was feeling trapped in suburbia, wanting something more but being stuck in this very cookie-cutter, sterile place where it was hard to find little pockets where we could talk or have a free-flowing dialogue.

Ife: When you say there weren't places to talk, do you mean that you were not feeling able to express yourself?

Erica: For sure. It was football and academics. It's high school, so you go through your thing of feeling misunderstood or whatever. I did find a couple people that were into art, but it was only maybe a handful of people. It was definitely not the general populace.

Ife: Those feelings of not connecting with your immediate environment, what did you do with that? Do you feel like that was going into your art as well, or how were you processing that as a young person?

Erica: I feel like I have amnesia from that [time]. I don't remember specific things. I probably... I hope my parents don't read this! *[laughs]* I wandered the woods and I smoked weed with friends and kinda fucked around. I was definitely always trying to get out of that bubble, even if it was just to a different part of Maryland or Baltimore, or that one time we skipped school and went to DC to go to see a photo show.

Ife: Right! *[laughs]*

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Erica: We went to Washington DC to go see a photo exhibit. That's what we went to do.

lfe: That's the kinds of kids that we were.

Erica: It was just grasping at anything that was remotely close to what I was interested in. Through high school, [my parents and I] would take trips up to New York and I would fucking love it, because there were so many things for me to do and see.

lfe: How do you feel now as somebody who's very much living in this city and has been living here for quite some time now, but you're primarily making work about these natural environments? Do you ever feel like you would want to return to somewhere like a Clarksville or Columbia, or does it feel more natural to be making work while living in this city environment?

Erica: It somehow feels more real for me to be here and for the work I'm making to come straight out of my head. I don't really sketch, my references are just places I've been and seen with my eyes. It's more of letting the experiences I've had soak into my brain sponge and letting it jumble together, and then whatever comes out comes out.

I'm thinking of this one quote I think Jennifer Packer said [about her work], who's this amazing painter. It was something like, "It doesn't necessarily look real, but it feels real." That's what I'm trying to get at. It feels real. That's a whole other thing altogether that is not achievable necessarily by mimicking exactly what is in front of you. I am not going to say I would never live there, especially if I want to have a family. I guess it is a nice place to raise a family. I'll concede that.

[laughter]

Whatever. At least for right now, where I'm at in this point in time, I think the length that the work has to travel is important to the work itself. It has to come from deep inside, and it has to somewhat be a mystery to me, where it's coming from and the thing that's coming out, because then it'll be endlessly fascinating. Endlessly a question rather than an answer.

Not to get too hippy-ish, but I grew up in a very non-religious household. I don't have a baseline of spiritualism or religion in a higher power, so perhaps the closest thing to me is being in nature and being in awe of what is out there and possible, what the earth has created. I think making the journey there is important. It's a pilgrimage or something. Not to say I wouldn't love a house in the forest in the future, but for right now, that is how I'm feeling.

lfe: As somebody who's known you for a while, I've seen definite shifts in your painting style and the things that you do, all of which I genuinely love. I feel like this show also represents another shift, for sure, just in the fact that there are people. There have always been these figures, but now we're seeing the figures are way more in the foreground. You're seeing faces, hair, fingers, all sorts of little details, which have not been in previous iterations of this same world that we've been exploring. Not to be, like, "Why??" *[laughs]* But what, both personally and artistically, were the catalysts behind wanting to explore this new side of your work?

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Erica: In my head, the action that I'm doing is I have a film camera and I'm zooming in.

Ife: That's literally what I wrote! It looks like you just zoomed in. That's amazing.

Erica: I'm literally zooming in. With previous bodies of work, I started by getting old pictures from thrift stores and actually taking elements out of different ones and collaging [them] together mentally and physically. Not collaging in the traditional sense, but sort of compositionally. Then that graduated to film stills, specific film stills I really liked. I was scouring the internet.

Ife: I remember this phase.

Erica: Printing hundreds of them out, like a physical archive of this stuff. What movies they were from, I have no idea. All I know is that they resonated with me in that moment for some reason, so I printed them out. I feel like that visual language definitely seeped into how I compose images now. That is definitely something that is now somewhat ingrained in me.

Ife: This mental composting of different images?

Erica: Yeah. From there [I was] also materially trying to explore and then develop a style. If I was interested in another material, then I'd pursue that and develop it until my visual language could come through. I love making things with my hands. There's an endless fascination with [materials], but also with the composing of images from that era of film stills or old photographs. Undergrad was old photos, then I graduated, got out, went to grad school, then I was into film stills. That was an interesting point where I was trying to interpret the images I was making from somebody else's images, which are also loaded with their own context and history and all that.

Then another shift was my last year of grad school. It was COVID and we got kicked out of our studios. I went back to Maryland, stayed with my parents, and I just started painting. Going home, staying in Maryland in a suburb but also in nature... I know there's a lot of other places in America that have [suburbs and nature], but it felt specific to me, our specific suburb with our specific nature, after visiting other people's suburbs and comparing them. There are walking paths through the forest, and I have memories of that because I would go into the woods and smoke weed.

Ife: Well, Columbia—and Clarksville, which is right next to Columbia—has its own very unique history in terms of why there are walking paths everywhere through these natural places. Columbia is this planned community, what's called a new town, and it was developed by this guy, James Rouse, who was very conscious about the specific details of urban and suburban planning. Everything had to serve the needs of the community, not only how people are living but also how they're interacting with each other and getting around. Also, there's the fact that, which was news to me until recently, but I did not know that all the lakes in Columbia are man-made. I did not know that.

Erica: They are?

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Ife: Yes! I knew [Lake Kittamaqundi] obviously was man-made, but literally all of the lakes, in Centennial Park and all of these places, they were all man-made. Isn't it weird? I think what you're saying is totally right. [Columbia] does have this beautiful, natural landscape where you can do all this walking and stuff, but a lot of that, not that the nature itself has been engineered, but the way that you're experiencing it, somebody else thought about the way that you were going to be interacting with nature. It's not just you venturing out into the wild brush, you are having this experience that somebody put thought into.

Erica: That's so interesting. I think my dad was trying to lecture me on something about this and I was not listening. Also, can we just talk about the street names for a second?

Ife: Yes! It's funny, because [we're talking about] coming from this area, this suburban place, this cookie-cutter place, and in many ways, Columbia still is that, right? Other than the street names, which we we'll talk about, I don't think you're necessarily driving around Columbia and thinking that this place is so weird or remarkable or anything. And then there's Clarksville, where we went to high school, and the juxtaposition is jarring. Columbia is planned in this very specific way, then Clarksville is part of that in the sense that the Pheasant Ridge neighborhood is technically a part of [Columbia], but also once you get into Clarksville, you are no longer in Columbia. None of that thoughtful planning carries over. In Columbia, you know how you don't see power lines?

Erica: Yes.

Ife: [James Rouse] was like, "I don't want power lines running through this town. We have to figure out a way to make it so that's not allowed." Then as soon as you get to Clarksville, you see them, right?

Erica: Yes!

Ife: That's what I'm saying! It is weird that we're on this Columbia border, but then you're also in Clarksville, which is right there but is also this completely different place where the demographics are completely different, the planning is completely different. You can't walk anywhere, you can't do anything. You know what I mean? That's where we went to high school even though we were technically living in Columbia. It's bizarre.

Erica: You're revealing so much. It's like we're on *The Truman Show* right now. I'm like, "Oh my God. It was all a lie."

[laughter]

Cameras everywhere!

Ife: There's cameras everywhere. *[laughs]* I feel like that's why I got so obsessed with [researching Columbia history] for a while because it did feel like that. It really made me reevaluate some experiences of growing up and being like, "Wow, okay. This all was just planned out for me."

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Erica: It's led to this moment.

[laughter]

Ife: Anyway, all of this is to say I think your point about the way that you're encountering nature in this part of Maryland where we lived is actually unique in some ways. You are correct. Columbia was made by this guy who was like, "I just want to name all the streets after poetry."

Erica: It's so weird! [Growing up], I thought it was normal.

Ife: Same.

Erica: I was like, "I live on Eternal Ocean Place," and someone's like, "The fuck is that?"

[laughter]

Or Summer Sunrise Drive.

Ife: Literally.

Erica: Or Lavender Lily Path.

Ife: There's Melting Shadows Lane.

Erica: What? That's cool. I like that one better.

Ife: Then there's Eternal Solitude Place.

Erica: Holy shit! Sad as fuck.

Ife: Right? So anyway...

[laughter]

Ife: You were talking about when you went back to Columbia during the pandemic.

Erica: Yes. That is probably the start of this style of work, of oil painting figures in landscapes that are very textural, abstracted, agitated, dramatic, sculptural. I've been doing that for maybe one-and-a-half to two years. That's what I showed at my thesis at Columbia [University], along with ceramics. I've just been doing that and showing as well in New York and other places. You can only make the same thing so many times and then eventually it has to develop into something else. [That's what motivated] me sizing up. The largest paintings here are four by six feet, whereas before I was making much smaller works.

I think the physical space of it allowed me to feel like I could zoom in on these characters and get the details of their face and hair, eyes, nails, all of that stuff, and almost make a different kind of picture. That really excited me. I like changing things up. I don't even know if it's

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challenging myself, or exploring the thing that I don't know if I'm going to be good at, or how it's related to whatever I've been doing, but I want to do it. I have to trust that feeling, so I did.

Zooming in on the protagonist's space, I think, gave a little more clarity as far as what kinds of situations these characters are in, and even probably brought a little bit more mysticism to it. Certain figures seem maybe more like shadows. Monster is a heavy-handed word, but they're humanoid rather than human, like a cross between a human and an animal. More primal. I'm excited by the confrontation. [Before], it felt like I was a stalker of my own work. I was like a hunter or stalker of the figures or the people roaming around. I was always behind them. I was far away. It was a wide shot, getting much more of a landscape and the figure was just a tiny little silhouette that you could barely see in the distance, or was cloaked in the shadows, almost imperceivable. Now I feel like I've moved forward with my camera on the dolly. I've zoomed in, or I have revealed myself as the hunter, stalker, viewer to my characters, and they're looking up and out at me, and there's a forced confrontation between us. I'm excited to see what happens after that initial moment of recognition.

I like to capture these moments of tension, or right before the climax, or it's like these two characters are about to encounter each other and something's going to happen. I think that sense of danger excites me in a way.

Ife: Let's unpack that.

[laughter]

Erica: Look, I love true crime shit, horror shit. Enough people have talked about that. I like that stuff. A lot of the stories and media that I like to consume are stories of survival and perseverance. I love anything where someone's dropped in the wild without them being prepared and they have to survive.

Ife: So, you love *Naked and Afraid*?

Erica: I kind of do. *[laughs]*

Ife: That wasn't a judgment!

Erica: I think the naked part is very funny. It just adds an extra layer of humor to me. But the afraid part, yes, they're definitely fucking afraid of a lot of things. Probably a little bit less because there's a camera crew there. I'm sure some of them did go through some very harrowing things. *[laughs]* I love watching people survive, but also persevere and make it through it all and succeed because our will is strong. Our will to survive is strong as humans. I think that kind of spirit and that thing within us all is fascinating to me.

Ife: Would you say there is an ultimately optimistic viewpoint in your work about the state of humanity?

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Erica: Yes, I would hope so. It's not doom and gloom in my mind, at least. It's like, we're all out here trying to survive and trying to fight to be able to live. [My protagonists are] always on their way towards something. There's a goal in mind. There's something in the distance like community, family, a home, salvation, forgiveness, another person, and that is what they're striving to get to.

Ife: But we're seeing them in these moments of challenge or uncertainty.

Erica: Yes, because all of our lives are filled with challenge and uncertainty and I think that's probably what makes them interesting.

Ife: In these pre-climactic moments that we're seeing, is whatever conflict is present being influenced by the environment around the characters, or do you feel like it's coming from the interaction between characters?

Erica: A little bit of both. Definitely the environment they're placed in is not helping them. Nature itself poses its own obstacles and difficulties because nature is a cruel bitch. It doesn't fucking care what you're doing. [The characters are] in a very difficult, harsh environment, and then also they're facing this threat—or maybe not—from another person. These two influences together make for an endlessly fascinating combination to me.

Ife: So much of your work is about how nature can be this wild, dangerous thing and we're moving through it. It can feel apocalyptic sometimes. A lot of it feels like it's about how nature is encroaching on us and influencing us as humans. Is there a part of you thinking about the ways in which the humans themselves are also interrupting the natural environment? Does it go both ways?

Erica: I think nature will always win. If we're talking about real life, like climate change, the sun's going to burn us all to a crisp. It's going to wipe out all life on Earth.

Ife: Oh my God. Wait, didn't you just say you had a fundamentally optimistic outlook?

[laughter]

Erica: Yes. That means live your life, right? *[laughs]*

Ife: Oh my God.

Erica: It's fine. We're not going to be alive during [the apocalypse] no matter what we do. There's an optimistic outlook, perhaps, on the attitude of humans in this specific world I've created, but what people are actually doing as far as destroying our planet, I don't know if that [optimism] carries through to real life. Corporations need to stop fucking up our planet. They also need to stop blaming the individual, like, "You just need to recycle," or that kind of thing.

Ife: I think your work is really acknowledging that the world is going to end. Things are going to get worse, but then we as people will find a way through it in some way. But then you're saying

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you're drawn to all these stories that either have this horror or apocalyptic bent, and then also these stories that are a little bit more like mysteries or that have these voyeuristic qualities to them.

I guess I'm just trying to think about the act of looking at a painting, and you talking about making this work from the point of view of a voyeur. It feels like you are looking in on this world. Do you see it, and do you want us to see it, as this alternate world that we're getting to peek into, or does it feel to you like a future world?

Erica: That's an interesting question. It oscillates between those two. Perhaps it's an alternate world because these humanoids don't really look like humans. Not exactly. They're slightly different. And what are they doing? There's no recognizable signal that feels like this is grounded in our world. I can't recognize a McDonald's fucking sign in the distance. Even if it was a post-apocalyptic era, we'd still have the many, many buildings that we've built, highways, these signals putting us in a specific place. So, it's an alternate world, a world that we're not in, but also it could be either way, way, way before our time, or way, way, way after our time where nature has taken over again and we're in the state of just fighting against that, because modern society has crumbled. It [could be] way before, something ancient, something like a relic, like a caveman, some prehistoric moment where the only thing you had to think about was survival. It could be either [before or after], or both of those at the same time.

Ife: You just called the figures in your painting humanoids, and it is true that they do have the general shape of a human, but they're off. They feel like a different thing. Why is that?

Erica: I don't know. Sometimes it just be like that.

Ife: Sometimes it do just be like that. That's a fair answer, and I will accept that.

[laughter]

I'm asking that because watching the walkthrough that you did [for Erica's last show at Rachel Uffner gallery, *Buried and Deep* with Robert Zehnder], I remember this interviewer was asking you, "Do you see yourself in some of these paintings, in the figures?" I was surprised when you said yes.

Erica: Did I?

Ife: You did. You weren't like, "Yes!" I think you were like, "Sometimes, yes." I don't know why I was surprised by that, but I was. Thinking about these figures that are not quite human, what is it in yourself, but then also maybe in all of us, that you're seeing in these people or these beings?

Erica: I don't know. Part of it, and this is going to sound hokey, one aspect of it is our connection to nature. I think the weird power and energy that it has makes the humanoid people in my paintings a little bit different. They draw on the power from the landscape, or they're overwhelmed by it sometimes. Maybe it's partly the way I paint. I don't know if I'm interested in

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one-for-one being like, “This is that person. I’m going to get the eyes and the nose and the lips and hair and all of that correct to indicate that this is a representation of an actual person.”

Each painting is almost like a draft. I don’t plan anything. Everything’s off the cuff. It’s almost like each painting is an exploration into myself, trying to find my shadow self. Maybe these faces are not very defined because it’s almost like if you’re trying to remember a dream, you have a general outline of, if there’s a person there, what that person looks like, but that face is, at least for me, always blurred. This exploration of trying to find that shadow self, I’m always trying to pin it down but I can never quite figure out what that looks like.

Ife: When you say shadow self, I think a lot of the time people think of a shadow self as somebody who is the dark version of yourself, or the evil version, or this reverse-mirror version. When you say shadow self, is that also how you're thinking about it? Do you think about it as this darker version of yourself, or does it just feel like a different, alternate version?

Erica: It’s more of an alternate. I think that even our normal selves already have a dark version. We’re capable of bad things. In your head sometimes you get those intrusive thoughts. “What if I just push someone into the street?” Or, “What if I jumped off this building?” I don’t know. That’s normal, that’s part of our psyche. Hopefully we don’t do bad things, but it’s part of a normal person’s headspace, thinking bad things. The shadow self is more so, at least for me, digging into the layers of the subconscious. What do I truly want? Who am I truly trying to be? Who am I? Who could I be, uninhibited by all of these other things that are around us: living in this world and waking up, going to work, coming back, making dinner? Who could I be? What if I just said all the things I thought in my head? I believe the person that is inside of you could and will far exceed your expectations. Every year you’re just like, “Wow, isn’t it amazing that I made it to this? Isn’t that crazy?” When I was 16, I never thought I would actually be able to do this. I’m not even saying career-wise, but interrelationship-wise. Just existing. I’m 29 years old in New York City. Isn’t that crazy?

Ife: Yes! *[laughs]*

Erica: I think it’s more like an onion. There’s multiple layers. You’ve got to keep peeling it back and it’ll reveal something that you would’ve never expected. That search for the shadow self, the mirror self, it’s not always insidious or threatening, but different. It’s the unknown.

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Ife Olujobi (she/they) is a proud friend of Erica Mao's, and a Brooklyn-based Nigerian American playwright, screenwriter, and editor from Columbia, Maryland. She is a 2020-22 Resident Artist at Ars Nova, a member of the Obie-winning Youngblood at Ensemble Studio Theatre, a 2019-20 New Voices Fellow at The Lark, an alumnus of both the 2018-19 Emerging Writers Group at the Public Theater and the 2020 Sundance Institute Theatre Lab, an inaugural Project Number One artist-in-residence at Soho Rep, and the recipient of both a 2020 Sloan Foundation commission from Manhattan Theatre Club and a 2021 Steinberg Playwright Award. Their play *Jordans* won a special commendation from the 2021 Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, and their plays include *Smoke*, *MARKETPLACE*, *Color Girls* and others. Her work has been seen at The Public, Bushwick Starr, HERE Arts Center, Bishop Arts Theater Center, and more. She also conceived and edited a book of interviews with theater artists during the pandemic called [No Play](#). is the managing editor of *The Supplements* at Soho Rep, and is a former assistant editor at the Criterion Collection. Currently, they are an artist-in-residence at the Public Theater.

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