

A Culture of Creepy Creations: Brooklyn's Fascination with the Odd and Obscure

by

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Divya Anantharaman grew up surrounded by death amid her biologist mother's specimen jars. She had a fondness for animals in their lifeless form from a young age, but it wasn't until college that she got the opportunity and freedom to begin collecting and creating.

Anantharaman remembers her first experience practicing taxidermy after she found a dead squirrel frozen in the snow while on a hike and decided to follow a YouTube tutorial and attempt to skin it.

"It was kind of unreal doing that process the first time, even though you know in school you do the frog dissection," said Anantharaman. "It's such a different experience because you have to keep in mind that you have to bring it back and make it look like the animal again, whereas with a dissection it's just done." After that experience, she knew she was hooked and planned to continue to pursue the art form further.

Anantharaman's interest in the unusual world of taxidermy is hardly unique, particularly in Brooklyn, which has become a hub for those interested in the peculiar world of oddities. The centuries-old fascination people have had with the odd and obscure remains vibrant today, and has sustained a profitable marketplace for those enchanted by the bizarre and macabre.

Women, in particular, have flourished in this marketplace, perhaps because of the societal expectation that has been placed on them for centuries: to take on the role of the caregiver. This ideal that has been instilled in women allows some of them to find outlets, in this instance within the oddities community, to use these interests and skill sets to be the nurturer and provide unusual products to a community that is just as unusual.

Not only do these businesses born out of passion and people's curiosities have a kind of enchantment that draws customers in, but also creates a community among the minds behind

them. Social media has made it easier for like-minded people to find each other, and museums and other public spaces have been increasingly willing to showcase all kinds of unconventional items.

While social media allows for individuals with similar passions to connect with each other from all corners of the world, the emphasis on technology in day-to-day life has fostered this need to connect to things and people outside of the internet as well. The common thread behind the resurgence in primitive hobbies like taxidermy and other oddities can be credited to this focus on technology. People are wanting to get back in touch with the physical world, whether that is through creating taxidermy, collecting antiques, or creating art inspired by the oddities scene.

Having tangible items like handwritten letters, photo albums or family heirlooms, used to be commonplace but now almost all sentimentality lives online through our phones and computers. The chance to get up close and personal with these kinds of items allows people to take a step back and appreciate creating and focusing on something outside of the electronic world. These kinds of hobbies highlight the fact that with so much going on in the world, the chance to slow down and be a part of the weirder and more interesting side of things is an escape for many.

Pulling Back the Veil: The History behind the Odd and Obscure

In general, death and things revolving around the past have been women-centric for centuries. During the 18th and 19th century it was the woman's role to take care of the deceased because they were the caretakers of the home, and that is largely where death took place. This goes back to the role of women as nurturers, mothers and daughters would be responsible for

properly preparing a body for burial. Having this role placed on them has consciously or not stayed with women over the years and plays into their interests even today.

The art of taxidermy dates as far back as 2200 BC, during which time the Egyptians began the trend of animal preservation using mummification techniques. Although their techniques were rudimentary, they started the birth of what would later become an art form for many. During the Victorian era, more modern methods of taxidermy began to be employed. Taxidermy had mostly been used by scientists so they could study foreign species that they would otherwise never be able to. Although the early techniques of skinning and stuffing an animal didn't always produce the most accurate outcome, the process of bringing an animal corpse back to life has vastly improved.

Places like the American Museum of Natural History made viewing animals as they would be seen in the wild possible for not only scientists, but the average New Yorker in the late 19th and early 20th century. Being able to stand in front of what was once an actual living animal probably acting much like it's displayed in the museum changed many people's perceptions of the world.

At this time the idea of preserving dearly departed pets was also gaining popularity alongside the more current techniques of anthropomorphic displays. In its more current form, taxidermy incorporates all these elements. Customers ask for custom work to keep the memory of their beloved animals alive. Some take interest in more creative displays, like adding whimsical and fantastical elements, making a jackalope by adding antlers to what otherwise would be your average bunny rabbit.

Following this trend of preserving things from the past is antique collecting. This movement gained traction during the 18th century with the growth in art and science of archaeology which expanded the demand for collecting. At its start what was sought after was typically old books and manuscripts. As this trend grew during the 20th century a wide variety of objects became of interest to collectors, people began to focus on specific items like china, coins, postage stamps and jewelry among many more.

Items are not always collected or preserved due to their intrinsic value but can be of desire because of the rarity of the items. Most people who become professionals or run a businesses in the field of antiques have to have extensive knowledge surrounding the type of objects they specialize in. Some collectors pick a genre and seek out antiques related to that particular scene.

The popularity of collecting items based on rarity and age allowed for places like antique shops to exist, especially in major cities like New York. Shops that carry a variety of items ranging in quality and price were once one of the main ways antique collectors sourced their items. With the rise in technology websites like eBay and Etsy are now major contributors to the antique collecting scene and allow people to find items from all across the world from the comfort of their own home.

The types of items that are most sought after are typically jewelry, toys, art work, furniture, cars, even tools and firearms. Finding jewelry or toys is a common interest in the antique oddities scenes. Victorian jewelry like locket and more gothic designs are highly coveted items. Along with dolls and dollhouses, the way they were painted and hand crafted is

something people take interest in when looking for a piece for their collection. Something as small as doll eyes or pieces of clothing can become an interesting addition.

Another type of antique that is frequently collected are of the medical variety. Many people seek out antique tools and equipment in all shapes and forms like vials and jars, dentistry equipment and optometry. Usually people who focus on medical antiques might collect a variety of pieces or even oddities associated with those particular practices. Sometimes people might focus on a specific aspect of medical antiques and one of those aspects is glass eyes.

Antique and vintage glass eyes are often found in large quantities due to old optometrists having kept collections as reference for their work. People take interest in glass eyes in particular because of the craftsmanship and intricacy of the hand made glass work. The way that eyes were created originally was far more intricate than how they are able to be made now. A technique called lampwork was what was primarily used, where a torch or flame from a lamp was used to melt the glass before blowing and using tools to create the eyes.

To get the color and pattern to match was an extremely detail oriented process because when the glass is hot it's an entirely different color than when it cools. The artist has to be extremely skillfully trained on many levels in terms of understanding color and glass better than anybody else, in order to match the exact color and texture of someone's eyes.

Having a prosthetic made of glass poses some issues in terms of fragility and safety. Glass eyes are supposed to be changed out every two to five years to ensure that they are fitting properly with how someone's body might change over time. There were still incidents where the prosthetic was known to have shattered in the face and because the glass is so thin this becomes an issue. For this reason eyes are now made out of acrylic which is still breakable but would

require much more force to do so. The problem with acrylic was when it first started being used it was much harder to create the same kind of depth and realism that glass was capable of. It's because of this complex history that collectors set out to find antique and vintage glass eyes now and collect a variety of pieces both glass and acrylic from all over the world.

Our mortality has also been something that carries a lot of weight and has been focused on throughout the ages. *Memento Mori*, the iconic Latin phrase "remember that you will die," was made popular during the Victorian era when mourning and the focus on death became an elaborate part of life for many.

This kind of notion and the tradition behind it can be seen in many graveyards particularly in the New England area featuring tombstones from the late 17th and early 18th century. Much of the imagery that is linked to this phrase is still popular today skulls, bones, coffins, hourglasses, and winged death's heads. Many of these images are still used as modern motifs within more gothic and Victorian era inspired work.

Another aspect of this that has come to life in recent years is the death-positive movement, popularized by mortician Caitlin Doughty as a play on the already popular term sex positive. This movement which has gained a lot of traction since its establishment in 2011 and touches on ideals that have existed for many years and coincides with the *memento mori* tradition as well. Through this movement Doughty created a group called "The Order of the Good Death," which has a particular set of beliefs in place surrounding death and our relationship with it in modern day. The major points that this movement tries to get across are that cultural censorship of death and dying does more harm than good and that having an open conversation about death should be seen as a natural human curiosity. Thanks to people like Doughty starting the

conversation, people, especially in the oddities scene, are embracing these beliefs and behaviors surrounding death in the modern age.

In more recent years, the weird world of New York City has made itself the perfect home for businesses focused on these kinds of things to thrive. The Morbid Anatomy Museum, a popular non-profit exhibition space open from 2014 to 2016, was one of the earlier spaces in the city that brought together people attracted to peculiarity. The museum itself housed pieces ranging from taxidermy to medical oddities. Their extremely popular lecture series featured individuals from all backgrounds ranging from artists, collectors, academics and morticians. They would also host workshops centered on taxidermy etc.

After the museum's closure in 2016, the absence of a hub for the kind of work that was showcased was felt deeply by the community that had grown alongside it. The Oddities Flea Market filled the void. The market was founded by Ryan Matthew Cohn and his wife Regina Marie Cohn, who were known for their presence on the TV series "Oddities" which featured collectors and connoisseurs of the strange and unusual. The Morbid Anatomy Museum had previously hosted a version of this flea market during the time that it was open but without the museum to house the event the Cohns took it upon themselves to find a new home for this event that brought so many people together. Matthew Chon, an avid collector of oddities himself was the perfect fit to carry on this legacy of bringing together people who are just as dedicated in collecting and creating unusual items that grab people's attention.

The Oddities Flea Market is hosted at the Brooklyn Bazaar in Greenpoint and transforms the space into a gothic fantasy. The walls are lined with the vendors and their wares placed on tables with velvety clothes draped across each of them. It feels almost like being transported

through time or into a fantastical world where even the most typical items deceive you. Many of the people who are regulars at the flea market got involved due to having run in similar circles for years prior to the flea market coming to fruition given that they're very much a part of the same subculture. Either through word of mouth or knowing the right people, a tight knit community has been formed of vendors and visitors alike.

Dearly Departed: Taxidermist Breaths New Life into Animals Passed On

One vendor in particular, Anantharaman, has had an affection for science, particularly biology and the human relationship with animals for her whole life. This interest is what has driven her to pursue taxidermy professionally, both creating her own pieces and running a business selling them.

Taxidermy was not always something Anantharaman planned to call her career. Having had an interest in biology from a young age she thought of going to school for science but quickly set the idea aside. Instead Anantharaman chose to go to school for design at Pratt Institute, knowing that she had an inclination towards making things and getting her hands dirty, arts seemed like the next best path for her.

After graduating, Anantharaman went on to work in the fashion industry, focusing on accessory and shoe design, but still maintained her interest in taxidermy. Her background in fashion and design may have even given her an upper hand in being able to so quickly reach the quality of work she now produces.

“A lot of people don't realize when you're doing taxidermy you have to have those skills of eye placement, composition, color,” said Anantharaman, “You need to have artistic skills to create something aesthetically pleasing.”

Being mainly self-taught, Anantharaman was able to bolster her skills and reach a point of acclaim through her work. She has regularly attended the Oddities Flea Market selling her wares and building a community of consumers for herself. In October 2018 she hosted her own taxidermy showcase which featured work of her own alongside pieces of other acclaimed artists.

Like many artists, Anantharaman lacked confidence in her work early on, despite having attended local workshops and competitions and being asked by friends to preserve a dead pet. That was until in 2015, when she placed second in the New Jersey Garden State Taxidermy Association Convention and felt that her skills had been validated and she was ready to take on commissions.

“It was sort of at a point where I had moved on from amateur to professional division in the competitions. I was like okay I’m confident here I know that my pieces look at least like the basic anatomical stuff,” said Anantharaman. “Only when I was good was I like I’m gonna be okay with selling this stuff.”

Since developing her career as a taxidermist, Anantharaman has risen to the top and worked to make a name for herself. She regularly teaches taxidermy classes at museums, universities, shops and conventions around the world. In 2016 alongside her friend and fellow taxidermist, Katie Innamorato, Anantharaman wrote a guide on all things taxidermy entitled, “Stuffed Animals: A Modern Guide to Taxidermy.” After having both been approached separately by publishers about writing a book they decided to pool their knowledge and work together. Both she and Innamorato teach classes on taxidermy and felt that they were being asked many of the same questions regarding the work.

“Wouldn’t it be nice if we didn’t have to keep telling people, we didn’t have to dig for a file, like oh where did I send this thing?” said Anantharaman. “We could just have a reference that people could go to.” They felt that making this guide something reliable and approachable was an important aspect of the book. As well as the fact that there is a lot of bad information out there about taxidermy. Anantharaman and Innamorato also agreed that having the guide be in color was important as well because many older guides are in black in white making it harder for beginners to follow.

“Life is in color you know, even just having color pictures and illustrations of very basic things would help,” said Anantharaman.

Having the opportunity to work on a variety of animals is a common part of Anantharaman’s job and with that she has discovered some of her favorites to work on. Overall Anantharaman finds that birds have become her favorite animal to work on.

“There’s so much diversity in birds you know you think of a bird you can think of a little pigeon or you can think of a giant ostrich,” she said. “There’s so much variety and interest in birds.” The array of birds that one can work on and their difference from humans and mammals in general is what draws Anantharaman to them.

Outside of birds there are all sorts of animals that come into her studio. Some unique ones in particular would be the kinds of “freak” animals she gets, imagine a two-headed cow or a pig with two bodies and one head. These anomalies are usually given to Anantharaman by people who own farms and have animals that give birth to these interesting creatures. On top of these being unique animals to work on they are also some of the hardest to work on as well. “They’re super challenging because there’s no manual for it,” said Anantharaman. She makes the

comparison of being given the chance to work on a rare bird and no matter how rare that bird might be there is still images to reference for her work. Whereas these animals are the exception and no one tends to record these situations because they are deformities. Each animal is born a little different and are not usually worth noting, which means when it comes to preserving them it takes a lot of improvisation based on that particular specimen. “Those are the most interesting, the most challenging and sometimes the most frustrating pieces to work on,” said Anantharaman.

Currently, Anantharaman is working on a few of those anomaly animals as well as some bigger commission pieces. She is working on a cat for a museum that is putting up an exhibition on how feral cats eat birds and ruin the bird population, particularly in rural places. She is also creating some study skins, which are essentially bird skins formed around cotton so they don’t look exactly like the full bird, for the Audubon Society.

Alongside all the work she does, Anantharaman fits in the occasional class to be able to make what she does accessible to the public. The beginners’ classes usually center around working on small mammals or small birds. Her most popular classes are typically mice, squirrels, chipmunks and animals like that. A class can range from six to eight hours in length and mostly covers the process from start to finish. Although Anantharaman will take some steps for her students and have the skins pre skinned and the forms sort of premade. “The students still get to sculpt and stuff,” said Anantharaman, “but it’s just like a few steps have been taken for them because if not they’ll be there for 12-16 hours and you don’t want anyone doing that.”

Recently Anantharaman has taken a break from hosting frequent classes to work more closely on her own work and restoration work she has been doing at a traditional taxidermy studio in New Jersey where they produce a lot of pieces for bigger museums. One of her latest

projects at the studio was helping restore a big collection for a family who owns mounts from one of the taxidermists who did the original dioramas at the Natural History Museum. “Even though they’re not a museum, those are museum pieces,” said Anantharaman. “Those pieces are historically significant. Fixing them up is different than fixing up new taxidermy.” Anantharaman describes how fixing up new taxidermy is easier because there aren’t any limitations to the materials you can use but with older pieces modern materials may not always aesthetically or chemically work. “It’s a really cool job and I like it because you get to see history right in front of you,” she said.

Anantharaman has been involved in the oddities community for a number of years now, attending local events and participating in the Oddities Flea Market itself. She first got involved with the market through Ryan Matthew Cohn, whom she knew from the taxidermy scene and her time working with the Morbid Anatomy Museum, so when the market started up she was welcomed in. Anantharaman also hosted her own taxidermy showcase this past year which was her spin on an alternative taxidermy event that had taken place in Brooklyn in previous years. The people who previously ran the event no longer felt they could handle organizing it and decided not to carry on so Anantharaman reached out to ask if she could take it over under a different name, which was extremely well received. She plans to continue in the future. In regards to her relationship with the oddities community, many of her close friends and patrons connect with her through social media. Having places like the flea market or hosting showcases allows for her to have more interpersonal connections with them. Being able to share her work and get to know the people interested in it is a large part of why she does what she does.

Curating the Curious and Preserving the Past

Liz McGerrity a lifelong New Yorker, has a passion for preservation through collecting and selling antique goods from her business Riposa Antiques. Much like others in this community, McGerrity has created her own following through her unique finds and creations. Her pieces have been featured at multiple oddities flea markets and is working on opening an online site to make her work more accessible to those interested.

McGerrity got into collecting early in her life, having fallen in love with the whimsy of antiques, and the fascination that comes along with it became an escape for her.

“I grew up in a very dysfunctional family,” said McGerrity, “and so for me that was sort of a survival thing.” As a child growing up in the Bronx, during the late ‘60s and early ‘70s, she would spend a lot of time at her local library. McGerrity mentions having a distinct memory of visiting the library and finding a book on antique doll houses. Having already been fond of dolls, something about the ornate nature of the antique pieces struck a chord with her. McGerrity noted that the book she found was marked as belonging to the Manhattan library which wasn’t a common occurrence, finding books from the multiple burrows mixed together. After making this discovery McGerrity became obsessed.

McGerrity went to LaGuardia High School, which at the time she attended was known simply as The High School of Music and Art. The fact that from a young age she was surrounded by art and creative people gave her the freedom to explore her interests, centered on collecting vintage clothing. This interest and love for clothing led her to later pursue a career in costume design which she maintained for 25 years. McGerrity studied art in high school and later earned a BFA in art from Syracuse University. Although she loved fashion, she recalls that costume

design wasn't something that was taught as a specialized subject at the time the way it is now. She felt her art degree benefitted her still in her interest in clothing.

“Everything I learned there I think in a way was more helpful because I learned composition and color and all that stuff,” she said.

McGerrity recalls her relationship with clothing continuing to blossom even during her time at Syracuse as an art student. Going to her local Salvation Army was a favorite pastime and during the earlier days of collecting vintage items finding valuable pieces was easier. “The first time I went I almost passed out,” said McGerrity. She remembers finding the iconic elaborately beaded sweaters from the 1950s, which during that time she could find in New York for close to \$25, she found them for something as little as a dollar fifty. “That was very thrilling, because it was so affordable I could just start collecting it,” said McGerrity.

After doing costume design for so long McGerrity began to long for the time in her life in which antiques were her main focus. Having owned an antique store with friends prior to her career in costume design, she felt drawn to that world once again. At the start of this transition period McGerrity had been working as a manager at a costume rental house. She took this job on already knowing that she was done with her career as a costume designer but just needed a job to pay the bills. “It was like a rude awakening, I used to make some really good money and when I looked out in the world I was like oh my god, I'm gonna be lucky if I can get a job for \$15 an hour,” McGerrity said. “So I did that for three years and hated it, I really just hated it.” Having always done freelance work, McGerrity realized she wasn't cut out for the 9- to-5 lifestyle of commuting to work in a dreary building and having to answer to demanding customers who wanted her to do work above her pay grade.

The opportunity arose for McGerrity to try and make the career switch she had been looking for when The Morbid Anatomy Museum began hosting a flea market for people to sell their peculiar pieces to a community of like-minded people. Having been friends with one of the stars of the television show “Oddities,” Evan Michelson, McGerrity was able to garner a spot at the museums market and thus launch her business. McGerrity’s boyfriend, Franco Gulemmo, who is also a collector of antiques, his niche being vintage cars, cadillacs in particular, which have been used as hearses or adorned with religious insignia, became friends with Regina and Ryan Cohn who would soon take over the flea market community.

McGerrity now focuses much of her time on her business and collecting and creating pieces for the Oddities Flea Market where she makes a majority of her income. Turning this hobby into a living was never something McGerrity originally foresaw but is what she plans to continue to do until the day comes when she can eventually retire. Riposa Antiques, which got its name from the word “repose,” which means to be relaxed or in a state of peace, is a great source of joy for McGerrity and the community of customers she has garnered over the years.

Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder

Amanda Maer is another dedicated collector with slightly more niche products, but an ever-growing business. Maer’s business, Oddball Oddity, was born out of her love for vintage and prosthetic eyes. This fixation on eyes started early on in her life. Her mother gave her a necklace with a blue evil eye pendant prior to starting school to reassure Maer that her mother would be there with her, watching.

Although her fascination with eyes was ingrained in her as a child, Maer didn’t begin collecting until late in her teens. Born and raised in New York City, Maer grew up in a typical

Italian neighborhood in Queens and attended catholic school for most of her youth. She never quite felt like she fit into this world she lived in.

“I was always interested in arts and things that were a little bit edgy, a little bit different,” she said. When it came time for her to go to high school, Maer pushed her parents to allow her to attend the prestigious LaGuardia High School, instead of continuing her Catholic school education.

“It really opened me up so I could discover who I was as a small human being,” Maer said. “And it gave me access to Manhattan, which I think even more so than the school itself, the city was more of a learning experience and being around different people in general and a lot of arts.” The experience of being able to attend LaGuardia and study fine arts shifted Maer’s perspective. After high school she initially decided that she didn’t want to go to college due to costs, but her parents encouraged her to apply anyway and she ended up falling in love with the School of Visual Arts. After three years at the School of Visual Arts, Maer dropped out with plans to start her own business, the prelude to Oddball Oddity.

Right out of college, Maer began to work for someone at one of the well-known Manhattan holiday markets. “I wanted to do something business oriented, my goal was to work under someone and then try do something on my own with my art,” she said. For two years she spent the holiday season working the market and trying to observe all the business tips and tricks she could. With all these skills in hand, Maer’s first business, The Garden of Curiosity, was born. This business was centered on the popular trend of terrariums that was booming at the time.

“I kind of lucked out and that’s the only reason why my business survived to be honest, because I hit it while it was hot and I rode that Pinterest wave,” said Maer. Although the

terrarium craze died down over the years Maer ran her business for eight years and only closed shop in 2018 because her current business was doing better.

Oddball Oddity was a name Maer coined at the age of 18. Looking back, she says if she could do it over it would probably be different now. She had started an Etsy page under the name for the purpose of selling miniature terrariums and it has now become home to her collection of prosthetic eyes in order to finance her love of collecting. The original reason Maer began selling her collection was not of her own devices but due to advice from her therapist that her excessive collecting was becoming a potential threat to her financial stability and the relationships in her life.

“He never got the whole thing and most people don’t,” she said, “Before the Oddities Flea Market there was never a community for it so everyone in my life, especially my family and the majority of my home friends didn’t get it.” Maer took these concerns to heart and began to try and get involved with the flea market scene in order to prove to herself that getting rid of some of her collection was the right decision. After being rejected countless times by other oddity markets throughout the city Maer became deterred by the scene and turned to selling her collection online instead. Maer recalls having no idea that anyone would be interested in buying her eyes but was surprised to find that they were selling extremely quickly. At the start, she was selling her findings at cost value in order to just get rid of pieces and was making no profit, but as she realized how popular they were becoming felt she should try making some money off of this.

“My entire collection at this point is financed from my business which was the goal,” she said. “If I could make some money and put it into an account, then that’s the money I’m allowed to spend.”

Collecting the way she does was never something Maer expected herself to get into. She considers herself to be a bit of a minimalist in almost all other aspects of her life. She’s usually reluctant to spend money on things that aren’t necessities.

“I try to wear my clothes literally until they fall apart,” said Maer, referring to a small hole in the arm of her sweater. “It wasn’t something that I was trying to do especially because it seemed so against the way that I do everything else, but it just happened and it brings me so much joy,” she said. Suffering from extreme anxiety, being on the hunt for eyes and having something to focus on alleviates that for her. Eyes have always been a source of comfort since the first day her mother gifted her that eye pendant or when a family friend gave Maer her first prosthetic eye as a worry stone, there was no turning back.

Getting involved with the oddity market scene was still something on Maer’s radar and the Oddities Flea Market became the first place to accept her and her collection. Although she had a booming business selling her eyes on Etsy, being able to bring together her collection in one place and share it with others was something she’d spent years trying to accomplish.

“It kind of was really hard for me,” said Maer. “For two years I was applying to all these things and everyone was saying no and I couldn’t get why.” Maer found her home with Ryan and Regina Cohn, and unlike the others, right away they were into what she does. Even to this day the Chon’s are impressed with her collection because no one in the market specializes so

intensely in one thing. Most people focus on a niche, like medical antiques, which prosthetic eyes are a part of, and Maer focuses so specifically on that one thing.

Maer's collection is filled with pieces from all around the world, which is largely due to her dedication to the hunt. "I think that's something I've always had in me since I was little, like going to the beach and looking for stuff," she said. "I've realized over time, a lot of it is about the search." Maer mentions that within the world of collecting the general consensus is that it's the hunt that gives you the high and you get your reward at the end within the pieces you find. The majority of the pieces Maer collects comes from old optometrist collections that were once used as reference during their practice. She mentions that these are her ideal collecting situations because she is able to acquire up to 300 to 400 pieces at a time.

As Maer's business has grown so have the products she sells. For years, Maer recalls being on the hunt for the perfect eye ring. She was as obsessed with finding this piece of jewelry as she was with the eyes themselves. This drove her to take matters into her own hands and after taking a course at FIT in jewelry making she learned how to create her own perfect eye ring. After she had created this piece for herself, people started asking her about it everywhere she went. "On the subway someone would grab my hand and be like 'where did you get that?' and I'd be like 'I made that!'" she said. Maer realized how much she enjoyed making things that people were excited about especially after having taken a break from her interest in art for so long. After starting to sell her first few eye rings Maer made it a goal to be able to maintain her business solely on her creations based around her collection of eyes, which wasn't difficult because after having introduced jewelry into the mix the sales of eyes on their own went down drastically.

Social media is an important part of Maer's business especially with the creation of her jewelry pieces. Being able to connect with customers from all over not just those based in New York, is something she finds instrumental to her business. Through her dedication to collecting and her business itself, being able to so successfully pair the two through her creations and see people appreciating these items online is an added benefit. "It's just kind of fun to me that people collect them now, and they'll always send me pictures of them which is really sweet," said Maer.

Her jewelry line has created a group of dedicated customers who buy pieces every few months to add to their own curated collections of her jewelry. Referring specifically to one woman who featured around thirty of Maer's pieces which she had turned into a necklace, in an Instagram post. This woman is a part of a group of ladies that buy and collect Maer's jewelry and borrow and trade them with each other. "It's kind of nice that they turn this into a thing amongst themselves where they collect and they share them with each other," said Maer.

What Comes Next: Painting a New Picture of Death

Brooklyn illustrator, Meagan Meli turned her passion for art into a living through her death-positive creations. Meli's interest in portraying death in her illustrations and creating pieces to commemorate the recently deceased is due to having personally gone through a time in her life of great loss. Due to having frequented cemeteries, Brooklyn's Greenwood cemetery in particular being a source of great inspiration with its more gothic and Victorian motifs, Meli began to incorporate this darker aesthetic into her work, which she has become known for.

Meli has always been involved with art from a young age since her artist mother helped instill that kind of creativity in her as a child. Meli never felt that she was an academic student and was able to attend Edward R Murrow High School for art which made school much easier.

After high school Meli ended up attending the Fashion Institute of Technology, which was mainly due to its affordability at the time and not about whether it was the best fit for her. She ended up doing six years of schooling there, two years in fine arts which did not work out for her.

“They essentially kicked me out because they did not like that I was very illustrative,” said Meli. After struggling to fit into the fine arts program, Meli moved onto illustration where she eventually flourished but still struggled to find her niche because she said everyone at FIT was so editorial, meaning that they were more focused on being published in the fashion scene than their art in general.

Meli’s work has always leaned towards the darker motif thanks to her interest in video games, from whose characters she drew inspiration. “Thinking about ‘Silent Hill,’ ‘Resident Evil,’ ‘Dead Space,’ ‘Bioshock,’ all of those really transformative games in the industry inspired me to want to make monsters,” said Meli. In order to do so, Meli realized she needed to learn more about anatomy, which led her to develop an interest in the history of medicine and undertaking, which led to an interest in the history of medical illustration and later gravediggers and the bodies that were often stolen from those graves. “It all evolved into something other than monsters,” said Meli.

What it evolved into were the monsters of real life such as medical anomalies like conjoined twins, hydrocephalus (the excess buildup of cerebrospinal fluid within the brain causing an enlarged head) and sirenomelia (also known as mermaid syndrome, a rare congenital development disorder causing partial or complete fusion of the legs). All of these diseases that make humans look like monsters inspired Meli greatly. It was also largely because of her

opportunity to work with Ryan Matthew Cohn, who runs the Oddities Flea Market, as an intern that Meli had the chance to work with these figures. “I got to, not just go to the Mütter Museum, but I got to help him restore fetal skeletons and restore specimen that needed help,” said Meli.

After being involved with these real-life monsters, Meli also experienced a lot of death through her husband’s side of the family in a short period of time. Her husband’s grandmother passed away first then his uncle unexpectedly from cancer and his father fell ill from a difficult sickness, from which he was able to recover. “Just years of facing death while I was working with skeletal remains and I frequented cemeteries like every six months,” said Meli. “I was not going for personal enjoyment but to bury the dead.” Having to visit cemeteries so often, Greenwood Cemetery in particular where much of her husband's family is buried, gave Meli the opportunity to be overcome with the gothic graveyard visuals which now heavily influence her art.

Greenwood was actually a place that Meli was familiar with prior to having to visit for personal reasons. She would frequent the cemetery just to observe its beauty alone. Being there because of death forced her to look closer at the mausoleums and the tombstones around her. She recalls how, during her husband’s grandfather’s funeral, the procession passed by the lake in the center of the cemetery which houses a small mausoleum in the center. This caught her attention. The once-bronze structure had weathered over the years into a minty green and featured upside-down torches that were still lit. Meli was so taken with this visual that from that moment on it would influence her work. “I used to only use earth tones and natural colors,” said Meli. “From that point I was using this ghostly green.”

Although Meli always had a passion for illustration and making a living from her work, she wasn't always able to be as focused on her business. Straight out of college Meli had gotten a job at the Evolution Store in Greenwich Village, doing entomology work and articulating skeletons for the shop. It was a dream job for her having always had an interest in art and the more scientific side of things. She attributes much of her early work to being inspired from this job getting to work with remains of all kinds of animals and objects.

Having had these personal experiences with death it pushed Meli to create more pieces that reflect passing on more positively. Particularly after the death of her beloved cat Charlie, which she was fairly public about on her social media accounts, she felt the need to make art that directly reflected that. One particular piece that Meli makes many of is a trinket box that can be used for a variety of purposes but is marketed to house and honor a loved one's belongings. She got the idea after Charlie's passing because gathering all his favorite items and keeping them somewhere she could physically remember him helped her in the grieving process.

"You're like a keeper of history and a keeper of that person's loved items," she said.

Soon, her friends started coming to her asking for a box of particular dimensions to house the items of their loved ones who have passed away as well. Meli takes great pride in these kinds of pieces in particular. "It makes me cry every single time because I'm able to provide this," said Meli. Much of what she strives to create is something that will resonate with others and help them through change that is difficult to handle.

In terms of work, Meli has a variety of pieces that she creates on a regular basis, staple prints featuring the medical anomalies of conjoined twins and apparel featuring her cat Charlie, as well as custom pieces upon request. The lover's eye, a Gregorian era art piece featuring the

drawing of the eye or eyes of a loved one, is something she makes frequently especially during the holiday season. Meli finds joy in taking on commission work because she gets to work closely with the person and understand the full story as to why they want a particular piece. “These are ideas that I could never come up with on my own because I’m not making it for myself,” said Meli. “These are other people relaying to me things that they love and I have to interpret it as best as I can and provide them something incredibly special, so it’s really fun.”

Meli has recently had a few memorable experiences with customers asking for custom work. One woman who had gotten advice about having a gothic wedding from Meli, who had one herself, and asked her to make a ring box for her special day. Another instance was a woman who had taken care of an opossum family who had been hit by a car and unfortunately passed away. Meli was asked to create a box featuring a death's head skull but instead of it being the traditional piece it was an opossum skull. “It was really lovely to do because it was a story I could never think of on my own,” she said. She feels that being able to connect with her customers and get their full story when creating custom pieces is an important part of the creative process. Meli jokes that her husband pokes fun at her for just wanting to be a part of people’s lives, but she doesn’t see it that way at all. “I just like to enhance people's lives with something that someone couldn’t do on their own, but I can bring their ideas to life for them,” she said.

Meli always has new ideas but it can be difficult to pinpoint exactly what she wants to make and how to execute it. She brings to light the struggles of being an artist in today’s day and age and needing to find that balance between coming up with new ideas but in a predictable style that your customers will continue to buy. “It’s important to evolve obviously because if you get

stuck in a rut no one is going to want it anymore, but having a predictable look to your work is key,” said Meli.

Meli also feels that the fact that she is a woman and that many of her customers are too has a lot to do with the fact that death is such an emotional process. This harkens back to the idea of women as the nurturer and playing the role of the caretaker historically. She hypothesizes that maybe for men death can be harder to handle because of the societal expectation that they are the bread-winners makes the idea of dying and leaving behind a family or loved ones a tough pill to swallow.

“For women it’s like yeah I’m gonna die some day and the next person is going to take care of what I was taking care of,” she said. “It’s just a social thing honestly.”

In terms of having a successful business, like many other people involved in the scene, it’s about creating a space for your work and community especially online. Social media continues to play a role in bringing people together. Especially because Meli no longer participates in the Oddities Flea Markets due to the stress of working for the Cohn’s and creating her own work at the same time. Social media has become instrumental in maintaining a connection with the customers she would normally get to see and interact with at the markets. Her online shop is also an important part of her business and she jokes that anytime someone buys something especially for more than \$20, it’s a surprise to her that people genuinely want to support her work.

“It’s still new to me,” she said, “and I really hope that feeling stays of it being exciting, like it’s the first time every single time.”

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