

# FUSE

## A BOMB PODCAST

WRITER AND VISUAL ARTIST

## Maggie Nelson & Tala Madani

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*Maggie Nelson is the author of several books of poetry and prose, most recently the New York Times bestseller and National Book Critics Circle Award winner The Argonauts. She teaches at the University of Southern California and lives in Los Angeles. Her latest work of nonfiction, On Freedom: Four Songs of Care and Constraint, is forthcoming from Graywolf Press.*

*Tala Madani is a Los Angeles-based artist who makes paintings and animations, whose indelible images bring together wide-ranging modes of critique, prompting reflection on gender, political authority, and questions of whom and what gets represented in art. Madani has had numerous solo exhibitions at museums worldwide, and in 2022, she will be the subject of a mid-career retrospective at MOCA, Los Angeles.*

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**Chantal McStay** Welcome to FUSE: A BOMB Podcast. Forty years ago, BOMB began as a conversation between artists around a kitchen table in downtown New York. Today, FUSE brings you into the room to listen in on candid, unfiltered conversations about creative practice. Here's how it works: BOMB invites a distinguished artist to choose a guest from any creative discipline—an art crush, a close collaborator, or even a stranger they've admired from afar—and we bring them together. No host, no moderator, no interruptions, just two artists in conversation. For this episode, we asked writer Maggie Nelson which artist she would most wish to speak with, and she chose painter Tala Madani.

**Maggie Nelson** I wanted to talk to Tala, one because I've been thinking about her work a lot, because I have written—I've been honored to write a piece for a show of hers coming up. So I got to immerse in her work a lot. But also because Tala was just one of my favorite living artists of all time. And it's not like a cerebral thing. Like a thing that I went out and saw; it's just a thing that her paintings do to me. And I, probably like a lot of people, go around looking at art, trying to find anything that feels magic, or that moves me. And if it really moves me, sometimes, not all the time, if I'm moved but sometimes if I'm moved, I have an urge to write sentences about the work and that definitely has always happened to me with Tala's work. And that's a much rarer thing than you might think.

**CM** Maggie Nelson is the author of several books of poetry and prose, including the *New York Times* bestseller *The Argonauts*. She teaches at the University of Southern California and lives in Los Angeles. Her latest work of nonfiction is *On Freedom: Four Songs of Care and Constraint* from Graywolf Press.

Tala Madani is a Los Angeles-based artist who makes paintings and animations that prompt reflection on gender, political authority, and questions of who and what gets represented in art. She has had solo exhibitions at museums worldwide, and in 2022, she will be the subject of a mid-career retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.

In the course of their conversation, Maggie reflects on the process of writing *On Freedom: Four Songs of Care and Constraint*. The pair discuss how to capture magic in adult life, balancing doubt and trust, and Maggie's first experience writing about art.

**MN** In the movie *Flashdance*, which was like, of paramount importance to me as a kid—

**Tala Mandani** Absolutely.

**MN** There's this moment—like, Jennifer Beals is doing her first kind

of like, strip thing on stage. And then the lead guy is amazed by it. And then his friend next to him tells him, you know, “She works for you, you asshole.” And he has this dumb smile on his face. But I only wanted to say that when I saw *Sex Ed by God* at The Biennial, and I was watching it and watching it and like, loving it and loving it. And my partner Harry came over, and I was like, “Do you know this artist?” and he was like, “She lives in LA, you asshole.” Like, I had the same moment where I was like, I had like the same smile, where I was like, Oh, my God, maybe I’ll actually get to meet this person, you know. Now I have, and now I know you. And now, those are some of the reasons, circuitously, that I wanted to talk to you for this podcast.

**TM** Well, I’m happy that we can’t see each other’s faces you’d be like seeing my face go extremely red and blushing and a lot of big smiles. No, but it’s so interesting, you know, we’re in such a particular time right now, where there’s such a challenge imposed on art, because of so many different ... Oh, gosh, you know, interests and so many different stronger magnetic pulls, or at least bigger, not really stronger. But at least, you know, we as artists, I think one of the biggest things that any artist would want is audience. And I think, because of the lack of art education globally, or its decline for so many years, the focus has now shifted so much more to technology—and of course money, always money. So everybody sees art also in these terms of administration and/or its commercial aspects. So just to even hear that one’s work affects anybody in any way .... The actual work is a gift and it’s amazing, actually, to hear that. So thank you.

**MN** Well, there’s actually something I really wanted to talk to you about. And, I didn’t really know ... I mean, it makes sense now looking back on it, that when I would see your work, I would feel ... It would make sense in some ways that some aspects of how we maybe think about art or just living or different things might correlate—but you don’t necessarily know that when you look at someone’s art—but again, it makes sense that you might. But I do find when I was working on the essay about you, and I read all of the interviews you’ve given, I watched all the videos that were on

YouTube. And I just found myself nodding in kind of overeager agreement so many times about the—

**TM** —the positions. Yeah.

**MN** Yeah. And I think this is the interesting thing, and I think I just noticed because I have this chapter about art in my new book, *On Freedom*, and I've been talking about the book a lot with a lot of people. And what has been difficult is that—I mean, it's not difficult; it's actually been interesting and challenging because this was the challenge of that chapter—but was to test out by moving the abacus bead, like in that chapter onto the experience of making, like of makers. And like, what kind of one has to do in certain ways, not in a kind of heroic, oh the artist who has to bleed and die and take risks for their art, but the more just a pragmatic and yet imaginative, beholding of what making is, and then also at the same time, what viewership or spectatorship or reading also can be. But putting the abacus bead back on that relationship. And then when I go out to talk about the book, so many of the questions have been art as capital, and art as cultural capital, and artists, capital, capital.

**TM** Capital, capital, capital, capital. You're right, right.

**MN** And then artists symbolic in political struggles. Many things that ... it's not like I'm not interested or willing to talk about in the chapter make gestures in those directions, but it was trying to kind of keep on the stage this other thing. And I feel like that you've talked about that so much. And that's the kind of thing where I think, Oh, maybe it's no accident that I'm feeling so much with your work. Because you're pouring that care.

**TM** Yeah, I also feel that when I read your book, there is definitely a resonating perspective that we probably don't even know that we share from based on something that we can't even, like, necessarily pinpoint.

**MN** Yeah.

**TM** One of the things that makes people so much more comfortable, I think, in talking about art in those ways is this sort of disconnect to the actual work. It's easier work talking about the things around it, because that's just the life around the work. It's the everyday, and we've lost a lot of the language to talk about what the work does in relation to care, as you say, for instance. It's very interesting, because in artworks, you can't sometimes do something directly, so you have to do it indirectly. So, to make work that is about, let's say, caring, sometimes you have to be the most sort of ... I don't want to say uncaring.

**MN** Like, reckless or something. Sure, yeah.

**TM** Yeah. Exactly. The most of it, which is so interesting, because I feel like so many people, when the intention gets translated very directly, it oddly ... it becomes another thing. Sometimes it becomes, in fact, quite fascist. You know, it becomes quite forceful, it becomes ... It loses its lightness, because it's been asked so strongly to become a thing in itself, right? So it's been so forced to become something, it loses any kind of space around it.

**TM** Now I'm talking abstraction, but it was actually related to me reading *Freedom*. I was so curious. God, this might be a very strange question to ask, but I was so interested to know which chapter started first? Did it sort of grow organically, or did you actually start with a certain chapter? I had a feeling that the first chapter, which was about the art, sort of contemporary art thing, was not the first chapter you started the book with.

**MN** No, actually, weirdly, because it's the most esoteric chapter, and, like, the least that anyone is interested in talking about. Weirdly, the drug chapter—

**TM** It was the starting point?

**MN** A little bit, only in that the introduction and the questions about how ... I mean I've always been really interested, and I think you are

too, although maybe not in, like, academic terms, but, like, in nexus between the psychoanalytic and what you might call the political, or not even call the political ... But just kind of, like, the way that the squares of your paintings enact a removal from easily readable circumstance but, yeah, of course, refer, make, evoke for the viewer many, many different particular circumstances. But that kind of act of light removal that—

**TM** That painting does, you mean the square, the canvas, like—

**MN** Yeah, but also the kind of allegorical space that your paintings in particular create without being concrete allegories. So I was very interested in what it meant in very politicized, hyper political times, to write a book that was interested in not exactly psychoanalytic, but what are the inner resistances to freedom or pleasures and unfreedom as much as the political struggle for agency and sovereignty and self-governance and everything. So I was interested in that. So that's the introduction. And all those questions kind of came first in certain ways. But the drug stuff, to me, was a place where—and this actually relates in some ways to the intense play and transgression in your work—is that drug literature, which is kind of a niche sphere that I've been interested in, and have taught a class called Literature and Addiction for a while, it's some of the raunchiest and most amoral genre of literature that I know of. And I've found things in drug writing, fiction, and autobiography that I have not found in other places, you know? Like, for example, maybe it comes with a trigger-warning kind of a thing. I talk little bit about in *Straight Life*, Art Pepper's book, he has a first-person account of raping somebody in that book. Autobiography that ... you just never hear that. Ever. What book would somebody describe that? So there was something about the way that a lot of these books—and I think this is also related to your work—like, a lot of these books were not describing experiences of liberation; they were often describing experiences of radical humiliation, or abjectness, or hitting bottom. And yet, the books themselves can have a very thrilling quality. And that reminded me of a problem of drugs themselves is, like, why? Why do we do things?



**TM** Well, what you said in the book was really interesting in that the drug actually takes you somewhere you can't even ... you don't control where it takes you. It's not like you have this thing and then you're free. In fact, you are then beholden, as you say, to the actual substance. It's a very bizarre thing to posit that in the language of, "I'm free to do what I want to do," or "It makes me free." But I guess it's in position to the socialized self. Or the, as you talk about, the anxiety-filled self. I mean, I do find that as much as it is a ... It takes you in a direction of its own accord, it does free people of themselves without it. I guess it's a freedom from the self, or the self that is without the drugs, at least.

**MN** Yeah, and I think for me, since I am a sober person, I guess—and now I'm just thinking about this for the first time, because I'm thinking about things that you've said about paint and the materiality of it—in some ways, it's kind of, a drug-ish. In that you meet up with the material, and the material is different from what you had in mind. And then there's, like, this dance. And, I think, since I am sober, I do think about art as a place for ... One of the places where this kind of dance between other materials and a desire to disinhibit in some ways and discover in itself meet up.

**MN** I was reading interviews with you, and I thought it was hilarious when I was thinking that, and then I read where you were talking about painters being like heroin addicts, like always searching for the first time or something. You actually said, the more you paint, the harder it is to paint and I—

**TM** Yes, it's true. It's true.

**MN** —and I really feel like that about writing, which is not something I saw coming in my youth. And I was also dying to talk to you about that as well.

**TM** That's so interesting. The heroin addict thing, analogy to that, is good. Freedom is American, in many ways .... It's an American

product, the idea of freedom. So I feel like there's also a very specific cultural dynamic; it's not universal. The idea of sovereignty, even the idea of like, autonomy and sovereignty, this is all extremely American. And I think the fact that you're dealing with it in this book has to do with what ... It's the big American ad, right? It's what America sells to itself, to its own psyche. It's like what it's brought up on, and it has to. But then it tries to actually deal with it. I feel like the idea of consumerism is so tied up with that. There is this book called *The Invention of Cool*, right, have you come across this?

**MN** No.

**TM** It's all about in the '70s how this idea of individualism, and "cool" and your own style was then taken up by advertisers, to then sell to all kinds of products and give you the sense that you're choosing it, you know, you have the agency. It went into complete advertisement mentality. Yeah, it's like, you know, running around wanting to be free, you'll never be free. The moment you think about it, you've lost it. And I feel like it's such a big ask for anybody, that then it becomes such a distraction to the actual work of life ... that is species to species, person to person. It's a very interesting problem. Because also, of course, when I say it's an American project, now America has been the cultural ... Everybody looks to America. Let's say, like, even if China takes over in terms of an economic superpower, or whatever, in ten years, or twenty years ... Culturally, I think people are still looking to America for their next kick. So it's also sold this idea of freedom, then, to everybody else.

**MN** When you were talking before about art and indirectness, and the difficulty of, like, putting art in service of care, or something, or another value. There is a kind of—and I've written about this a lot in *The Art of Cruelty*—but the emancipatory ... to want art to emancipate is another form of wanting it to do something to other people. And of course whenever you want to do something to other people, there's an aggression in that you've diagnosed that they have a problem, that you've got the fix, and that you're going to make something that's going to fix it. And I think I'm really interested in



what you talked about, about this problem of disconnecting from the work, and maybe, I don't know if we want to talk more about what you see as, like, relating it to a decline in art education. I don't, I haven't thought about it from that angle. I do think, for me, and I don't ... You know my deep hope is that it's not retrograde or reactionary. I don't think it has to be. But I do think that something about that connection to the work, like reconnecting to it, insofar as it has to do also with an experience of presence where, like as you said, instead of letting everything you already know about the world be the center, you're actually letting this other thing, like this painting, be the center for a minute.

**TM** Yeah.

**MN** And letting it teach you something that you didn't know before you stood in front of it. And, I mean, that was how I was taught by a very great mentor of mine, Marianne Cause, when I was in graduate school. I'd never written about art before; I wanted to. Most of my friends were artists, and I loved art, but I didn't know what to do. And people were asking me, because I was a young writer, they were like, "Oh come write about my show, come write about this," and I was like, "I don't know how to do this." So she would assign us to go to The Met, because I was at school in New York, and to just pick a piece of art each week and stand in front of it and write about it. It was one of the hardest things I ever had to do, just because I had no idea how to do it. Like, I knew how to do a lot of other things as a writer, and I just had no idea what to do. But I think about it all the time because I realize now in retrospect, that she was asking for us to do something very awkward ...

**TM** I wish everybody would do that. I mean to to go stand in front of something and think about what it is doing to you, as opposed to just also reading about what it does to other people. I feel like we've also gotten so used to experiencing artworks through history books, so we feel like we have to read about it, understand where it's coming from, which is very good and well if you're interested in that

direction, but that's not its purpose. I mean, the painting is not there so that you can understand about when the painter was born and which city it was painted in. The painting is a thing in itself that it wants you to think about, right. So because we've, again, put the artwork in a kind of an administrative sort of channel, we have lost connection to the actual object. Again, I do think to have the kind of visual literacy, it's great to know as much as possible, so of course it's great to know about its history. But to give the agency back to anyone with, with faculty, to actually be able to just stand in front of it and just see what they see. What it does for them. To become more selfish, ultimately. That's the whole point, to not feel that is anything but an artifact that another human's made, and you're human and so you can relate to it negatively or positively or dismiss it, however you feel like. And I think that's an important agency we have to give back to the public. Because there is a separation there.

**MN** I mean, maybe this links into something else just more mundane that I wanted to talk about, which is that, I am not seeing you right now, but I saw that you were in your studio when we first signed on, and I know that you've been working. I know we both also have little kids, and I, the COVID times has been like ... I mean I haven't been out to be able to see other art for so long.

**TM** Yes, that's very true, yeah.

**MN** And it's made me think a lot about, as I'm describing this going to The Met, standing in front of things, how poorer my life—I mean it's richer in certain ways—but how in this aspect, how poorer it's been, you know, in the past eighteen months. And I've tried really hard to think what ... Okay, well if that's not part of this time, look, John Berger lived in a small village in France and only probably got in to London a couple times a year to see work. Like there are people who don't live in towns with museums and galleries, and it's okay that you're going to learn something else for those eighteen months. But it's been hard for me, and I wonder how it's been for you.

**TM** See, for me, I always go to films, and literature, and text. So I haven't had as—I mean, I absolutely have missed seeing certain things, but not in the same way, because I feel like we do maybe ask other disciplines for a bit of a release from our own discipline, maybe.

**MN** Yep, absolutely.

**TM** And I have such a strong mimicking, sort of de facto mimicking? I mean, it's not as bad as I make it sound. But I, basically for inspiration, I don't really find that I can look at ... I mean, obviously I would just look at ... If I look at a lot of Goyas, I'll just start making Goya paintings, basically. It doesn't leave me as much as I need it to leave me, right? So it's good that it's in Spain, and I can visit it once in a while. *(laughter)* But no, but happily, we do have some amazing collections in LA, obviously. But it's also so interesting. I was thinking about light. And you know, so many paintings were not seen in the kind of light that we have. I think they were for, a long time, candlelit in spaces that they were in institutions. And that's also so interesting to see how pigment and paint translates in a different space. And I was asked about, actually, I don't know, I need to say this, but we don't even have to have this in the interview if we don't want to, but God—the NFTs yesterday. Had to have a big discussion with someone about NFTs. And that's just depressing. So we don't have to talk about that.

**MN** I don't know what that is.

**TM** Oh, God, I don't know if I know enough about it to be able to, like, put it in a podcast, but they are basically ... They have a digital signature.

**MN** I'm looking it up. It's a digital asset that can be anything online.

**TM** NFTs as art works. Everybody is, like, on this, because the interesting thing is, for tech people, is that it has a code behind it.

So you know where it's been. And people are really, because of cryptocurrency, they're really interested in using, selling it, and buying it. I think Christie's just auctioned Beeple, which was a huge digital art—basically, JPEGs or basically art—and for very expensive. I don't know how much you went for. So there is, like, this interest in, it's a very .... And the whole point that it misses is that you're not having an experience. There is no experience. And the argument that people in the tech industry make is that the new generation is only experiencing things on their phone anyway. So what's the difference? Like, if you're only looking at paintings on Instagram anyway, just might as well be looking at NFTs. And then you can exchange that and you can change that. And so this is where again, the commodity, we had like, is coming in, because of the deficiency of people being versed in the language of the visual arts, it can easily be taken over with exactly the interest of the code behind the work, because people just want to see who had it—and supposedly be honest about it. Their big tick is like, when it gets sold over and over again, the creative, the artist, can get ten percent, over and over again, not just the first time. And of course, these things have also been implemented in the real world.

**MN** I think what I'm really interested in too, though, is something that ... I mean, I'm interested in two things. We can talk about light more, but I also ... You seem to have an ability to understand your art, and art in general, in time, in a way that I think is in tension with a kind of presentism and, like, obsession on the contemporary. And I think it's one that I was trying to write about in this chapter on art that like ... It's not the same thing as an artist being like, "I want to make timeless things that live for centuries." It's not that. It's more just understanding oneself or one's making work that the question of the immediate reception or the culture such as it is right now. It just, it cannot be its only sphere. Or, its only magnetic pole. And I think, I'm really curious because for me again, I want to figure out a way to have the conversation about this that doesn't sound regressive. People will always read books, or they'll always have paintings.

**TM** I think I can tell you where that comes from. I think for me that comes from a complete disinterest in art, actually. I have no romantic attachment to art at all. I didn't grow up with art. I never went to any museums until maybe I went ... until I was in ... God, late in high school, where I went to a museum in San Francisco from Oregon. I mean, I didn't even go to the Portland Museum. It wasn't in my periphery. I mean, I was interested in making art. Because to me, it was an expensive thing. For me, art is totally about sublimation. I mean, when I'm making work, I'm sublimating X, Y, and Z, which is so much about myself in the world today. And the politics of power, and the politics of money, and the politics of whatever it is that I can see, or feel, or project onto that's familiar to me on some level. So there's absolutely no nostalgia for me about our history. I mean, I'm deeply interested in it as a viewer, but not as a maker. I'm not aspiring to, you know... And I think, I realized that nostalgia in itself is a very dangerous position to have, because it's a psychological, it comes out of fear. It comes out of a disinterest in the now. It comes out of ... it's Trump on some level, right? It's whatever conservatives can pull on those sins. And not to say that we all don't have it; it's in all of us, right? Some idea of something that was better. But if you feed ... If you make your work on it, if you can't separate some psychological kind of need or something that is, and to make your whole work about that, then you're also feeding that back into the population and not actually giving them something in return, right? You're actually giving them the problem as opposed to any solutions. Basically, you're turning your public more conservative, if you're invested in nostalgia. So that, I think it's really important to think about art making in real terms and not as separate terms. Not separate from life. It's not separate from life. Because it is an artifact, it's the same human psychology that makes it and reads it, that does everything else; that does vote, that does parent, that does talk to its neighbor, or doesn't, or whatever. I think that's maybe where it's coming from, what you're explaining.

**MN** And how do you, like when you say that, like having it be on a continuum, or part and parcel of all those things? Like, what is that?

**TM** I mean, I don't make sure that it's a continuum or anything. It simply is on a continuum, because I'm another human being making it. You don't have to work for that, you know?

**MN** But how does that work with like ... Okay, so there's this phrase people use sometimes when they're feeling either good or bad about art, where they'll kind of talk about like, whether or not it's the kind of like, state of exception, where certain things, whether they're ethical things or whether they're whatever things, can or should be held in a band, you know, in a certain way, and I think ... I don't think about it as a state of exception.

**TM** Can you explain that a bit more for me?

**MN** Well, I'm curious, for you, as to how that feeling of art not being separate from any of those things also relates to what I feel is one of your work's, like, major claims and achievements, which is that you are allowing yourself these spaces, that you're inventing spaces of fantasy. Or sublimation or however you want to, whatever mechanisms you want to call it by, in which much more is possible, and I'm just curious how you understand those two things.

**TM** So, as an artist, first, and you know, I teach as well, and I always say you can make anything you want. As unacceptable as it is. You don't have to show it. So that's a very different thing as well. Like, to make something and then to show it is also very different, right? So you can make, if you need to make something, by all means. Again, if you have to make something that hurts like someone physically, that's a different thing, right? I'm talking about ... There are a few different things. There's a first thing about trusting yourself. There's another thing about understanding that we're processing, we're all processing, and making is also part of processing, and we absolutely will be making tons of mistakes. And not mistakes, we will be stepping on so many toes, as we're processing. But it's only through actually doing that, where you understand the dance of, "Oh, I went too forward, "I should want step one back," "I should have gone



left where I went right.” And this is what’s called a studio practice. So make it and then understand it, read it, remake it, become your own audience. If you immediately just cancel a subject or position out for yourself, because you don’t feel you should or you can or it’s the temperature today, you’re just reacting and you’re not actually allowing yourself as a maker to process even for a possible audience that might process with you. I also feel like it’s a dance between really trusting yourself and really doubting yourself. You have to immediately question everything you do as much as trust and have total faith to actually do it. So it’s like this thing of do it, question it, do it, question it, in a very intense way. And then of course, in a really practical way, that becomes very difficult if you actually listen to anybody else. Because people will come in with all kinds of interests, clapping for you, or telling you not to do something, and you really have to just shut the door, to understand what you want to do.

**MN** Yeah. And there’s also, I think, like you’re saying, with your clapping, like, there’s a weird thing in ... I mean, don’t get me wrong, I like it when people like my books and stuff like that. If you feel well beheld by a review, or by a consideration, that can feel really good, you know—but at the same time, I think, you know, any artist as you go along, as the Buddhists have it, like praise and blame are two sides of the same coin .... The love and the hate have a weird way of feeling ... like producing a similar reaction in you, which is kind of to say, I think I don’t need either of these things. I think I need to go back to work. *(laughter)*

**TM** And that’s exactly the truth for the maker. And I think when people say something positive, they’re talking about themselves, their experience. It’s not about the work. To aspire to something is one thing, but to think that something because someone else has had that experience of it is not productive for someone who, as a maker, should grow. But we have a lot of distractions right now, namely, again, administrative and commercial entities that are much bigger than the artists to a large extent, their size, right. So it’s important for, I think, younger artists, and even older artists, to understand.

**TM** It's funny, we're in a moment where we're really quite afraid of making a wrong step. You know, not just like art makers; politicians, anybody. Because the public eye seems to have become ... it's more immediate with social media. So the fear of that is quite crippling, I think, for so many people.

**MN** I feel like I've heard a lot of people say, and I think it's true in some ways, that these are kind of like anti-art times or anti-intellectual times. I think sometimes, like what to do if you find yourself there in such times, I think—and this is where the time thing comes in—a part of me just feels like, Well, no time lasts forever. So, the worst thing that you would do would be to just say, "People don't like thinking; I guess I won't think!" or "People are down on making; I guess I won't make." There's this little essay that I write about in *On Freedom*—I don't write about it, I just referenced it—by the composer Schoenberg, who is called "How One Becomes Lonely." And it's like a little short story—not short story— it's his narrative of the praise and blame of his career and innovative music. And the times when he was thrown off the stage to the times when he was beloved and said he was the second coming in music, and then long periods of indifference in between. And I think that no matter what kind of times you find yourself in, like just figuring out how to keep on keeping on. And like you say about the administrative, like becoming a kind of manager of your own work. I mean, it's something I really also really wanted to talk to you about. It sounds all well and good to keep on doing your work. But as you say, not only are there the distractions of the times, or social media, or all various administrative forces. There's also just the fact that, like, if it's true, that the more you paint, the harder it is to paint. And if it's true, and I hate to say this, but I wrote about this with Sarah Lucas, who said this, which I thought was fascinating that Sarah Lucas of all people would say this. She was like, "I always am looking for magic. And as you grow older, magic's just harder to come by." And I thought, It is! And then I thought about it a lot. And I really feel like, and especially raising kids, and seeing kids through like their teenage years, to know how

much magic that they're kind of—pain and suffering, too—but to know what it feels like when you're kind of neurologically younger, and things are imprinting so big and they're new experiences. And you've never seen X, Y, or Z before and just to know all that. And then to know about this kind of neurological, I wouldn't call it deadening, I just would call it ... There's just more tricks that kind of have to be performed sometimes in order to keep your curiosity nourished and alive. And I'm just curious as to what you have, and what you've been thinking on those accounts.

**TM** I mean, we were talking about Allen Phillips the other time ... He has this thing where he talks about how, when you're a kid and you're reading something, it's all possible. So when you as a kid get into a book, let's say, there is no limit on the projection, and you can read everything. And as we get older, you just read things that you agree with; you just want affirmation of your own position. And then of course, how could the magic but all not be dead? Because you're just affirming your own position constantly, right? So I think to some extent, is to seek things that you disagree with—not disagree with, like necessarily in the same—but that are not in your highway. However, that is, right? To some extent, I find the problem exhausting. I mean, for me, right now, I feel the impossibility of seeking that, even changing the highways, as just tiredness. But that also is temporal. And I was thinking about how, you know, Dali, like, purposefully didn't sleep for three days so that he would fall asleep, wake up immediately, and make a drawing to see how he would, what he would do as a sleep-deprived person, as someone utterly exhausted. So I feel like also as a maker, if you see yourself or your experience, all of it as a plausible place to start, exhaustion and tiredness become part of that, too. It's just about the willingness to see it as plausible as opposed to, no, it has to just be this one thing that I need to access, that is the thing that I make, right? If your work is about anything to do with your experience, the person, then it's all food for thought. Hunger, you know, being too full, being too angry, being too whatever. But you know, that's why it is magical, right? It is rare. It is heroin. We also have to be okay with that, I guess to some extent, yeah.

**MN** For it being rare.

**TM** It being rare, and also the value of other experiences that are not magic, like utter exhaustion. The value of experiencing making your work that ... like, what would it totally ... a consciousness that's exhausted. Could that even make your work? I mean, I'm deeply interested in if someone knows that they're departing soon. And of course, in the history of art, there's been many people who've had to face imminent death, and what do they make, and how do they make it? That's been of long interest for me. I collect that kind of story. Obviously, it's riddled with, of course, AIDS and cancer. Of the two things.

**MN** So funny, I was just telling my students the other day that I was going to teach a class next year on AIDS and cancer writing of people facing death. We must have a similar archive that we have collected.

**TM** Or at least a similar, like, interest. I mean, I'm not sure if I have an archive archive, but I'll take your class. Yeah, that sounds fantastic.

**MN** I love this bit about the not magic too, because I think that, like you say, everything is everything, you know, and in the last year and a half or so ... I mean, just believing, again, the kind of trusting—not even in yourself or anything—but just trusting in life, that everything that's happening is going in, and it doesn't even, it's not even trusting like, "Oh, it will come out as an unproductive piece of art." It's more just like, I'm just living and, insofar as living ...

**TM** It's about not feeding the anxiety of productivity, right? It's like, what it is is like actually an anxiety. I mean, I think that's the malaise of today, if anything, globally, right? I mean, I was thinking that also in relation to parenting, that parenting, which is the thing that people have done since humanity—it's the most ordinary everyday thing—what is going on with our generation? And seeing it as such an impossible thing? And I think it's the level of anxiety and the

impossibility of just being. Like just, all your kids want from you is just for you to see them. And this, like, difficulty of not ... of losing yourself, of, like, not being yourself, to just sort of be an audience for somebody else. I go back to that whenever there's a problem, if we can pinpoint an anxiety becomes easier to maybe then .... I mean, you talk about it so much in the book, and I think you're completely right. I mean, the environmental, the impossibility of actually sitting with that, to some extent, I think it's extremely human not to be able to, you know. Because we need to survive psychologically. The threat is so real, and it's so imminent, and it will dissolve us if we're really honest about it.

**MN** I think, I tried in my book, and I try my life, to just like you're saying when you said, all the men in your paintings, or whatever, are you, or different things ... Like, I feel like I don't have as much difficulty seeing myself, like, I could be a climate denier. Like, that seems to me like a reasonable response to the anxiety. I mean, no one listening to this should think that I am or that that's where ... I'm just saying, I get, under the pressures, I get why psychology morphs into, whether they're just wrongheaded or all the way to toxic or ... It doesn't feel mysterious to me. And I think it's in part because I have a lot of anxiety, and I've struggled with a lot of anxiety, and I try not to have it smear out with being, you know, a noxious force on others, but its force is real. And it's something that, you know, I think a lot about the effort that it takes to, not if I'm feeling ... I mean I'm not—you know, as I'm sure you can relate to—like, I'm the worst parent when I'm feeling the most anxious. I'm the least patient. I am the least kind, which is strange, because often my anxiety is about my child. Like, I'm wanting it to be well, yet, that very anxiety separates you from making them feel the presence that you're talking about that they desire.

**TM** I'm really happy you said that though, about the climate thing, because I feel like it's really important to just ... The antidote to this moment is just to understand and empathize with shitness. You know what I mean? If we'd like, that we're going to be shit, and other people are going to be shitty, and not to be so demanding of other people, to see that it's going to be a process. I'm not suggesting that

we shouldn't be aspirational, we shouldn't do the work to go through it, right? But through doing that ... I mean, I think the capital riots were so important to happen. I was so sad in that moment from liberal art community the slogans of, "Lock 'em up, lock them all up." This moment after all this discussion from the left about less police force, to immediately go to lock them up, you know, as opposed to, they did it, everyone should be able to if they have something that they think is at stake. Not only should they do it, maybe the left should too, without being locked up, when it's something significant. I don't know. I mean, I'm not suggesting, again, not to be taken.

**MN** I think you're right, though. And I felt this in response to my book, which is ... I'm totally riveted by the anti-carceral, like the importance of all of that. And I'm utterly riveted by how that seems over and over again to crash up against the "Lock them up" mentality. And it's not like I don't understand. I mean, it's like a code. It's not like I don't understand it; I do. I find the provocations of letting go of carceral thinking so profound, and so important that it really ... You know, and I knew this would happen with this book, and that's fine, because I knew that that was the risk it was taking. But I feel like the easiest read to me is that kind of first layer that people go through, where they kind of say, kind of first level where it's kind of like any moving into empathy at all, that people feel like doesn't have enough moral condemnation attached to it just produces panic in people. Because if you can't have your convictions, while also being interested in projects of radical compassion—and I understand why for some people they feel at odds, but I feel like I have done enough, and we're totally like way off topic of art but you know, a lot of this processing ... I mean, I feel like I did a lot of this work a long time ago, which was that, you know, I grew up with a murder in my family, and that was very affecting, and my mother's sister and I wrote two books about it ... It really bothered me when people would talk about victims, like families of victims, and say, "Oh, they're so out of touch with their own anger that they've gone so far as to be advocates against carceral solutions or against the death penalty," as if they would, like, pity victims' families who hadn't yet gotten in touch with their vindictive anger and it just, the whole thing made me crazy for years.



**TM** The mechanics of fear-producing in this country, they're so strong that there is no ... it's so difficult to work with. I mean, what you said, radical compassion—the fact that compassion has to be termed as “radical compassion,” because that in the mainstream is so, you know, impossible, that it has to become radical for it to register... It's quite problematic, but I think it's about, again, the psychology of the big fear grip on people, right? Fear of al-Qaeda, fear of Islamic extremists. When the capital riots happen, this idea that when you have a population that doesn't have access to the same economic opportunities, or the same educational opportunities, to have a bit of magic. Because the magic that we're talking about in art is not in the work; it's in what happens while you're making it. It's an experience; it's a life experience. So if you have a population that you've not serviced as a country, as a society, to give it a possibility of that. And of course when it goes on riots, and when it's being consumed by total propaganda constantly, and gets a bit of wind on his wings and thinks he can do something and have an experience with that when he wants to get grab on some power, one has to understand that. And that's exactly what happens within, you know, Islamic countries, etc. So I think it's really important, actually, to unpack these things, not let them sort of be driven in our mind by media, basically. Into places that we can't touch anymore, as a concrete object that we can't actually then more than change. I mean this is the shit we live in.

**MN** I guess what I wanted to, what I was really curious about, was ... I've seen you say a couple of times that you felt like the work you were making when people come to you and they say like, “Oh this is really transgressive or really out there,” whatever, and then you've said like, “Actually it feels kind of PG to me to where I feel, like, where I could go.” And I've always really related to that. I mean, I think your work is more transgressive than mine, but I am a little bit familiar with going into auditorium after auditorium—when we used to go to auditoriums, we don't anymore— but like when people would say, you know, like, “You're so brave,” or “This is so out there,” or

whatever, and it always felt to me like ... My inner response was like, "I haven't even begun." Like, there is nothing in here that is even the beginning. But when I hear it from you, whereas your work does seem like it pushes more fully into the imaginative spaces that I don't go to because I don't have an imagination, sadly. Which is also, what I wanted to say, why I chose you to talk to you, is that I'm totally riveted by having a lot of overlaps with our concerns and thinking. I'm just riveted by your relationship with your imagination, because I don't feel like it's one, that is ... it's not a connection that's well oiled in my own mind. Anyway, I just wanted to know if you had anything more you wanted to say about that PG feeling?

**TM** It's exactly as you said. I don't think I've even started yet, and I'm interested. Gosh, it's so interesting, because I also feel like ... but it's funny that you say that, because you have seen so much work, I feel, and you've written about, you know, obviously your book on cruelty. You've written about artworks that are very much out there. I feel like when it's painting—I guess with painting specifically, I feel there is such an abstraction involved when you turn an idea into an image. And I've worked so hard, in fact, to make my work extremely ... palatable, to some extent, as a project in itself. Because that's what I thought the project required. Especially early on, when I started, the very early works that I ... like in 2006, 2007. Part of the challenge for me was to make, like almost candy-like work. Like tiny little delicious things, kind of a thing, that still has my ideas in them. So, there was a point where I was very purposefully making pastel works, right? Like PG-looking works. I mean then there is, like, the resistance of your own psyche not completely letting you go into the deep end, or taking you step by step and how slow that takes, how many steps there has to be. So that's what's exciting about, for me, about, you know, continuing in the studio ... Obviously, it's not how easy it goes; it's how difficult it goes that brings me back here basically. It's not the mastery of the thing; it's the fact that it masters over me, in a sense. So, yeah, yeah.

**MN** I was just teaching this week an independent study of reading the Marquis de Sade ... And when we were reading, I was just thinking this week that, like, you know, Sade, of all the things

that there is to learn from Sade, like one of them is just ... how watching someone push as far as they can push, like ad nauseum length, ad nauseum, how it's so eventually not. Like, you can feel his panic that there's nowhere else to go. There's no, there there, I get, like, it's just ... and I think about sometimes—I mean this happened to me with *On Freedom*—where, like, instead of pushing in that kind of transgressive direction, I kind of thought, a kind of scholarly idiom right now that takes a lot of time to think through some kind of unsexy thoughts is actually my biggest risk right now. What's difficult and interesting in studio time or in writing time is not always going to be this kind of superficially transgressive pushing. You know the risk, depending on who you are and where you're at, the risk can be anywhere.

**TM** No, absolutely. I mean de Sade is a really interesting one because of the repetitiveness, but also because it's such a call for religion. I mean it's, in a way, such a ... the kind of Christian language in that. The argument for morality that the victims constantly spew out is stronger sometimes than the descriptions of the violent acts. The request for a moral behavior ... it's a really interesting one to think about, actually.

**TM** Thank you so much, Maggie. That was so lovely speaking to you.

**MN** Tala, I love talking to you. I love your work. I'm delighted that we did this, and I hope there's just more and more to come.

**CM** FUSE is produced by Libby Flores, Associate Publisher at BOMB. It is edited and engineered by Will Smith, with production assistance by Isis Pinheiro. I'm Chantal McStay, Associate Editor at BOMB Magazine. Our theme music is "Black Origami" by Jlin. This project is supported in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts on the web at arts.gov. Subscribe to us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen.