

Women In Motion

Emily Yang

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Manori RAVINDRAN

Hi everyone and welcome to the final edition of the Kering's Women In Motion conversations. We are here; tomorrow is the final day of the Cannes Film Festival and the award ceremony and I am thrilled to be here. My name is Manori Ravindran and I am International Editor for Variety. We are here, actually, with a truly inspiring guest, Emily Yang. Emily Yang is a former visual graphics designer turned multi-disciplinary artist and NFT virtuoso. She is here to tell us about the artist in the digital age, Web3 and the decentralized financing landscape and how women and women of colour are leading in these spaces. I'm really looking forward to this conversation. Thank you for being here.

[Photographs]

Manori RAVINDRAN

Hello Emily, welcome, very nice to see you. Thank you for being with us.

So, welcome, welcome to Cannes, how are you doing?

Emily YANG

Thank you. I'm doing great, actually.

Manori RAVINDRAN

I've been really interested in speaking with you just because I know how huge Pplpleasr is online and everything that you're doing online but you've had a really interesting trajectory, I feel like, because you began your career as a visual graphics designer for big studio movies. So, how did begin at that place?

EMILY YANG

Well, pretty much what happened was, I've loved art and drawing since a young age but when I was at university, I watched *Wall-E* for the first time and I just thought – I was so moved by the movie that when I watched the credits and I saw all those names in the credits who had worked on it from a technical perspective, I thought, 'Oh, I want to be one of those names', and then, so, I sort of went into this deep dive of looking into how to make animation and computer graphics and then, I saw a career in it, afterwards, yes.

Manori RAVINDRAN

That's very, very cool and, I know that you had a big job lined up at Apple, effectively, and then, when the pandemic struck, that was, sort of, put on ice, obviously, because of the Covid crisis. How did you, sort of – how did you pivot because, ultimately, you sort of bettered yourself, right, when that happened?

Emily YANG

Yes, I mean, it was definitely not an easy time. You know, looking back now, I obviously see it as a blessing in disguise but, at the time, it was particularly stressful because I was living in New York and I was paying rent. I was actually collecting unemployment insurance because I had lost my job and you know, sort, I think what kept me sane was, I started an Instagram account and that's how Pplpleasr was born, was because I wanted an outlet just to make art for – because, I was doing endless job interviews and applications at the time. I was actually unemployed for more than a year so, I was applying for jobs for more than a year and it was obviously, a really hard time to get a job because competition was so high and the global economy was unsure because of Covid. So, to make myself be all the more productive during this time, because I had been working non-stop since I graduated all the way up until that point. Not having a job made me feel like I didn't know what to do with myself or I didn't have a sense of purpose and so, I made that Instagram account to have an outlet so that I would start making artwork for myself for the very first time because before, I had always been making artwork for other big Hollywood studios and such. It was really just to make myself feel like I was doing something productive and I wasn't putting my life to waste. Around that same time, I started looking into other ways of generating income because of a lack of a job. Then, later in 2020, that summer, I had discovered DeFi, which stands for decentralized finance, which is a sub-sector of cryptocurrency. I saw a way to sort of marry my own skill set with crypto knowledge and make myself sort of valuable and useful in the space out of purely a need to make some kind of income for myself. So, yes, I started using my medium and making all these animations to promote DeFi protocols and then, through word of mouth, I think, one after another they all started hitting me up and then, that's when I was like, 'This could be a real job'.

Manori RAVINDRAN

Yes, so, there could be something here.

Emily YANG

Yes.

Manori RAVINDRAN

I feel, like, digitally, most people, sort of, in the online world, most people know you as Pplpleasr, which is a really fun handle, I think. How did you sort of land on Pplpleasr?

Emily YANG

It really was one of those things where I made that Instagram account. I was looking at all these other really amazing digital artists who all had really cool artist names and, you know, my actual name is not particularly interesting or unique and so, I thought, okay, I should probably also have a cool artist name and I think it very much resonates with just my personality type, being a people pleaser. So, it was one of those things where my hand was already on the screen and I just typed it and, honestly, I wasn't in love with it and I said, I can always change it later and then, everything happened so fast now; I don't have time to change it – I can't change it anymore. It kind of just stuck. But, yes, thankfully, other people like it, so.

Manori RAVINDRAN

I think people relate to it and they can understand it. It's a very human sort of-

Emily YANG

It was not intentional. I'm very lucky.

Manori RAVINDRAN

How did you kind of go about expanding your art and what you do into the NFT world and, sort of, into this area because it's quite a – it's a very different sort of ball game, isn't it?

Emily YANG

It is. You know, I think a lot of people see it as either super-ridiculous or it's all over the top. You know, very over the top or the media focuses a lot on sort of just numbers being generated. You know, to me, I found – obviously, the technology is very interesting about being able to generate on-chain royalties for artists. You know, beyond the many, many things that NFTs sort of enable for people; it's really weird because I feel like, as an NFT artist, your entire income and worth and self-worth is put online. Everybody's judging you by the numbers that you generate and, you know, it is actually a lot of high stress. But it also, at the same time, is a very interesting and new field that people are just looking into. For me, when I started doing the DeFi animations in 2020, I had also, obviously, discovered NFTs in tandem and then, I would mint a few here and there. But, you know, they were fairly cheap and sometimes, wouldn't sell, just because at the time I didn't have a huge following. So, me entering NFT space was a pretty intentional step, actually, so, then, in early 2021, that was when Nifty Gateway started becoming really big and then, all the big celebrities like The Weeknd and Grimes and, you know, all these people started dropping NFTs on the Nifty Gateway and then, I sort of realised that there's a giant tsunami wave of interest from the mainstream that are coming towards NFTs and I sort of was wondering how can I position myself to also be a part of this wave. So, that's when, sort of, I, you know, was experimenting around and then, I did the first – I had never done an auction up to that date and feel like the interesting thing about auctions is, it sort of lets the market decide what the price is, so, this was definitely during the peak, sort of interest in NFTs, as well as I recognized that I had this opportunity because from my DeFi career, I had already garnered a community of fans who are crypto-native and willing to spend cryptocurrency. Because, just because you're a celebrity doesn't mean that you're necessarily going to do well in NFTs because your millions and millions of followers probably don't even transact in cryptocurrency, right? So, I definitely had a little bit of an advantage there because my fan base was already crypto-native. I just saw an opportunity and I describe it as like having a baseball bat ready and I was watching the ball drop and I was wondering when I could hit it. Thankfully, I hit a home run.

Manori RAVINDRAN

I think you did and it's amazing that it's been so recent, because, you know, this has been in the last two and a bit years, right?

Emily YANG

Yes, I think that's a result of the space itself being so fast-moving. We call it 'crypto time dilation', where one month in crypto feels like six months of real-life events. The industry is ever-changing; always moving really fast.

Manori RAVINDRAN

I can well imagine but I still feel like there is still some confusion in terms of what NFTs are. I feel like it's still a little bit opaque in terms of audiences and, just, you know, the public like, not really having a grasp of it; is that fair to say?

EMILY YANG

Definitely, and, you know, I think that, sort of – well, it means a few things. One, we're still early. Also, I think, you know, builders and people, for example, like Silicone Valley, I think, probably when Web 2.0 products like Facebook and Instagram first came out, people didn't understand it right away either. So, hopefully, you know, that's part of my job or what I'm doing here is to help digest it a little bit with the mainstream and, at least, with my art or my platform. I also try to make the content a little bit more fun. It's definitely what I was doing with DeFi. DeFi has a lot of really complex and just not immediately intuitive concepts and then, so, I would sort take those and stay the white papers and I would come up with really sort of meaning and relatable ways, using art to kind of regurgitate that back for an audience so that's – so they can understand it better.

Manori RAVINDRAN

Got it, and just for our audience here as well and people who might not necessarily have a grasp of it; how would you describe NFTs and Web3 and how it sort of sits within this wide space?

EMILY YANG

So, Web3 is pretty much just the whole Internet that's being sort of operated and orchestrated and built and owned by the people who are using it and building on it and orchestrated via tokens. So, you know, an NFT is a type of token. Cryptocurrency itself so, Bitcoin and Ethereum are also – they're all tokens. They all use the blockchain to store information. I think the concept of NFTs, I think this also depends on what generation you are from but I like to talk about *Neopets*. If anybody has ever played that before?

Manori RAVINDRAN

Yes.

Emily YANG

It's a pretty straightforward – you know, as kids, through *Neopets* we understood the concept of digital ownership and the value of various digital goods. It's the same as any other video game, really. You know, for certain video games, they might have different – like *Neopets* they have different omelettes, right, and there are certain types of omelettes that you know are rare and more expensive. Then, there's, like, the plain ones that are free or very cheap and NFTs are really the same thing. If you live quite a nomadic lifestyle, like mine, right now, moving around so much, you actually realize, 'I don't want so many physical things anymore', and having an NFT really sort of helps that lifestyle as well. So, you know, I definitely – I think it's a combination of Covid also accelerating this process. You know, during Covid, I spent a lot of time indoors. I didn't really play video games before but when there was a pandemic, I had nothing to do but to sit at home and that's how I, you know, really discovered games on the Nintendo Switch or sort of, VR, or metaverse games online and I realised there was this whole other digital world that I wasn't even a part of. Hopefully, we don't – I mean, I hope that we're not going to a future where everyone stays indoors all the time. But it definitely is something that we can't deny that is coming. More and more – everybody, I think, spends most of their time online or on digital devices these days. So, it's something that we should all, at least, strive to understand better.

Manori RAVINDRAN

Of course, and why has art been, sort of, leveraged in this way? Because it feels as though this area is really associated with the art world which is really interesting and cool and, obviously, you've really kind of taken advantage of that; like, how – what is the link there?

Emily YANG

I think art is just easier for people to understand because it's a very visual medium. So, even right now, when you're talking about the concept of a music NFT, I think people feel like they can't execute it unless there's album art that goes with it. I think it's just because humans are such visual creatures so, if we don't have something – when you think about a digital file, if there's nothing to look at – if it's not a video, I think, then it sort of relates with people less and I think that's probably why art sort of took off first but, you know, just like the Internet or we have MP3 files, right now, I think as sort of more and more of this NFT technology is integrated with our daily lives, people will move away from the art aspect of it and realise that it can be used for many other things like, you know, the obvious would be tickets or documentation, like drivers' licences. I mean, yes, so.

Manori RAVINDRAN

That's really interesting. And, what about the gender – obviously, this is the Kering Women In Motion talk and this is a very – you know, this is a very strong platform for this particular conversation but in terms of the gender balance within the field, and also, you know, ethnic diversity; what is your take on much representation, I suppose, there is right now?

EMILY YANG

I think that the crypto community, itself, is not a sexist one. You can sort of – this is pretty obvious by how many anonymous influencer accounts there are whereby people are just being represented by a picture of a monkey online or something. You know, they don't know who you are, what you what your background is, what you look like; it doesn't really matter. It's just what kind of thoughts and ideas you are putting out in the space. There's definitely a gender disparity though but I think that's a spill over from the tech industry being more male oriented as well as, you know, people who are, I guess, more interested in finance – like, traditional finance also. It's basically a convergence of all these industries that I think previously had a large gender imbalance. So, yes, I mean, my job is to fully inspire more women to join the space and, you know, you are seeing this happen more and more and I think, you know, my own success is also a result of people not being genderly discriminating because I think they just recognize that the work I was doing was cool and much less about who I am and what I look like. So, in that regard, I feel lucky and I hope that my story can inspire other women to join in my footsteps and building on Web3 as well.

Manori RAVINDRAN

Of course. What about in the wider art world, would you say?

EMILY YANG

I definitely notice there's a gender – you know, I don't come from a traditionally art background, right? My first, sort of, exposure to the art space was from entering NFTs but I definitely notice that, even in traditional art, the top selling artists are typically male. So, I'm not really sure if it's because there's a gender discrimination there. I'm sure there's some relationship there but, yes, I hope that – everybody digitizing themselves, it will matter less and less who you are and what you look like.

Manori RAVINDRAN

Got it, and how have you, personally, kind of gone about bringing more women into the field?

Emily YANG

Well, I mean, I love doing panels like this that are women-focused. Obviously, recently, this is more fem related as well but with my – I did a partnership with *Brut* in Cannes to create NFTs that help – we're working with Doctor Stacey Smith for the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative and so, with the funds that we gathered from selling those NFTs, we are issuing scholarships to aspiring female filmmakers or female film students and I guess the rest is just preaching the gospel to girls.

Manori RAVINDRAN

Very, very cool, and, like, just, in general, is enough being done to bring women into it. I mean, obviously, you are clearly doing your part but just in the broader landscape, you know, what are some of the initiatives in place and is it enough?

Emily YANG

We could definitely use more. We can always use more. You know, we are trying to move away from a societal systemic impact that has been around for, you know, probably like a century at least, right. You know, it's not going to change overnight but I am seeing way more and more effort being put into sort of educating women or just being more inclusive towards women, which is really inspiring and it makes me more optimistic about every space in general. Yes, I think the rest of it is just – you know, I've seen so many amazing communities online; even with crypto where they're making it very girl-friendly and sort of pulling screenshots from chick-flick movies that we like. But then, educating crypto in that way which I think is really fun and cool. *Boys Club* is a good example of this. So, yes, I highly encourage girls to check that out so that it makes it more fun and interesting.

Manori RAVINDRAN

Very cool, and this partnership with *Brut* and I believe you have actually been collaborating with them and also addressing the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative. What are some of the fruits of your labour out of Cannes, would you say?

Emily YANG

Well, I mean, I think, first *Brut* is just a really amazing partner to have worked with. You know, they've been so supportive and resourceful and, you know, it's super early. Hopefully, this is just the beginning of an ongoing partnership and we're excited to – hopefully by the time next year that Cannes rolls around, that will actually have some kind of activation for the females that did receive the scholarships. Yes, so, we'll see how that goes.

Manori RAVINDRAN

That's very cool, and I feel like a lot more is being done within the NFT space, within film in general and the industry. It seems as though there is still a little bit of confusion and people are trying to leverage the space a little bit more, especially in places like documentary and what not. How – have you sort of seen it in action? I mean, you've only been here a short time but do you get that sense here in Cannes as well?

Emily YANG

I definitely see people talking about it and, you know, I think it's sort of – that's probably where the next wave of NFTs is going. It's media and IP and longer form content. Including myself, I've been quite interested in this as well. Last summer I used NFTs to crowdfund the Ethereum documentary. We raised over two million dollars within 48 hours. So, within two days, the documentary was fully funded and is now almost a year later, it already had been shot and well into production. This sort

of gave me new ideas about how we could use crowdfunding via crypto, because it's efficient, as a resource for filmmakers and this is something that I would love to, you know, hear about filmmakers talk about because, you know, I think a lot of people have this sort of maybe idea that as an NFT you – like a movie needs to be an NFT or something but I don't feel that's the way we should go, you know, because you're not going to sell a one of one NFT of a movie for, like, \$5 million to one person. You know, that doesn't make any sense. So, it's sort of pushing us to think how we can use NFTs as utilities to facilitate the making of movies, which is, something that I'm looking into and working on, personally, as well.

Manori RAVINDRAN

Got it. Got it. Here in Cannes as well, you know, just in terms of women and their place within the festival, and their place within the film industry, at large, has been a real topic of conversation. There have been, you know, various incidences that have, you know, really put that conversation into sharp relief. What are your views and, obviously, as an artist, albeit working within the digital space but when you're kind of looking at cinema right now, how do you sort of perceive its progress for women?

Emily YANG

I think it's slow but there is progress and hopefully, you know, through events and missions like this, we can accelerate it all a little bit more. I definitely still feel, like, especially film compared to – I would say even Tech and other industries, right now it's still very, very much behind in terms of inclusivity of women, especially in, sort of, female directors/filmmakers. So, obviously, you know, that's part of what we're hoping to change with the USCN Annenberg Inclusion Initiative as well. Yes.

Manori RAVINDRAN

Absolutely. They're really at the forefront of doing a lot of that work.

Emily YANG

Yes, it's super-inspiring.

Manori RAVINDRAN

I think, actually, we have got a social media question here for you that I will – I will see here. We have a question from Emma from Instagram for you, 'Jeff Koons is just one of the artists from more traditional forms of creation who just created his first NFT which he donated to the amfAR gala, which actually happened last night. Do you think different artists can naturally move to this new space and how do you see that happening?'

Emily YANG

Yes, I think any artist can move towards this space as long as they study up on the material and understand the technology. The space is very, very sensitive towards anything that could come off as a cash grab because I think, you know, the media probably isn't helping in that all they do is report about how much an NFT has – you know, 'This NFT has sold for several million dollars' and then, so, it's drawn a lot of, you know, unwanted attention in terms of people, you know, who might be greedy or in the space for the wrong reasons for monetary reasons. Of course, there's a lot of monetary upside but I think that, generally, you see people who sort of make a transition into the space that are doing well are the people have done their homework to really understand why this technology can be revolutionary and not the financial upside of it.

Manori RAVINDRAN

It needs to feel organic.

Emily YANG

Yes, and authentic too.

Manori RAVINDRAN

And authenticity, exactly. Exactly. I am going to throw to the audience in case anybody has any questions for Emily as well. Do we have any? Okay, you can go, one question here. I think we have a mike coming to you, actually, just because we are recording.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

Hi, hello. So, So, you just mentioned earlier that this auction – I would like to know who did win the auction; if it is possible to know. You were mentioning the auction you were doing, and how are Charlie Shrem, Courtney [?] and [?] involved in DeFi?

Emily YANG

Sorry, do you mean the auction that is associated with *Brut* in Cannes?

Audience MEMBER

Yes.

Emily YANG

It's still ongoing but part of the utility of the NFT, which is really cool is that it helps activate attending of red carpet or a movie premiere at Cannes. So, you know, if you bought it now, it would just be sort of more of a commemorative because Cannes just, you know – it's almost ending now. You know, I'm sure if people are interested, they can head to – it's just – maybe we can include a link later. It's just like, Shibuya.xyz. Yes, we will include a link later if people are interested in looking at the NFTs or where they are selling. Yes.

Manori RAVINDRAN

Of course, yes.

Emily YANG

And, sorry, what was the second question?

Audience MEMBER

How was Charlie Shrem involved in this and Courtney [?] and Tonelli?

Emily YANG

I don't – I don't know-

Audience MEMBER

You don't? Because I got an invitation earlier from them for this event. It was defined.

Emily YANG

Are you talking about the amfAR?

Audience MEMBER

No, I'm not talking about that. I can maybe explain later on.

Emily YANG

Okay.

Audience MEMBER

Because it was interesting but it was also-

Emily YANG

Yes, I'm sorry; I don't know who those people are, so.

Audience MEMBER

They work in the cryptocurrency world.

Emily YANG

Ah, okay, got it.

Manori RAVINDRAN

Okay, do we have any other questions? At all? We have got one question here.

Audience MEMBER

Thank you. Thank you for the conversation. I have a question regarding the gender equality and the discrimination that you were talking about. You said that obviously, there are not that much discrimination because you are here, obviously, and you have succeeded in that very, very difficult sector of crypto and the others that you are succeeding in. So, the question is regarding more your female touch, because you mentioned also, the scholarship. So, what is the specific female touch that you are adding in your art and that you would convey as a message to the youngsters – the young girls? Thanks.

Emily YANG

Well, it's interesting because early on, I had a conversation with somebody who was interested in just, like, my art profile, and they were mentioning to me, which I had not noticed before that, 'Oh, just by looking at your art alone, I could tell that you're female'. Then, suddenly, you know, I found that very interesting and I asked why that is and apparently, it's – I mean, I guess, obviously, there are just so many just natural differences between men and women but, you know, the way that we use lines or colours; there's just something that's more of a feminine touch that I feel is harder to describe with words but, for sure, I think when people see my art, it's a little bit more feminine, I think, and you know, that's what makes it fun and keeps things a little bit more diverse in the space as well.

Manori RAVINDRAN

It's like what you were saying before, isn't it? It's easier to sort of hide behind that digital sort of, I guess, like mask, but, ultimately, you know, the work you produce, it has that lens of empowerment for women.

Emily YANG

At the end of the day, it's a little bit of an expression of yourself, right. Yes.

Manori RAVINDRAN

Absolutely. Well, I believe that we will wrap it up here but thank you so much, Emily, for being with us and congratulations on your Cannes debut.

Emily YANG

Thank you.

Manori RAVINDRAN

And, thank you to Kering as well for having us.

Emily YANG

Yes, thank you.

Manori RAVINDRAN

Thanks.

[Applause]