

# TOSKA



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Kao Lee

Thao

@kaoleethao



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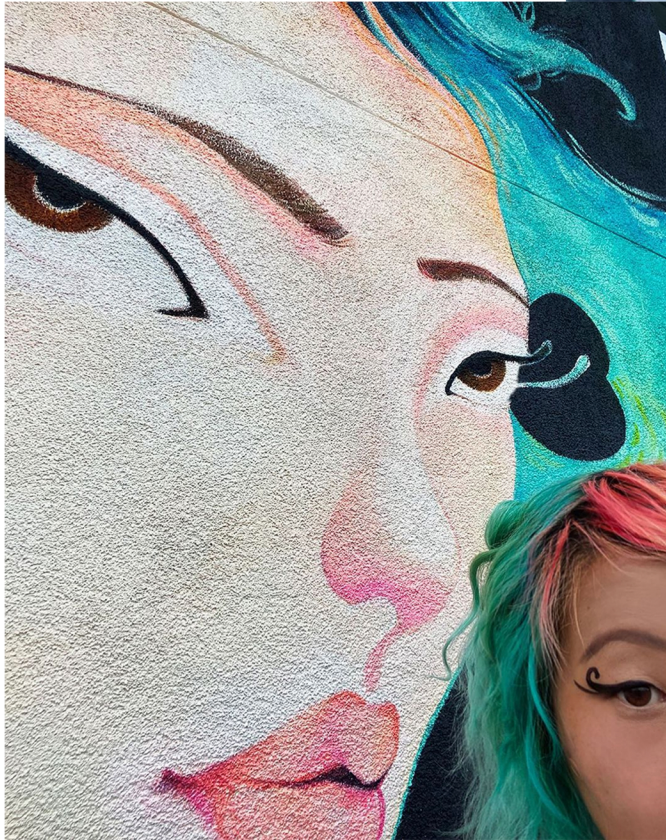
**Interview with Artist**  
**Kao Lee Thao**

@kaoleethao

## Topic: Making Public Art

Phil - How did this mural come about?

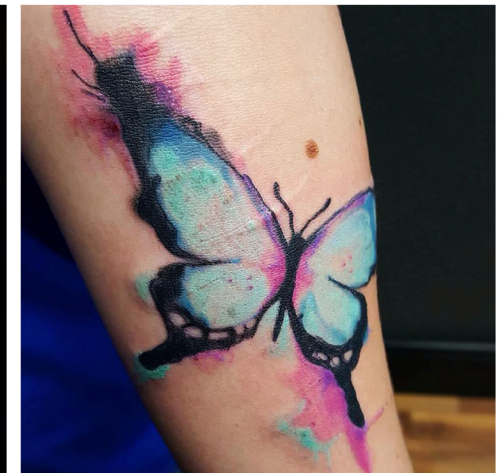
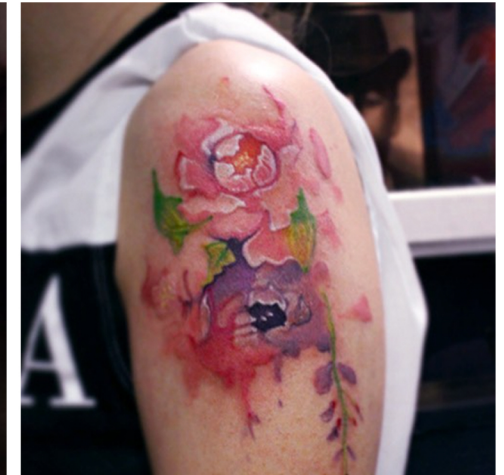
Kao Lee - It happened because of Creative Enterprise - every year they select different artists and pair them up with businesses to work together. When they selected this building I had no clue what the building owners did and then once I found out they're a clothing company and they had Hmong seamstresses I was like "this is so perfect" and I definitely wanted to incorporate my culture - being Hmong and also their sewing and custom apparel; weaving those things in, that's how I came up with this idea. I think creating personal work debuting my Hmong culture is important because I want to inspire young minds that your culture is vibrant and make sure you don't forget about it.



## Topic: Selling Art

Phil - In terms of developing the sales side of things - how did you arrive at it?

Kao Lee - The first art show I ever did was in St. Paul and I was a purist - I was only gonna sell originals, I didn't want to do prints or anything else. But then, all of a sudden, I realized that people loved my work but they couldn't afford it. So I felt kind of bad - I was only creating art for people who could afford it. That's why I switched things around, because I want to make art that's affordable for everyone so they can enjoy it too.



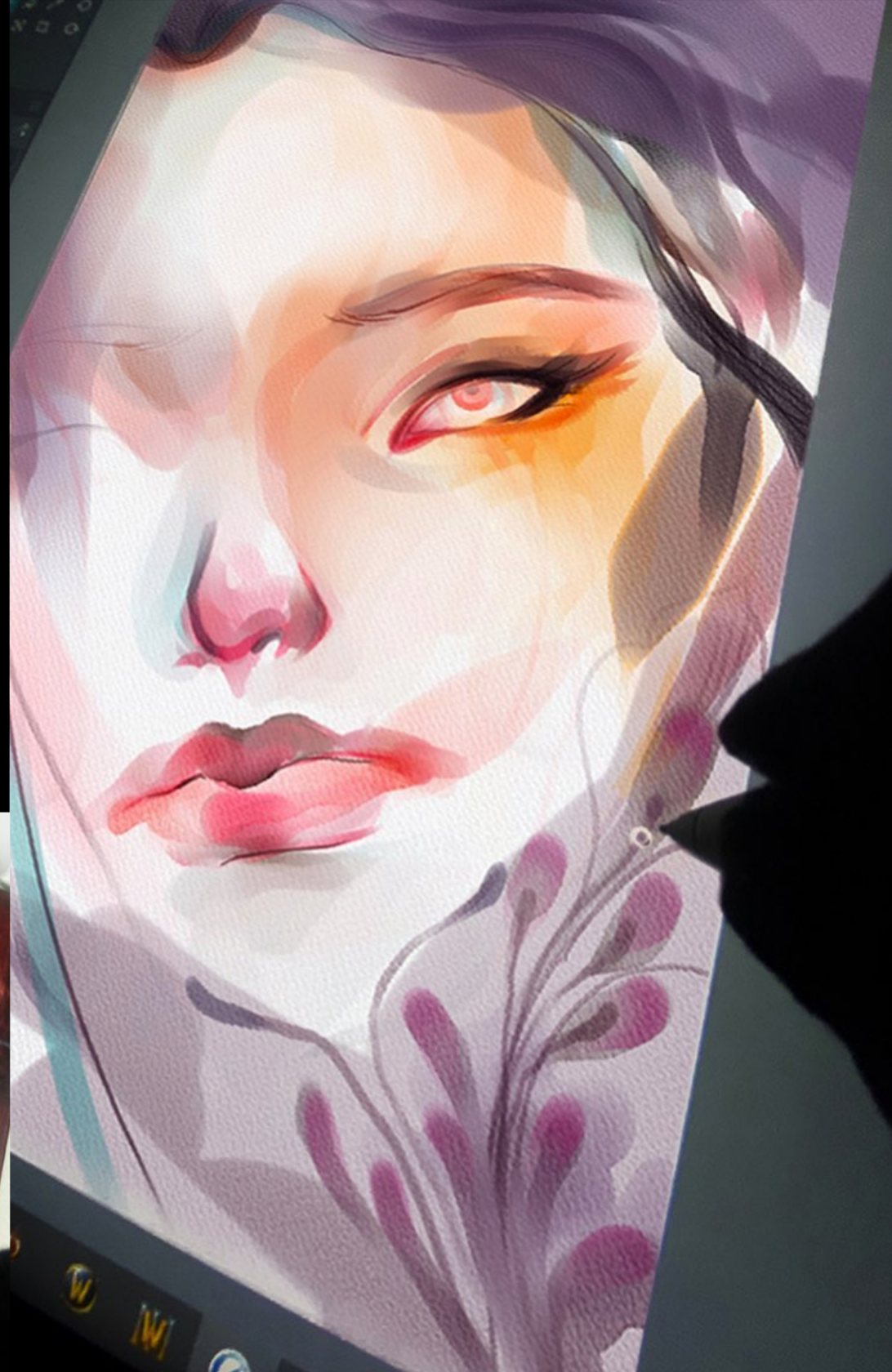
## Topic: Influence of Emotions

Phil - When does creating get hard? What's a sticking point for you?

Kao Lee - Well, I never really run out of ideas, it's just the time management that stresses me out. I also draw a lot on my emotions. So when painting or creating something, my emotions have to feel like I WANT to paint or create. I know a lot of people don't understand that but artists put SO much into their work. Or when they're distracted and have emotions they won't be able to produce.

Phil - So it's like there's a window of time that someone can create, so that time becomes even more valuable. Do you see emotions as good or bad?

Kao Lee - For me it depends, because you can create something beautiful with negative emotions and vice versa. But if I can't work, it's because I'm not emotionally attached or I feel withdrawn, so it's hard for me to create. Whereas other people are like "you have this project are you gonna get started?" Well, I have to put myself in the right mindset and make sure I can create something good, then I'll get started.



## Topic: Sloughing off expectations

Phil - How much did you draw as a kid? I know there's a big range of parents being supportive and not supportive.

Kao Lee - I've always been drawing as a kid, so I knew I was going to be an artist. My parents coming to America were like "you're not gonna be an artist" you gotta be a doctor or a lawyer. I felt like I should be doing these things for my parents because they sacrificed so much coming to America. So I spent half my life getting a psychology degree, but then had a bizarre dream, dropped out of school, and pursued my career in art.

Phil - .... wait, a dream, like a dream dream?

Kao Lee - Yeah, literally a dream.

Culturally, I always felt ignored as a woman. Women are married off and don't seem to matter as much as the men who carry the family name. My parents are very Americanized, but also very traditional. So finding the balance was hard for me and I was always pushing against the norms. It's like, I'll embrace my culture, but I live in America and I love that culture as well, so I'm trying to find a balance and figuring out who I am.

Phil - It comes through powerfully. What do your parents think now?

Kao Lee - It's interesting you ask that question because I just installed a public piece a week ago and that's the first time my mother has ever seen me do art. It's crazy to think that, because I've done so much artwork. The Hmong community knows who I am, they know my work. And my mom is well known in the Hmong



community, but she's never introduced me as her daughter. I haven't shared this, because culturally you shouldn't talk about family, but I'm at the age now where I'm just going to do whatever I want. That's why I'm doing a collection called Dragon's Blood. It's a collection about me in my mother's womb. She literally thinks that a dragon stole my soul and that's why I'm so weird and different.

That's why there was never that motherly connection with my mom, so maybe this collection will help me release all of this pent up tension within me.

Phil - It's interesting that you and your mother are known in the community but she, maybe isn't comfortable with the way you are known.

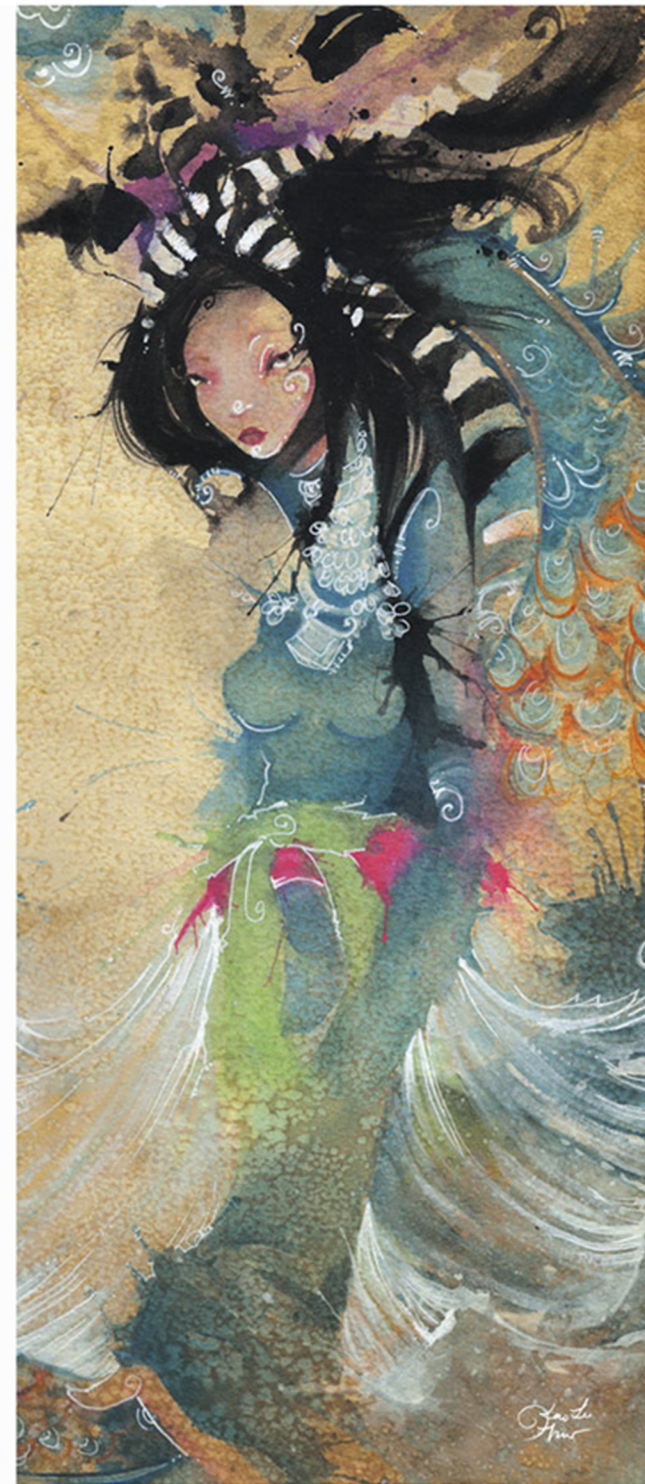
Kao Lee - Yes, she's VERY well known; the community knows and trusts her. She's always about Hmong power, and women's power. Then behind closed doors it's the complete opposite - "I don't support you, I don't support your work", but when we're out in public, "sure I support you; I look like I support you, but not really". They didn't even think about me as "an artist" until a doctor told them that my work was really good. After that she was like "Yeah, my daughter is great" and I thought "After so many years, it took a doctor to tell you this for you to then say it?!" That's why the bond with my mother and I has been really strange and different. I never had the mother daughter bond. If you look throughout my career, there are no pictures of her going to my shows or in front of my art.

Phil - That's tough because then when she does show up - you don't know if she shows up for you or for her. As opposed to "wow mom came", you question it - "Is she here for me or for herself?".



*I want to make art that's  
affordable for everyone so  
they can enjoy it too.*

*- Kao Lee Thao*



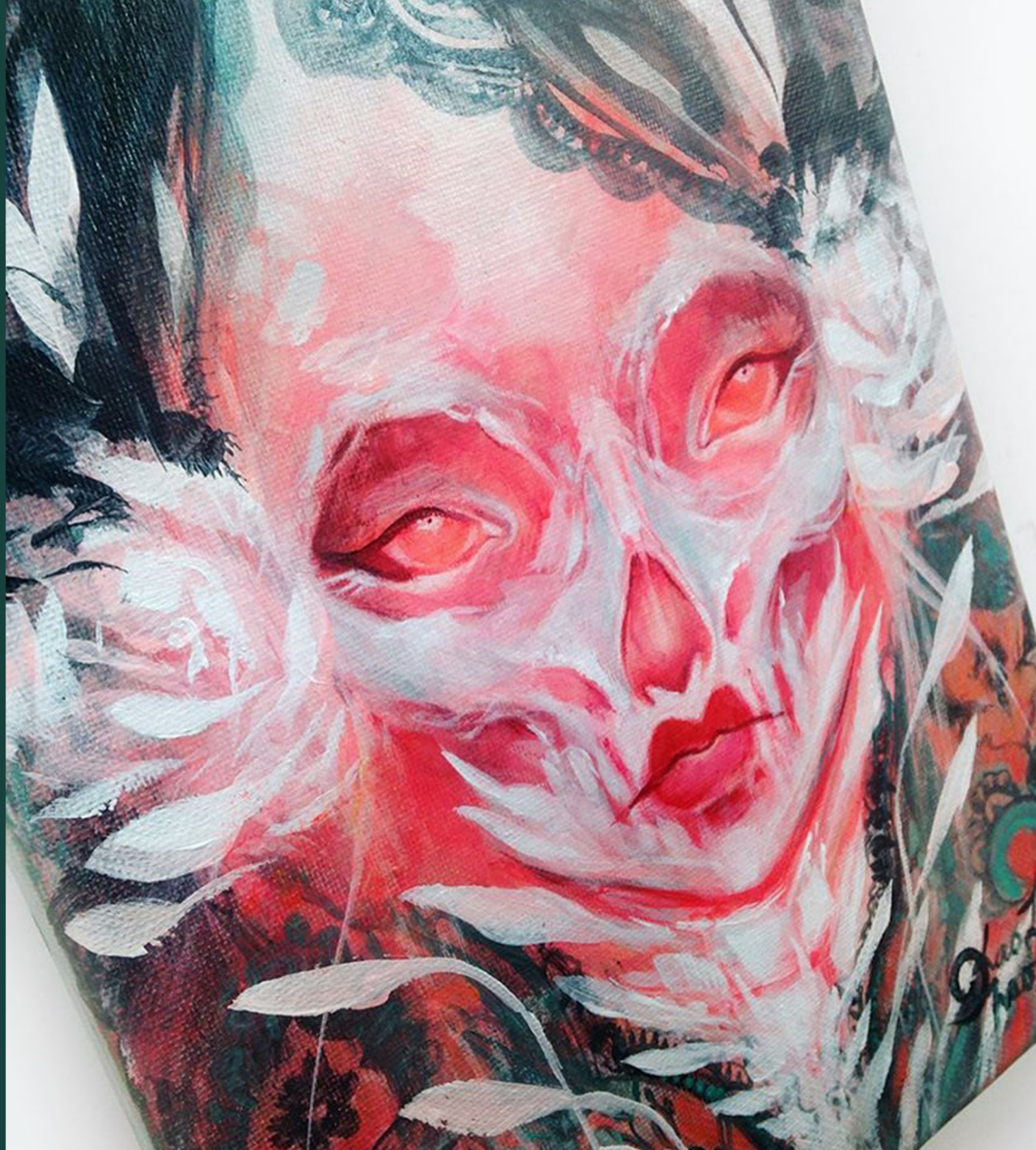
## Topic: Support in Relationships

Kao Lee - Ash is also an artist so we're lucky we compliment each other. But it's difficult to find someone to support you, especially when you're an artist. I remember dating was so hard because people wanted to go out and I was like "can i just focus on my work?". It's good that we both enjoy creating because we be together or have our own time, and can still continue creating.

Everyone's like "well I wish I had an Ash", but that's just because he's supportive and he always has been. All the other guys I've dated have been the opposite - I've gotten a lot of negative comments about my art. Where Ash has said "Go for it, keep pushing". He's been my support, so I've been able to push my creativity and not be afraid of it. He's always the voice telling me to not be afraid and do what I want.

Phil - Having someone else give that extra bit of support really helps.

Kao Lee - Yeah, because we're already going through our own emotions and doubt so outside support really helps.







### Topic: Selling at Art Fairs

Kao Lee - I know I can sell things online, but if I go out in public, I can sell even more, people will support me even more. They want to meet the artist and hear their story, or see the creator. You feel more when you meet the artist vs. purchasing something on the computer. It's always good to sell in person, but I totally understand why people don't - it's a lot of work. We'll be up for a week before, night and day, creating inventory. Once you're at the show, it's great, you're set up, you're there, but nobody knows the days leading up to it. Sometimes we won't sleep because we have to replenish the inventory - that's how crazy busy it can get.

But I've been doing more public art and less art fairs so I miss connecting with people. I get asked "are you ever gonna do art shows?". But right now, because of public art I don't know if I will.

Phil - Public Art has kind of filled that space for you.

Kao Lee - Yeah, definitely! Not that I don't enjoy selling in person, but one of my goals is, if i don't have to do art shows, I wouldn't just because it's so straining and time consuming. I love meeting people and being there, listening to stories and telling mine, but you know it just takes a toll on you - physical and emotional.

## Topic: The Feeling of Satisfaction

Kao Lee - It's kinda silly - the things that people see as success. They probably see me as successful, but I feel like "No, I'm not there yet". Being an artist I always thought that if I work hard and I push myself, at some point I'm gonna make it.

One time I was being hard on myself for not making it yet and Ash was like, "What if I told you, if you move to Hollywood, you're gonna become a famous actor." I thought that sounded ridiculous, but that's the same thing as being an artist and being famous. He helped put me into perspective and see that my expectations are too high. But I always feel like I can still give more and still push more.

Phil - That satisfied vs dissatisfied feeling is an endless struggle. I see it all the time in artists - that urge to constantly keep searching and creating.

Kao Lee - But I've also seen artists create the exact same look - it's their signature work. I don't know if I'll ever find the signature look and be satisfied. Just because it's generating money doesn't mean it drives me to be creative. I think I'll finally be satisfied when I have my own land and my own studio. That will feel like success. Then I'll be satisfied. Or maybe not. (we both laugh)






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