

Spotlight: Emilie Gossiaux

The artist on her unique methods and the indescribable bond she shares with her guide dog.

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Platform Art

There's nothing [Emily Gossiaux](#) loves more than working with her hands. Whether reading some of her favorite fantasy novels with braille or crafting a sculpture from clay, her hands are always busy. From her home in Manhattan, the artist spoke with Platform about the profound relationship she has with her dog, London, the techniques she's developed to create visual art since losing her sight, and what she enjoys most about experiencing nature.

Platform: Your work's been written about quite a bit, but how would you describe what your work is about and what it deals with?

Emilie: For me, it always deals with something personal and autobiographical, relating to my memories, my dreams and my experiences.

Platform: I'm wondering about your process for making work since the accident that took your sight over a decade ago. How do you go about creating visual works of art?

Emilie: I use materials that are very tactile to me, so I can feel them while I'm working. With clay, it's very easy for me to manipulate and is so organic and flexible. I love making my sculptures out of clay and also papier-mâché, which is easy to build with.

For my drawings, I use this board that has a thin layer of rubber over it, so the rubber is very pliable and soft. And I always draw with a thin kind of paper. It's the same sort of paper that they use for newsprint or in most skinny sketchbooks. It's very soft and thin, and smooth, but also archival. When I'm drawing, I draw into the paper with the ballpoint pen or pencil on top of the rubber mat. The pen will push into the rubber and the paper, and the result is that the lines will become engraved, so I can feel them as I'm drawing.

I like to color my drawings with crayons because that leaves a waxy texture on top of the smooth surface of the paper. I'm able to color and feel where I've colored between the lines. I have this whole setup with all my crayons that I've labeled and categorized.

I have 120 crayons. And I was able to organize and label them by going through each color in the Crayola box with my partner. We went through each crayon and he described a color to me. Or I would describe a color that I'm thinking of in my mind to him. I associated each of those colors with a specific memory of the thing. For example, the color almond is the color that I associate with Labrador blonde because I had a Labrador growing up when I was a kid. The color bluetiful I associate with my mother's wedding dress that was a very pretty blue color.

I separated all these colors into seven boxes, so one is blue filled with blue colors, a box of purple or violet, a box of yellow and orange, a box of red and pink. And then I put each crayon into a tiny little envelope that you would use for buttons or stamps. Then I put a braille label over each of the envelopes, which I was really happy about. Because before that I would have to ask assistance to pull out a color that I was thinking of. So now, I have a lot more control over when and what I want to color.

Platform: You mentioned your partner helping organize all of those different colors. Once you actually begin a work yourself, are any other steps in your practice collaborative?

Emilie: It's just me.

Platform: Your work on Platform features your dog, London, really prominently. How did London come into your life and what's your relationship with her like? How did she make her way into your art?

Emilie: London and I have been together since 2013, and it's been a really amazing experience to work with a guide dog, and to develop this non-verbal communication and understanding that we have. Our relationship was rocky in the beginning when we were first starting to get to know each other – getting to know when we like to wake up in the morning, when we want to sleep, our eating habits and everything else. A lot of times, a relationship between a guide dog and a human companion is described as a marriage. And I totally feel that way about my relationship with London. Another way that I like to describe our relationship is interdependent. It kind of reconstructs or deconstructs the idea of power relationships where it's more about, like you mentioned before, the word "collaborative" or a mutual dependence on each other. I think that with all these memories and experiences I've had with London, and knowing her as a person, she's really important to my life. And I feel like when we're together, we become this sort of superhuman or super-being, really, something not totally human.

Platform: What do you mean by the term 'super-being'?

Emilie: I feel like we have really meshed together. London is a little older now and she doesn't travel as far with me as she used to, but in the past it was always a given. If Emilie was going to be there, London would be

there too. People could expect that. There was this one time when I stepped into an elevator in one of my old apartments and there was a woman on her phone talking to someone and she was like, "Oh, the girl with the dog is on the elevator with me." And I didn't say anything, but I was like, "Oh, wow. I guess I'm the girl with the dog now." That's how I'm known by my neighbors or people who encounter me in my neighborhood. At first, I was sort of offended, I'm not just a girl with a dog. That kind of became part of my identity. And I sort of embraced that part of myself.

Platform: Do you feel like your relationship with London has brought out different things in you or allowed you to experience things differently than perhaps you would have otherwise?

Emilie: Absolutely. I've always had a sort of love of animals, even just looking at animals. I used to collect little toy figures of animals and draw them, and I just have them around. But with London, I feel like having that ability to understand each other, and having that nonverbal communication, I just feel like it's gotten a lot stronger. My feelings about animals, about nature and what I choose to eat have changed.

Platform: How did the pandemic affect your feelings?

Emilie: I think there have been a lot of stories about how a lot of people have decided to adopt dogs or cats during the pandemic. And now that they can just work from home, they can spend a lot of their time with their animals. I've certainly spent a lot more time with London during the pandemic. And also, just being inside so much, especially, in the beginning and missing being outside, or feeling safe and comfortable outside and in nature. Because I live in New York City, it feels so draining to be in a city for so long and not have that connection with nature. I've definitely taken that for granted.

Platform: Pre-pandemic, did you try to escape from the city regularly to rejuvenate?

Emilie: Yeah, I did. My partner Kirby's family lives in Hamden, Connecticut and we would go and stay with them for long periods of time. They have a huge backyard with a lot of birds and I also spent my time there. I created a little studio for myself in the garage, and I was so thankful to them for letting me use their space. Sometimes, if it's warm enough, I'd have the garage door open, so I could work and listen to the birds at the same time. It was just really invigorating.

Platform: Do you go into nature when you're in need of inspiration to start new work?

Emilie: I never went out searching for inspiration in that way. It just sort of comes to me. I did a residency in Scotland, at the Dumfries House, which is on a big plot of land that was just gardens and livestock and woods. I would go into the gardens and touch the flowers and the plants, and then go back to the studio and draw them. And this past winter, as part of the Wave Hill residency in the Bronx, which I did remotely, the curator there, Jesse Firestone, would describe a part of the landscape to me at Wave Hill and I would draw based on his descriptions of the landscapes. And even before that, I would have dreams about being outside and in nature around trees or even just in backyards. All those things have really influenced and inspired me.

Platform: It's so different for everyone, but what kind of environment do you like to create for yourself as you're working?

Emilie: I like small spaces a little bit more than larger spaces just because I feel like things are closer and at hand. I like to work in warm environments. I like to have some tables up, like a table for clay work, a

table for papier-mâché work or a table for drawings. But I usually like to work on my drawings in bed, so I'm comfortable and just work in a small, cozy sort of space. Small spaces help me remember where things are, so I don't forget like, "Oh, I have this other material over here that I completely forgot about." It's really important to have things I can easily touch and reach.

Platform: You speak to many people who are writing about you and your work. Is there anything that you feel you get asked that is well-intentioned but just doesn't sit right with you?

Emilie: I mean, I don't want you to feel like you were in the wrong by asking me if my work is collaborative, but I get that sometimes. I do work with assistants and a lot of times that involves clear communication and understanding so that my vision is able to translate into something physical that we can both agree on, that it's what I see in my mind. It's challenging and that's part of the process, but I feel like that would be part of the process with any artist who works with an assistant. It's really important in any studio practice to have that relationship and that understanding, and being able to communicate an idea clearly.

Platform: Do you think that question of collaboration sometimes comes across as though people are trying to take your agency in the process away from you?

Emilie: Right, exactly.

Platform: Outside of your work, what would you say are some of your biggest passions?

Emilie: I love to read, and I read in many different ways. I love reading in braille, but I also love listening to audiobooks. I also read by just using my

screen reader on my iPhone. And lately, I've been reading a lot of memoirs by people who are also disabled. I love to read fantasy/science fiction novels. Those things really keep me inspired. In terms of my other hobbies, I love eating [laughs].

Platform: Me too!

Emilie: I love experiencing and trying different things with food. It just gives that sort of sensory experience. Food is a big one, but I also love to go with my partner, Kirby, to SoHo, which we used to do fairly often. We would look at the stores and sort of window shop. The people who work in the designer stores are actually pretty nice if you just want to feel the dresses and the clothes on the racks without trying them on or buying anything. That's also another sort of sensory experience. I like the feel of the fabrics and the way clothes are designed and just touching things. There are so many things you're not allowed to touch, but you can go into a store and touch everything.

Platform: Back to reading, are there any particular titles or authors that have stuck out to you recently?

Emilie: Yeah. So, Sunaura Taylor's *Beasts of Burden* is one of my favorites. I was introduced to her writing through my friend, Emily Watlington, who's an independent curator and art writer. Sunaura is an artist and animal rights activist and is also disabled herself. I started reading her after I already developed my ideas about animals and their relationship to humans and vice versa. It was really great to read someone's work who was sort of in the same vein as mine. The way that people with disabilities have been mistreated, or even like animals with disabilities are mistreated under that same assumption that it's better to kill an animal with a disability than to have them live out their lives the way they are living.

It's a little embarrassing, but I've been obsessively reading Diana Wynne Jones' books. She's a fantasy writer. A lot of her books are meant for young adults, but I feel like she doesn't treat her readers as though they are childish. I think some of that fantasy sort of rubbed off on me and it's actually helped me a lot over this pandemic because I feel like I'm able to escape. It's an escape for me to go off and explore a new world.

Platform: You have really diverse interests. Are there any things that you collect?

Emilie: I used to collect butterflies. When I lived in New Orleans, I would find dead butterflies and I would keep them in a sketchbook or a little envelope. And then I discovered that you can buy butterflies on eBay. I don't know what to call them. They're dead, but they're sort of just on display in frames.

Platform: What would you say motivates you?

Emilie: Well, that's actually another question that I get asked. I sort of hear that question and I think about another question that gets asked a lot which is, "Why do you still make art?"

Platform: People really ask you that?

Emilie: Yeah, like, "What made you decide to be an artist?" I just feel like it's a part of me. I always wanted to be an artist since I was a kid when I first started drawing. I love art so much and I feel like if I don't make art, then what else am I doing in my life? But what motivates me is the same thing really. I love making work and making things with my hands. If I'm not using my hands to make art, then I'm using my hands to play cards or

using my hands to read braille. I just get this restlessness. If I'm not using my hands to do something, then I'm not doing anything.