



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Demi, 2020
September 2

This interview received Federal support from the Latino Initiatives Pool,
administered by the Smithsonian Latino Center.

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with DEMI on September 2, 2020. The interview took place at DEMI's home in Miami, Florida, and was conducted by Josh T. Franco for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Pandemic Oral History Project.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JOSH T. FRANCO: Okay. This is Josh T. Franco and I'm interviewing, uh, DEMI at her home in Miami, Florida on September 2, 2020 for the Archives of American Art Pandemic Oral History Project. DEMI, thank you for taking time to talk to us. We want to create a record of this year and the impact on American artists. So the question—first question is how have you been since March, and how did your life change in March?

DEMI: Well, for me, it's a tragedy and full of chaos. So it's the second time in my life that I have experienced it. Like, you know, once in my childhood and then now, I'm an adult and it's not nice at all.

JOSH T. FRANCO: So I know what you're referring to, but it's interesting to hear you talk about—I know what you're talking about, but please say it for the—whoever watches this. That's interesting you take it to that level of what you experienced as a child.

DEMI: Completely. When I was seven years old, my father was executed and I was sent away to a different country to different people far away from my mother and my two sisters, uh, to people that I hardly knew anything. That to me, uh, I felt the reaction that I had during that tragedy in my life which I always felt, like, paralyzed while the whole world was going by me. And I felt like that until the age of 28 when I began painting, which, uh, helped me out a great deal. Now is the second tragedy, I call it the pandemic, this, uh, coronavirus.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That means it's very significant. Is painting helping you through this tragedy?

DEMI: Well, now I am an adult in—and so many rushing feeling, different feelings that I'm—I can reason. Before when I was a child, I just was paralyzed and I didn't know what was going on. Now because I am an adult, I'm analyzing, I'm thinking, and I mean, can I list for you the list of all the feelings that are rushing through me?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Absolutely.

DEMI: But I should say that this is my house studio, and I have been here since March 10. Why? Because, uh, my immune system, I am a three-times cancer survivor, and I have asthma. So my life is—has been threatened by this and I have to stay home. I only go out one hour to do my exercises and then—with my husband Arturo who is also a painter, and then I come back here to—so you can imagine I have lost my freedom completely. And I'll tell you the—all the feelings rushing for the past four, six months now.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DEMI: Which is sadness, desolation, hopeless, fear, faith, abandonment, unbearable, grateful to God, surprised, disturbed, in darkness, in light, compassion, depressed, persevere, peace, despair, threatened, unrest, loneliness, and inspire.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's—I think that's a perfect [laughs] list for all the feelings many people are feeling. Um, yeah, the isolation and loneliness stand out to me and I wonder have you been able to connect with friends or people through the virtual at all?

DEMI: Yes, but it gets to a point where you get bored doing—and—you know. So you have to find certain other things, you know, that will help you out, which I have been trying to find. One is my faith in God through Jesus Christ. It's nice to have someone close to you like I feel. Like, in the morning, I woke up at six o'clock in the morning, I go to the darkness of my studio, I light a

candle, and I talk to God and I said, "I want this light to come in to my life." All I paint, always, all my life is lightness fighting with darkness. That's what my paintings are all about. And that's what I'm asking for now also, that this darkness will disappear and lightness will come back.

[00:05:16]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Is the pandemic having a direct impact on what you paint, on the subjects you paint?

DEMI: Oh, yes.

[They laugh.]

Somehow, uh, I do not like to paint in an easel anymore. I mean, I have been painting for the past 35 years. I have paint in my easel, small, medium, large size painting, but not anymore. I decided on March 10 that what I needed was to paint large murals. Like, I'm talking about from 120 inches long to 120 inches wide, which is almost the size of my studio. I needed something larger than life. Like, like which I was confronting this thing, this coronavirus which is larger than life. And I needed to paint and fight and struggle with this big, for the first time, mural. I created—I'm working on it. Evidently, it will take me like a year each one because I paint very slow. So I have two. One is reserved. Once I get bored with the first one, I switch to the second one which is difficult. Uh, now I think one weighs like 30 pounds because I have so much paint in it that has increased the canvas weight, but it makes me feel that I'm doing something with—fighting something bigger than me.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's a very clear impact, the scale. Uh, what about the subject that you're painting? What are those paintings about?

DEMI: Well, one of them is called *A Big Storm*. Okay. It's children cover up with umbrellas, but there's one that the umbrella became upside-down, so no covering, no protection whatsoever. And it's raining and all that. The second mural is called *Brothers of Darkness and Songs of Light*. And that has to do, like, with the nightmare of light and darkness.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I'll be looking forward to seeing those one day.

DEMI: How much would it weigh?

[They laugh.]

Fifty pounds?

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's great.

DEMI: [Laughs.] But again, I'm fighting against something bigger than me.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. The—abandonment also stood out in your list and you don't feel abandoned by God. That's clear. Who do you feel abandoned by?

DEMI: Yes, I do sometimes.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh.

DEMI: I believe in God through Jesus Christ but there's so much despair sometimes and so many feelings in my mind and I wake up like in the morning, and it's the same thing over and over, you know. And I feel abandoned, He has abandoned me, you know. But then through the day I can see things. He makes me go and I feel that he makes me, like, look to music, okay. We have here a collection of 5,000 CDs, and I love jazz, I love, uh, classical music, and there's one special that I like. It's James Brown. He, you know, he's a kind of funky music and he was called in his time Mr. Dynamite. And when I'm completely down and I don't want to paint or anything like that, I put James Brown and the special song, "Get up, get up, get up," and I began dancing, and energy begins to come inside of me and I begin painting. Once I begin the painting, it's fine. I can paint forever. It's the start of the painting that is so difficult, you know.

[00:10:00]

JOSH T. FRANCO: I bet James Brown is getting a lot of people through this?

DEMI: What?

JOSH T. FRANCO: I bet James Brown is getting a lot of people through this.

DEMI: [Laughs.] He is with me.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

DEMI: I dance and I exercise at the same time.

JOSH T. FRANCO: What are your thoughts about how, uh, Miami is handling things, or what are you observing in the city that you live in?

DEMI: Well, I guess the only thing I can judge is by me. If I'm having a difficult time, I think a normal, sensible person is having problems. How they handle, I don't—because my life was destroyed by politics, okay, I don't touch that. It's—I mean, I was completely alone in the world because of politics. So I don't want to—I know the political, um, thing is—I can see it in everywhere, television, uh, cellular, Facebook. I had to close my Facebook because my friends would talk about it. That's all. People tends to talk about all these things. I know they are important, but I am especially one way. I was destroyed. So—and I picked up little by little my person, you know. And twice I cannot go through that again, you know, because I'm not strong. So what I do is I rely on my friends which are very sweet, very—and God. That's all I can do. I mean, my talent, my husband Arturo which he's also an artist and he has such an everlasting hunger for art. He can paint. He doesn't care about anything but paint. And he can, standing up six, 10, 12 hours. He doesn't care because it's a hunger. And I look at him and that helps me out because I said I want that hunger for art. And art built up my life, helped me to understand myself, and I see that in Arturo and I become one with him and I steal that energy from him too, besides James Brown.

[They laugh].

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's lovely. Uh, is there a particular museum or art that you are looking forward to seeing once we can—once places can open again and we can go?

DEMI: Well, that is also self-destruction and in despair because I have so many ideas, so many plans. My gallery, uh, so many plans. And now you don't know. Now the museums are beginning to open. But I must tell you something. The NSU Art Museum in Fort Lauderdale, four months ago they did an interview with me. And usually, you know, they take—they interview to the YouTube pages and people will see it, whoever is interested and click view—the viewers, you will see it. Usually when I have an interview, I only have three or four or 80 people. The most, 80 people. That's all. But I'm seeing something that also is amazing. Can you believe that I began with one, two, three, and now I am 1,400 viewers?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Amazing.

DEMI: Isn't that a miracle?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

DEMI: So that gives me such happiness because I see in my loneliness, in my darkness, I see the people are contacting me that I am with them and they are with me. They're looking at my paintings in interview, listening to what I have to say, and who knows? They are all over the world. And every two days I go there and say, "Let's see who else wants to see me."

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

DEMI: It keeps increasing. It hasn't stopped since it began. Never happened to me. Never. So this is a way of feeling people that they are with me and I am with them. It's beautiful.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's great. I'm so happy. That's great. I—

DEMI: [Laughs].

JOSH T. FRANCO: You should have more and more. You should have all the fans in the world

[00:15:01].

DEMI: I hope this interview gets more people, a lot of people.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I think it probably will. We'll see. Uh, I'm curious about the paintings behind you.

DEMI: Okay. This is—in January, my gallery, Oksana Salamatina, published a big, large—for the first time in my life I have a book. And yes, I am very proud of it and it's about my paintings and that is the cover of book. And it was published in Milan in—I don't remember but it's a very famous publisher. They publish the best art books in the world and she gave me that as a gift. So that is, uh, *Botticelli's Garden*. It was inspired in the Botticelli painting. I think it's called the *Primavera*, something like that. And as usual, usually I get inspired by masters and I switched the story to my own childhood story. Like here you see my three sisters when we were happy, dancing around with bubbles, balloons on top. And then you see here like a metamorphosis going on here, a change of a child, being born child changing to, like, in a different kind of world, you know. Again, I transferred my life, which has always been an inspiration for me. I can paint a thousand paintings because I never forget that. You know, it's like an open wound—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

DEMI: —that never closes. But it has been like a miracle for me because otherwise I will be painting trees, landscaping [laughs], and I don't like that. I like to touch people like things touches me. I—it's a way of feeling alive, you know. So that's—I love Botticelli and that's a homage to him. And this one here. Can you see this one here?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yes.

DEMI: Okay. That's also a metamorphosis of a little girl changing physically, and she eventually will become like a firefly insect like I'm hoping that one day I will be.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That will be great.

[They laugh.]

DEMI: Full of light.

JOSH T. FRANCO: You'll be beautiful. Yes. Yeah.

DEMI: Yes. My paint—I only paint children.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

DEMI: Even if I paint adult people, they look terrible. But they will look like a child, you know. I cannot paint adult people somehow [laughs].

JOSH T. FRANCO: Another question. We're wondering how people are living differently in their homes because they're there so much now. And I know you and Arturo cook quite a bit.

DEMI: Oh yes.

JOSH T. FRANCO: But are you cooking—are you cooking even more? Do you—have you had new recipes?

DEMI: Well, my husband is very upset with me because he has gained almost 15—15 or 20 pounds because I cook like I'm crazy. I love to cook Moroccan food, Balinese food and Cuban food, Japanese food. Every nationality you mention, I cook it.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

DEMI: And it's a way of expressing myself too because all the species, you know, the things I put in there has a lot of colors. And besides that, it keeps me occupied when I'm not painting.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. I remember my meal at your home was so great.

DEMI: Oh yes.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I can't wait for the next one.

[They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Okay. Last question for this interview. I've been asking artists, you know, this is a record for us to have for the future. So what do you think that's important in 100 years for people to know about being an artist in the U.S. in 2020?

DEMI: Okay. Very simple. Do not think about the future and just do your work, your paintings until your last breath of life. That's all.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Perfect.

DEMI: Okay.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Well, thank you so much. I'm going to stop recording and, um, I'm not going to hang up though. Just stop recording.

DEMI: Okay, darling.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Thank you, DEMI.

DEMI: Love you.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Love you. Thank you.

DEMI: Bye.

[00:20:00]

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]