

Demi: Biographical Note

Demi was born in Camagüey, on October 6, 1955. She emigrated to Puerto Rico in 1962, and then came to the United States in 1971. She settled in Miami in 1978 and received an AA degree from Miami-Dade Community College. She began exhibiting in 1987, at the Cuban Museum of Arts and Culture of Miami. She has received a Florida State Visual Artist Grant (1992-1993). Her work is found in many collections, including that of the Fort Lauderdale Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale.

Demi: Interview

Date: 01/04/06

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The interview took place in Demi's home and studio.

[Gracia]: "Demi, why don't we start the interview with your name because this is a very intriguing name. I was looking at the internet and I put down 'Demi' and then there were all sorts of things that came up that were interesting, such as 'demitasse.'"

[Demi]: "I wish I could look like a demitasse!"

[Gracia]: "So, how did you choose this name? This is not your real name, is it?"

[Demi]: "No, it's not. And I'm not going to tell you my real name either."

[Gracia]: "Well, you told me already earlier, but I won't repeat it."

[Demi]: "'Demi'— like 'demitasse' means half, small. To me has like two meanings I always liked. First, it is something cut in the middle-- I was taken out of my country and it's as if they cut me right in half. And I always paint children; no matter how much I try to paint adults, I don't. I cannot do it – so small people, 'demi.' Demi is my alter-ego. Demi can reach places and do things that I think my other name would never allow."

[Gracia]: "Your other name -- which will remain unmentioned --is more, let's say, serious, substantial, and you like the playfulness of Demi."

[Demi]: "Yes."

[Gracia]: "So, when did you decide this? Did you start painting first or 'Demi' was a name that you chose for yourself before you painted?"

[Demi]: "No, no. I discovered that I could paint only when I was twenty-eight years old. I was a late bloomer – I never knew I could paint before. I knew I was very sensitive to music and I always had a desire to express myself, but I didn't know how. I even took theater classes at night at Miami Dade Community College, and they helped me a great deal. But I never went to a museums. I didn't know what an art gallery was, or what art was. I lived in my own little world at twenty-eight years old, a terrible world!"

[Gracia]: "So, first of all, I want to know something about how the painting came about and then I also want to know something about your past history, what you thought was very important – lamp posts in your

development. So how did you begin to paint?"

[Demi]: "I was a bookkeeper, and very unhappy. We'll talk about my life later if you want to because my life plays a very important role in my paintings. I always thought that my whole life, even now, has been in preparation for my paintings, because it's thanks to all the things that I have gone through that I can paint with such a dedication, such a focus. I have always been in training – very tough training – for my painting. But going back to when I was twenty-eight years old is exciting. Like I said, I didn't know that I could paint. Then I met a person, and that was Arturo Rodríguez – a Cuban artist – and the impact of knowing him on me was so revolutionary, so powerful, that it changed my life completely. It was like my life stopped, turned around, and began anew. I channeled all the negative energy that I had in my life and I changed that energy into a positive one, and my life changed completely to such an extent that for the first time I was proud of what I was doing, and I began to love myself. And I began to love people. It was a miracle."

[Gracia]: "And how did this happen exactly?"

[Demi]: "First I saw his paintings at a gallery and I received a great impact because he had a painting that to me was me. It portrayed a person divided into many parts. And I said, 'that's me!' because that's the way I always felt: cut up in pieces. And I fell in love with the artist, even without knowing him. And I met him that night, and he liked me too!"

[Gracia]: "And the rest is history, as the cliché says!"

[Demi]: "And it was beautiful, and we fell in love with each other. But then I began to know him as a person. And in many ways, he was the first person that cared about me, the first person that was interested in listening to what I had to say. He showed me a lot of compassion because my life was terrible; I hated everybody and I hated myself. I was a very twisted person. And he showed such compassion for me. I saw so much innocence in him, even though he painted very strong stuff. But, to me, he was like a clean soul. Then he took me to live in Spain for a whole year, and he only said, 'Demi, I want you to clean your mind of whatever happened in your life. I want you to look, experience, and listen. Don't give any opinions, clean your mind and learn.' That's what I did for a whole year. It was the first time I could listen to someone teaching me what to do. He taught me about music, about the arts; he took me to museums, he took me to the theater. He showed me so many beautiful things that I did not know existed. I knew some existed, but I had not wanted to experience them before because I was in such a negative mood in my life that I didn't want to accept anything. But from him I could. I began accepting these things and watching him painting for a whole year captivated me. It was such a mystery that from a white canvas, he would create life, like a god! Originally everyday I would go to the store and buy clothes and buy shoes. And I didn't care what he was doing in the studio. But then, after I began to experience what he was doing and was captivated by it, I stopped going to the stores and began to spend time watching him paint. After we came back to Miami after that year, I began painting. I asked him for a small piece of canvas and a brush and I began painting."

[Gracia]: "What a wonderful story! It is extraordinary because clearly you were inspired by him and his work, and yet your paintings are completely different from his. It's like day and night. I don't see anything in common. Am I missing something? I am looking at one of your paintings right now behind the camera and I'm looking at one Arturo made on the other side of the room, and they look so different!"

[Demi]: "Right."

[Gracia]: "So how did this work?"

[Demi]: "It is as if I have been in training for my whole life. From the beginning, I began painting with my own style. Painters sometimes have difficult times in finding out their own style, in finding out what they really want to paint. Not me. The moment I began painting, I knew what I wanted, how I wanted it, and that it had to be children. I knew what I was doing. It was a miracle; it's very mysterious. It's the same way with painting itself: it's a mystery. I don't know how I do it."

[Gracia]: “Thinking about this, it seems that you were fascinated, for example, by color because your paintings use a lot of color. They are very colorful. And at the same time there is an extraordinary amount of – I don’t know how to call it – detail. They look like tapestries. They have a sense of cloth, material -- you used the word ‘embroidery’; this fine putting together of cloth and little strands of thread. This is very different from what Arturo does. Had you seen any painter that inspired you? Did you start with someone in mind? How did this come about?”

[Demi]: “It was like an explosion. Remember, I was twenty-eight years old. I had such an interior life that had never been opened before. I was a very lonely person from the time I was small. And I would create my own life, like the colors. I know the colors is where it comes from. I used to find pieces of glasses of different colors in the garbage and I would collect them, and wash them, and dry them and look at them drying in the sunshine. And when the sun would hit them, it was so beautiful. In a way, I was trying to find some happiness, some enjoyment in what was a sad life. It was a defense mechanism. I used to love doing that. So I know the colors come from there. Then, when I began painting, it was as if somebody had opened up my heart to something that had been closed for twenty-eight years.”

[Gracia]: “And just poured out in enormous quantities, not quantities of paintings, but quantities of the intricacy and detail and overflowing...”

[Demi]: “It did pour out. Some people call my paintings decorative, because of what they see as ornaments in them. Some people call them a madness, and they do have a lot of madness in them. I use hundreds of dots, little lines, hundreds of flowers, hundreds of lines. And I create a kind of claustrophobic atmosphere also. They are creations of what I have felt. I’m always in confrontation with something -- life and death. Remember, I had a home and then I didn’t. I had a father and he was killed. I had a country and then I didn’t have it anymore. It’s always a confrontation. Life, death, light and darkness. And I create these hundreds of dots and lines and flowers – it’s an insane atmosphere because that’s what I have always felt. The hundreds of dots is also a very important element in my paintings because it helps me to unify the whole – the whole thing that I’m doing. It unifies the color, the space, the figures. The painting has movement, it has energy.”

[Gracia]: “Now some of the impressionists used similar kinds of technique, like Seurat for example, little dots. But your use of them is very different in many ways. But did you see some of those paintings in your trip to Spain, and perhaps they had some impact on you?”

[Demi]: “I get influenced by everything. I can look at a newspaper and be influenced by an ad – a hat. I made a very big painting of a hat after I saw an ad for hats. I open a book and I see a painting and it touches me. Eventually it will come out in a painting. Every year for the past thirty years we travel to the museums, to see the masters. That’s how I learn too, by looking at the masters and the brush strokes, the use of the colors, the balance of the paintings. So I have been influenced by everything.”

[Gracia]: “When you married Arturo, he already had a career as a painter and was devoted completely to painting. So, did he teach you techniques and things of this sort, or did you try to develop your own?”

[Demi]: “Remember, I didn’t know anything so Arturo taught me about the kind of canvas and colors to use. The best thing he did, however, was that he never interfered with my own style. He accepted the style immediately. I began painting children without any hair and I know he didn’t like that. He said, ‘Demi, why don’t you put a little hair here, and a little bit there?’ And, ‘Why do you have to do it like that?’ But I could not do it. Like I said, since the moment I began painting, I had strong convictions and nobody could change them. I knew I could not put hair in my children’s heads. And it had to do with taking away the cuteness children have. I didn’t want people to look at my children and say: ‘Oh, look how cute they are!’ You see, I do not paint about all kinds of children. I paint about children that have had conflicts, have lost their innocence in some way. And I wanted to inflict on them respect, as in a monk. But now I’m painting children with hair.”

[Gracia]: “I’m looking at some of them.”

[Demi]: “But that was after twenty years. And I mix them in a painting and you can find children with hair and without hair.”

[Gracia]: “But the classical ones that you used to do had no hair, and they also were surrounded by an overflowing of finery. And yet their faces are somewhat serious and enigmatic; sometimes sad, certainly capturing your attention. They are not light-hearted children. So there is this contrast between this extraordinary finery – which suggests wealth perhaps, well-being, and happiness, pleasantness -- and the faces.”

[Demi]: “I have always been very poetic. I like flowers. But if you look carefully at some of the garments – these beautiful garments – they are very claustrophobic.”

[Gracia]: “Yes they are, they trap the child!”

[Demi]: “But you have to look very carefully. If you keep studying my paintings you will always find something happening, some kind of confrontation the child has. Also the child can be in a very wealthy position but be trapped in a very unhappy life. But it’s interesting that people began buying my paintings right away. I was amazed. I said ‘my God, I can make a living at all this!’”

[Gracia]: “So what happened? You started painting and you accumulated a few paintings and then you had a show?”

[Demi]: “No, collectors would come to buy Arturo’s paintings at the house.”

[Gracia]: “And they saw yours.”

[Demi]: “I would hide them. I would put away the little things – I used to paint them very small. But then one day Arturo began showing them because he was proud of them; he was my teacher. He was teaching me and I was growing, and the collectors began buying. Then they gave me an exhibit and I sold everything, and I couldn’t believe it! I really enjoyed doing it. I was beginning – through my paintings – to understand my life, which to me was always a mystery, a dark spot. I couldn’t find myself and I have found myself through my art. That’s why I love what I’m doing. I have such a big respect for art because of what it can do for a human being.”

[Gracia]: “Both to the one who produces it and to the one who doesn’t produce it.”

[Demi]: “Exactly. I have letters from people of telling me how much they have been touched by my paintings. And that’s such a gift from life. I never expected it; at twenty-eight I thought my life was over! Over! And then this miracle happened through art. That’s why every day of my life is enchanted by the art that surrounds my life: by my husband’s art, by the art that I produce. I still cannot believe that I can do it. But it’s also a struggle, because the moment I began painting, a little voice told me, ‘You cannot do it,’ You cannot do it! You cannot do it!’”

[Gracia]: “And also it’s very clear that you are not what one would call a prolific painter. You have few paintings.”

[Demi]: “Right.”

[Gracia]: “But you work at them endlessly. We were just talking about one that you mentioned in your studio. You’ve been working at it for a year and it’s still not done.”

[Demi]: “And this collector has been waiting for a whole year for it. For me to paint is very painful, because I paint through the unconscious, with my unconscious, and by elimination. I begin with an idea and I begin painting – very prolifically here and there – and then all of a sudden I start eliminating, and putting, and changing, and putting more and more. With a blade, I erase everything, I scrape everything, and I begin

again because I have to create in stages, in layers, and destroy the layers. It's like I'm copying my own life. A layer came over my life, toppled my interior, and then I have another one and another one and that's the way I paint. It's very painful, with all those little dots and little things. Everything is done by me with little brushes. At the end you can see all that struggle, all that energy coming out, and that touches. . . . People either hate or love my work. Those are two strong emotions and I love them."

[Gracia]: "Indifference is what you cannot take, but it would be difficult to be indifferent to your paintings, I think. Do you find anybody that is actually indifferent? I think I can see people saying 'oh, I hate that!' and other people like ourselves who say, 'oh, my goodness, this is wonderful!' But to be indifferent, it's almost impossible. That person must be someone who doesn't have an inner-life or no appreciation of the complexity of art and the beauty of it. So, in many ways your painting has been a catharsis or has provided a catharsis for your life and has brought it to a level in which you have become productive and rich. You probably should tell us a little about the past because it's a very tragic past. And I know this is painful – we don't want to create pain for you – but insofar as it was the background of what brought you to art, I think we need to have you say something about it, although perhaps briefly."

[Demi]: "When I was five years old, my father, who was in the military was executed by the Cuban Revolution. Immediately, my mother sent me away to another country to be with relatives that I didn't know. So, in a second, you could say, I lost my father, my family, my home and my country. That's strong stuff!"

[Gracia]: "You became completely lost, as it were. And at what age did you leave Cuba?"

[Demi]: "I was seven years old. And it was very hard. But in order to survive I created a world for myself. I would look for colors which made my life happy. I was separated from my mother and my two sisters, for almost nine years. Then we came together again, but I had to start to know them all over again, to love them, which was very difficult. I moved in with them, in New York. And that also was very painful because I did my last year of high school in New York and I didn't know the language. And the people at the high school laughed at me. I would sit down to eat lunch and they would disappear. I was something terrible. So I began having these confrontations. And look at this, I'm fifty years old and I'm still crying when I remember all these things! I had confrontations with my family, with the school, I didn't know the language. But I learned a little book keeping and I got a job and then I moved down here to Miami. That's when I felt like a very twisted person. I hated everybody. I wanted to die, and I met Arturo."

[Gracia]: "And that was your salvation."

[Demi]: "Yes."

[Gracia]: "But you know, Demi, many of the greatest artists and intellectuals and writers have had very painful lives and experiences. And they have been able to overcome them in some way – maybe sometimes not even overcome them. In fact, I don't think many of them have overcome them, but those experiences have made possible for them to produce a kind of art and literature that has the kind of depth that helps establish it forever. It makes it universal because it strikes a chord with every other human being who has suffered."

[Demi]: "I always say that I had a lot of bad things happen in my life. I have had three bouts with cancer, one after the other. That was tough. So I have had physical and emotional – how do you say? – storms in my life. But if you compare all I have suffered with the blessings I have had with my art, I welcome it. Because the suffering makes me a better human being. It makes me a better artist. It makes me appreciate the gift that God has given me: by giving me such a husband, such a friend like Arturo, and by giving me the art that I can create. So, it's beautiful. I'm happy."

[Gracia]: "That's wonderful. Now let me ask you, how do you feel as a Cuban or Cuban-American? How does this play in your art, is your art inspired by Cuban themes. Some of the games your children play are very Cuban. And in other paintings you have depicted First Communion and other things that are very much related to Cuba. But how do you feel as a Cuban or Cuban-American artist? This is too complicated,

so let's begin with two questions: Do you feel that you are a Cuban artist or a Cuban-American artist? Or is there any difference between the two in your mind?"

[Demi]: "I have tried to do universal painting that cannot be associated with any country because every place in the world has children suffering, children going through suffering – their parents die, they get killed. This is a universal pain that children experience, with the loss of innocence. And the games, they all play games. But I cannot deny that I have a wound as a Cuban – as a person who comes from Cuba, because I was born in Cuba. And I can never forget that my home was destroyed, that my father was killed in such a terrible way; this makes me Cuban, because those sufferings come from Cuba. It was caused by my own Cuban brothers and sisters. And I am Cuban, so I paint. Now I do not paint Cuban paintings – even though I have some Cubans in my paintings – but. . . I don't know how to say it."

[Gracia]: "That your experiences as a Cuban, in relation to what Cubans have had to suffer, has in a sense informed your painting."

[Demi]: "Exactly, now you see how you said it better than I did."

[Gracia]: "No, no, I didn't. But anyway, you mentioned in our conversation before the interview something about Frida Kahlo; that you admire her. So, I'm wondering how you feel about Latin American art."

[Demi]: "I love Frida because I identify with her as a woman, with her suffering – but I also identify with Velázquez. He has been a great influence on me. And I also like the Renaissance painters. I love Fra Angelico and Filippo Lipi, and all the little things and the delicate kinds of ways they paint. And I love the English artists. One is Palmer – very few people know him – and Dodd – 'D-o-d-d' – he was insane. All his life he was in an asylum, and he would paint these strange looking girls with these magnificent dresses too, with flowers. And nothing would make sense, but I love him."

[Gracia]: "You never considered painting abstract or anything of the sort."

[Demi]: "Not yet!"

[Gracia]: "That's right, it could be, couldn't it? It's an interesting question, because you have a couple of series that are more simple than the very elaborate ones, but you seem to be painting elaborate ones still. So, you are not, as it were, abandoning the former style and moving to another but sort of developing various types of things at the same time."

[Demi]: "Exactly. I have collectors that don't want my paintings to change."

[Gracia]: "They want you to do the same thing."

[Demi]: "Always the same and... I paint for them too, and I paint the other way, the ones with less figures, less colors. I love to do different styles at the same time. It will always be a Demi. It will always identify with me and my way of thinking and my experiences. But I do – I like to do different things at the same time."

[Gracia]: "Well, Demi, we are about to finish the interview. But before we do, let me ask you if you want to say something else?"

[Demi]: "My language is painting and I'm terrible at speaking."

[Gracia]: "But you have done a marvelous job of speaking today."

[Demi]: "Maybe I have a thousand things more to say but I don't know how."

[Gracia]: "Well, let me ask you one more thing. You mentioned that you paint for some of your collectors who want you to do certain things, and not go away from your style. And yet, you want to feel free to do other things. How important is the audience for you?"

[Demi]: “Let’s be honest. The economic…”

[Gracia]: “It’s very important!”

[Demi]: “It’s very, very important. And I have to yield to it. But whenever I feel like doing something else, I will do it and they will wait until I can do whatever they want. It is natural for me to do different things and then all of a sudden I begin doing the same thing back again. It’s very easy to me to change and come back again. I do not have specific stages. I am very flexible.”

[Gracia]: “And now with this business about the art world and the galleries and the shows – does that play an important role in your choice of themes, topics, or career?”

[Demi]: “I try not to pay attention to anything like that. I am in my own world. I know it’s important to pay attention to what’s going on in the world, but I decided not to pay attention because it would upset me. Sometimes you see things that are not well done, but I’m not going to get into that.”

[Gracia]: “Right, right.”

[Demi]: “I live in my own world and I’m happy where I am. My life is full, just trying to survive in my own life: my health and my paintings, that’s my whole life. Nothing else matters.”

[Gracia]: “Very good, then. Thank you very much for a wonderful statement of your painting and your goals. I’m sure that everyone who reads the transcript or sees the interview will be moved by your life as an artist. And of course, they will be moved by your work.”

[Demi]: “Thank you.”