Hi, I'm Mauro Porcini, PepsiCo's Chief Design Officer. Join me for our new series where we dive into the minds of the greatest innovators of our time, with the goal of finding what drives them in their professional journey and in their personal life, trying to uncover the universal truths that unite anyone attempting to have a meaningful impact in the world. This is In Your Shoes. Growing up in a small town in Texas, fashion magazines were one of my windows to the world. But, since I didn't see many people that looked like me represented in the pages, I started to paint what I wanted to see. I'm quoting our guest of today. She's a Nigerian American mixed media artist who paints figurative artwork as well as practices photography and videography, all inspired by fashion and pop culture. She lives and works in Austin and she received her bachelor degree from the University of Texas and her law degree from the Texas Southern University. Her desire to become an artist spawned from her love of fashion illustration, photography and design. Her work has been featured in multiple magazines, including Forbes, Architectural Digest, Drawing Magazine. Her art has been shown in the Texas Biennial, Notre Dame University, George Washington Carver Museum, the MoCADA Museum in Brooklyn amongst many others. And, saving the best for last, the artist featured on LIFEWTR bottle as part of the February 2021 campaign celebrating Black History Month. You can check it out on lifewtr.com. Dawn Okoro, welcome to In Your Shoes. It's such a pleasure to have you with us today, Dawn. Thanks for having me. And, thanks for accepting the invite. So, I was looking at your bio, and something came immediately it was very, very visible. You have a degree in law. Mm-hmm. But, you are an artist, and you dress like an artist, and your art production is fantastic. Thanks. So, how did it happen, how a lawyer became an artist? Can you tell us a little bit about this? Yeah, so, I always knew that I wanted to be an artist,

but growing up and even through high school I knew I was...

Well, people would say that I'm good at art and I enjoyed doing it,

and I felt like I needed to do it, but I didn't know how to do it as a career. I didn't really have any examples of...

like I'd been taught about Picasso and Monet and all that,

but I didn't know where do I fit within that as an artist.

And, my parents they just wanted the best for me.

They just wanted me to be able to make a good living as an adult.

So, when I went to college, like, I studied other things.

In undergrad, like I really wanted to study art, but I felt pressure,

and so I got a degree in psychology, but then my minor was fashion design

because that's what I really liked at that time.

And, then after graduating with my undergrad,

I just was like, okay, what am I gonna do with my life?

I want to be an artist. I don't know how.

I want to make my family happy too,

and I want to survive, so, I'll go to law school.

And, so that's how that happened. So, yeah.

And, then, I mean, you are at law school,

how did you do that jump to the art world?

What happened?

It's funny that you say that,

because here's what happened leading up to law school.

So, I just did a Hail Mary.

I applied for one school, and then I got in.

I was like, okay, darn.

And, so, I was just like oh my God, what am I gonna do?

I have to go now.

And, so, I contacted the school and said,

hey could you defer my enrollment for like a year?

And, I said, I'll give myself a year to become an artist

and then I won't have to go to law school.

And, so, that whole year I tried to create an art career out of nothing.

I didn't know what I was doing.

And, I did have like my own solo show, and it was fun, but of course,

it still wasn't enough to make a living, or anything like that.

So, I went to law school in Houston, Texas,

and what's funny is that I feel like one good thing about going to law school is that it put me in a town where I found a community of artists.

And, it's like artists that I really looked up to.

And they really embraced me as well,

and showed me that maybe this is something I could really do.

And, even when you're in law school,

you do an internship in the summer at a law firm.

So, I got an internship, and when they found out that I'm an artist,

and the partners hired me to do portraits of their kids and stuff like that.

I was making extra money doing that.

But, all through law school I just continued to do art,

and was continuing to show my art.

And, then, by the time I graduated, I decided, okay,

I'm just gonna pack everything up and I'm not gonna study law. I'm just gonna move to New York City. And, so, that's what I did, like right after law school. Fantastic. I think it's a mix of having a dream. You had that dream and that passion from the beginning, and then you had resilience. Because no matter what, with all the roadblocks, and trying to please everybody, your family. But, you went through with your dream, and at the end you have been successful. It's a very inspiring story. There is part of it, also, in the design work. Design and art are somehow cousins and often, I had a very similar story. My parents were like, well, you need to study something that gives you the possibility to have a job. I didn't come from a wealthy family. I needed to have a job. So, even design was like, oh my God, you know... And, I loved art, too, and they were like, no way. Design was already a bet, but they were like, it's better than art to get a job, but still, oh my God. He's not gonna find a job. And, I heard so many stories of artists and designers that found themselves in this situation. And instead, the society needs the inspiration of art so much. What do you think we should do as a society, garments, school, companies, brands to support the world of art in a better way, to make sure that kids can understand, first of all, that you can live of art and that you can do a job in the world. and you should follow that passion. What should we do? What can we do? It's a billion dollar question, I think. Yeah, that's the question. I feel like, and again, at this point, with public schools, with them cutting so many programs and things, it may be a long shot right now. But, I think for me when I was younger, it would've helped so much to just have someone to have as like a role model, or just someone to just show me, I don't know, like someone that could act as sort of like a big sister or a big brother to kind of show me what the possibilities are. I feel like a lot of times like with art. it just isn't taken as seriously, even though it's important.

It's kind of like some of the first things cut as far as like resources. So, yeah, I definitely wish there was more support there. Like a form of mentorship, if you want. Yes. Mm-hmm. You have been talking a lot about this in the past few months, it seems especially for the Black community. Especially in a country like the United States, there is a very complex situation, a very difficult situation, because for many people, it's not easy to get a certain kind of a level of education because it costs money, especially in this country. And, then, once you get it, when your family is supporting you in this, then you really want to get a job, and you want to give back to your family. There is all this expectation on you. And so I was talking with may friends that were telling me at the end of the day, you are somehow almost forced to study law or medicine or things that you know you're gonna get the right job. And, so at the end of the day, you look at the numbers in the US, in design, according to the IGA Census, just three percent of the designers in the US are Black people. In art, actually I was reading one of your interviews. I think it's 1.2 percent of artists in major American museums are Black artists. I mean, the numbers are just mind-blowing. And, so, this idea of mentoring people in the schools is really powerful and I think it's really, really important. We need to find a way to let them know that they can achieve that dream. They can go after it and there is a real job in it. And I think you are a wonderful example of this. Your art is literally screaming creativity and I think it's very inspiring also for the Black community. Can you tell us more about your philosophy, how you express you ideas, how you use your art as a platform? Mm-hmm. So I grew up in a town called Lubbock, Texas, and it's a town, at the time it was probably about like 200,000 people. So, kind of a small city. It's, how do I say? It's very conservative, very boring. Not a lot of cultural activities going on there. And I didn't get to travel a lot as a child. So for me, my window to the world was magazines, like fashion magazines. Even like my mom used to get a subscription to a magazine called Ebony Magazine. and each month they would have maybe two pages dedicated to fashion. So it would be like Black models, Black designers,

models on the runways in New York, and Paris.

And, I was just like I want to see that some day.

And so I just loved to draw and I would get into my own world through my art and magazines.

But I was very quiet, very introverted.

I was just a very weird kid.

So it made it so that I was alone a lot isolated a lot.

And so I feel like I didn't really, how do I say it?

I feel like I eventually wanted to create art

for people like me, anyone that's felt othered.

I felt growing up,

I just felt like I needed to sort of like, kind of hide in my light,

or hide my true self in this conservative town.

And so now through my art, like you said, it screams creativity.

Like, I just want to scream through my work, just through the colors,

and just through the poses of the people and the expression and their fashion.

And it's just interesting to hear from other people how the art makes them feel.

And so I guess I'm happy to be able to reach people

who may have felt the same way I did.

That is fantastic.

Actually, even your outfit, your style,

the way you dress, it screams something very, very similar.

There is so much energy in the way you dress.

How important is fashion?

You mention, actually, the fashion magazines were somehow your inspiration from the very beginning, or your window,

your gate to the world outside of Texas and your city.

How much is important, fashion,

in the way you express yourself and your personal branding?

Yeah, and I know it's different for everyone, but for me,

I feel like the way I dress is just an extension of my art,

and it's sort of an extension of myself.

I dress just how I feel at the moment.

I feel like it's just sort of like another way for me to express myself.

And then I paint mostly people.

And so fashion kinda helps tell their story, as well.

So like in one of my recent series,

I've painted most of my friends and people that I know,

so I told them just to wear whatever you want.

And like, some people showed up done up to the nines, with a full on thing,

and then others just like got up in just t-shirt, jeans, whatever they had on.

So I feel like everyone has their own personal style,

and for me it's just kind of I don't know how you would describe it. Energy.

It's, for me, like a little sparkle, I guess.

Yes. In a different way,

I like to push a little bit of the boundaries of my style and...

Yeah, same.

...as well, and it's not easy, because sometimes it's beautiful,

because if you're confident, it differentiates you from others.

You become almost memorable and unique.

But often, eventually, it also pushes you apart from others,

and eventually you feel less included,

and people are looking at you like you're weird,

and eventually they even criticize you.

So is it the same for you?

How do you manage this balance between being unique and yourself and different,

but in the meantime, you also want to be included, right?

You want to be part of the scene.

Yeah. I think for me it has a lot to do with the environments

that I put myself in or that I find myself in.

Like, for example where I grew up in the small city in Lubbock, Texas

if I was to walk around dressed like this,

I'm sure some people, you know what I mean what's...

Yeah.

I come from a little village, too.

Exactly.

I would be like same thing.

But I live in Austin, Texas,

and here we're sort of like one weird city

surrounded by a very conservative community.

So I can get away with it here,

and that's what I miss about living in New York.

Because I feel like walking around there just feels like, you know anything goes.

And I loved lookin' at the window displays

and just watching how fashion would change and cycle.

And they were just so much further ahead than it is here in Texas, you know?

So, I think I just like surrounding myself in environments

that are more accepting of me, and if it's not accepting,

then that's just a part of like having my own confidence and not to care.

You are saying something super, super interesting.

I'm very curious about this.

You are in New York. You are inspired by New York.

New York, obviously, is such an amazing city for any artist and designer.

But you are producing amazing art out of Texas.

And, okay, Austin is a unique city too in its own way.

But it's different than New York.

And we have design teams in so many different parts of the world,

and some cities are more inspiring.

Some cities are less inspiring.

Me, personally, I've been living for a few years,

for instance, in Minneapolis, that probably is not as inspiring as New York.

But still I found my inspiration in so many different ways.

How do you find your inspiration in Austin? And I think it could be inspiring also for all those designers can't work eventually in New York City or in London, but they can be super creative also anywhere else they are. How do you find your inspiration? Yeah, that's the thing that is really an issue that a lot of artists face, because of course, like the stereotypical dream is you're gonna become an artist. You move to New York City or something. New York City, that's kind of like the heart of where all the art stuff is in America. But a lot of artists are still able to be successful and have a career without having to live in New York City, because it's just, obviously, like so expensive there. Like it's hard to get much space for a studio. Hard to work, so you kind of have to get creative and find inspiration in whatever city you are in, but still travel as much as you are able to. Kind of hard to now as much. But for me, when it comes to inspiration, I think, even though I'm someone that... I'm not very extroverted when it comes to dealing with people, I still find inspiration in people and through my art. That's how I connect with people. So, like Austin, for example, we've never been like a huge city. We've grown a lot right now, but when I first moved here, it was more of like a college town. But, then, for some reason, I guess with South By Southwest, and different things, like it just kind of started blowing up with tons of people moving here from other cities. And that's had some negative effect on the city, as far as driving the cost of living up. But there's also been some good in that, for me, for example, like a lot of these people that are moving here are also creatives, and in the past few years I've been meeting these people and working with these people and they've become my friends, and I just feel just like this new energy in Austin, this energy of change. So through some of my work, I wanted to sort of like, just capture that energy. So, yeah, I think my biggest inspiration is just through the people that I'm around. And, look, you said something that is so important. You want to capture that energy. But to capture that energy, you need to be receptive, right? I mean, I think as an artist, artists have a unique sensitivity. They have like the antennas up, and you can capture the energy that is in the air. And that energy can be, at the end of the day, anywhere.

It could be driven by nature. It could be driven by people. And it depends on your sensitivity and you are able to capture. That extra sensitivity, I think, is really what is so important. Actually, I was reading another interview of yours and you were talking about the circular relationship between cause and effect, and how artists are impacted by what they receive and what they take and then they give back through their art. We come out of, Actually we are in the middle of a very particular moment. On one side, a pandemic, COVID. On the other side, Black Lives Matter movement, and then all the political situation around this and the civil unrest. You are already an ambassador of the Black community through your arts. It was very inspiring in so many different ways. How did everything that happened in the past year impact you as a person and then your art? Yeah, so, 2020 has been a very interesting year, all over the place, because, yeah, I had so many plans. And just before the pandemic happened in the US, I was touring my art show. I have an art exhibition called Punk Noir that I started here in Austin. And then I was touring it to other cities, and I was about to show a version of it in Africa, in Nigeria, in Lagos. But then with the pandemic happening, it just wasn't a good time, obviously. And then I also had a show already going on in Dallas, Texas, and so that had to end early. And then the lockdown started happening. So, I mean, fortunately, I'm able to work from home. And at first I thought I would enjoy just being at home more, because again I'm shy and quiet, so now there are no events that I have to go to, you know? But even being a guiet introvert, I do need some face to face interaction with people. So definitely wasn't easy. So at first, I really wasn't creating very much. I was more concerned about okay are my basic needs gonna be met? What's goin' on? But after a while, after I saw, okay I'm gonna be okay, basic needs are being met, then I was able to start creating again. A lot of my art, like you see behind me, it's big, but I start off just with some drawings, like small drawings. And just kind of easing myself back into it. But then, like. Say, fast forward to June, and that's when George Floyd was killed, and then there was this renewed call for,

I guess for social justice, racial justice. And people on social media were like support Black businesses, do this and that. And then so in June my art business, like, exploded from all these people comin' in buying my prints, buying paintings, and asking for this and that, and more interviews. And so it was just like, okay, well, I appreciate that support. And maybe things can change. Maybe things will be changing. But then of course, it started to slow down in July and then slowed down some more in August. So, I don't know, I mean, I felt a lot of support just with people trying to be more supportive of Black businesses and artists. But I just hope that it's something that's not a fad not a trend. So, yeah, I guess time will tell. Yeah, that's really interesting what you're saying. So you think it may be just a fad? Or you think that something changed more radically? I think the big difference between what's going on now and the many, many, unfortunately, many protests that happened in many years. And, I say unfortunately, because I wish that with so many protests the situation would be radically different today, and it's not yet. But, today, the difference is that social media are there. And so there is an amplification that is incredible. You think this is gonna last, this change? The big difference between the many, many protests in the past is that today we have social media. And social media is amplifying endless times the impact of these protests. So do you think this is gonna be permanent? What's your thinking about this? That's a good question. This time did feel a bit different, this year, at least earlier this summer. I already see things slowing down as far as people calling to support Black businesses. Like, that's already slowed down. And I want to be optimistic, but I have to be realistic too, and I don't think that much is gonna change any time soon. But I hope to see a major change in my lifetime. But when I think about where I come from and my parents, like my mom when she first started school, like elementary schools were still segregated. And so I'm only one generation away from that. So, I don't know, maybe things can change in time. But I don't know. I just hope I live to see it. It's never gonna be fast enough. I mean, for me, it's just unbelievable that we are still in this situation. It's just incomprehensible. I think companies have an important role.

They have so much reach and so many resources.

And so many commitments of many companies and organizations and brands,

and obviously in the middle of the civil unrest, there were many.

We need to make sure that all these companies are monitored

and the efforts are really happening, and they keep happening.

I work for PepsiCo.

I'm glad to see many of the initiatives.

Actually, we are talking today, also because

you are the protagonist of one of the LIFEWTR collaborations.

For the people that don't know, LIFEWTR is one of our max premium water brands.

And every few months we have these collaborations with emerging artists,

and Dawn is gonna be, during the Black History Month in February 2021,

will be one of the protagonists of this collaboration.

So can you tell us a little bit of this relation with LIFEWTR, with the team.

How did it play out? How is it going?

And what you think about in general beyond LIFEWTR,

companies that somehow are trying to engage with artists in general,

first of all, and then also with the Black artists.

So, both, because even you were talking earlier about the art community

that is often neglected, so there is that first dimension.

And then the Black artists that are a minority,

within a community that is already minority.

Yeah, so, that's something, when it comes to making a change,

like actually doing more than just releasing a statement is really important.

Like, actually, like taking the action and doing something is important.

Yeah, so I was really surprised.

I was contacted out of the blue by a curator for the LIFEWTR project. And this series is gonna be called Black Art Rising.

And yeah it was a chance to really actually make an impact

and to be seen, and there was support from PepsiCo for that.

So it's just really good to actually see like something being done,

and see this LIFEWTR project actually elevate Black artists.

I think that's really important, and again, it's so much more important

than just only releasing a statement or posting

like a black square on social media, or something like that.

And so I'm not sure what other companies are doing, but I know anecdotally,

I've heard about people saying that the company released a template statement,

but then things are still not going very well.

They're not really doing much else.

So I'm excited to have my work shown

with other artists of color around the country.

And just to be a part of it,

and have people around the world see my art through this project.

Because the piece that I'm using for this design is supposed to spark joy

and just show a Black person

just living without worrying about what other people think.

So I hope it reaches people that way. Wonderful. Well, talking about what you paint and your art, what is the piece that you love the most and why? Of all your production. Oh, no. That's hard. I know. It's like to say you have many babies. You have many sons and daughters. - Which one is your favorite? - Gosh. I know how difficult it is. Is there one that somehow - yeah this is me. - One. Or a few. Well, okay, I'll talk about a couple of them. So, yeah, my babies. One of my favorites right now is one of my newest pieces. So I'm really more known for painting, but I just want to do other stuff too, and I love fashion and I always wanted to make wearable art. Like this jacket, like I painted it and put the spikes in, but I wanted to do more with that. So I love to wear different headpieces just for fun, and change up the look. So I decided to make a set of headpieces, and one of the headpieces is made out of purple stones, amethyst stones. And it's like, I did that because it's my birth mark and purple is my favorite color. And this one is not very practical to wear, but I love it just to look at. And then one of my other favorite pieces, it just so happens to be one that people are gonna see later through the Life LIFEWTR project, but it's called Roshi and it's a painting of a friend of mine. So what I do when I paint people is I go and I photograph them so that I can use that image as a reference. And so when I photographed her, she wore a sundress, and we had some different poses that I pulled out of magazines of different models doing different things. And she said, well, I'm very flexible, so I can do more advanced poses. So she did a back bend where she went all the way back down to the ground. And so I was just snapping photos of that. And so I thought I was gonna do a painting of her in the back bend, because that looked pretty cool, but then I was really intrigued by the way it looked as she was like halfway there, like not all the way back. And so I decided to paint her in that position. And some of the people that have seen the painting, they like to take pictures with it, because it's huge. It's like six feet big, like, six feet by six feet. So they'll take pictures with it, like doing like the same pose.

And a lot of people have said that it looks joyful to them.

And so I'm glad to see that it gives off a positive feeling.

I love, you used this word multiple times, joy.

And then we use the words color and energy.

This is so obvious in your art.

It's something like this, and I think this society needs it so much.

There is so much negativity often we're bombarded with,

and this is one of the beauty of art in general, or many forms of art.

And your art, I think, is the extreme of this in terms of that kind of energy.

Your story is inspiring in so many ways.

I think, again, we talked about this, the beginning as a lawyer,

but in parallel you just went after your passion.

Essentially, you have been innovating in your life.

In corporations, we use often the word innovation applied

to products and business models, and everything we do.

But you can innovate in your life, as well.

There is that approach.

You change things and you do something that is unique.

When you innovate, you take risks.

And when you take risks, from time to time, also at the end of the day,

you may fail, and you need to rebound, and you need to...

What risks did you take during your life, but mostly if you had failures,

how did you react to those failures, and how you managed those failures. Oh, goodness.

Like, as an artist, it's been such a roller coaster.

I'm like, okay, where do I start?

I mean, as an artist, I've had so many, I don't want to say ...

I've had several stops and restarts.

For example, like I told you, when I found out I got accepted to law school,

then I was just rushing to try to hurry up

and become successful as an artist in one year,

so that I don't have to go to law school.

And that didn't happen, of course.

And looking back yeah, that's kind of silly to try to do so much

in such a short a time without knowing very much about it.

And so I didn't give myself much time.

And the other thing too, is I studied other things in school.

So I didn't get an art degree.

I didn't get like the MFA.

And now I know I want to be an artist,

and to even go do that I've already got

so much depth from my other degrees,

that I can't just go back and get another one.

So at first I was afraid that, okay, I don't have this certain pedigree,

so am I gonna be rejected? Are people gonna accept me as an artist? Am I a real artist? And I do get as an artist, you apply for a lot of things and I do get rejected, and that is something that...

Dealing with rejection is definitely a work in progress.

And as an artist, you really do have to...

Well, a lot of artists have to get used to like,

constant rejection, and it can be hard.

Like, when I've gotten rejected before, and so many times I've just thought, okay, this is just too much.

I love being an artist, but the hustle is too much for me,

so I'm just gonna stop and just focus on journalism for a few years,

and I don't know if I'll go back to it.

But then I focused on journalism only, and I just wasn't truly happy.

And so I just started getting back into art.

And I'm talkin' about this happened several years ago.

This was my most recent restart.

And it's been about four years and I'm continuing to go,

but it's definitely a thing, like when you get rejected

you get knocked down, you have to get back up.

And because my background isn't traditional for an artist,

I have to really innovate in literally creating my own path for myself.

And one of the ways that I do that is really through social media.

Even going back to the MySpace days, like I was, I was always posting. I met other artists that way.

I met collectors, and now fast forward to now like

I post a lot on Instagram and show my process,

and it's sort of like a way to create a little bit of a community there virtually. And so, yeah, that's just really important for me, just social media

and just putting myself out there the best I can and being creative.

And, like you said, just innovate and just carve that path.

And I have a point of view.

Many people are somehow afraid of using social media in that way,

and I think if you just learn how to be comfortable in that,

and you express your point of view that is unique,

your perspective on the world that is unique,

people will embrace it, and it's such a powerful platform.

I am really glad that you mentioned it, because I really believe in it,

and many people I think are not leveraging it as they could.

Yeah, I think that even other artists I've talked to they say,

oh, you're good at social media.

I hate doing it. How do I do it?

And, I mean, and again, every artist doesn't have to do it,

or they may not need to do it.

I feel like I need to do it.

But for artists that want to do it,

and aren't sure how, just start off small.

And and when it comes to social media,

I mean, you really don't have to share everything in your whole life, or anything like that.

Just show little bits and pieces, just with your phone.

Like, just take a little picture of a corner of something

that you're workin' on here and there.

It's really simple.

Like, just upload the image, or just something small.

And the biggest thing is just being persistent with it

and well, being consistent, I guess.

Consistent, yeah.

Yeah, being consistent with it, and just keep doing it.

At least people that are starting out,

like at least maybe a couple posts a week or something like that.

But for me, it's really been a good way to just connect with people

that love art and it's people that maybe they don't collect art,

but they just like the way art looks and like following the process.

And then there are serious collectors and even gallery curators

that find my art on social media, like Instagram and Twitter.

And it's just been really good because a lot of times when the painting is finished,

I've already been showing people kind of the process and what I'm going through.

So people feel like even more of a connection to that work,

because they were with me as I was creating it.

So that's important for me.

Full engagement. And then transparency, I guess.

You are really putting yourself out there, but

in a controlled way, with filters.

Exactly.

And so what is the project that you would love to do,

that you'd dream to do, but you didn't do yet?

I would say, and of course hopefully

there will be a vaccine for the Coronavirus then,

because I love to paint people, and I could see myself...

I'm really sad I didn't get to go to Nigeria this summer,

because I wanted to do this.

Like, I want to go to different corners of the world

and find people to do their portraits.

Take their picture and then make a portrait.

I'm very interested in, like, punk culture.

So, for example if I go to Lagos I would want to find Nigerian punks,

and hang out, take their pictures and do their portraits.

I want to go to Japan and take pictures and do portraits of people there.

So that would be my dream, is to be able to travel the world

and do art in different places

and connect with different people through my art.

But in person, so hopefully that can happen eventually.

Well, Dawn, thanks for your insights, for your inspiration,

for the energy and the colors you put out there in the world with your art and for being with us today to share all of this. It's been really inspirational and insightful. Well, good, yeah. So it was great chatting with you. Thank you.