



# ROVEL HAGOS

>>>> *Talanoa* (conversation) via zoom between Rovel x Lisa

I ask Rovel how he defines himself as an artist.

'I am a storyteller who uses shapes and colours ... I've always had issues with being boxed in. A lot of people try to box me into being a photographer or stylist or one of the two. My whole thing is, if tomorrow I feel like building furniture, I'm going to build it. I design clothes when I feel like designing them. Sometimes I buy them when I feel like styling someone else's work. I would consider myself to be just a creative.'

Raised in Eritrea, Egypt and Australia, Rovel has unique perspectives that inform his artistry. From watching his mum in the photography studio in Eritrea as a child, to watching African American films as a teenager in Egypt and learning Arabic as a third language, Rovel was immersed in creative expression from a young age. When Rovel was nine years old, his mother opened a photography studio for him and his older brother.

'I used to always sneak into the studio and see what they were doing, whatever settings they were using, how to load the film into the camera. And eventually someone left the studio unattended. Some customers came in and I led them into the studio and I

took their photos and that's how it all started. Basically from there I kept trying to learn more and more. My mother is pretty much responsible for nurturing creativity in me through introducing my brothers and me to photography. That was not a normal thing for where we were from. It was not normal for a mother or even any parent to be like, *Here's a camera, learn how to use it and I'll open a studio for you to use.* Usually you have to go to school but my mother was different in terms of opening doors. That made me feel like I could express myself freely. It made me comfortable to try new things and not just follow the other path that is typical for all of us to take.'

I reflect on how special it is that Rovel's family have a shared passion for photography.

'My photography is mostly based on colours, shapes and angles. Like how can I create a shape that feels a bit abnormal, almost alien-like.'

I ask Rovel what kind of stories he is hoping to share through his creative expression.

He responds,

'The story I'm trying to create most of all is just to have an insane amount of

self-expression. That's the only way you will be satisfied and happy with yourself.'

There is an emphasis on Black joy in Rovel's work. He also aims to shift narratives. For some artists, their whole work is based on processing their trauma or understanding their cultural identity. For Rovel, it's about celebrating beauty.

'I don't want someone that is not a Black person to see me and their first thought is to victimise me ... People highlight enough Black struggles. It almost feels like that is all that is highlighted. I'm not saying we're not victims of a lot of things - we are. But it doesn't get highlighted enough how much beauty there is within our culture, within being Black, within existing without those labels. For me personally, a lot of the Black models I work with are beautiful and the way they express themselves is beautiful ... I want to celebrate the beauty more than the pain ... This is on a personal level not on a social level - there are issues that should be fought for. But on a personal level, and art is extremely personal, it comes from within. Life is difficult as it is. Why make it harder by focusing on that pain more?'

images on opposite and following pages, *Untitled* (2022)  
Photos: Rovel Hagos



I ask Rovel to explain the part of his arts practice that gives him the most joy.

'As an artist, you can envision how something is going to look on a model's body but when it works in person - that's the best part. Sometimes it becomes exactly like the vision you had. Sometimes it becomes way more - like this one shoot I did in 2018.

I used the last amount of money I had to buy a Versace catsuit that I found. I had been wanting to buy the outfit for a while. I had a vision for it. I went to Melbourne. I hit up this really beautiful model. Her name is Koujayn. She's phenomenal - an amazing model. She's in the UK right now and she's absolutely killing it there. I put together multiple outfits but the Versace vision was super monumental for me.

That photoshoot made a huge shift in my work - it influenced my style for the next four years after that. It took me to spaces I'd never been in terms of creativity ... It was like magic happened. That (photography) style almost became the identity of my work - because of how that one photo turned out and how Koujayn modelled

and the way she used her body. It created this look for the rest of the other models to copy.'

I ask him what his process is in selecting models for his art.

He shares,

'I basically do the most unprofessional way of doing it. I go directly to the model rather than through their agency. I just prefer it if the models see my work and they want to do it because we're not paying each other. I want to create a mutual artwork that the model would love and that they would see themselves in.

I'm always looking for different faces and different people that would match really well with my work. I look and I look and I look for six to eight months. I think about the specific people I've picked. I put pieces together and see what works with what colour-wise over the course of a few months. Then make a decision on the outfits for each person before they even say yes to modelling, hoping they will say yes when I eventually message them. I've been lucky enough not to be rejected.'



Rovel is unattached to the art world. Instead he tries to focus on self-expression.

'I used to be extremely ambitious. I don't think those expectations are healthy for you. Not because I don't think it's achievable. It's because it completely takes away from the art. It takes away how you make your art. Intentions are really important in this art world. Intention is the number one thing ... You can see when someone is genuinely creating something they enjoy and when somebody is trying to become something they're not ... so I took a step back. I just want to create and whatever comes from it, comes from it.'

Rovel brings beauty to the world through his perspective and practice. He will be exhibiting with Ctrl+Alt+Del for a third time for our final exhibition at Metro Arts.

He shares,

'I love what you've been doing with Ctrl+Alt+Del. I really appreciate it. It's the only group exhibition that I've been part of in the past four to five years. I appreciate what you've been able to do with it. I know it's not easy running gallery shows for multiple artists... You get people to come socialise, talk, share ideas, but on a personal level you give more than you get. For that, I appreciate you and everything you guys are doing.'

Rovel doesn't realise how much we all gain from sharing space with artists like him. Rovel reminds me of the power of self-expression. I feel grateful that he is catching up with me and tell him that I feel like soon he will be hard to get in touch with because he will be booked and busy.

He laughs joyfully and hints at exciting international projects around the corner.



