

*Photography Sam Penn*

*By Devan Díaz*



DEVAN DÍAZ: The first thing you see when you enter the Lomex Gallery is the painting of Satan coming out of the protagonist's laptop. Sitting alone in your bedroom talking to a computer—is that an incantation?

JULIEN CECCALDI: Filming a YouTube video does feel like making a deal with the devil. The algorithm rewards vulnerability because that's what people crave, so you have to pay with a part of yourself to receive benefits. And the classic YouTube phrases are like chants, summoning viral success: "Hey, what's up, you guys? Please like and subscribe." That's how you call on the internet demon, and then you hope he answers your prayers.

DÍAZ: YouTube has the best algorithm.

CECCALDI: It's been gathering info about me for almost 15 years, so it knows me and feeds me well.

DÍAZ: Do you still have friends who you only know online?

CECCALDI: I used to chat and draw anonymously with fellow artists, but I don't have friends like that anymore, now that my drawings are attached to my real-life name and image. Maybe now it's different, but in 2004, none of my friends were as passionate as I was about anime and manga art. Even if they were, it felt unnatural and

embarrassing to talk about manga out loud in real life. It's also liberating to experience a disembodied friendship based only on jokes, thoughts and art.

DÍAZ: What got you interested in manga?

CECCALDI: Since I was five years old, I naturally gravitated towards animated shows or video games that I later found out were partly or fully made in Japan. They'd have more appealing designs and better animation than a lot of what was made for kids in the West. This kind of artistry respects the audience more, too.

DÍAZ: You created a comic for the current show, where a man named Francis is trying to tell a woman named Marie-Claude about *Là-Bas* by Joris-Karl Huysmans, and all she can say is that she finds being obsessed with pretty things relatable. Is relatability the same thing as understanding?

CECCALDI: The comic's purpose is to highlight two contrasting perspectives. It ends with Francis struggling to catch Marie-Claude's interest, and wishing she would react in a different way. She doesn't really advance the topic at hand, but at the end of the day she's not the one who's anxious and a little bit miserable. So it's not about one character being better than the other. The question is: Would you prefer to make an effort to be smart at the expense of being bothered, when no one cares? Or would you rather be liberated and comfortable in your skin, at the risk of seeming vain or dumb?

DÍAZ: If it's not about winners and losers, is it about perverts?

CECCALDI: This specific exhibition is free of perversion. I hoped to disconnect feminine clothing from anything having to do with sex with men for example. The original vision was to do something shamelessly fun involving styling. I wanted to style pretty outfits and show characters enjoying themselves independently of a romantic partner. I wanted to drive home the point that fun outfits and makeup are not really about appealing to anyone but yourself.

Halfway through making everything, I got back into old familiar patterns, and horror and gloominess crept in a bit. Those Victorian elements evoke textbook oppression, but here our Victorian girl appears hermit-like, independent and disconnected from society. Like the heroines of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) by the end of the movie. The girls from this boarding school in Australia are on the verge of graduating into adulthood, but they wear frilly, ribbon dresses and gloves. The clothes imply they are contained. The movie starts with girls reading love poems to one another on Valentine's Day. One of them is Shakespeare's "[Sonnet 18](#)," a love poem saying, shall I compare you to a summer's day? Unlike the summer's day that ends, you will live forever through this poem.

DÍAZ: When I entered the gallery I recognized the mud-splattered dress from the artist DeSe Escobar's Instagram story. She posted a photo of Ada O'Higgins as she was muddying it. It felt like I was meeting an internet celebrity, because I saw the garment online first and then here it was in person.

CECCALDI: I had a feeling that Ada would know how to distress a Victorian gown, and it turns out she had actually done it already. She would wear muddy gowns. I thought she would just put a bunch of coffee over it and then call it a day, but she really took it the extra mile with some real-life distressing. It wasn't my plan, but I love that that's how it turned out. I also got most of the clothes, but it turns out the skeletons are too skinny. I assumed that my stuff would fit them, but even kids' clothes didn't fit. We did try Brandy Melville—that's where Ada got the skirt.

DÍAZ: I was wearing the same black tennis skirt and white socks as the blonde skeleton girl.

CECCALDI: Was it literally the same one?

DÍAZ: Yes.

CECCALDI: Oh, okay. Yes, yes, yes. [laughter] Love that. That's what I like about the show—it's infused. It is a bit about magic incantations in a way. I've put pieces of myself in the art before, usually in a figurative way, but here it's more literal. The bag that she carries with a chain, for example, was my staple bag.

DÍAZ: The bag with the ticking clock was very unnerving.

CECCALDI: Ada did the bag, the dress and the skirt. She saw the clock while running errands and sent me a photo saying, "Do we need it?" I said, "Yes." We didn't even know that the clock ticks. It was a cool surprise. It's not really part of the concept in that sense, but it adds to the show. At the same time, yes, there's some magic incantation where they're, I don't know, voodoo dolls that you use to take a part of someone.

DÍAZ: The new work has a high gloss. I know you made the jewelry and some of the accessories that the girls are wearing. How important is precision to you?

CECCALDI: Precision is ingrained in me from being a fan of manga. The goal for so many years was to know: How did they do this? How did they do this blending to stabilize? How did they make this line so sharp? Anime's appeal is usually in how very few lines can convey a character's design. That comes from not just aesthetic pleasure, but also the limitations of the job. A character is easier to animate if it's narrowed down to very few lines.

If I do something imprecise, it's hard for me to let it go into the world. In a way, I have to force myself more to make something look rougher on the edges. Or I need to be under a time constraint until I have to lift the pen. Then it is what it is, and some people will actually like it more because it's imprecise.

What was cool about the jewelry is that it was a collaboration with Arielle de Pinto. She lets the material do its thing, whereas I tend to try and really control the material. I carved little wax pieces, and she cast them in metal and arranged them, mixed and matched. She can achieve a level of fantasy that I can't. It was very important for me that she made items that she was happy with.

DÍAZ: There's a lot of fashion in this show.

CECCALDI: A big part of the show is this callback to the Victorian era, this stereotype of the constraining garment. I did these embarrassing Google searches—like, "Gen Z trends" or "typical TikTok outfit"—because I wanted to do something that was really current, where a few months from now we'll look back and be like, I'm so over this. There are different

generations in there. The outfit with a button-up shirt and t-shirt is really nineties—that fashion is called otaku. In Japan, there's a movie called *Otaku No Video* (1991). It's about this guy who's really put together, and he meets an old high school friend who is into anime. He's disgusted by his friend because he's unkempt and loves these hobbies that the main character thinks are for children. Throughout the movie, he realizes that actually all those things are really cool. He transforms into an unkempt, obsessed fan himself. And then he loses his girlfriend, becomes sloppy and doesn't care. He's like, "I love anime. I'll be the biggest anime fan in the world."

That fits in the show for that vibe of not being ashamed of what you like. I was also breaking the fourth wall a little by including an anime fan within this show that I'm assuming would be visited by people who like anime.

DÍAZ: It's a lot of devotion.

CECCALDI: Yes. "Devotion" is a good word, because there's different kinds of devotion—like, devotion to yourself, devotion to looking cute. And there's a divine element to it. The idea of my character is that she's so devoted to her goals, and that's what potentially inspired the devil to allow her to live indefinitely. There's something admirable about her devotion. She's like, "No, I will not die because I have things to do." That's the energy that she's supposed to exude.

DÍAZ: I wonder what ambition means for your characters, not only in this show but in general. It seems like these characters wouldn't even notice if they were dead, their internal hard drives would still keep going.

CECCALDI: That is definitely the fantasy—not even death could stop them. Some have different goals. As pathetic-looking as my characters can be, they have an otherworldly determination. To me, that's why they should never be read as ridiculous, because determination is something that you can't make fun of someone for. You can only admire them for it.

DÍAZ: Do you ever find desperation funny?

CECCALDI: Yes, definitely. As embarrassing as it is, I look back fondly on my desperate moments because my emotions were really unbridled and wild and uncontrollable. I take it as a sign of intense truth. It must be true because they're so overwhelming. I think of it as both embarrassing and pure at the same time. It's funny because it's goofy and irrational. The humor comes from like, "Oh my God. What is that person thinking?" Or, "Are they not realizing what they're doing?"

DÍAZ: Why do you think the devil is more likely to answer our prayers?

CECCALDI: I get the impression the devil answers calls more easily. Even though I'm not spiritual, I was thinking, "Oh, all the things I like, they really do technically line up more with Satanism." All my hobbies and the things that bring me joy, they're not compatible with the Church. I feel like if I step into a church I'm going to catch on fire for everything I've done and said and thought. It's not that I worship the devil, it's more that according to these people, I'm basically a devil worshipper.

DÍAZ: I wonder what your characters hope to achieve. The girls in the comics who are dying for the guy—I've been that way, and when I look back now I'm like, "The guy could've been any guy." It's like spending the whole night thinking about him is enough.

CECCALDI: All the guys I've drawn can be any guy. That's why a lot of them are dogs, because it's just random. The secret beauty of that situation is that there should be pride in making up all these beautiful feelings about them. That's on you, and it's actually not embarrassing. There's something pure and glorious about the beautiful story that you made up in your mind about this random person. I think it's just the nature of life—it keeps the ball rolling. Until you die, and then the ball stops rolling for you and it keeps rolling for others. I like endings that hint at the story continuing. When characters realize there is a difference between who they are, who they say they are and who they're perceived to be.