



How Reyna Noriega's Year of Responsibility Ushered In a Year of Rebirth

The Miami-born and based Cuban-Bahamian artist, designer and author shares her insights on the intricacies of brand partnerships, the power of introspection, and how she learned to manage the business of design without sacrificing her love of the craft.

Alicia Menendez: If you have seen Reyna Noriega's colorful and vibrant artwork grace the covers of Science Magazine or The New Yorker, or amplified brands like Apple and Old Navy, it might be hard to believe that she almost forwent a career in the arts completely. We talk about what pulled her back, the year of responsibility that gave way to the year of rebirth, and her powerful message about ignoring the rush and the trends and the service of building something meant to last.

Reyna, I am such a fan. Thank you so much for doing this.

Reyna Noriega: Thank you so much for having me, Alicia.

Menendez: All right, so you and I both have Cuban dads. Your mom is Bahamian, you grew up in Miami. How does the Caribbean then show up in your home?

Noriega: It's everywhere, to the point where I'm spoiled and I didn't realize that not everyone lives like this. From the meals to just the presence of just joy and music and how all of that is kind of ingrained in how we interact, how we celebrate. It was such a vibrant upbringing.

Menendez: As an Afro-Caribbean Latina, I don't need to ask if you saw representations of yourself in the media, because you and I grew up consuming the same media. We know how few and far between that was, and I think the damage that does is hard to quantify. What happens to a kid when you don't see yourself reflected back at you?

Noriega: Yeah. I sometimes mention this cognitive dissonance that existed within me that I thought that my Blackness came from my Bahamian mother, when abuelo is Afro-Cuban from Havana. So I'm seeing it, I'm seeing Celia Cruz and I'm seeing my family and it's not clicking.

Menendez: Well, did you talk about race in your house?

Noriega: I mean, I think there were definitely conversations, but not really with identity. I know that my abuela was very proud of her husband and that she had chosen to marry a Black Cuban, probably against what was the norm at that time and what was accepted, and so that was vocalized. But they always joke with me. As a kid, I would say that I'm light Black. That was my terminology, and so it's just like you figure it out along the way.

Menendez: Reyna, you go to FIU, you got a bachelor of arts in psychology, you minor in visual arts and English. What was the plan at that point?

Noriega: The plan was to figure it out and make my family proud. I discovered that I loved art and I was good at art in high school, but up until that point, I was just a scholar. So I was getting the highest test scores and the highest grades. When I made the decision to apply to

colleges for visual arts, I was really happy about that and I thought, "This is so fun, this is so great." And I chickened out during my orientation when FIU announced that they were doing a psychology pre-med track. And obviously it's every parent's dream to have a child as a doctor. It wasn't forced on me, but it was definitely something that I was aware of that, like, "That would make my parents proud if I was a doctor, and I think the mind is really cool, I could do this."

So I approached psychology for that reason because it was like if I ever decide that I want to do pre-med, I could do this. I don't want to cut people open, so this is a good way to still do both. And then I was like, Art is not a sure thing anyways, so I'll just keep it as a minor and I'll have it just in case." That's not how it panned out.

Menendez: It's only a few years after chickening out taking the safer more secure path that you really end up pulled back into the arts. What is it that happens in 2017 that you're able to commit yourself fully to a life in the arts?

Noriega: I think I saw it throughout college that obviously as a psych major, I was supposed to do internships and all types of things to compliment that, but every time an internship would come up for the arts, that's what I was pulled towards. And so I did Art Basel internships and things like that, and I felt so free and I felt so much joy there and I felt so much possibility that it kept calling to me. And after I graduated in 2015, I got the opportunity to be a high school art teacher, and that was just supposed to be a buffer period until I got my master's in behavioral psychology and figured out what direction I wanted to take and all of that. And it really reinvigorated my love for the arts and the possibilities. And over time, I experimented with different materials. When I became an art teacher, the courses were digital drawing base, and so that is where I learned illustration.

I had not tried illustration before that, but I had to learn really quickly for my students and to appear like I knew what I was talking about. And so it was a great kind of push. I didn't have time to say, "Oh, I like this. I don't like this. I'm scared of this." It was like you're teaching high school kids digital art and they expect you to know it, so you can go in there as a very young teacher and look like you don't know what you're talking about, or you can go in there confidently like you know everything about it. And so it was pretty much like overnight I had to teach myself Adobe Illustrator and some other drawing apps that I could go through with my students. And yeah, it evolved from there.

Menendez: Reyna, I look at your portfolio of work and I see three main avenues. You'll tell me if you see it differently. I see the work that you've done for major publications. I see the work that you have done with brands. And then I see the art that you sell to people who want to have it hanging in their homes and their office. So I want to talk through each of those. How those opportunities, did they find you, or did you find them?

Noriega: They definitely found me. I was when I started, and I still remain very open to whatever lane my art is meant to live in, so there's a lot of things that I love. I love fashion, I love travel, I love making people feel good. I love home decor and goods and things like that. And so as I've tried to imagine this world that I'm creating where people are happy and confident and they feel seen, I think of the things that I touch and use and rely on every day and how art can show up in those spaces. And so as I started sharing more of my work and my personal style, probably around 2018, 2019, I started to create and manifest opportunities like murals and designing wine bottles and just different things and doing it on my own.

Menendez: Where are you sharing? This is all on Instagram?

Noriega: Mostly Instagram at this point, a little bit of Behance as well. People are seeing it and people are getting excited about it and they're tagging other brands and they're like, "Oh my God, you should design a t-shirt for Rihanna." Or you should do this or you should do that. That's the advice I give to other artists now all the time, is if you're looking for more opportunities, dumb it down for these companies, show them how you can use your storytelling to help whatever missions and things they have going on. Pretty much what I did. And naturally people started to email and reach out and one opportunity shows my skills in this aspect, that brings more opportunities and it builds and it builds and it builds.

Menendez: Now, do you manage the business side for yourself or do you have someone who handles all of that incoming for you?

Noriega: I was completely on my own until late 2020, and then I've had a manager for the last two and a half years, and now I'm going back to managing everything myself.

Menendez: Can you talk me through the evolution of thought? I've seen the advantage of having someone filter through those opportunities, because otherwise your inbox is just full of random things. And then there are times where someone is handling it for you and you think, "I would've handled that differently if I would've been one-on-one with the brand, if I was interacting with them rather than having someone between us." So talk to me both about the decision to take someone on and then the reversion to doing it yourself.

Noriega: Having a manager, it ended up coming naturally. I ended up meeting someone that was a perfect fit for me, because I was always kind of stressed out about someone not really aligning with my goals or not being able to speak for me the way that I wanted to be spoken for. It taught me a lot about what was possible. A lot of things that I had just accepted and I was like, "That's the way that it is." I watched my manager negotiate payment terms and net sixties and nineties and those things, higher rates. Obviously as an artist, you're practicing as long as your needs are met. Sometimes you're not thinking, "Oh, I should have made 10 times that." So having a manager really helped me to see that my work was valuable and that me as a person that is co-signing these big businesses, that is valuable because they're going to use my image the way that my audience respects me, my identity as a woman of color. They're going to use all of that to enhance their business. And so that was super important for me to kind of understand and put my foot down about those things. But in the process, I kind of lost myself and my love for the art. 2020 was the year of responsibility. Every time I wanted to do something, the back of my head, this word responsibility kept coming up and I felt like I had the responsibility of growing the business, and making sure that everyone else was able to grow and making sure that everyone else was able to profit and making sure that this was like this well-oiled machine. And so I was going, going, going, going and thinking in a way that just didn't align with the artist in me, and there wasn't enough of that to sustain the business me.

Menendez: How did you know? Is it that you felt it in your body? Were you unable to produce artwork? What was it that crystallized for you that in the interest of chasing the business, you were losing the core of the art, which was of course the foundation of the business?

Noriega: Last December, I went through a very dark period where I was not my optimistic self, and I felt defeated by a lot of things, defeated by what was going on in the world, just filled with worry, and it wasn't my normal way of thinking. And it started to alarm me because I had never been in a place where I was like, "What's the point? Why do I keep fighting? Why do I keep doing this and that?" And I didn't like that, because I don't know what that feeling and what that thinking evolves into, and I didn't think it was good. And so I kind of had

some time to step back, step back from that relationship with my manager. And in the absence, I realized that I didn't desire more of it. It wasn't like I took time off and I was like, "I really can't wait to talk to my manager and strategize and do..." I was just like, "If not having any more deals means that I don't have to talk and strategize and think this way, then I'm fine.

I don't think that's the way that it's supposed to work. Something probably needs to change right about now."

Menendez: Reyna, your bio says you have seen the power of introspection, self-reflection, and healing. Can you give me an example of when in your own life those have come into play?

Noriega: Constantly, every day. My books are a reflection of that. I would say around the time when I was teaching and imagining more for myself, I started to write down the things that I was thinking and feeling. And when I would look back at those thoughts and that journaling, it would show me that everything that I thought was so bad was a part of the journey and it was teaching me the lesson so that I could evolve, and it was exposing me to pain points and it was exposing me to trauma and healing that needed to happen. And so by doing that, seeing the effects of it, I started doing it more and more and being more intentional about it, and I started to realize that through many points in my life I wanted to run. I thought that life would be different if I just picked up and moved. And then I would try picking up and moving, and the same feelings would follow me and it was like, "Okay, maybe it's not outside, maybe it's inside. Maybe I need to deal with this."

And so that is where this emphasis on joy and peace and all of those things that I want people to have come from, because it wasn't a certain amount of money I needed to make to be happy. It wasn't having the perfect partner or being in this place or all of those things. It started within, and then it started to reflect outwardly, and it gave me a sustainable amount of happiness and joy and peace, and it wasn't just like, "Oh, my job is going well. I'm happy. Oh, I lost my job, so now I have nothing." It kind of gave me that balance of whether things are up or down, I have what I need to feel good.

Menendez: A big part of your ethos is this idea of showing up as your best authentic self. Do you have practices that you come back to that allow you to show up in that way?

Noriega: Definitely the way that I'm speaking to myself, definitely the way that I'm keeping track of my small wins and expressing gratitude. Gratitude for nothing, gratitude for everything, it definitely helps me. It helps me to remember that, like I said, everything is inside, it's not outside. And that is what has allowed me, I think, to keep climbing. And that is the part of myself that I started losing when I had those feelings I was talking about last December, was like I wasn't doing as many gratitude practices because it was go, go, go. Expand, expand, expand. And I needed to remember that that is just as important as achieving.

Menendez: I have a business question, which is, thousands of people now own pieces of your art. How did you figure out how to price your art?

Noriega: I think pricing is always kind of a work in progress. And I wanted my work, especially the prints, I wanted them to be accessible. I didn't want them to be out of reach, so I compared my prices to people in my industry, and there was a higher end and a lower end, and so I tried to match up the quality with the access I wanted people to have and kind of land at a happy medium.

Menendez: Reyna, there are people who want to be the next Reyna Noriega, and they're also people who work at big brands and they're trying to find someone like you and bring someone

like you into the fold. With those two audiences in mind, is there anything you want to share?

Noriega: I would say that regardless of where they fit into that mold, whether they would like to have a successful career or if they would like to work with an artist, the biggest thing that this industry has taught me and this world has taught me is that there's a lot of love that we need and integrity. I would like everyone to start there, with being intentional about storytelling and being honest with ourselves and being true to ourselves. There's so much chasing that's going on because sometimes we feel like there's not enough opportunity, or we have to be something other than ourselves to get certain results. And the best things in my life have come from authenticity. It might take a little longer, but that's what's going to last. And for me, the sustainability is key. I don't want to be a one hit wonder or an overnight success.

I want a long fruitful career. Social media and the speed and AI and all these things are pushing us to go faster, faster, faster, faster, and I don't see any of it lasting. So I hope that the people who are hoping to work with someone like me and the people who are hoping to show up like me know that I am taking my time to build something of quality that will last, and not just jumping on trends or trying to be the next this or the next that. I want to be me, and I want to share that love.

Menendez: That resonates so deeply. Reyna, thank you so much for doing this.

Noriega: Thank you so much for having me.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer, Kojin Tashiro is our lead producer, Tren Lightburn mixed this episode. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram, or tweet us @latinatolatina. Check out our merchandise@latinatolatina.com/shop. And remember to subscribe or follow us on Radio Public, Apple Podcast, Google podcasts, Goodpods, wherever you're listening right now. Every time you share the podcast, every time you leave a review, you help us to grow as a community.

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