

'I stuck out more in Japan than in America'

When you go to Christine Mari Inzer's Instagram account, all you'll see are carefully drawn black-and-white panels depicting a young woman navigating her life, mostly in Japan. When Inzer, then a university student in the United States, began posting her hand-drawn comics, her followers were limited to close friends and family. Now, a year or so later, she has more than 110,000 people following her account.

Based on comments from those followers, Inzer's appeal might come from the fact that her comics are deeply personal. At times, Inzer touches on her mental and emotional health, baring her anxieties and fears with the kind of honesty you'd get in an intimate conversation with a close friend. Most often, however, the illustrator focuses on her experiences as a half-Japanese, half-American woman. Through her artwork, Inzer delves into understanding her identity, a pursuit that appears to be resonating with a wide audience.



(<https://cdn.japantimes.2xx.jp/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/p08-smith-illustrator-d-20190923.jpg>)

Unlocking the diary

Inzer was born to a Japanese mother and an American father and spent the first five years of her life in Tokyo's diplomat-friendly neighborhood of Hiroo. From there, her family moved to the United States where Inzer lived until graduating from college in spring.

"For a while, I didn't really come back to Japan. My family and I would try to visit as much as we could, but it's far away and expensive," she says. "I kind of felt out of touch with Japan, especially once I was in a completely new (American) environment. I just wanted to fit in and adapt to that community.

"I grew up in this really nice, wealthy neighborhood in Connecticut and the majority of the people who lived there were white. I never had any trouble fitting in, but it was still interesting because there I was, 'the Asian girl.' That's all people saw. It wasn't a negative thing, but I didn't really focus on being Japanese at that point. Then things started to change in high school."

At 15, Inzer decided to come back to Japan for the entire summer, the longest stint she'd had here since moving to the States. It proved to be a pivotal time in her life and became the basis of her first published book, "Diary of a Tokyo Teen," a humorous account of her rediscovering her place of birth.

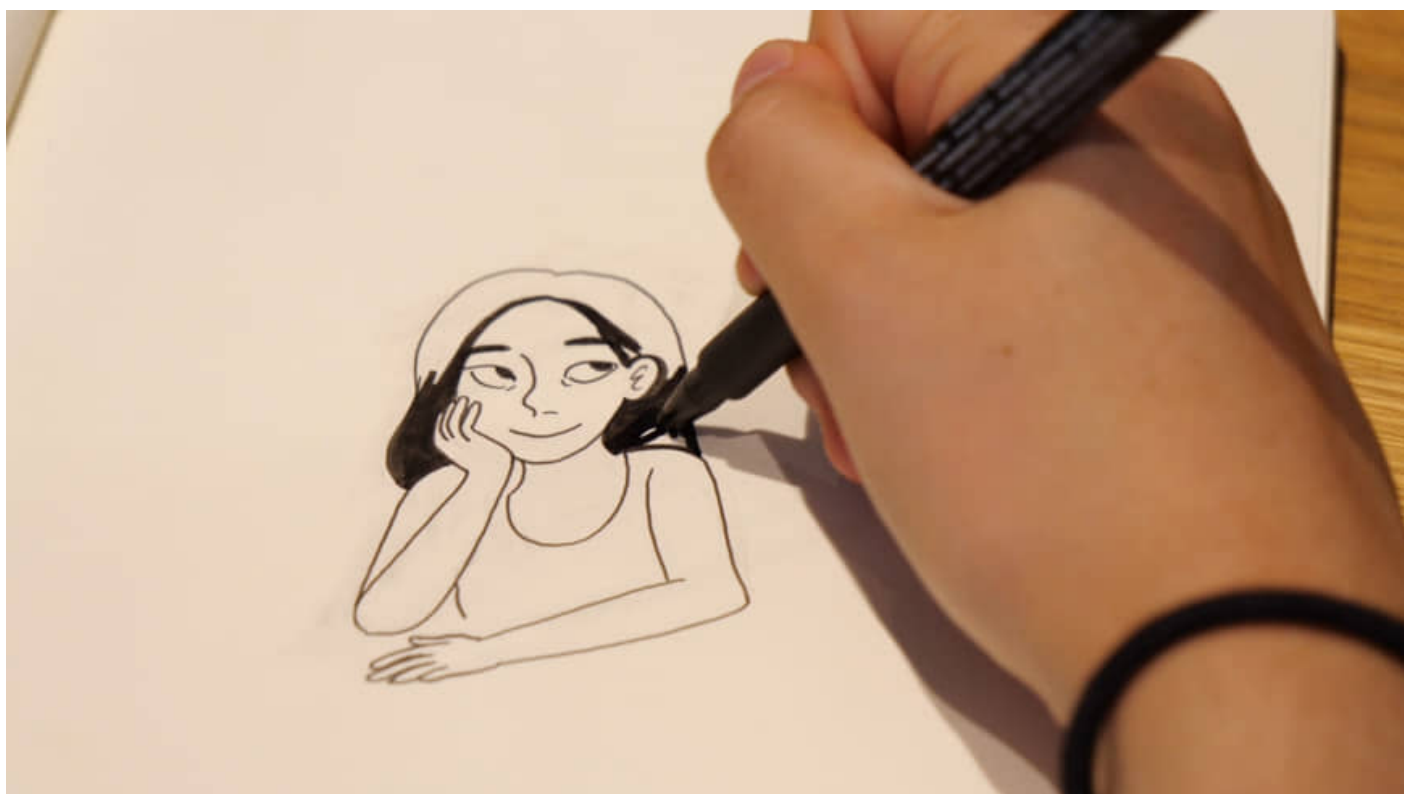
“I don’t even know how that happened,” Inzer says. “At that time, I was getting really interested in drawing and I was reading a lot of graphic novels, especially by a lot of women artists. I had the idea to keep a travel diary to capture my experiences, especially because I hadn’t had the opportunity to be in Japan for such a long time.”

By the end of her trip, Inzer had amassed a collection of drawings, which, at the urging of her father, she self-published. The following year, she submitted the booklet to Tuttle Publishing who said they wanted to publish it and distribute it to major bookstores like Kinokuniya and Barnes & Noble. Inzer says the news left her flabbergasted.

“I must have been 17 when that happened and I was like, ‘What? I’m just trying to graduate from high school!’” she says, laughing. Inzer worked on the updated, color version of the book during her first year of college in Virginia, and then published it during her second year. “It was such a crazy transition for me. I never thought it was actually going to happen. I think that’s kind of a recurring theme with all of my art. I was never expecting it to be bigger than it is, especially with that book.”

“Diary of a Tokyo Teen” shows that even from the early days of making her comics public, Inzer’s artwork has always been personal and honest, sometimes with awkward outcomes.

“I’m 21 now and I wrote all of those comics when I was 15, and I think for a lot of people it’s embarrassing when you look at something that you’ve done a few years back,” she says. “It’s my teenage self’s diary and it’s out there for the world to see, but I like hearing from other teenagers who read it and say, ‘I find it so relatable.’ That makes it worth it.”



<https://cdn.japantimes.2xx.jp/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/p08-smith-illustrator-c-20190923.jpg>

Penning a narrative

During her third year of college, Inzer decided to return to Tokyo and study at her grandfather's alma mater, Waseda University, for a year.

"Before then, my time in Japan was always with my family and I was experiencing Japan through that lens," she says. "But being at Waseda, it was the first time I was in Japan as an independent adult. That was a completely different experience. I think I romanticized Japan ... but when that shimmer of being in this new and exciting place started to wear off, I started to understand Japan more as someone who lives here.

"When anybody moves somewhere new, they always realize that place is not perfect. I had that realization, especially with my identity as a *hāfu* (an informal term used for individuals of mixed ethnicity) and even as a woman in Japan. It was a kind of culture shock. That year was definitely challenging."

Despite having lived a significant portion of her life in the U.S., Inzer says she never felt like the people around her identified her as simply American, but rather Asian-American or Asian.

"I thought maybe if I go back to Japan, I'll feel more at home or I'll belong more," she says. "I think a lot of people with similar experiences, who grew up far away from their mother country, have that expectation that they'll belong or they're more suited for Japan. I came back and I found out that's completely not the case. ... Suddenly, I stuck out even more in Japan than I thought I stuck out in America. I wanted to be and feel more Japanese, but then to find out that's almost not possible just because of who I am, that really changed the way I saw Japan and thought of myself."

As a way to process her experiences, Inzer started to draw comics about life in Japan again.

"My art has been one of the ways that I see the world and myself," she says. "I'm still learning more about this community and I know that although my experiences are shared with a lot of people, I am not the one voice that represents all of these people."

While Inzer's drawings are based on encounters and musings that are uniquely hers, her nuanced and startlingly honest depictions of figuring out who she is have allowed her to reach individuals with similar struggles from around the globe (although at times, Inzer has to make deliberate efforts to protect her privacy).

"I never thought that this could become such a platform, honestly," Inzer says of her Instagram account. "I just kept drawing and it started snowballing into something bigger."



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She points out that one of the best parts about her success on Instagram is that many of those who contact her have backgrounds that differ from hers yet still find her themes deeply relatable. She says one such idea dealt with “the emotions that come with the pain of not being able to speak your mother tongue.”

“These experiences that I thought are very personal to me are something that so many people are able to relate to,” she says. “That fact really blew me away. I’m so glad that a lot of half-Japanese people see themselves represented, but to see that these experiences and emotions are more universal than that, it’s a nice, validating feeling to know that I’m not as alone in this as I thought it was.”

While drawing has come to represent a large part of her identity, Inzer doesn’t see it as much more than a hobby. She says she has largely made peace with how she fits in here, and the reason she returned to Japan was to pursue a career in international education.

“My foundation of learning as a child was in Tokyo as someone from an international background,” she says. “That really shaped who I am today. One of the things I learned from my comics is that how you see yourself is really affected by how you’re raised. (Teaching) is a nice parallel to my art because with both interests, I want to teach people and help them understand different experiences.

“When I left Japan after my year abroad at Waseda, in many ways I felt a little defeated by my time here because I came looking for an identity and the comfort and security of being Japanese in Japan. But now I know I’m not fully Japanese and I’ll never be fully Japanese. But that doesn’t take away from the fact that I am still Japanese. I’m myself. I’m Christine. I have to sometimes stop worrying and just think about myself and who I am without labels.”

For more on Christine Mari Inzer, visit www.christinemari.com (<http://www.christinemari.com>) or follow her on Instagram at @christinemaricomics.
