

## Isabel Urbina Podcast Interview - Feb 2017

Isabel Urbina is an Art Director and designer, focusing on books, lettering, typeface design, and experimental handwriting, originally from Venezuela and currently living and working in Brooklyn, New York. In 2015 she was named a New Visual Artist: 15 under 30, by PRINT Magazine. She is a Type@Cooper and ProDiseño Alumna. Her book cover designs include several best sellers, and her work has been recognized nationally and internationally. She currently works from her studio in Brooklyn, teaches workshops online and in person, speaks about design and typography, creates zines, and runs Yes, Equal.

### On growing up in Venezuela

BM: Can you tell us a little about your experience growing up in Venezuela and how that shaped you as a creative?

IUP: Well as you might know, it's a rich country in the sense that it has many, many things happening at the same time and a lot of influences. You see great art on one hand and then you see a lot of poverty on the other, so you see a lot of contrasts. Just culturally it's really rich and colorful. People, the charisma they have and the personality, it's really interesting and great. I loved growing up there; it was a great experience for me and I wouldn't change it for anything. It's sunny and beautiful all year long, and you go to the beach and you have the best time. There's a very different feel about life and how you plan things and how things work. It's very different from living in New York where everything seems to be really planned and you're organizing your schedule. In Venezuela things come as they go. It happens as it happens. You do make plans but it's not as organized as here. Luckily I've picked up a little bit from here and I've always been an organized person. It's really laid back compared to here.

BM: You were born here in the U.S. and then your parents moved back to to Venezuela, where you were raised. Had you come back and seen those differences before you moved to New York?

IUP: Not really. My parents lived here New York in the 80s, and I was born in '86. It was a really rough time—they had been here for a while, studying and then working. When I was born, they moved back because it's really hard to raise a child here. I grew up there and I didn't come back to the States. I went once to Miami when I was young, about 7 years old, and then I only came to NY when I was 18, so it was a long time. I had traveled to other countries but there was never really a big interest in coming to the States. Our culture [back in Venezuela] is very Americanized so we see a lot of how things are and how things work. I was more curious about going to Europe. When I came to New York in 2005, I was blown away because it's a great city. That was the time that I felt like I really have to move here. I've always been dreaming about the city because I was born there but had never been, so there was a mystery and intrigue about it. I finally moved [to New York] in 2008 and it was like whoa.

BM: Do you think that dream of coming back to New York shaped your upbringing or the way you developed as a creative?

IUP: Definitely, in the sense that I was always very independent. I was always thinking about that moment of leaving home, which is not common in our culture. In Venezuela, people stay home until they get married and I was not at all like that. I felt that once I graduate from high school, I would want to leave. I ended up staying for a

few reasons; I ended up wanting to go to school there. There's a really good design school there and I wanted to stay and do my studies there. In the back of my head, I always wanted to leave, I always wanted to come [to New York], so that did shape some of my decisions. I don't think it shaped my creative career as much until I came here, which of course changed things and made me learn millions of things. At first I was more focused on the idea of being on my own and living in the city, but it didn't have that much of a connection with my career at that point.

## On being influenced and encouraged by her parents

BM: You've mentioned that your parents were architects and they were very encouraging of you and your sister to be creative and they had a lot of designer and artist friends. How did that shape you as a creative?

IUP: It was awesome because since we were kids, we were always seeing stuff. We always attended art shows and exhibitions, and exposed to the most amazing artists, musicians, painters and designers. In that sense it was a very rich childhood. I'm lucky; my parents were amazing and always supportive. They were really encouraging. My sister and I were always doing many, many things and we were never forced into focusing on a specific topic. If we liked math, they supported it; if we liked painting, they encouraged us to do that too. So we were kind of over-achieving girls in the sense that we would take many classes, but at the same time we wanted to explore so it seemed pretty independent. At least for me. My sister, because she is the youngest, she was more structured. She wanted to be a musician for the longest time

I had a lot of great input from my parents' friends because I got to see [this environment] every day. But when I had to choose a career, it also pulled me back. At one point I thought maybe I want to be an architect. Then I realized that was probably because I'm exposed to it all the time with them. So I ended up going to design school because I felt it calling my attention since I was like 13. First I went to the Universidad Central de Venezuela, which is a huge university and has more of a college feel. I went there for a year to study art theory and art criticism. I learned tons and I loved the experience of being at a university, but it wasn't for me. So I was there for a year and then I decided to start in ProDiseño, which is a tiny school that fit in a house. It was a very different experience. There I started my career as a graphic designer. I continued studying at the university for one term and then realized that was insane; First year of design school plus another major at a school on the other side of the city, I can't do this so I put my first major on hold. It's still on hold I think—maybe someday I'll finish it!

*10:15*

BM: It's funny, my mom is a computer scientist and my dad is an artist. I thought I wanted to study computer sciences and then I was going to study art and then I was going to combine it. But then I went for graphic design.

IUP: It's inevitable to have that connection, I think. Especially if you're in the same realm, if there's something that's kind of intriguing for you about their career. You're always thinking, look at that, it's so much fun. You have that reference. It was hard for me to decide what I was going to do. I was good at a lot of stuff so it was easy to think, oh I can do this or oh I can probably do that. So it was more about what do you really want and you're young so you're like I don't know what I want. So it was an interesting process for sure.

## On moving to New York

BM: You went to ProDiseño for 4 years and when you graduated you moved straight to New York. You've said that when you moved there, you felt behind because you didn't know anyone. What made you make that jump, not knowing anyone? And how did you proceed?

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IUP: That was super crazy. Actually, for some of my recent talks I've been looking into that story. Because you remember you emailed people but you don't really remember what you said. You think it was good, but then when you see it you think oh my god, what was I thinking?!

So basically in 2005, I wanted to move because I had visited here and it was awesome and I wanted to do this. So it became my goal. I went to college there [Venezuela] and as soon as I finished I said, "I'm leaving in two weeks". So I graduated and I booked the trip and in two weeks I sold everything I had and I came to New York. I had no real expectations. I had the little money I could gather from selling my computer and whatever I had in my room, and not many savings. I just decided I'm going to come and see what happens. The only alternative I had was to start reaching out to people. I got in touch with as many people as I could; I even sent emails when I was back home, which was really funny because I was like, "I'm coming in a month, do you think you'll have an internship for me?" And they replied, "No, it's Sagmeister studio. We're booked for three years."

At least some people did respond. I wrote to Milton Glaser's studio, and they invited me to come in and meet with them. I went and did it, but it was at that point that I realized I didn't have a portfolio. My school, ProDiseño, was really great in the sense that they teach you how to conceptualize and come up with really strong ideas and then come up with a visual solution for them. They give so many exercises that you could come up with a lot of work. It felt like exercise in a way—we exercised a lot and then we were really strong in that area, but we never talked about creating a portfolio. We never talked about building your resume or even how to present yourself in an interview. I was definitely lacking there, so what I started doing was I applied to as many jobs as I could and I kind of made up my own exercises. I would go to the interview—maybe it was an interview I wasn't that interested in—but I would do my best, and then see what went wrong right after and how could I do better. Definitely the portfolio part was something that worried me. I was really hung up on the idea that I'm a graphic designer and my portfolio needs to reflect that I know what I'm doing and it needs to look great. Obviously I didn't have the projects at the time to be the most shining star—they were all student projects. There were many hiccups in the road.

I also had a language barrier. I did speak English when I moved here but speaking professionally is quite different than when you're talking with a friend. It was a big jump. It's still a little hard for me sometimes to find the right word because my brain still thinks in Spanish, even after 9 years here. It was really interesting. I felt like kids here were so prepared, they had these amazing portfolios and cases and I didn't know about all this? And then I started researching and everyone was spending \$500 bucks on a portfolio case. I didn't even have that money for my rent, so how could I do this? I did my best and slowly things started to pay off. I tried millions of things.

I got my first internship at the Museum of Natural History, which was the best place for me at the time. When I applied for it, I knew I needed to be true to myself. I thought of what I know—I like writing, I like handwriting so I'm going to write it by hand. I hand-wrote a note and sent my application in. It was super simple, but a really heartfelt note. I don't know if this had anything to do with it, but the girl who was looking at the applications was from Mexico. I guess she identified with some of the things that I wrote. When I met her she was super compelled by everything I showed her. My thesis at ProDiseño was in astronomy; I created a visual language for that and a several pieces and applications and she loved it. She was said I obviously had to work there because it's science and it would be so fun to have me there. I ended up there and it was great because it was a free internship at that time, but they were so happy that they ended up paying me. Also, they managed to bring me on as a freelancer for

a few projects afterwards. It was a good point, after being in New York for a few months and not finding anything. So it felt really good.

There were a lot of times in the first year, or even two years, that I questioned what I was doing. I went to the best design school in Venezuela, so I had all the contacts, everyone knew about me. I'm sure if I had stayed there I would have been so much easier, but I think it was worth the effort for sure!

BM: Now 10 years later, you went from not knowing anyone to making so many connections— speaking at TypoBerlin 2016, Typographics, Weapons of Mass Creation and Design Fest in Guadalajara in 2016, and now you're scheduled to talk here in Philadelphia and in Toronto next month; your book covers are best sellers and award winners, and you're filming online courses left and right. Do you ever look back and think about yourself back then and far you've come.

IUP: Yeah, it's funny because there's something in the New York life that doesn't let you fully appreciate things. You're always feeling like you need to do more, and there's someone always doing more than you and it feels like you haven't done enough. Sometimes it's hard to see all the things that are happening. Definitely last year was a big change for me. I left Random House in December 2015. I was there almost three years. When I left I wondered what I was going to do. I've already been a freelancer, and it had gone well, but I had a lot more eyes on me right at the time because Random House gave me a lot of exposure. I was nervous to not be able to keep that up and also about what kinds of projects was I going to get. I didn't want to get projects that aren't as interesting creatively. I was definitely worried. But last year, a lot of things happened that gave me a lot of confidence. And also it makes that all this struggle has been worth it. It's taking a while to get where I want to be and I feel like I still have a long way to go—that's what I'm excited about because if I already had everything I wanted it would kind of suck because I would be bored. It's interesting to me to look back and it's why I like doing talks and classes. I get to look back a lot and when I see people in the same place I was back then, I can encourage them and tell them they just have to work hard and want it, and know when to leave places. For me it's been very important to be confident enough to accept that you might have a paying job but you actually want to explore something else and just do it. It's scary at times, but it's also great because you never feel fully secure, so it's okay if it doesn't work out, you can figure it out. In a way when I left last year I felt like if it doesn't work out I can always go back and I can find another job. Life is going to go on. It's going to be fine. That kind of helps a little bit to take risks.

## On Yes, Equal

BM: In addition to speaking, teaching, and designing, you also have a side project called Yes, Equal. It's an online directory of women in the creative field to build stronger creative communities. Your goals are to bridge the income gap and the work gap and you have about 1,300 members registered. Can you tell us about this project?

IUP: This project I started because after going to a few conferences and being a spectator on the other side of the stage, I realized that there are not that many women speaking, especially in typography. A friend of mine from Cooper Type started a discussion on Twitter about TypeCon. Last year the gender split was 50/50, but the year we attended, it was a bad ratio, and we were surprised because we knew women who had applied and they had some interesting subjects and they didn't get it. We wondered what was happening, why is there not more diversity? So I figured that sometimes it's good to vent, but sometimes I like to do something about it. In this case I just thought there needs to be a database to prove that there are many talented women doing this, and they are

available and want to participate, so why not go and talk to them. If the excuse is that there aren't many women in the field, here they are.

I really saw it as a simple project. It was a really naive—I thought I was going to have a hundred people, and in a few days, by the end of the week, I had 600. I built it all myself with a WordPress theme, and I'm not a programmer so it was really basic. It required a lot of manual work. It took me awhile to get it into a place where everyone could be there. Eventually I realized that it's something that people do care about and they need an outlet and they want to get the opportunities and there's definitely an imbalance. It was really interesting to make something that could help a bit. It was cool too that immediately I got some people to write letting me know they got contacted through Yes, Equal.

BM: You thought you'd only have a couple hundred members and 1,300 people later you're making an impact through that.

IUP: Yeah exactly. So now it's strange because I really want this to grow, and I feel it should stop being my project and become everyone's project. I'm trying to include more people and engage whoever is interested in participating. Some people there have spoken up that they want to help more and they want to do things for it. It's good. Slowly I'm trying to make it move forward. Right now it's just me so it's a little bit tricky to get it to the point that I feel like it can really make a difference. I would love to, in the next year or so, add job postings. A lot of people write saying they have a job and ask me for recommendations from the Yes, Equal directory? I can post it on our Slack community, but it would be great if there was a directory of jobs there and people can just look there. So that's one thing I would love to add. Also keeping up the calendar with dates for applications to conferences and different summits that need people and their deadlines. It requires so much work. If anyone is interested in helping me out shoot me an email ([hi@yesequal.us](mailto:hi@yesequal.us)). I'm trying to add more people to it and make it more of a community instead of just my project because I feel it has evolved into something different. I would like to have more voices because I feel like it would be richer.

BM: You were talking about the problem of not having a fair distribution in terms of gender. Do you see that as a problem with people hiring creatives or do you see that as a problem also within the creative community?

IUP: I've been lucky. At Random House it was very much the opposite situation. It was a lot of ladies. Apparently publishing is a very female-oriented career. In previous situations, I've dealt with my fair share of injustice. For me what's interesting and important is to make sure that people get what they deserve. If you have the same experience as a guy and you both deserve the same pay in theory, why not get it? Why do you have to fight harder to get these things? It's something that I don't understand and I'm clearly against it. I would love it if everyone would make an effort to change this situation, starting with our own friends. I talk a lot about it because I realized that some people are not aware of this imbalance. They think because we're in a creative world it's fine, but it really isn't. I have friends who have experienced these issues. I myself have heard that I didn't get the job because they needed a dude for it, and was surprised that they were really telling me this. I really think it's something that we should be mindful of and make an effort to balance out. Sometimes people say that if you're making an effort to balance things out then you're being biased, but I think you need to make an effort to actually fix it because it's not going to go away by itself. It needs to be a conscious effort. I see this very much in conferences. Like in the design fest that I was in, there were only three women and we were 11 speakers. So what's happening? There's definitely a hole there.

BM: You would think the creative world that's more liberal in general would be more balanced.

IUP: I wrote a couple pieces for the blog for Yes, Equal. The first one was when I launched the site. It was a lot of research that I did. It was mostly about the fact that many, many women are studying graphic design and graphic arts—the ratio is about 60% or 70% women and 30% or 40% men. When they graduate the jobs turn the total opposite, everything flips. The guys get 60% of the jobs and women get 40%. It's the same with the awards, which is something that really blew my mind. I figured that if that many women are studying to be designers, there should be more chances for us. But then you see that, for example, judging panels are mostly male and then you think that maybe there's not a conscious bias. It's a very tricky subject, but I do think there has to be an even playing field so you can actually get better opportunities.

I did a zine recently called *It's Not OK*, inspired by cat calling. It's mostly related to the subject because a lot of things you don't realize that happen or you don't really think oh, this is a big deal, but we're dealing with microaggressions every day. People normalize these things. They expect you to be like it's fine, I don't care. These things shouldn't happen. I feel like if everyone puts a little bit of effort into stopping these actions, things would be much better.

## On personal projects

BM: I want to make some time to talk about your personal work and I think this is a perfect segue because you mentioned your zine, *It's Not OK*, which came out in 2016. Before that, in 2013, you created the zine *Rants from a Stranger*, a typographic novel hand lettered and written by you. What inspired you to create those zines? Can you tell us about your process for those?

IUP: *Rants from a Stranger* I started right after Type@Cooper when I had finished the program. I was exposed to a lot of typographic, calligraphic and lettering inspiration. Basically I just wanted to do something to practice my skills and so I set a little deadline for myself and started doing those. In a couple days I would write it and draw it from sketches to a finished piece. I wanted to do something that was quick and had a fast turn around just so I could get better at it fast basically. It was really interesting because you would see the first drawing and the last drawing and there's so much difference between it. Like you can really tell that I started here and then this is the end. It was mostly an experiment for me and also it was a personal exploration of my way of thinking. I feel like a lot of people that know me but don't know me so well they think I overthink too much and I think a lot and I give too much importance to things that they maybe don't care about. So it was a little bit of a dialogue with those people and myself about what I think about the world and the way I see it. I wanted to do something like a comic but without characters and that's why I ended up lettering the whole thing. When I did *It's Not OK* it's also because I feel like *Rants from a Stranger* is an unfinished project. I wanted to keep doing it, but I've been crazy busy and I have a bunch of different projects that are pulling me in different directions so it's hard to keep it up. I did *It's Not OK* for a contest in Vice. The topic was the offensive. I thought I'm not going to be offensive like they want, I'm going to say what's offensive to me. That's why I started talking about cat calling because that's something that I lived with in Venezuela. I'm sure you've seen it there and experienced it at least with your friends. It's insane. You live with that and you're like oh, it's normal you know I have to deal with this and they're telling you crazy stuff. Really crazy. I'm not going to say it here.

Why do you have to deal with these things. Why can't I walk from my house to the corner store and just get some milk without being harassed. So that was the inspiration for that zine. Also, of course, with all the feminist stuff that I'm being exposed to recently I'd been thinking about it a lot so it was a subject that was really important to me I feel like it's in the same family as *Rants from a Stranger* because it's the same idea. It's a hand lettered zine and there are no illustrations it's only quotes and thoughts but it's a little different in the sense that *Rants from a*

*Stranger* is a dialogue while this is not at all. It's just isolated things. I think I also started these project because I've been always interested in print. At the time I wasn't doing any print work. I just said if I'm not getting it I should just do it myself. I just started printing myself and getting it together because I've always been big on DIY and crafts. I'm that kind of person, so I felt like it was my own opportunity and my own way of getting those jobs.

BM: You just posted on instagram that you got a new risograph to do more DIY and more hands on stuff.

IUP: Oh yeah, I'm so excited about that! I've been talking about wanting to get a riso printer for like 6 years. It's a big machine and it's expensive. I never thought I could have it because it takes so much space—guys, it's crazy! It's huge. But now we have a studio with 4 other ladies who are awesome and 3 of them were like let's do it let's get it, so we bought it together. We're going to share it. I'm really excited about all the projects that I'm going to be making. I can't wait to have some free time.

## On “Everyone Else Is Already Taken”

BM: Can you give us a little preview of your talk in Philly? What we can expect.

IUP: It's very honest, like this conversation. A little bit of my experience and a little more of how my story went. Also what I've learned in all my struggles about presenting my work. It's been really interesting for me to see how that's affected the way people see me. It's a little bit about from that day where I didn't know how to show my portfolio to today when I have a very specific visual language for it but I'm still thinking of what's next.

BM: I'm very excited that you're coming to Philly next month. A, because I get to see you, B, because I can hear your lecture and C, because I get to see you.

IUP: Yeah can't wait, I think it's going to be fun!