

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief, I'm Eric Molinsky.

My Instagram feed is usually full of cosplayers, action figure designers and photographers, and LEGO Master Builders.

A LEGO Master Builder can re-create anything out of LEGOs. You've probably seen images of their work, whether it's a full-sized Darth Vader made of LEGOs -- or a 14-foot-tall replica of The Empire State Building at Legoland.

But this one LEGO figure kept popping up in my feed. It was a human body from the torso up, made entirely with yellow LEGOs. The figure is tearing his chest open. His guts are spilling out, and his guts are a pile of yellow LEGOs.

The moment I saw that figure, I knew this was not just a great technical achievement. This is a work of art. It made me feel something. It reminded me of moments when I felt vulnerable or exposed, and I wanted to know more about the artist.

His name is Nathan Sawaya, and he has an exhibition show, The Art of the Brick, which toured the world. The show has other monochromatic figures that play with similar themes of personal angst. Like there are several figures holding up their faces like masks while their actual faces on their bodies are a blank slate, or a sunken crevice. And besides his original creations, he also recreated famous works of art for the show, like Michelangelo's David or Gustav Klimt's The Kiss made out of LEGOs.

Today he has a great relationship with the company LEGO, but when he started building his sculptures in the early 2000s, the company was keeping their distance from their adult fans. They kept insisting that LEGOs were just for kids. When they changed their stance, and embraced their adult fans and LEGO artists, it was great for their business and for their brand.

Art critics have also been slow to accept that a show like The Art of The Brick could be seen as an art show, not just a novelty or a show for kids, even though The Art of the Brick has been in art museums, and sculptors have been using unconventional materials for over 100 years.

But the first person who had to be convinced that Nathan Sawaya could be a full-time professional artist working in LEGOs was Nathan Sawaya.

NATHAN: At a certain point. I was practicing law in New York city. I'd gone to law school. I was becoming a lawyer, was practicing corporate law. And I would come home after long days at the law firm. And I would need this creative outlet, you know, I needed something to do that was different from being a lawyer. So you usually tended to lean towards the artistic stuff, like painting, like drawing. And I sculpted out of all sorts of media, uh, more traditional media, like clay and wire. I did sculptures out of candy and then it was just one day I thought, well, what about this toy from my childhood? Could I use LEGO bricks as an art medium to do, you know, large scale projects. And I started experimenting with it and eventually would leave the law firm behind him become a full-time artist that use LEGO bricks,

Well, what about working with other mediums. Like why, why did you find that you enjoyed working with LEGO as opposed to any other kind of medium?

NATHAN: Yeah. Uh, working with candy it was one of my favorites actually, as, as you can imagine, it's delicious. And, uh, it, it's like it's like working with LEGO in that it's small pieces, it's additive sculpture. You're creating, creating these large forms with these tiny little pieces, but I tended towards LEGO for probably a variety of reasons. There was an understaffed chick sense to it in that I had LEGO bricks growing up. Uh, my parents were very generous in the sense they allowed me to have a 36 square foot LEGO city in our living room, uh, which was quite the conversation piece. So I always had this toy around me and I just liked the aesthetic of LEGO bricks. I liked the sharp corners, the right angles. You know, you look at it, you see these human forms, but when you're up close to them, they're really sharp and all these corners, and then you back away in the corners blend into curves and that's really something cool about using LEGO. So I decided just to play with it. And I think one of the main factors was the reaction I was getting from people, you know, they'd never seen art like this before. And so I just kept experimenting with it.

What was your learning curve like? Like what were some of the mistakes that you made early on that now you've incorporated those solves into your process?

NATHAN: Well, you get a feel for the bricks. Uh, that's one of the main things is like I was working on something this morning and I just knew I could just reach without looking and knew what I needed because you can just, you can just feel it even the weight of a, a one by four, between one by six, which are very similar bricks, but you can just tell without looking what you have. So you get that feeling for it. But early on, there was plenty of mistakes. Uh, the biggest one probably being how to bond the bricks together. Uh, I used all sorts of glues and try sprays and things, trying to find a way to build a sculpture that could be transported without it falling apart. That was a big learning curve. And then when it came to the medium itself, I mean the biggest thing is learning how to do curves. How to, how do you use rectangles to make them look like

curves and spheres and spheres or something? I practiced a lot learning how to build spheres out of rectangular pieces is a key component.

And there are specialty to bricks that are curved. You don't want to sort of collect as many of those as possible.

NATHAN: Well, back when I started, I mean, this was almost two decades ago, so there was less of those features for me. I really enjoy the rectangular pieces. So that's where I think the magic comes from is getting those curves out of the rectangular pieces. Plus the detailed pieces, those elements that have curves to them. Sometimes they work and sometimes they don't. I mean that my, my type of sculpting, I use the rectangular pieces because that's just what I've learned, how to do the detailed pieces are something that are useful at times. And I call them detailed pieces because I use them for details. Like maybe there's a nice round piece I could use for an eyeball, but the rest of the sculpture is pretty much going to be rectangular pieces. And that's just how I use them. The other, the other factor is there's like 15,000 different LEGO elements, uh, shapes, you know, there's so many different shapes that keeping an inventory of every shape in every color is it would be really difficult. So my inventory is almost entirely just bricks.

So at what stage do you glue and what happens when you realize you made a mistake?

NATHAN: I glue as I go these days now, when I, when I started, I was not gluing. As I went, I was, I would build a model completely unglued, and then I would copy build it gluing as I go looking at the original and then gluing it as I go and up on some shelves over to my left here in the studio are plenty of unglued models from early days that had just been around for awhile. And I don't know what to do with, but now today I have this, the sense of how the sculpture is going to come together. So I glue as I go, if it doesn't look right, I get out the hammer and chisel some pliers tear the bricks apart, eights. It's part of the process. And it's a heartbreaking part of the process because I've worked on sculptures where I have to chisel away days worth of work. But that is, that is part of the process in that you go into this knowing that's always going to happen. You have to have patience for this job.

You know, it's funny. I thought my wife was brave to do a crossword puzzle with ink. This goes way beyond that.

NATHAN: I have buckets at feet, uh, as we speak of glued bricks that have been torn apart and they just, you know, by the time they're glued and then chiseled off, they're useless.

Was there a moment that you sort of like started doing that and being like, this is insane? And then being like, you know what, this is my process.

NATHAN: Yeah. I mean, you're always trying to be more efficient sometimes, right? You're trying to find a way to, to avoid that and you have to learn to accept it because I had to learn to accept it because there was no way around it. I, I did try to find some more efficiencies. As I mentioned, like spraying. I thought, well, if I build a sculpture and

then just spray it with the glue, would that work, but there's nothing that really keeps that sheen. That is that perfect sheen on a LEGO brick without with, you know, once you spray it with a glue. So I, I tried different things, but I found this was the best way to do it.

Now, many of your most famous sculptures are human forms. The human figure, which really, to me goes back to like classic art, you know, Renaissance art or read, you know, of, of the human figure. Why are you so interested in using that also as part of your medium?

NATHAN: I think the human figure is critical, uh, for conveying emotion. And it goes back to early on when I started doing this, I would go to, uh, art galleries and talk about my work and they would kind of laugh and they're like, oh, you make art out of LEGO. And I was like, yeah. And in their minds, I'm sure they were picturing what they saw at a toy store, which was, you know, a train set or a castle or a spaceship. And I started doing human figures because it can, could invade more emotion, but also it hadn't been really done before. It hadn't been seen, like it is now, now you see it much more, but back then, it wasn't really out there. And it really captured the imagination of the art world a bit, which was good. Uh, but for me, it always came down to what I was trying to convey and what I was trying to say with these pieces and the human form was, was the way I wanted to do that.

Well, I think probably your most famous sculpture is the yellow man who's tearing his chest open, and all the pieces are spilling out. What were the emotions that you wanted to express through that piece?

NATHAN: It's interesting because I don't really go into what the pieces mean to me. Cause I always want the audience to have a role, uh, in interpreting itself. But I think for something like Yellow, which has become a bit iconic, you know, it's about opening oneself up to the world so much so that your soul is spilling out. I think it's about giving everything. You've got it. It's, it's interesting because more people have contacted me about that piece in any particular piece I've ever done. I think it resonates with folks for a variety of different reasons and it resonates with kids as well because they see this figure and it's tearing its chest open and its guts are coming out and that's kind of cool, but those guts are loose LEGO bricks, that same toy they have at home. And it reminds the viewer of what all this has made from,

Well, uh, maybe then I'm projecting too much into some of these figures because I mean, there's like I see a lot of anxiety and depression and some of these you've got the blue figure tearing himself in half, the red head screaming, the gray figure, reaching up at a quicksand with these red hands or like are trying to pull him back. There's a lot of figures like that. Is that, am I imagining things or does that sort of working through?

NATHAN: Yeah, no, you're not imagining things. Yeah. A lot of it is a representations of my struggles with depression. Um, you know, the transition metamorphosis, the theme

is a big part of that is trying to pull myself out at times, trying to get out of those places and, you know, creating artists helped, uh, for sure in doing that. But yeah, that theme of, of what you're describing of that, of, of depression or trying to find a way from it is pretty accurate throughout a lot of my work.

Yeah. Especially like the arms, you know, the, those red, the arms coming out of nowhere to hold you back. I, I see that a lot as well.

NATHAN: Yeah. That's a figure called grasp. That's a sculpture called grasp. The figure is this red figure pulling away from a wall and the wall has these arms grabbing at the figure, pulling it back. And that actually came from my transition actually of being a lawyer to being an artist. And so many people telling me I was making a mistake, which was kind of shocked me because these were colleagues and friends who I thought would be very supportive, but actually were very negative about it. Now, I, I shouldn't say everyone. I had some very supportive friends throughout the process, but when I decided to make that transition, some people thought I was crazy and that negativity is something you got to break away from. And literally that's what the sculptures about.

So working all these emotions out through art, do you feel that you've sort of exercised those demons or are these sort of things that you're, you know, you're always going to deal with because you're a human being and this, you know, these emotions will never go away.

NATHAN: It's a little bit of both. I think there are times when I feel like, oh, I've put it into a sculpture now. I don't have to think about it anymore, but things come back and, and life still continues. So it is for me, a very therapeutic way of dealing with things I've been told. I go into a bit of a trance when I'm working on a big project like that, where I'm just focused. And, and I do think there is some therapy and just clicking brick by brick working over time. It's just me alone in the studio working. Sometimes my dog's here, but other than that, it is just me dealing with my thoughts and I have found it to be therapeutic over the years.

I also love the figures that are losing body parts. There's a gray figure and kneeling over because his hands have turned into a pile of bricks. Is that like out of an anxiety dream?

NATHAN: It's exactly. It's my nightmare. My hands are my tools. Right. And they, they, they look in a little rough today. They got some cuts and bruises, but that's part of the process as well. Uh, but yeah, they that's what that sculpture's about. I mean, my hands are what I use to create all of this. And so that sculpture just came from fear.

How come so many of the figures are monochromatic?

NATHAN: The idea behind the monochromatic sculptures was something that early on I wanted to focus on because I felt, again, it gave the viewer a little more of a role in the sculpture. If I made the sculptures look like a particular person, then, then some people may be able to connect with it. But not everyone I thought by making the monochromatic, they were more universal. Huh.

That's interesting. I assume it's also probably easier to buy bricks all in one color. Like thousands of bricks in...

NATHAN: Well, I mean, at this point, my, as you know, I've mentioned my inventories kind of, kind of large. So I have the colors that I need, but I like to keep a giant inventory though, so that when I have that idea for that sculpture, whatever it may be, I don't have to think about, do I need this? Do I need that? I, I know I have whatever I need here. And that's why I keep a huge inventory. Um, I'm actually adding about a quarter million bricks every month.

Today, he lives in Los Angeles. His studio is filled with aisles and shelves of LEGOs, each one organized by size and color. And his LEGO sculptures are set up around the shelves and aisles, spilling out into a gallery. It's the coolest man cave ever.

After the break we hear about his latest work, and why it was one of the most challenging projects he's ever worked on.

BREAK

In 2021, Nathan introduced a new exhibit to his traveling show, The Art of the Brick. The exhibit is called Perniciem, which is Latin for destruction or extinction. For the exhibit, he built over a dozen life-sized figures of endangered species like cheetahs, whales and polar bears, all out of LEGOs. If you look at them from far away, they're surprisingly realistic. And then the images I've seen of them up close, there is so much life to those animals, it's uncanny.

NATHAN: I mean, it's weird though, when you're working with LEGO, as I do as is these like, like the polar bear, which is a life-sized polar bear, you know, it takes about a month to complete it. Although at a certain point, the head was done and I was still working on the, on the torso and the back and the head felt great, but I knew it was still a sculpture at that point because it had to fill out and it's such a slow step by step process. It's almost not till I put down that final brick that I can just step back and be like, there it is. I think one thing I did learn about the animals was how to, how to give them a little more life, you know? And I think a lot of it has to do with the eyes, giving it that shine, putting life into the eyes really brings the animal. Uh, it just, it just elevates it to a bit with my monochromatic sculptures. I'm not, I'm not focusing on the eyes at all, usually because it, again, it's just these monochrome heads. But with, with the animals, it was a different approach. And I learned a lot about what it takes to make something feel more alive. They are in some sort of environment just being alive. And the whole thinking behind the project was, you know, what, if we do nothing and these

endangered species go away, we will be left with just plastic versions of them. So it was trying to just capture animals in the moment, but made out of LEGO.

Are there any particular pieces that were the hardest to work on that just, you know, it took forever to get that one, right?

NATHAN: Yeah. There's been a few, uh, where I've really frustrated myself over months at a time. Uh, there was a piece called red dress, which was part of a collaboration with a photographer Dean West. We did a collaboration called in pieces several years ago, where we took, uh, objects like an umbrella. And we, we would have the talent hold the LEGO umbrella. I would build the umbrella out of LEGO, then the talent would hold it. And we'd photograph these images where something in the images in the Tableau would be made out of LEGO. And one of the images had a woman wearing a red dress. And so to build that red dress took, I mean, months, it was a very difficult process because the dress was to appear as if it was blowing in the wind and to get the thinness of fabric, but made that still out of plastic LEGO bricks was a challenge because if you look at my sculptures, you see the outside of them, but you don't see the inside. The inside is a mess. But with this particular sculpture, because you were seeing pieces of fabric flowing in the wind, you had to see both sides of that fabric. And that was, it was challenging. I had more chiseled red pieces on the ground. Then I think I actually used in the sculpture when I was done.

Do you, I mean, do you try to create a balance in terms of sometimes people come to you with something that you're like, oh, that would be very challenging versus I still feel the need to do these more personal monochromatic, faker sculptures. Do you sort of try to every so often be like, you know, I need to put this aside because I've got to create one of these figures right now. I just I'm feeling it in my gut.

NATHAN: Yeah. I do try and keep a balance. In fact, when I started out and I'd left the law firm, I didn't know if I'd be able to pay rent the following month. And I thought, okay, the way I'm going to do this is I'm going to take on a commission project. And then it will take on a project for myself and take on a commission project and then a project for myself. And, and I really was strict about that balance. And those projects for myself are what became the art of the brick, the touring exhibition. So for, for these days, it's a little more random because you know, commissions come and go and I'm have other projects. I work on this TV show called LEGO masters. I have installations going on. So I don't take on every project because I do need that balance. And I have to find a way to be like, okay, what interests me? What projects going to be challenging and keep my interest. I do, you know, if I took on every project, I would be bored out of my mind because a lot of requests are very similar and, and are very, are not, are something I've done before. And I want to keep going in different directions.

What are you working on now?

NATHAN: I wish you could see what's what I'm staring at right now. It's half a body that's, uh, needing some work that I'm working on a new exhibition. Uh, so that's something very exciting for me, uh, because it's not just one piece or two pieces, it's an entire exhibition. It it'll probably be my largest exhibition to date. So that's something that's really kept me, kept me going and kept me focused. But it's also something that keeps me up at night and, uh, stressing out and, you know, waking up in the middle of the night, jotting down notes. It's, it's been an interesting time. So,

Well, I'm curious what, when you, when you, when you're up at night and you're fretting about this, is it like this isn't working or I've done this too many times, I need to do something different or like, what are the thoughts in your head that you're just like, that are keeping you up in terms of your artwork?

NATHAN: I mean, it's usually this isn't working, this doesn't look right. How's this gonna play? How is this going to meet my expectations of what I want the final feeling to be for the viewer? When someone steps into a gallery and they see these works, is this gonna, is this gonna play the way I want it to are, is this going to be able to fit through the average doorway? You know, I've learned a lot about door sizes in the us versus Europe. You know, we go to some venues, some beautiful museums, and they still don't have doors that are big enough for, for certain sculptures. Um, and it can be frustrating.

Yeah. The God, those are logistical things. I would never think that you would have to deal with.

NATHAN: Yeah. I've learned how to develop there's this engineering aspect of what I do, of course. And part of that is learning how to create a sculpture that if necessary can be taken apart at a certain place, something like, um, there's a, in one of my touring shows, there's a, there's a, T-Rex, it's a T-Rex skeleton. Uh, this dinosaur skeleton, that's like 20 feet long. And it breaks down into 14 different sections because that's, what's necessary to, to allow it to travel and then we have to reassemble it. So things like that are interesting because I just want to build it as one, but realizing, realizing the hard way, learning the hard way that sometimes it doesn't fit through the doorway, literally building sculptures that I have finished. And then I'm like, oh my gosh, my door is only 33 inches wide. What am I going to do? Now? I have an art studio with a much bigger garage door. So that's not an issue. But building back in New York City, I literally had to get everything through a 33 inch door and had forgotten that I learned that the hard way.

Yeah, it's funny, I mean, I haven't gotten the sense from you at all, but theoretically you could have some kind of chip on your shoulder about the art world, you know, like, ah, they've never taken me seriously centers, but it sounds like that is so not an issue with you.

NATHAN: No, uh, the art world's interesting, as we will know, the art world has all different aspects to it. And I won't go too deep into that. Other than that, you know, at first, uh, the art world felt like it was laughing at me and that was fine, uh, because

eventually it came around and now we see all sorts of artists using LEGO as a medium. And just to be a part of this LEGO art movement is kind of special. I think, I think back to some of the early criticism I received, I remember one of the first critiques ever written up in a newspaper was pretty harsh about my art. They had gone to one of my shows. This was like 2008, 2009. And they, they were really critical of, of some of the pieces they had. They said some nice things about certain works and critical of a lot of it. And I was so happy because they took it seriously. They took the art seriously enough to write a critique. Yeah. They were critical of it, but it was kind of, it was pretty amazing that they were even writing it. So I take the small wins and just keep going and look, I'm happy with what I do. I have, I have a weird job, but it's a job I love doing. So I can't really worry about anyone else, what they think about it.

That is a fascinating, uh, reaction that you're just, you know, that they sort of have, you know, gave you a very, half-hearted even some panning. And you're just like, well, look, who's talking about me.

NATHAN: Well, that's, I mean, but that's how I had to approach it. I could have gotten really upset and been like, oh, you don't understand my art, but what is that going to do? I just had to keep going. And the truth is I have, you know, supportive people in my life, my life. Um, my, my wife is very supportive of what I do. My folks have always been supportive. And so I just kind of say, you know, I'll just keep, keep at it.

Um, it's funny. I've, I've heard you say that you find interviews stressful, but you've, you seem so practiced and interview, sorry. You're just used to them now.

NATHAN: Well, I, you know, I'm an introvert. I, I create a job where I can just sit alone all day and not have to talk to people. So it is something that stresses me out. Yeah. ***Yeah. Well, you know, it makes sense. You're a visual, you're an artist. You spend a lot, it's about a lot of, time by yourself.***

NATHAN: Exactly. It's the only person I like to talk to is my dog.

The dog is real, by the way. Although there's a LEGO version of him too.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Nathan Sawaya for taking time out of his really busy schedule to talk with me.

My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. You can like the show on Facebook and Instagram where I put a slideshow of Nathan's work. I also tweet at emolinsky and imagine worlds pod.

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