

Drawing on Life's Experiences, However Few

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Shutesbury, Mass. - LIKE many artists Alexa Kitchen disavows her early work. She just feels that she has moved past it. "I think it's pretty good and pretty bad mixed together," she said. "I don't hate it, and I don't dislike it, but I don't love it, and I don't like it, you know?"

If she hasn't yet settled on the ideal sound bite, it may be because this artist -- who has created more than 20,000 cartoons -- turned 9 last month. She hasn't adopted standard interview etiquette, either: as she spoke, she sat on a beanbag chair in her bedroom, her spidery legs clamped around her ears in a pretzel formation. She had on jean shorts and a Garfield T-shirt, and her mermaid-long hair was hanging everywhere. "I'm just more comfortable than when I'm in a normal position," she said.

Alexa has been a sensation in the comic book world since she was 6, when her parents first showed her work at the art festival that the Museum of Comic and Cartoon Art in New York puts on every spring. Her draftsmanship is a little primitive, but her drawings powerfully express some of what it feels like to be a kid, from the raging war between boys and girls to the bummer of being too young to baby-sit.

Every year has its crop of teenagers putting out their first comics, and Alexa had a head start: her father, Denis, is a former comic book artist and publisher himself; with his help she produced 50-print batches of "Alexa Kitchen The Early Years," Volumes 1 and 2. The softcover books, each about 200 pages, presented her best sketches and multipanel stories.

But this month she becomes the first of the elementary-school set to put out an entire hardcover book of her own: "Drawing Comics Is Easy! (Except When It's Hard)," 176 pages, released by Denis Kitchen Publishing and distributed by Diamond Comics. The print run is a bit higher this time: 5,000 copies: puny for major commercial publishing but quite respectable for the genre.

The project has the backing of some of the most famous names in her field. "I started drawing when I was 5 or 6, but it was nothing special until I was 17 or so," Robert

Crumb said in an telephone interview from his home in France. "Her stuff is way exceptional."

The project emerged from Alexa's interactions with her classmates. "I just wanted to teach other people how to draw," she said. "I wanted to show them that they should be able to draw but they shouldn't copy my techniques. They should find their own personal style."

Her lessons are whimsical and digressive. A page showing how to draw male figures in different positions includes arrows indicating that women are waiting off-panel. "Hello!" a female voice says to a man holding a bouquet of flowers behind his back. A man making monkey arms is greeted by the voice of a woman saying, "I HATE you!"

Alexa spends up to four hours a day drawing comics, which she leaves around the house for her father to sift through. But when she's not drawing, her focus gives way to playfulness. When a reporter turned up on her doorstep, she seemed elated to have a new friend to take on a tour around the house, and proposed a sleepover party. When she's excited she speaks so quickly that she has to stop midsentence to gulp for air.

Her strips often have a similarly frantic feel, as if she had an idea burning through her head and was worried it would escape before she got it all down on paper. "I just daydream," she said. "I'll just set my mind on one subject and start thinking about it, and suddenly I spend hours thinking about some stuff. Sometimes I'm so delighted because an idea will pop in from Pluto. And I'll go, 'I want to draw that.' "

Patrick McDonnell, the creator of "Mutts," a nationally syndicated comic strip that Alexa cites as one of her favorites, said: "It's not just drawing funny pictures. She's very sophisticated in her storytelling, using different angles, expressions, moving a story along at a compelling pace. That's the very trick of cartooning."

Alexa's drawings are far from the only cartoons in the Kitchen house, which sits on a windy road in rural central Massachusetts, about 90 miles west of Boston. Mr. Kitchen, 59, has collected comic paraphernalia for as long as he can remember. He and Alexa's mother, Stacey, 35, met in 1993 at a comic book convention in Dallas. (Ms. Kitchen said she's "not a comic books person," but she used to model for a comic book series.)

At the center of Alexa's room is a table covered in building blocks, all of which she has drawn on. "I draw on everything," she said. "I'll draw on myself. I'll draw on the air."

She obsessively constructs sets for fantasy worlds out of the blocks and plastic people that she decorates in foil wrappers from miniature chocolate bars. The blocks with hieroglyphics signify the ancient Egypt area, those with "bone buffet" mark the dog land, and the greatest amount of real estate is devoted to her interpretation of "The Wizard of Id," the syndicated comic strip written by Johnny Hart about a medieval kingdom.

According to her father, when she was 4, Alexa dreamed up a world called Kirsy-Lirsy Land that had its own language (she made a K.L.L. Dictionary) and its own cast of 50 dogs. Kirsy-Lirsy Land suddenly ceased to exist when she was 6, and the characters haven't shown up in her drawings since. "I remember going to dinner with her when she was 4," said Jay Kennedy, editor in chief of King Features, the syndication service. "She had notebooks filled with different languages that she had invented. She had her own worlds, but she was also able to talk to the grown-ups."

On a recent afternoon a crumpled-up drawing on her bedroom floor showed a bride and groom in church, being married by a goldfish. Asked why she had discarded the drawing, Alexa shrugged and explained that she wasn't satisfied with all the white space on the page. "I'm not really good at being slow and detailed," she said.

Her parents say she is awakening to the unpleasant consequences of her talent. Though she doesn't lack for the occasional play date, she doesn't have many close friends either.

"Some people at school are jealous, and some are nice, and some are just plain mean about it," she said. Lately, Alexa has been toying with the idea of two girls drawing. The pictures show one girl's canvas crowded with an elaborate constellation of flowers and animals and spaceships, and the other's bearing a lone stick figure. In some of these drawings the girl who can't draw very well looks on at the artist with disdain.

"We were always reluctant to conclude she was a prodigy," her father said. It wasn't until Alexa was 6 that her parents felt certain something extraordinary was happening.

Will Eisner, the renowned comic artist and graphic novelist and Mr. Kitchen's client, was visiting the house. In the middle of a business meeting Alexa showed him a comic she'd just drawn of a little girl holding her nose and flushing the toilet. Mr. Eisner asked Alexa if her father had helped her come up with it.

"She got very indignant," Mr. Kitchen recalled. "She said, 'I did it myself,' and he looked at me, and I nodded, and from that point on he ignored me and spent the rest of the time looking at her drawings with her."

Mr. Eisner died last year, but his widow, Ann Eisner, remembers his meeting with Alexa. "He was really amazed at her work, and he said, 'I hate to use the word genius, but I don't know what else to say,'" she recalled. "She's amazing. She keeps herself amused. She just sits there and draws and writes, and she spells right, and she doesn't misuse words."

It wasn't until Alexa's encounter with Mr. Eisner that Mr. Kitchen began promoting her work in earnest, mailing samples of her comics to friends in the industry and bringing her to National Cartoonist Society dinners. She went to one such dinner honoring Mr. McDonnell, and he invited her to sit at the head of his table. "She loves talking to older cartoonists," her father said. "It helps being a little girl."

Her parents say they are torn between wanting to encourage her and their fear of being aggressive. Growing up in Mississippi, Stacey was a child singer and witnessed "all kinds of mothers who were really pushy, the JonBenet Ramsay kind of thing," she said. "There's a fine line."

Alexa shrugs off the attention, up to a point. "I'm not under any pressure," she said, "except when I have to sign books, I get a headache. I get headaches a lot. I have one now actually."

Alexa seems to regard her own progress with a mixture of impatience and delight. A recent drawing features a "children's drawing timeline." A huge squiggle accompanies "age 1 1/2," a stick figure is labeled "age 3," and the evolution continues until a finely turned-out drawing of a girl next to "age 8 1/2." Her work continues to improve month by month, but how long she keeps at it is anyone's guess.

"You see people that get a bit of buzz fairly early on, and then they fall by the wayside or go into another career like animation or banking," said Eric Reynolds, an editor at Fantagraphics, a leading publisher of graphic novels.

For now Alexa doesn't seem to be the slightest bit restless. In June she made \$250 selling sketches at the cartoon museum, and she saved the money for art supplies and a birthday trip to Hershey Park in Pennsylvania.

"I just felt so great," she said, shifting to a cross-legged position and picking a little purple pillow off the floor. "I never expected to do anything like this. I never expected a single person would buy my book. It makes me want to hug this pillow so

hard. It makes me want to burst it. It makes me want to hug the whole world and squeeze everybody."

Photos: Alexa Kitchen and some of her work: From top left, her illustrated "Poem"; a page from her book on drawing; a comic strip called "School Days"; and at right, "Lipstick."

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