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COVID chronicle

by Karen Wilkin

On artists in lockdown.

I've been asking many artists—some with significant track records, some aspiring, some students—about the effect of the changed world we've been living in since mid-March. The responses have been both negative and positive, sometimes at the same time. People complain of too much solitude or not enough, of the luxury of more studio time or the stress of distance from the workspace or—worst case—of having lost it. There's the challenge of not having one's usual materials and the freedom to improvise out of necessity, the lack of interruption and the frustration of losing direct contact with peers and colleagues, and more. The drastic alterations in our usual habits over the past months have had sometimes dramatic, sometimes subtle repercussions in everyone's work. Painters in oil are using watercolor, drawing, or experimenting with collage; makers of large-scale paintings are doing small pictures on the kitchen table. Ophir Agassi, an inventive painter of ambiguous narratives, has been incising drawings in mud, outdoors, with his young daughters.

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Many of the artists I've informally polled have had long-anticipated, carefully planned exhibitions postponed or canceled. In partial compensation, a wealth of online exhibitions and special features has appeared since mid-March, despite the obvious shortcomings of seeing paintings and sculptures on screen instead of experiencing their true size, surface, color, and all the rest of it. Rachel Rickert, a rising young painter of intimate ideas about being female, observes: "As much as I am impressed with the virtual versions of exhibitions and conversations, I miss putting my nose inches from another artist's work. I miss experiencing the layers, the marks, the difference in

viewing something close versus across the room.” It’s a common sentiment, although it’s worth noting that all the on-screen activity has allowed more work to be seen more widely. Some artists have made the virtual world integral to their efforts. John Bjerklie, a sculptor and antic performance artist, has an ongoing project in his persona as “BigHat,” a nod at his early days as a *plein air* painter. BigHat and another artist, sometimes on opposite sides of the globe, paint portraits of each other, using FaceTime or Skype, raising absorbing questions about the nature of mediated perception. (The results, like the work of all of the artists mentioned here, can be seen on Instagram or on their websites.)

Established painters and sculptors with ready access to their studios, especially studios in or close to their homes, seem to have fared best during the lockdown. They are often delighted that the forcible elimination of other obligations has allowed for undisturbed studio work and time for contemplation. Medrie MacPhee, whose mysterious abstractions are haunted by elusive allusions to the world around us, notes: “The solitariness of daily life without exhibitions, openings, museums, social life, and few trips into Manhattan from my outer borough studio in Ridgewood has—as many artist-friends agree—enforced a mental space to think and regroup.” Artists with young or school-age children, or with older offspring back in the family home, often have other things to say. (See “not enough solitude.”) But even for those with dedicated workplaces and few demanding domestic imperatives, getting to the studio and settling down to work can be problematic. Sometimes it’s psychological. Rickert writes: “Despite more time in my schedule, I have found it incredibly difficult to paint with my usual fervor. I feel almost crippled by the current multiple crises happening outside my door. In a way I have been making paintings about quarantine for years. My work routinely focuses on my intimate spaces, the most private pockets of the home, like the bed and the shower. Now that we are all really stuck inside these physical and mental spaces, and the anxiety of the world increases daily and permeates the walls of our homes and into our minds, I feel frozen.”

Geography turns out to count a lot. Jill Nathanson, a painter of expansive, eloquent, color-driven abstractions, found that taking a bus from the Port Authority Bus Terminal to her Hoboken studio was no longer an option, for obvious reasons. Now she drives the family car from her Manhattan home, dropping her physician husband at his Brooklyn hospital, backtracking to New Jersey, and later returning to Brooklyn to pick up her husband. “The logistics are a little crazy, but at least I’m able to concentrate when I get to the studio,” she says. Some tough, lyrical recent paintings with overlapping, translucent pools of unnamable colors and a group of promising studies suggest that the zig-zag commute has not disturbed her work stream. If anything, perhaps because studio time has become more precious, Nathanson’s recent work seems more intense and spatially inventive.



Karlis Rekevics, Broad Ordinary Occasions #10, 2020, Charcoal on gessoed paper.

Jeffrey Morabito, a young painter of ample expressionist canvases, moved to Astoria shortly before the lockdown, retaining his Bushwick studio. A roundtrip of nearly twenty-four miles on bike proved daunting, so at first he worked on drawings and at small scale at home, but that proved unsatisfying. “I wrap myself up like I work at Chernobyl and take the subway now,” he says. “During the first few months of lockdown I was too distracted to be ambitious with my work. Since then I’ve taken on more ambitious paintings, but rather than finishing them quickly, as I did before, I’m working very slowly and I have many going on.” The Brooklyn-based sculptor and draftsman Karlis Rekevics has long made work, often site-specific, about neglected aspects of the urban environment, using as starting points for his generous, unpredictable structures architectural and mechanical details that would escape most viewers. The walk from his Sunset Park home to his workshop, two and a half miles each way, much of it under the Brooklyn–Queens Expressway, triggered a series of very large, dramatic, black-and-white drawings that shift between reference and abstraction. As in all of Rekevics’s work, the point of departure is the expedient infrastructure of the city he lives in, fragmented and reconstituted, but

the provocation for the covid-era series is something that he hadn't dealt with before the lockdown, seen from a viewpoint new to him, over an extended period of time.

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For many artists, the pandemic and its global implications have generated feelings of anxiety that have been as influential on their art as the enforced changes in their working conditions. Many say they felt compelled to make intimate, small work, even though they had the possibility of working large. Some noticed that they were using more limited, subdued color, without really being aware of it, while others found a need to employ vibrant, saturated hues. A painter of fairly non-specific images writes that she is painting a flower a day, finding comfort and calm in the discipline of close looking and translating her perceptions into mark-making. Several say they are exploring ideas that they have harbored for some time, sometimes almost subliminally, but had not yet acted upon, investigating the possibilities of earlier studies and source material, picking up on ideas previously abandoned, or entering roads not taken. Are these ways of turning back the clock or of moving into places not yet tainted by the pandemic? Another reports that she is improvising with small, repetitive blocks of wildly varied color. Figurative images emerged for a while, she says, but were ultimately not compelling. Is the systematic nature of the repeated squares a clearer expression of control and order than the vagaries of the body, however freely indicated? Is geometry a substitute for a comprehensible world in a time of chaos?

For David Stern, whose ferocious, dense canvases are populated by glimpses of figures in the urban environment, nearly subsumed by a sea of paint, the lockdown provided an occasion to return to an earlier project of making one self-portrait drawing in ink per day, with the touch, the rhythm of strokes, and the visual density echoing both his mood and the weather. As posted on Instagram, with Stern's comments on the particulars of the day, the series allows us to share his shifting responses to the events (and non-events) of each day, translated into expressive images that pulse between pure gesture and reference.

Some painters have found the current situation reverberating in their work obliquely. "While wanting to mirror the external bleakness of the moment with the interiority of the paintings," Medrie MacPhee says, "I still am employing the same processes, but in some cases the paintings have become far darker. For example, a nearly all-black eight-by-ten-foot painting, *Dark Matter*, whose title refers to the invisible forces believed to keep the ever-expanding Cosmos from flying

apart." Rachel MacFarlane makes cardboard constructions of landscapes she has studied like a *plein air* painter, using them as "models" for free-wheeling, improvisatory paintings. Until mid-March, she had been traveling fairly widely to various settings. "Now more than ever," she says, "it seems clear that media which recreates natural spaces is tied to a desire to replace lost natural terrain and reflects a lost experience of connecting to vaster places. We're all currently sheltering in place, relying heavily on a barrage of digital replacements to satiate a desire for greater connection to both people and places. Our personal space is shrinking, companies are moving to fully remote work models, and educational sites are now in our living room. So as our freedom to explore the physical world shrinks our digital space grows exponentially. It's a seismic shift. Creating these projections of landscape in my studio while trapped by a pandemic has been holding even more weight for me recently."

For Ophir Agassi, time, or rather, the effect of time on the drawings he made in mud with his daughters, was the most compelling thing about them; they would disintegrate with the first rainfall. The idea is not new to him. For years, he has made very large drawings, outdoors, with earth or in sand, in tandem with his paintings, filming the evolution and eventual dissolution of the image; beach drawings, for example, are erased by rising tide. But painting on canvas has usually dominated. Now, Agassi writes, "The focus has shifted from archival 'permanent' works to transitory, ephemeral works. There is a heightened sense for me of the significance of working this way now. In contrast to the high-tech devices and communication we are now completely engulfed in, these works are made with the simplest of natural, raw materials. Working on these feels elemental in a way that is even more potent for me than paintings or drawings on paper, and it feels like a way of balancing the digital/virtual ocean we're living in with real life/real material." The irony, of course, is that "Once the actions/works are completed, the only record that they ever happened/existed is a digital/virtual one." And, he adds, the transitory, ephemeral aspect of these works reminds us of the impermanence and fragility of our own lives: "The lockdown has been destabilizing; instability is where these works exist. They embrace the unstable, the lack of controllability, and this too feels balancing and grounding."

The responses I received had common threads, no matter where they originated. From London, Olivia Bax, a young sculptor of enigmatic objects who is beginning to attract attention, writes, "I found the beginning of lockdown completely overwhelming. Like most artists, I have various part-time jobs. The expectations of these jobs increased when stay-at-home measures were put in place. Lockdown brought an expectation that everyone was 'free.' This meant that all carefully positioned walls built to protect studio days were shattered. Days when I was in the studio to make my own work were bombarded with emails, requests, phone calls, etc."

But, Bax notes, there were also unexpected benefits. "There was an alarming amount of packaging material (from online shopping) being left on the streets," she says. "I have been collecting polystyrene packaging on my walk to the studio. This has been incorporated into a lot of sculpture I am making at the moment. I was also trying to avoid shops so I used what I had. I started using leftover paint in a more sporadic, less controlled manner. This has changed the way I think about

coloring my sculptures.”

Although some artists I contacted have been working for more years and are better known than others, all those I’ve discussed so far have respectable, often impressive exhibition histories and figure in many collections. They all entered the art world and began to establish themselves before everything became virtual, so although galleries have closed and shows have been postponed, and though they miss the stimulus of studio and museum visits, of seeing other people’s work in actuality, and taking part in critical discussions, they all have experience working alone, concentrating independently on the painting or sculpture evolving before them. For art students, however, especially those who were slated to have thesis exhibitions and receive their Master of Fine Arts degrees this spring, the abrupt cancellation of classes in mid-March was shocking and often very disruptive. Many had to abandon their school studios on a day’s notice, retreating to usually smaller, often shared spaces, or returning to their family homes and childhood bedrooms. For students used to working from the model, the extended interruption was particularly difficult to deal with, certainly at first, but some have found that their new situation has sent them in new directions, provoking work quite different from their previous efforts.

The varied experiences of some of the mfa candidates at the New York Studio School are fairly representative. Bee Chessman, a graduating student whose thesis exhibition, originally scheduled for May, is now planned for some time this fall, writes that, in some ways, her enforced separation from the school environment has been helpful. “After March 13, apart from Zoom critiques, I was isolated from the influence of teachers, classmates, and exhibitions. Adding to that the stress of the covid crisis, I quickly realized that I deeply desired to just paint beautiful subject matter with colors that I loved. I also found myself grateful for simply the food I was eating. It resulted in small, intimate paintings of foods with a newfound lushness and thickness of paint. I let go of the pressure to include everything in a painting and focused on the search for rich, intuitive color and form.” Chessman’s new small paintings of fish and seafood are particularly strong, although she says that she was sometimes interrupted by her mother’s needing to cook her subject matter for the family dinner.

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Anne-Sophie Hubschwerlin, one of Chessman’s classmates, unable to return to her family in France, left her shared Brooklyn apartment for a friend’s vacant Manhattan home, bringing paint, a stack of small canvases, and a suitcase of canned food. Hubschwerlin’s work, like Chessman’s,

changed—quite notably. “At the Studio School I was painting from life exclusively and painting only people,” she writes. “I found myself frustrated about finding anything I could paint while I was alone and isolated. After a couple weeks of anxiety and fear I started painting the stack of the cans of food I brought with me, which were my only belongings in the new apartment. Somehow I have found myself painting these cans ever since. I was never interested in painting still lifes, but these cans somehow gave me comfort and beautiful colors to look at. I love painting big canvases, but having to deal with small formats has opened a new path that I would probably have never tried if it wasn’t for this time of limitation.” Hubschwerlin has since moved to an apartment where she can make large canvases again. The result? “I set up big bunches of cans and started to paint bigger than life for the first time. Maybe because of the loneliness, because of the lack of feedback and peer inspiration, my language has evolved and become more free. It has become more about my experience and less about the subject.”

The lockdown has had a different effect on Mimi Kwon, an abstract painter from Korea who completed her first year of the Studio School’s mfa program this spring. “I will never forget 2020 in my life,” she writes, “with covid-19, Black Lives Matter, political issues. It’s all happened at the same time. I’ve never been involved with these issues in my painting before. I keep thinking how to show them in my painting. This will be a connection from my real world to the other world that I wish to create in my paintings.”

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