



Pat Kane, "Isolation Portrait, Swan Family, Yellowknife," 2020

Art in a Time of Pandemic

How are artists coping with anxiety and isolation during the corona virus crisis?

by Sarah Swan

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When I close my eyes, they burn. I've spent too much time staring at social media, scrolling through infection updates, but also through endless posts about balcony concerts, free performances, online exhibitions, dance classes, virtual poetry readings, beading circles.

I scroll through scores of new Instagram accounts, catch-alls for ghoulish, apocalyptic, virus-inspired art. I download colouring pages for the kids, bookmark a Broadway play to watch later, subscribe to a drawing app, contemplate answering a local film group's call for quirky quarantine home videos. They're calling it COVID(eo). Get it?

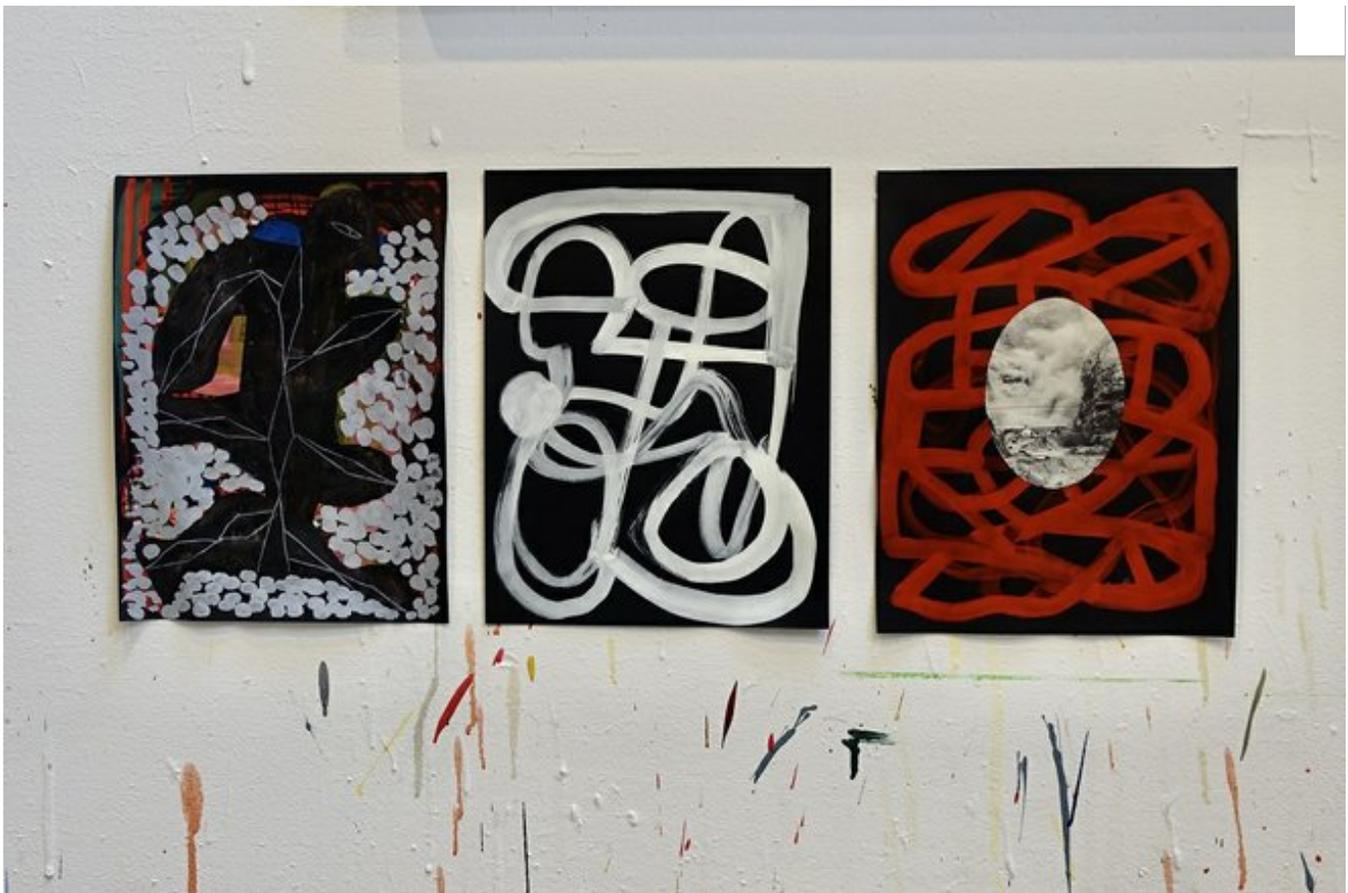
Such a swift turn to the arts is heartening. Humans were made to sing, to paint, to perform sock-foot-on-slippery-floor dances in our kitchens. Inventiveness is in our DNA. It is theoretically possible, I've recently learned, to construct a bagpipe using a garbage bag and three recorders.

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store aisles are empty, we absolutely must remain upbeat, entertained, distracted. During a crisis, it's helpful to avoid the question that hangs heavy in the air: "What if ...?"

I've been wondering about the inner lives of artists during this pandemic. Are artists experiencing a surge of creativity, like everyone on the Internet seems to be? The pace of the world's virtual creativity is a carousel spinning too bright and fast. I'll be honest. There's more than burning eyelids here. My retinas feel frayed, my hippocampus scarred.

Many artists have learned to adjust and calibrate their inner lives away from distraction. Artists make art because they've learned how to find that further, quieter, uniquely sensitive place. I reach out to several artists with questions: "How are you doing creatively at this moment? Is this crisis spurring you on, or is our collective anxiety making it so you cannot work?"



Mark Dicey, recent work in studio, 2020, gouache, pencil crayon and collage on paper, each 12" x 9"

Terry Fidelak responds from Regina: "My desire to make art has been completely curtailed. I've felt foggy-brained, unable to focus, dislocated from regular rhythms. A pandemic is a real buzz-kill. But I've never been one to translate difficult times into an artwork."

Calgary-based Mark Dicey is still drawing, albeit distractedly. "Lately, I do see anxious, nervous energy in my rambling expressions."

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now, but I'm also seeing posts about how artists don't owe anybody anything during a pandemic."

Some responses remind me that there's no way to isolate the effects of this crisis on artists' creative psyches. For many, the pandemic only compounds or complicates the loss and grief they were already feeling.



Julaine Deborgorski, "Get Happy," 2020, screen shot of dance performance

Julaine Deborgorski is a student at the Yukon School of Visual Arts in Dawson City. Last year, she lost her brother Andrew to a house fire. "We created a safe space among students and staff so I could create the most vulnerable work of my life," she says.

"I needed a lot of space to move through the emotions, channel them and turn them into something. This school year meant everything to me. But suddenly the doors are closed and it is all gone. Now, all I have the capacity for is to make art that is silly."

Every day, Deborgorski makes videos of herself dancing and twerking in her underwear while blowing on a kazoo. She dances until she runs out of breath, out of new moves, or until she dissolves into tearful laughter.

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Elvira Finnigan, "Winter Vision," 2020, eyeglasses, glass bowl and salt crystals, 9" diameter (photo by Shaun Finnigan)

Elvira Finnigan has had nightmares about losing her way as an artist. "I am, in fact, in a somewhat dormant state of art making and feeling rather upset about it," she says over the phone from Winnipeg. "I'm trying to ask myself, what is the exact nature of our loss? But I'm also trying to rest."

As she talks, I remember an image on the Internet – Mona Lisa sporting sunglasses and tattoos, every bit a chill millennial, enjoying a puff. She's taking a break, as it were, from being her famously enigmatic self. Millennial Mona's message: If Western art can sit down, you can too.

Still, some artists are seizing the moment. Last night, I gathered my family near our living room window in Yellowknife. Photographer Pat Kane was outside in the dark, aiming his camera through the glass.

He's been taking what he calls isolation portraits of folks quarantined in their homes. As his wife-turned-assistant Heidi directed us over the phone – "Move left. A little more. Good." – I took note of their creative focus. The series



Mona Lisa rests. (Facebook image, author unknown...)

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"If you can make art right now you're incredibly privileged," says Kablusiak, noting that, if anything, this crisis leads to thoughts about the ingenuity and the vulnerability of disabled artists and artists without access to studios or the Internet.

Kablusiak makes a good point. The physical space of a studio, as well as quietude in one's psychological space – the zone, so to speak, that allows for respite and refuge – can be elusive for many artists, particularly in a crisis.



Tom Lovatt in his Winnipeg studio. (photo by Bette Woodland)

"Everything outside the studio vanishes," writes Winnipeg painter Tom Lovatt. "Artists have always self-isolated to a greater degree than most, so the idea of being cut off from the world causes me less anxiety than it might others.

"I do feel anxious," he adds, "but I also feel wonderfully, unexpectedly free in a way I never imagined possible ... and the contradiction isn't threatening."

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(and sometimes downright hostile) to the role of the visual artist, it's good to feel advantaged.

It's good to be able to reflect on art, too. After hearing from Terry Fidelak, I look at her website and remember why I love her work. Inanimate objects seem to grow vasculature under her touch. She's like Mary Poppins singing in the nursery, making things come alive. I look at Mark Dicey's drawings – so free, loose, gestural – and feel less tense. I watch the desperate dancing of Julaine Debogorski and decide it's an entirely appropriate response. She's playing the fiddle while her personal Rome burns.

After Sept. 11, I recall most art making screeched to a halt. Art felt suddenly hollow. Articles were written about art's failure to express the depth of the tragedy. There were cries of "too soon" whenever somebody tried. But now?

It's too early to know what will happen to artists in the wake of COVID-19, and I generally refuse to offer platitudes about the power of art. I love art with all my being, but that kind of comfort is just too thin. I suspect the spinning carousel will slow eventually, at least I hope so.

We have no need of more bagpipes or colouring pages, anyway. Artists or not, what we do need is to reckon with what is happening, and come to terms with how little control we have over our lives. In the eerie glow of these strange hours, perhaps we need to look down at our empty, idle hands and feel their lack. ■

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Mark Dicey

Pat Kane

Terry Fidelak

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