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ENTERTAINMENT

# 'Traces' at Collarworks an arresting exploration of creative spirit

Patrick Tine

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Kyoung eun Kang's "Traces: 28 Days in Elizabeth Murray's Studio" Provided

There is a moment in Martin Scorsese's documentary "Public Speaking" when the film's subject, Fran Lebowitz, holds forth on the importance of audiences. She says that great audiences with high levels of connoisseurship are as important to the culture as great art and artists. Lebowitz made this observation to illustrate the incalculable loss that AIDS inflicted on the New York arts scene. Not only was a generation of artists and performers wiped out, but some of the audiences sophisticated enough to fully appreciate their work was gone, too.

As a virus lays waste to our cultural life, though in very different ways than a virus did in the 1980s, what does it mean to be a great audience right now? Money is needed urgently so give where and what you can. But no one can be blamed for not visiting an art gallery when going to the grocery store is as stressful and ethically fraught as it was in March. But how can you appreciate art, or even enjoy it, (let's not even get into connoisseurship) when the only 100 percent safe way to do so is pulling up a virtual show on the wheezing, dying laptop that has been approximating your working and social life for the last nine months?

Collar Works in Troy has risen to the occasion and ably contended with these physical and psychic barriers with Kyoung eun Kang's "Traces: 28 Days in Elizabeth Murray's Studio," which runs in the gallery until Dec. 13 and online for eternity.

The body of work on display comes from Kang's 2019 residency at the 77-acre Washington County retreat that belonged to Murray, a pathbreaking neo-expressionist artist and MacArthur Fellow. Anchored by three video installations totaling nearly five hours in length, it is a deeply contemplative reflection on ritual and process. The show also has a number of large-format photographs taken from the video as well as spare watercolor riffs on Murray's style. But the video installations are the beating hearts of the show. In them we see Kang in the repurposed dairy barn that served as Murray's studio surrounded by white canvas, a table, a ladder and little else.

It is not so much what's on the canvas that matters in this show but rather Kang herself. Shot from behind on a static camera, we see her move and begin to fully inhabit the space. Almost all of her movements are suffused with a balletic grace and thoughtful deliberation. It's more devotional than yoga or tai chi. There's a moment where Kang is almost en pointe, which is no small physical accomplishment considering she is barefoot on an unfinished barn floor. Kang's performance – and it is quite a performance – also reminds us of the true physical rigor that comes with creating visual art. We see it as Kang briefly stretches her neck from side to side and move with the determination of a boxer heading back to their corner after a tough round. We see it when she lugs an ancient, paint-flecked ladder nearly twice her size across the space. Kang calls it a "prop" in her performance and that may be true on some level but the ladder is on display in the gallery and it sure looks like the real thing to me.

All three films play in the gallery at the same time and the effect is a deeply compelling meditation on process in syncopated triplicate. You'll hear a table of the same approximate vintage as the ladder being dragged across the floor, dawn chorus birdsong and a passing summer downpour in the same moment. It is, in the best sense, alive.

If you choose to view the show entirely online, Collar Works has partnered with Hudson Virtual Tours to create a digital show. It's essentially Google Street View inside an art gallery. It works very well and I suspect this approach will not be going away even after we've all received our Pfizer jabs and life, we pray, returns to something like normal. Because this show is so reliant on video, the digital approach actually has some advantages. These films are long and standing on a concrete floor for several hours to watch them goes beyond the stamina of even the most dedicated connoisseurs. You can watch them at home while you're working or should be working. These films reward the lingering eye and at home there is the time and space to linger.

Painstakingly ritualizing our work and creative processes seems like a distant memory or even an indefensible luxury right now. Don't you know there's a pandemic on? The barrier between work life and home life has been annihilated and every waking moment has a precarious immediacy. We are advised (rightly!) that we mustn't visit our houses of worship. Ritual and divinity are on hold and yet here is Kyoung eun Kang reminding us there are still muses to invoke.

### If You Go

"Traces: 28 Days in Elizabeth Murray's Studio"

When: Through Sunday

Online Artist Dialogue, Tuesday, Dec. 8, at 7 p.m. register at collarworks.org/calendar

Where: Collar Works, 621 River St., Troy – Down the parking lot and to the right.

Hours: Thursday and Friday 12–6 p.m.

Saturday and Sunday 12–4 p.m.

Admission: Free

Information: collarworks.org 518-285-0765

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