

ART SPIEL

Reflections on the work of contemporary artists

APRIL 9, 2020 BY CATHERINE KIRKPATRICK

Artists on Coping: Elisabeth Condon

During the Coronavirus pandemic, Art Spiel is reaching out to artists to learn how they are coping.



Elisabeth Condon in front of Urban Idyll at Ditmars Blvd., Queens, in 2019. Photo Phillip Reed

Informed by scroll painting and 20th century abstraction, [Elisabeth Condon](#)'s landscapes intersect nature and décor. While the overlap of New York and Florida inspire the majority of her compositions, Condon frequently travels to numerous residency fellowships from Shanghai and Mexico City, to the Grand Canyon and Florida Everglades. She recently completed *Urban Idyll*, thirty-six laminated glass panels for the NYCT Astoria-Ditmars Blvd. Station in Queens, commissioned by MTA Art & Design. Her work has been recognized by the Joan Mitchell Foundation, Pollock Krasner Foundation, and State of Florida Individual Fellowships.

AS: How are you coping?

EC: I so appreciate this dialog, thanks for asking. Quarantine indulges my natural proclivity to isolate. Though so far preoccupied, I feel optimistic the stillness will invite deep time. Last week I completed a paint-by-numbers canvas, simply to paint. This is a step towards resuming the scroll painting techniques I have practiced for many years.

I also began painting on discarded wood scraps and linen. I want to bring scrappiness to the elegance of the linen. The flowers I've been painting in New York the past five years have shifted from more literal translations of vintage textile patterns to curled pours of color bound by lattice patterns. I'm really excited about these poured flowers, and ordered ten canvases that I picked up in the nick of time. My husband is an artist and paint maker, so he has pigments and binder to spare, therefore I have materials and space to work.



Checkers, 2020, acrylic and calligraphy ink on linen, 30 x 21 inches. Photo Jason Mandella

AS: Has your routine changed?

EC: Yes, everything. The second week of March everything changed. On that Sunday my studio building announced its closing. By Monday I was on an empty flight to join my husband in Florida. I have a studio there, so I can work. The

prospect of not being with him and without my studio in New York was too much. So there was an abrupt shift from urban life—running around seeing shows while galleries remained open and stocking the apartment for the upcoming shelter-in-place—to actual quarantine on an acre lot in a suburb of Tampa. I was fortunate to travel without restriction or mishap.

Now the day begins with the sound of birds and the silhouettes of foliage as the light dawns. I read the *New York Times*, check in on social media, practice Spanish, and online yoga. I connect with friends on Zoom and work in the studio. These activities build momentum and help my unease. In the evenings, Karl and I walk around the block and take shameless escape in films from the Criterion Channel. The films I've been watching, the wood discards I'm painting, and my LA childhood are slowly combining into a triumvirate of ideas that may manifest in work to come.



Pavilion of Winter and Spring, 2017, in Flora Fantastical at Glyndor Gallery at Wave Hill, NY. Photo Stefan Hagen

AS: Can you describe some of your feelings about all this?

EC: The world I believed in is crumbling. All the explosions in action films can't replace the human loss and suffering caused by an ahistorical leadership. Life is science fiction, without cease. The globalism that opened my eyes to the world through culture, education, and travel vies with contempt for expertise that marks the ignorance of this time. Whether in politics or art, when the ability to articulate is viewed suspiciously, we descend into fundamentalism. We must re-route the pyramid scheme and find new ways to cooperate.

Perhaps countries are a collective history of consciousness, so only those who have truly experienced folly are now capable of reform. Germany is one example. Yet culture represents the highest aesthetic, spiritual, and heartfelt aspirations of what it means to be alive. I cling to what is possible in culture despite the lowest historical moment since the Civil War.

The virus is a call for a united world based in cooperation and I must continue to believe in our capacity for peace.



Brick Wall, 2020, acrylic and calligraphy ink on linen, 30 x 21 inches. Photo Jason Mandella

AS: What matters most right now?

EC: People. Staying connected and staying open. Supporting when and where it's possible. My heart is with friends and family around the globe, and the health workers at the front lines of the virus. Focusing feels much harder when the heart is split. My mother-in-law in assisted living is unable to receive visits. For so many, just going outside constitutes enormous risk.

When I remember to stay open it combats nihilism. It also firms my resolve to paint with a free and open perspective, to create a space in which others can open as well.



The Unexpected Orchid, 2019, acrylic and ink on linen, 30 x 21 inches. Photo Pat Blocher

AS: Any thoughts about the road ahead?

EC: After the 2016 election, rereading the passages on Reconstruction in *Gone With the Wind* illuminated some of the historical tensions in our country anew. It turns out that Margaret Mitchell's father was a historian of the period. Now, reading the new Sontag biography shows the rise of a cultural class in America and a similar backlash. History is alive and we are participating. Hopi Chief White Eagle states that we can view the virus as a hole or a portal.

I have been thinking about how to share my work more broadly with others. Not only is it time to reconsider society but cultural production as well. In this time of great leveling, giving restores hope. I find succor in scroll paintings, which circulated as gifts and documents of political resistance. In the discreet and beautiful compositions of scrolls I find moral

strength and succor. As Elizabeth Murray once said of Cezanne, “someone is at home in there.” The sense of life lived and companionship through landscape is a goal and a gift.



Everything is Fine, 2020, acrylic and ink on linen, 30 x 21 inches. Photo Jason Mandella



Catherine Kirkpatrick is a writer and photographer based in New York. She wrote the introductions to Meryl

Meisler's two books, and is currently working on an oral history about recent changes in photography.



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