

ART IN PLACE ONLINE AT STANDARD SPACE

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Richard Saja, *The Plague Doctor*, 2020, cotton floss embroidered on found toile fabric, 23" x 23".

by J.M. Belmont

In mid-March, the art scene all over New England — and slowly afterwards, much of the United States — came to a standstill — or at least its institutions. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many galleries moved to appointment-only viewings. An overwhelming number temporarily closed altogether. Cultural backbones like the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston are closed to the public, with its date for reopening being extended to further and further dates. The communal feeling that art brings has been thrown out of sync. Even imagining the empty halls of museums or a gallery with its lights out brings a disconcerting mood.

But some institutions are defying that mood. Standard Space in Sharon, Connecticut, has launched “Art in Place,” a rolling virtual exhibition focused on art relating to the ongoing pandemic. The idea for its development came to curator Theo Coulombe two weeks ago:

“My art practice as a photographer has me driving around quite a bit, repeatedly scouting favorite locations for my images. While cruising, I’m listening to the radio, which provides me with constant content to riff on, in that moment commentators were debating the merits of ‘shelter in place’ and my mind spat out a couple of things like ‘cook in place’ which went to ‘craft in place’ which went to ‘art in place’ and bang! I told myself, that’s it, online show for Standard Space... I’d been wracking my brain about a concept for the gallery and the idea of ‘ART in PLACE’ locked it in.”

The concept of “Art in Place” is simple: any artist interested need only submit a work that they have created in “self-isolation,” and that meditates on that theme.

“While the physicality of the exhibition is stripped away,” said Coulombe, “its visual nature is actually reinforced, you can only view the works in 2D and viewers don’t necessarily have to view the exhibition in sequence. Works are posted in the order that I receive them in, I’m not sure why, but I’m fairly open to subject and medium.”

And this is one of the most engaging aspects of the show. Scrolling through Standard Space’s Instagram, or paging through their website, opens a unique exhibit. Paintings are followed by photography; installations are followed by video works; collage by embroidery. Each work — different from the one before — unfolds under the same, broad theme.

It is also abundantly clear that Standard Space’s call worked. The pieces keep coming in. Most of the artists I reached out to said they were inspired to submit work based on the gallery’s online presence — from emails to the website to the ever-ubiquitous Instagram.

The first work from “Art in Place” that I came upon was a photograph by Lazlo Gyorsok titled “The Lonely Walk.” The lush image depicts a cobblestone sidewalk. There is a thick fog that drenches the area, blurring the light of lampposts. We cannot tell if the redbrick stores that line the cobblestone are open or not. In the background is a single person. Gyorsok felt that the image “might ‘describe’ our life now.” In many ways, it does. A stroll around one’s neighborhood now, even at mid-day, can often feel as abandoned as the world captured in “The Lonely Walk.”

Mike Nudelman’s “Time Suspended” is a meticulously detailed reproduction of a photograph dating to the 1970s by Billy Meier, leader of the cult-like “Free Community of Interests for the Border and Spiritual Sciences and Ufological Studies.” (And the term “reproduction” itself is the wrong word to describe Nudelman’s works, telling me, “The drawings aren’t reproductions of sights seen, but are unique worlds of their own.”)

With great care, Nudelman, using only ballpoint pens, renders a facsimile of the photograph with a pointillist-like method. Strikingly, he still manages to keep the hazy nature of the original film photograph intact. “I prefer working from printed sources. Mostly images clipped from books. I collect printed images of a variety of sublime and seemingly unbelievable pictures,” Nudelman said. In “Time Suspended,” we see the grainy images of two fly-saucers hanging over rolling green hills. In a time when much of the outside world is absent of humans, the UFOs somehow seem no more out of place or bizarre than the photographs of Time Square abandoned going around social media.

And, beside the point, Nudelman’s interest in flipping the concept of the “landscape” on its head was developing well before the lock-down: “I find the traditional idea of landscape paintings as windows overlooking sublime vistas to be pretty absurd. My drawings are more of an experiment in inverting the illusion of traditional landscape paintings.” There isn’t a better time to question the ways in which we

interpret nature and its vastness than now, when we are crowded away from it.

The painting “Untitled” is a coffee hued labyrinth of gouache and walnut ink. Sitting just off center are a few drips of blue, red, white, and a mustard yellow. The painting is by Douglas Degges. It wholly captures the feeling of being trapped in self-isolation. One does task after task, chore after chore, trying to keep busy, keep the imagination working, attempting to find clarity. And, in a way, “Untitled” is a clarifying work. The curls of the circles that together make the labyrinth-like structures are both meditative and soothing.

But the act of painting during the lock-down has brought its own difficulties. Degges has found that the ideas don’t come readily in the present situation, saying, “While I have been physically present for my studio practice more over the past month, I honestly can’t speak to the quality of this presence. I am certainly making more work, and have found the making essential during this time, but I am easily distracted and have a hard time holding on to more than one idea at a time.”

One of the more haunting works posted thus far is Richard Saja’s “The Plague Doctor.” Saja is a master embroiderer who now, even 20 years in, is still enthralled with the medium: “‘Takumi’ is the Japanese concept of mastery of craft granted only after 60,000 hours of practice. I estimate that I’m approaching the two-thirds of-the-way-there mark, so I’m not even all that close, but getting there has been an incredible and delightful path of discovery of a medium for which my love only continues to grow.”

“The Plague Doctor” is a vivid work of embroidery. Saja’s doctor is unique. While the imposing beak-like mask filled with aromatics remains, the doctor’s suit is a flurry of different colors. His getup is of green and blue, and his leather boots have saffron tassels. He is also carrying a straw-hat adorned with a daisy. The doctor seems to trace through history, from the dark ages to now.

“My work usually takes an historic print and, through embellishment, decontextualizes it, relying on the humor and surprise of juxtaposition,” Saja said, adding that he, “opted to look back for The Plague Doctor in order to indicate that this isn’t a new phenomenon, that we’ve been here before and weathered the storm and will do so again this time — albeit with only marginally better tools at our disposal than a mask filled with aromatic herbs.”

For the artists, the work goes on. Many I talked to found that their creative work has been a refuge from the on going pandemic. Mike Nudelman elaborated: “My drawing process is very meditative... For me, there’s meaning and purpose in making, so keeping busy in the studio has been a great comfort.”

Others are grappling with the change in schedule. Some are adjusting to working from home. Degges has had to bring his studio into his living space and is still adjusting: “I’m totally out of synch, away from my tools and materials and stuck at home. So much of my practice involves spreading out and making a mess. Now, I’m working at home and have had to restructure my practice and use whatever is at hand.” A hopeful jewel in the exhibit is by photographer Jeannette Montgomery Barron. Simply titled “scrapbook,” it is what it purports to be: a beautiful, personal collection of scraps and memorabilia. Like so many of the works in “Art in Place” it is a reminder that this pandemic will be weathered, that a whole world and continuing of life sits just on the other side of the lock-down.

And the hope and appreciation is felt. Coulombe has been gratified by the response to the project. “At first I did not expect a ‘pointed’ reaction but I started getting emails with, ‘Thank you!’ ‘what a generous effort,’ really all positive feed back and it feels great to give something to the community.”

With “Art in Place” giving artists, and the community, an outlet for connection and creative energy, it makes the end of this lock-down seem all the more closer. [https://www.standardspace.net/art-in-place.\)](https://www.standardspace.net/art-in-place.)