



Debra Keirce.

ART IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

DEBRA KEIRCE

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ROBIN SAMILJAN

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SUSAN VALENTINE

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JOYCE ZAVORSKAS

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# STAYING AT HOME, WORKING AT HOME

ARTISTS HOPE FOR  
STRONG SECOND HALF  
OF 2020



Ever since COVID-19 became a household name, the art world has gotten much quieter. Galleries and museums have closed indefinitely, and artists can no longer travel to their studios or teach in-person art classes. But just under the new quiet is a low rumble, the rumble of the art world adjusting to this new — and hopefully temporary — normal. Online exhibits and art classes are cropping up, and artists throughout the country are converting their garages and living rooms into impromptu studios and continuing to create. I spoke to four artists who are currently working from home, making the best of an unprecedented situation.

Robin Samiljan is a Chicago-based artist who primarily paints in encaustic, though she's lately been experimenting with pastels. Before the pandemic, she taught two art classes and often attended encaustic workshops. However, she attended a pastel workshop last November, which piqued her interest in the medium. "I haven't had time to focus on pastels since then because of my teaching schedule," she said. "After two weeks of freaking out about the virus, I slowly began to calm down and realize I had the opportunity to work with pastels at home with absolutely no distractions and nowhere else to be!"

Samiljan's current subject of choice is landscapes, and each canvas drips with vibrant, sumptuous color. We look to nature in the best of times, and its beauty is especially poignant now that we're stuck indoors. But she sees the silver lining in the situation. In addition to her newfound medium, she's started her own online shop



Robin Samiljan.

and has been holding Zoom meetings with the students in her Friday afternoon classes, encouraging them to create. "Art is a wonderful form of therapy if you can find the discipline," she said. "I think the hardest part of COVID-19 is the lack of control and understanding of the virus, but if we can find a way to escape into a safe, creative space, there is a sense of order and calmness that can be achieved." When quarantine ends, she'll be an exhibitor in the Wells Street Art Festival on June 13 and 14 (still on as of press time) and the "One of a Kind Show" from December 3 through 6, both in Chicago.

Joyce Zavorskis is a printmaker based in Orleans, Massachusetts, working on a series of the secluded cliffs found at the ocean's edge. As the cliffs erode and fall away, spring continues to bring them new growth. Even in



a tumultuous year such as this one, spring provides us with that sense of rebirth: Zavorskas and her husband have been using the extra time quarantine has provided to clean up the yard and plant vegetables. "It feels good to declutter," she said. "It feels good to not have any pressure from outside obligations for this little while."

Indeed, the solitude of quarantine is familiar to her as an artist who uses quiet to create, but she does miss teaching and seeing people. "I don't feel inspired to create new work right now, there is too much uncertainty," she admitted.

"I feel like staying physically in touch with nature, my source of strength and resiliency. And to reach out to family and friends by Zoom or FaceTime or text, and to strangers walking down the street. It's so good to see anyone and they all smile back." She looks forward to exhibiting with her fellow 21 in Truro artists at the Falmouth Art Center from May 29 through June 22, and at the Marion Crane Gallery in Orleans, Massachusetts, in October.

Debra Keirce is an acrylic painter who, though based in Virginia, has exhibited across the United States. She was even recently in Japan as part of a six-woman art show in Tokyo. Though she's now stuck inside, she continues to exhibit online in the Manassas, Virginia-based One Love Art & Music Festival exhibition, where her work took first place; Seaside Art Gallery's "29th International Miniature Art Show" in Nags Head, North Carolina; and in Snow Goose Art Gallery's "The Art of the Miniature



Joyce Zavorskas.

Show" in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

Keirce enjoys the miniature for the way it forces a closer examination and a keener eye. "My goal is to create art that engages all of your senses," she said. "I want you to see, feel, smell, taste and hear my oil paintings." She's keeping herself busy with several series, including her "Hidden Paintings" collection, made up of miniatures painted on and inside little cupboards that can be hung up or shelved. In the 17th century, art was often kept under a curtain or in a cupboard to protect it from insects, vermin or nosy visitors.

While we may feel confined by the circumstances of today, Keirce urges us to "look for opportunities to do what you are really passionate about during this time." For example, she added, "If you love to paint, challenge yourself to paint your best work yet while the world is taking this deep breath. People will be





Susan Valentine.

eager to see it when everyone steps out again.”

Susan Valentine is an oil painter based in Leverett, Massachusetts. Her paintings start out as photographs that end in paintings as vivid as a photograph, but brighter, better and enhanced. Her current series, “Sustenance,” is comprised of realist depictions of her favorite cooking ingredients, like lemons, cherries, eggs and artichokes. The paintings look just as good as the real thing, perhaps even more so. One wants to reach into the canvas and pull out the plump tomatoes or shiny peppers to use in their own cooking.

Lately, however, Valentine’s attention has drifted elsewhere. “COVID-19, it turns out, is distracting,”



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# GET LOST.



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Susan Valentine, *Liz & God 2*, oil on panel, 6' x 6'.

she said. Instead of painting, she's channeled her creative energy into sewing face masks for distribution in her area, slowly learning the best way to make them. "I never make two masks the same," she said. "At this point I've probably made little more than 30 face masks, but they're starting to take on a pretty good look."

To make the masks, she uses donated fabrics, tea towels and heirlooms from her grandmother's sewing cabinet. "She taught me how to sew back in the '60s," she said of her grandmother. "She also left me a lot of bias tape and cotton twill, and I just know that she'd be happy that they're being used this way." Although she's been focused on mask-making, she does have several exhibits coming in the future, including "Florals, Large and Small" at Salmon Falls Gallery in Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts, from July 3 through August 30 and her big solo show at Leverett Crafts and Arts in Western Massachusetts from September 3 through 27.

Although many of the exhibits these artists are planning to be a part of are currently up in the air, the urge to create nevertheless persists. In times like this, art is one thing we can take comfort in, whether it provides us an escape from difficult times or serves as a helping hand. When this quarantine eventually ends and galleries can reopen and artists can return to their studios, we'll have something beautiful to look back on.



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**THROUGH AUGUST 16**  
**Above and Below: Stephanie Roberts-Camello and Emily Gibson, exploring below the surface**

**THROUGH SEPTEMBER 6**  
**Duxbury Art Association Winter Juried Show**  
**Rotations: Hamada Shōji at the Intersections of Culture**

**AUGUST 23–NOVEMBER 8**  
**Aaron Norfolk: Full Sonic**  
**\*Subject to COVID-19 decisions**

Emily Gibson, Tuesday, April 18, 2017, exhaled breaths of air, time, ink, pencil, paint.

Aaron Norfolk, Night-Song 2018, oil on canvas.

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