

Crisis Mode | artistic narratives of resilience

<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/15gh77FqiFsfrj2VAyt9PXyAHa5rjcCno7yebOBCfhuA/edit?usp=sharing>

During unprecedented times—moments of evolution accompanied by volatility, uncertainty, and unrest—art offers makers and viewers an outlet and relief from a state of near constant grief. In this past year, we have lost hundreds of thousands of people due to exposure to [COVID-19](#); hundreds of Black, brown, Native, and poor people met violent ends at the hands of [police](#); thousands have lost their homes. Close to two hundred have lost their lives as an unprecedented number of [fires](#) and [hurricanes](#) hit the West and Gulf coasts. Thousands have died of [drug overdoses](#) and [suicides](#) due to increased depression and anxiety born in isolation.

And yet,
we persist.
And still,
we create
art.

Art has the power to energize ongoing fights for liberty, equality, and kinship. In times of cataclysmic change, art can function as a vehicle through which an individual challenges their society. This can be an intimate expression of an individual's identity, as seen in Chad Morris' abstract work *Self-Portrait 4: Only a Little Gay*, or a loud accusation of gross injustice as seen in Craig Cheply's *#9 Business As Usual* and *#34 Voter Fraud* from his *100% Natural* series. Whatever form and however subtle or overt the message, the product of internal struggle and toil and intense contemplation—reflection, and then assertion—when asserted through art can open viewers' minds to new possibilities.

In the works submitted to *Crisis Mode*, I saw beauty, strength, intelligence, and wit. I felt hope, as well as rage, anxiety, and depression. I explored the meticulously crafted sculptures of Tara Daly and the rapidly drawn, powerful designs by Jared Schwartz. The works chosen tell stories of those isolated and at risk, of immigrants and aliens, of the free and the incarcerated, the young and old, wealthy and poor, those with disabilities, those who identify as LGBTQ+, Black, Brown, Asian, and white, people from Southern California, as well as the South, Midwest, and Northeast.

In a moment such as this, I find it important to explore how art manifests in different cultures and individuals—and there are so many in the United States—by practicing radical inclusivity. In jurying this exhibition, I sought out works that could build a narrative with as many different experiences of this pivotal moment as possible. It is fortunate that this exhibition will live online—where there are few barriers (physical, geographic, economic). I was able to choose from a variety of media (film, sculpture, vehicles, painting, photography, installations) without a concern for budget or space. I don't know many contemporary art curators who would have accepted Brad Kopps's *Dig it Dragon*—I was ecstatic that I could.

Few artworks speak to the diversity of media like those of Texan-native feminist Rosemary Meza-DesPlas, whose intimate stitchings of the female body use human hair to represent the unique

experiences of women, particularly Latinx women, as we navigate this world. Our hair being at once a symbol of health, age, and beauty seem grotesque when not found tumbling from our heads and down our backs. Be it between our legs or stitched onto a stretched canvas, Mezas-DesPlas employs women's hair to provoke a strong (bodily) reaction. In *Marching Across Your Lawn, The Grass is on Fire*, three naked feminine figures made of gray hair stitched into black twill fabric stomp gracelessly across the canvas from right to left, instantly speaking to a multiplicity of feminine bodily experiences in the use of gray hair, while referencing an ethos of persistence necessary for older women at this time (and always) as we collectively march on and over the mess of our ancestors towards true liberation.

Moving across the Gulf to Florida, we find the work of Miguel Saludes who captures the beauty of the unforgiving swampy terrain. In *Life after the Fire*, the reminder that something must rise from the ashes of the day is enough to stir any Californian's heart. The many dead roots of an old burnt down oak are now swimming in a sea of green grass. Saludes then takes us on a restless midnight ride out into the bayou. From inside his barren car, we look out onto a star-studded blue-toned landscape of a Floridian swamp. Made during the first months of quarantine from a photograph taken earlier in the year, the creation process and final product helped Saludes battle bouts of depression and anxiety while facing a difficult medical diagnosis in isolation.

Inspired by Thomas Freidman's *NYT*'s article "How We Broke The World," Stacey Gregory's *Pandemic Dominoes*, a 36 x 48 inch map of the world with dominoes laid out in an infinity symbol, speaks both to the thoughts and writing that have come out of this moment as well as the actions of our predecessors which have led to the disasters at hand. From global warming to social injustice, Gregory's work reminds us that a lot has been building up to this point; and, *what* we do now will have repercussions that ripple decades into the future. Much like Gregory's other work *Tech... tech... tech... BOOM!*, *Dominoes* references the creeping in of powerful global forces that have caused death and destruction to the poor and working classes.

Finally, I found self-portraits made in the time of COVID quite intriguing. From April Williams' *Spread*, to Nirali Thakker's *Recalculating*, to Kurt Weston's *COVID Scanner*, to Jeremy Woodward's *Self Portrait 2020*, to Eric McGhie's *Degrading DNA*, to Jacqueline Knell's *Sheltered: The Scream*, artists couldn't help but place themselves within this pivotal moment. And, with their self-portraits, we glance at the many different physical, mental, and emotional experiences of COVID-19.

Art is more than a reaction, but a response. A vehicle for individuals with expansive scopes of vision to provide commentary on the state of their respective societies. The wonderful thing about this exhibition, about these United States, is the ability to explore multiple communities within one space, and to find and catch the common threads. At a time of crisis, the best artists embrace the chaos to reveal possibilities—to see the lotus out of the mud. People continue to become disenchanted with the lives of the elite and with the infallibility of government officials. There remains deep distrust of power and yet, an indefatigable faith in the arts, in mamma Earth, and, still, in humanity. We may not have a clear-cut solution to this madness, but we can at least hear the voices of many artists yearning for a better tomorrow.