

During this time

SOUNDS OF SOCIAL DISTANCING

GAGA Artists share experiences during the Covid-19 Pandemic

By Pamela Ferguson

In collecting, reading, and re-reading member responses on how we've coped during these months, I learned so much about the spirit of artists. The closed doors become portals to new insights and experiences.

Some GAGAs got busy in the studio. As Norma Jean Moore stated, "I am viewing this as my residency at my home." Some rose in other ways to the challenge - planting gardens, completing home projects, or, as Caroline Royall discovered, "cooking beer bread is very easy." Bibi Saidi and friends created a social "pod" so they could feel like they were going out as they dined at each other's homes. She added, "a decent selection of wine sure helps."

Many of us learned to meet through Zoom, creating virtual online communities with family, friends, and associates. GAGAs also found solace in walking or gardening, writing, or talking on the phone with friends.

The good from this crisis is that many of us discovered new self-knowledge during the enforced solitude. So often, I read members' testimony of realizing how much we need others in our lives and how much we take for granted the simplest things, like smiling faces, being with friends, or a good old hug. What impressed most is that the common thread in all responses from GAGA members has been one of hope, humor, and perseverance. We will weather this.

Lyn Belisle

"Over the course of three weeks in the isolated and troubled month of March, I watched from my window as two birds created a nest. The birds were tiny, tireless, focused, unflinching, unceasing. They lifted scraps and shards in their beaks to weave a safe place for new life. Once, a jay tore into the nest, but they began again at first light."

"I made the banner of canvas, fiber, sticks and wax for them (displayed on the exhibit page). Affirmation came from my old dictionary. All on the same page were the words "Lift, Light, and Life" – now woven into the banner."

Dona Walston

"I returned from Hawaii on March 16 to self-quarantine for two weeks- that turned into months! At first, I experienced anxiety and was not productive. Then I kicked into gear and am now accomplishing a lot. I have done several paintings, and more are in process. If I learned anything, it is that anxiety shared by the multitudes is better than anxiety alone. Somehow, that brought acceptance and patience with the process. Now we must proceed slowly and at the pace that is most comfortable to each individual; accepting that range of responses."

Lisa Mara Bell

"I have found that the more time I have, the less I actually accomplish. Why? Well, there is always tomorrow. How does that work? On the other hand, exercise has become a priority along with family. I walk almost daily and visit with my young grandchildren regularly. Text and zooming with our New York family has also taken a priority. And I am finally working on a few commissions in addition to finishing a pet portrait of "Honey" for a client in Austin."

"Also, I have received and sent a plethora of viral jokes."

Susie Monday

"During these strange times, I've spent a lot of time in the studio working on exhibit submissions, plans for an exhibit of abstract textile work in Temple at the Cultural Activities Center, and with online teaching of my Art on the iPad courses. A nice balance of activity, sloth and self-care is keeping me relatively sane. As a textile artist I do a lot of design work digitally and then have fabrics printed at a commercial press specializing in Print on Demand on fabric. Due to their supply, labor and shipping issues related to Covid-19, shipments are slow, so I've worked around that by using materials I have on the shelves in unexpected ways. Improvisation is an important skill these days, whether in the studio or in the kitchen."

"I've found that giving myself weekly goals and a short must-do list of three, as well as good morning habits are the key to battling what seems to be an almost universal kind of low-level anxiety and lethargy — weird combination of feelings, right?"

Terry Gay Puckett

"During this time, I have learned several new things - I have been teaching Tai Chi on Zoom because my location at the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas shut down during this unsettling time, and now have a Zoom account. I created an outdoor space for birds near my living room window, and I now meet with cardinals for breakfast every morning. I have gone back to collage and collecting throw away stuff to make art and find it to be a cathartic means of expression. Shown is my paper bag art, titled *Pandemic Portfolio*. I also collected money for the San Antonio Food Bank by selling prints of my drawing Corona Virus Eater-Upper and donating the profits."

Carol D. Koutnik

"For the month of February, I traveled from Rockport, Texas to Portugal to visit my daughter and her husband. It was my first trip to this country and I found intriguing differences from the rest of Europe, especially in its history and food. Luckily, I returned home just days before Portugal closed its borders and international travel was suspended because of Covid-19. Due to the airline travel I self-isolated for 14 days and have been practicing the social distancing regulations since."

"Pieces of my travel to Portugal have come together as I embrace the time of quiet days. Slowly, my extra reading about the country and reflection of the extensive touring and visit materialize into paintings. It has been a blessing to not feel obligated to jump into the hectic art world here in Rockport, but rather to have uninterrupted time to remember and create."

Hebe Garcia

"This year has been one of many hardships with the current Covid-19 pandemic. In between all the craziness, I found myself working harder than ever both painting and sculpting to survive the lockdown. I have also been hard at work updating my website, so if you get a chance visit it and let me know what you think."

Sylvia Benitez

"We reflected a lot about artists and others. Both my husband and I agreed that for us the lockdown did not impact us too much. We live far out in the country. We are and have always been intentional isolationists in order to protect our creative time. We rarely go out but prefer to spend our off hours creating artwork. It does take time — a lot of it. With that said we were extremely sensitive to others who did not have the "training" that we personally/professionally have developed over the years. We realized that many people were probably experiencing withdrawal, anxiety, and having to confront themselves in away artists have done for years. Not an easy place to be thrust into without any preparation. So... we prayed for them."

Norma Jean Moore

"I had applied for a residency last year, and if I had gotten what I requested I would be in upstate New York during this time. But I didn't get the residency, instead Covid-19 entered our world. Most distractions have been removed and I spend most of the days on the premises. I am viewing this as my residency at my home. I do find my attention is not as clear as I would like, but that has to do with the current state of affairs. Grief has seeped in."

"I know that I have a special home that allows me to continue working, and others are not so fortunate. So, I have dedicated some of my time to participate in projects that are aimed to address the needs of the community: calling on seniors and making packets for the homeless. Stay safe."

Paula Sussman Abrams

"I wasn't surprised about Covid-19 and had stopped going out in February because I am immune suppressed. I was watching the news every day since 1/22. I went to Mexico City in January to see Frida Kahlo's house. I have struggled with my disabilities and I know she struggled through pain and handicap to continue her work."

"I painted many paintings about separate yet together. During Covid-19 I thought I was thinking of the world fighting together. It was disappointing not to see any global unity and now the terrible current events. It's weird because my husband and I were struggling too after 32 years of marriage separation last week. Separate yet together in many ways."

"I think now with disturbing current events as artists we must ask ourselves what we can do. How do we document this awful time? How do we inspire ourselves and others? What impact can we make? How can artists impact racism?"

Nancy Gerfers

"During the pandemic I had a big show with my daughter cancel but have been back to water coloring at this time and deliberately worked on pieces of beauty to lift my spirits — roses, cactus flowers, and assorted blooms. Thematically, I have also been doing a lot of gardening which I find very cathartic and also good for burning those extra isolation calories from snacking! Cheers!"

Brigitte B. Saidi

"Three things on our daily schedule helped us maintain sanity and our marriage:

1. Declaring a "pod" of 4 people, us two plus two single women and locking down "together" in three apartments. We dined together in alternating apartments, thus "going" out every night.
2. Movies and Scrabble kept our thoughts out of the misery vortex. With four different tastes in movies we expanded our horizons.
3. Meeting with friends via zoom was a major escape route, especially after the initial few weeks."

"What did we learn?"

- We are good hermits as long as comfort level is okay, and everybody pulls in the same direction.
- A decent selection of wine sure helps.

Did we find new paths? Not really, but we rediscovered old pleasures. I went back to baking all sorts of bread. The best one was a French *boule* that ripened for 2+ days before baking. I also went back to Bach piano sonatas — always a consolation."

Ilna Colemere

"I have seized the time to engulf myself in beautiful distractions. Thoughts, daily occurrences and things once considered incidentals have drawn me into places of deep reverie and occasional bouts of melancholy. Painting has served as a stained-glass filter for my emotions and for my abundance of energy."

Vera Smith

"I found it a time to reconnect with myself and what I want to create. It was also a time to reflect on what is most important to me. I realized I spent too much time on mundane tasks and socializing and not enough on creating. I found it very valuable and enjoyed my free time and time in the studio to the point that I don't want to go back to a hectic schedule."

Mary H. Morton

"The pandemic has kept me from traveling with friends, to see out of town friends and worst, I haven't seen my children and their families in 6 months. Not sure what has happened to my artistic urge. It needs a reboot. I have watched way too much TV and I am tired of Zoom. So that was the negative.

"For the positive I constructed and started a vegetable garden, continue to work on my yard, have taken up Bridge for my brain, golf, yoga and exercise for my body. I have started sending handwritten notes. I have reconnected with many friends and family via telephone and FaceTime. My sweet adorable furry companion, Messy Bessie Black, is forever at my side and loves me unconditionally. And best of all, I have slowed down my pace a bit. Life is Good."

Caroline Royall

During the confinement of the past 3 months, I have been feeling as if I was riding a rollercoaster without ever getting off (I have always hated rollercoasters.) or if you prefer, a runaway train with a conductor that just had a heart attack!

The spread of COVID 19 alone would have been enough to send anyone in a panic, but the apparent initial worldwide lackluster response was, as far as I am concerned, downright despairing. The realization that we are alone in the world, all 7.9 billion of us, was even more prescient. By alone, I don't mean that there are no aliens (I live with one), I mean that WE HAVE TO TAKE CARE OF OURSELVES BECAUSE NO ONE ELSE WILL.

So after a few weeks of sitting on the couch consuming chips, cookies, chocolate, refreshments and watching catastrophic television news, a period that culminated to my 63rd birthday, I realized that if I didn't take action, I would die, mostly from eating so poorly.

What I decided to do:

- Read a long book (Paul Auster - My favorite contemporary American author - "4-3-2-1" an 868 page novel - can be lengthy at times but very insightful in so many ways. I am on page 501.)
- Work on a garden which I watered every day, religiously.
- Walk my dog every morning, then walk myself.
- Order some things on Instacart in large quantity so we wouldn't need anything (25 lb of flour goes a long way... so does 25 lb of pinto beans...)
- Cook good meals.
- Start painting again although it took many walks and many pages of Paul Auster's novel to clear my mind to the point where I could be creative again.

What I couldn't help doing:

- Stream videos sent by friends, family and on Facebook (some were downright funny)
- Read people's posts on Facebook, including people I don't even know.
- Try to comment on posts finding that I was unable to come up with comments that:
 - 1) Made sense
 - 2) Would add anything at all to the discussion
 - 3) Would satisfy EVERYONE(All this till my brain was a total blur.)
- Laughing and crying uncontrollably at the sole idea of going out to eat, going to see a movie or just hanging out in a crowd.

What I learned:

- I was looking forward to zooming with family and friends - "Goodnight Zoom" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wVBQVmymb8I>. A lifesaver.
- Cooking beer bread is very easy.
- Staying cool when my spouse who is working from home was not immediately dropping what he was doing when hearing: "Breakfast is ready", "Lunch is ready" or "Diner is ready".
- That what I need more than anything in my life is HUMAN CONTACT.
- That I miss being free to come and go as I please.
- That I miss being in a crowd.
- That I miss making small-talk with shoppers at the store.
- That I miss people's smiles and that connivance that comes with being a human being among human beings.
- That I miss people living their lives and pursuing that happiness that is so often mentioned in this country.
- That in times of pandemic, one has to protect oneself and others.

And most importantly:

- That what happens to the world and my community matters more than I ever thought. I will never forget the last week in March where I felt the pain of the world as the virus was destroying lives. The fact that the people who died and their loved ones could not be together at a moment where being together is everything was and remains heartbreaking to this day.
- That I was very fortunate not being an essential worker like so many who do not have a choice and must go out during a pandemic.
- That nature tends to send us curve balls and that we must believe in man's ingenuity and empathy to get us through these tough times.

Bonnie Kirkley

"I have been really busy during this Corona crisis. Out of frustration from having three group exhibitions cancelled, I started a new series, and I have completed eight pieces. Thus far and will have two more done by mid-month."

"The NWLA group I belong to is sponsoring a salon style show in July titled *Quarantime*. All members have been invited to show up to 10 pieces at Artspace in Shreveport."

Lesta Frank

"I stopped teaching during this time and started painting more. It's been my saving grace along with gardening, meditating, walking outside and talking to friends. Painting takes me into a world beyond all the current events that are going on. Beyond the fears. Beyond the conversations in my head. I love a lot of what I've done. It's really been a gift of more time too. I was in a stuck place the first couple weeks, then a teacher who I did a Masterclass with told her group — paint anything and post it. So, it was like giving me a shove. After that, I got into the studio. There are times when the work just flows and other times when it's a struggle. I decided it was a success just doing the work no matter if something wonderful came of it or not."

Robin Gara

"This has been a crazy time like none other! I miss a lot of things including travel, seeing family, friends, going out to art and music shows. Despite feeling stir crazy, I have thoroughly enjoyed having time to be in nature (which now seems strangely more alive than ever) and to focus on my art practice. I have been having a lot of fun painting, collaging and continuing to find my voice in the studio."

Lisa Brown

"I find myself on this journey of wanting to be far better. I'm not a great person as it is, so to want to be better is no real stretch, but I want to be even better than I wanted to be before. I find myself wanting to live longer. Wanting to love more and appreciate more. Life is not timeless. Well, not in my body it isn't. And I want to make a few more booms happen before this body retires to the earth. I want the earth to absorb a satisfied soul, not an unfinished and wanting soul. Of course, it will, who am I kidding? But I can get closer to giving back to this life, than what I thought I simply did not have to give. Or, maybe this is all too simple. Perhaps reverse psychology still works on me after all these years. If you tell me to do it, I'm going to revolt and swing in the extreme. Stay extreme, even if it's extremely quiet. Love."

Virginia Lukefahr

"During the Corona Virus, I enjoy a peaceful routine. . . trying to maintain a peaceful heart, I walk the neighborhood in the mornings."

"A friend gave me readings for morning, afternoon, and evening prayers which help me be mindful of His presence. I also tried eating healthy foods — less makes me feel good."

"Being grateful each day for my painting, my husband, my family and gift of God's presence in my life, makes me humble and has brought peace I enjoy during the Corona Virus pandemic."

Lara Hye Coh

"I miss our group of artists so much. The newsletter will connect us. Looking forward to it. Hopefully soon we will be able to get together again and plan more fun shows."

"I haven't been productive at all. I tend to get distracted easily and have hard time concentrating. I watch too much CNN and MSNBC. I do enjoy crocheting while watching the news, it feels mindless yet very comforting."

"I heard the pandemic is going to change our future a lot, not only on the economic level, but our whole way of life. We are entering a more digitally advanced world. It's a new industrial revolution where we depend more and more on the smartphone, with Instagram and YouTube. Artists will soon have their own digital galleries."

Sally M. Astleford

"Be the Light"

"My activities: Garden and watching birds — Making and "feeding" my Sourdough starter — Creating — Hanging prayer flags in my studio — Zooming with family and dear friends — Photographing marine finds and ranch skulls and bones — Working w/ colored pencils and graphite on paper — Walking, walking!"