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'Pressure leads to unity': celebrating art in the time of coronavirus

A new exhibition features art made during quarantine as well as pre-existing pieces that speak to a tumultuous year

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The Dysturb Covid-19 awareness campaign in New York City in April 2020.

Photograph: Benjamin Petit/Dysturb

In 1918, when the world was plagued by the Spanish flu, artists tried to make sense of the world around them. Edvard Munch made lonely self-portraits, while Egon Schiele drew his mentor Gustav Klimt on his deathbed. Photographers

captured empty streets and ghostly cityscapes, like Morton Schamberg's rooftop views from 1917, to hospitals shot by the California photojournalist, [Edward A "Doc" Rogers](#).

With the Covid-19 pandemic still raging on, and the world in quarantine, the online exhibition [Life During Wartime: Art in the Age of the Coronavirus](#) hosted by the University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum, offers a window into what artists are up to right now.

By partly featuring artwork made since 5 March, the date the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic, it shows how artists have responded to the crisis – with four more artworks added every Tuesday – that will allow us to watch, in real time, how art evolves over the course of the pandemic, until the exhibition wraps up 12 December.

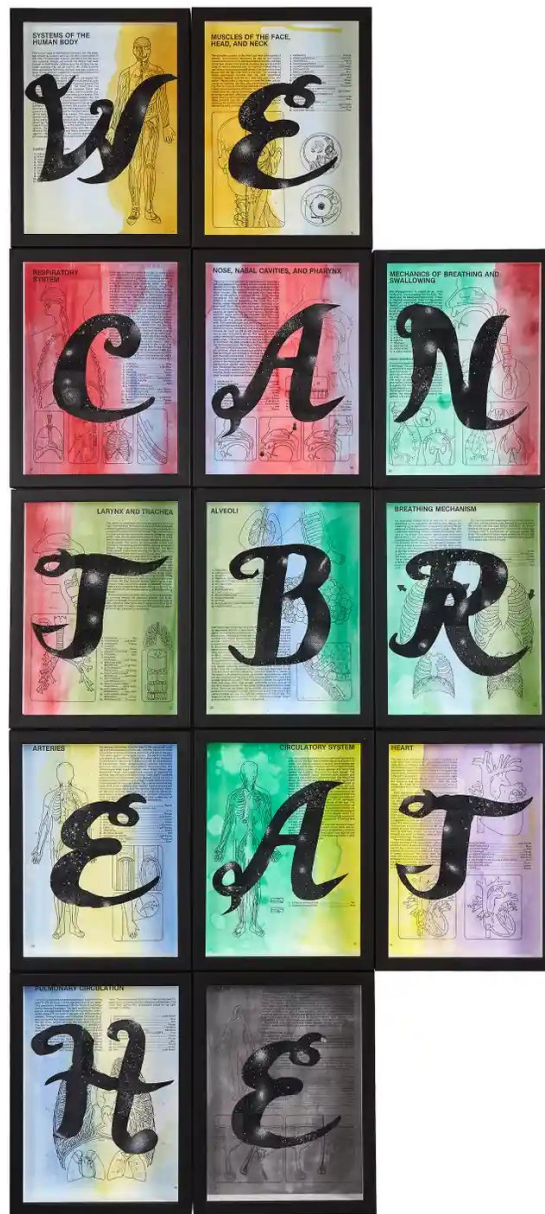
“We didn’t want to do a data dump, where you just unload everything, that’s a single vision,” said the curator, Christian Viveros-Fauné. “Part of what we wanted to do, because we want to react to the times, is to create, sustain and engage, if we can.”

The goal is to trigger conversations with stories about the pandemic, he says, and provide what he calls: “optimism in the face of a global emergency”.

The artwork ranges from self-isolation selfies to photographs of hospital intensive care units, portraits of essential farm workers, with themes of climate change, family drama, government control and police violence. It features world-renowned artists such as Kiki Smith, Patricia Cronin and Cristina Lucas, among others.

The idea came about in March, upon the closure of museums and galleries across the country. “Knowing in-person exhibitions were too risky, it got us thinking,” said Viveros-Fauné. “Artists directly respond to what’s going on in the world.”

While half of the artwork in the exhibition was created before the pandemic – but remains relevant in today’s world – the other half was created in quarantine.



William Villalongo, *We Can't Breathe*, 2015. Photograph: Argenis Apolinario/Courtesy of ©Villalongo Studio LLC and Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC. Photo by Argenis Apolinario

One piece is the New York artist William Villalongo's *We Can't Breathe*, from 2015, which was created in response to the death of Eric Garner. The artist has written out the words on to pages of respiratory diagrams from children's coloring books.

“It is a memorial of the events surrounding the murder of Eric Garner on Staten Island by the police,” said Villalongo. “Garner’s last words have become a call to protest and change being met with little to no action. George Floyd’s tragically

similar murder does not come as a surprise, especially to black people. We've witnessed many more murders between Garner, Floyd and recently in Atlanta, from an overly militarized law enforcement apparatus."

Looking back on the artwork today, he adds: "I hope there is a time when its relevance is no longer perennial, and instead becomes an object of historical inquiry to learn from."

Another series showcases photos detailing the impending climate change in Miami, Florida, taken by Anastasia Samoylova. One photo, taken on Jefferson Avenue, looks like a beautiful lake, then reveals it's actually a flooded street during high tide.



Anastasia Samoylova – Jefferson Avenue, Miami Beach, 2020. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and Dot Fiftyone Gallery, Miami, Florida

"The combination of rain the day before and the high tide created this degree of flooding in the middle of Miami Beach," explains Samoylova, who recently

released a photo book called FloodZone. “While everyone’s attention has been on the pandemic, I thought of it as a preview for the health crisis that climate change will inevitably cause.”

She asks: “We know climate change is happening right now, it is not a future event; and we have reached the point of no return, so how do we explain the failure to prepare for the consequences?”

The exhibition, which takes its title from a 1979 Talking Heads song, also features the work of Basil Kincaid, whose photography and quilting work taps into the artist’s personal history with African diaspora.

“I am currently most interested in the practice of quilting as a way to collaborate with ancestral energy and as a method of empowerment,” he says, “honoring my predecessors, while adapting the practice to address the questions and concerns of contemporary life.”



Narsiso Martinez – Good Farms, 2020. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and Charlie James Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo by Joshua Schaedel, Michael Underwood

There are also artworks by the Mexican artist Narsiso Martinez on his experience as a farm worker, the type of essential work that he sees as invisible in the farm-to-table business. “The government has been insisting on deporting these folks, calling them rapists and drug dealers, but in a final instance, they’ve become frontline workers and they’ve become the most disenfranchised workers – they can’t vote, many of them,” said Viveros-Fauné. “It speaks to the Latino community and their exposure to the Covid-19 pandemic, too.”

There are photos showing street art created by Dysturb, a non-profit based in Brooklyn and Paris, that works with photojournalists who have access to photographing hospital ICUs, and have printed out and pasted up patients and healthcare workers across cities. It’s part of their series [Artists Against an Infodemic](#), which addresses public health messages in response to the pandemic. Many of the posters bear the slogan “Stay Home, Save Lives.” On their website, [their manifesto](#) claims “education is our priority” and their goal is “to challenge misinformation, disinformation and improve public communication and news delivery surrounding Covid-19”.

There are moody, personal photos, too. The Iranian [photographer Newsha Tavakolian](#), who works with Magnum Photos, shows a selection of shots she has taken from her apartment in Tehran, when she hasn’t been working on the frontlines of the pandemic. One photo shows her father’s grave covered in rose petals on the first anniversary of his death, another shows her mother peering outside her window, as well as stray cats, foggy days and politicians on TV news reports.

“I walk the streets of Tehran with mixed feelings,” Tavakolian writes in an essay alongside her photos. “I’m afraid of what the future will bring, of loved ones dying, or even of myself being in danger. But I take some comfort that this is a collective and global halt to everything. We are facing this ordeal all together, no one is alone in their house, because we all are. Pressure leads to unity.”

- [Life During Wartime: Art in the Age of the Coronavirus](#) is available online until 12 December

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