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HYPERALLERGIC

Artists Quarantine With Their Art Collections

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“With vast art mausoleums now shuttered, we artists increasingly occupy the same virtual space, deepening our exchanges by sharing readings, conversations, and Zoom studio visits.”



Lisa Beck, “Untitled #16” (2017), mixed media, 12 x 9 inches; in situ (image courtesy John Phillip Abbott)

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *I’ve been asking artists to describe recent shifts in their perception of the art in their collections in light of the ways that a global cataclysm can reshape meaning in artworks that predate it. My*

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questions are: In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, do you look at your personal collection differently now, and which works in particular? Is there one that especially resonates with you at this weird, frightening moment? And does it take on new meaning?



Lisa Beck, "Untitled #16" (2017), mixed media, 12 x 9 inches (image courtesy John Phillip Abbott)

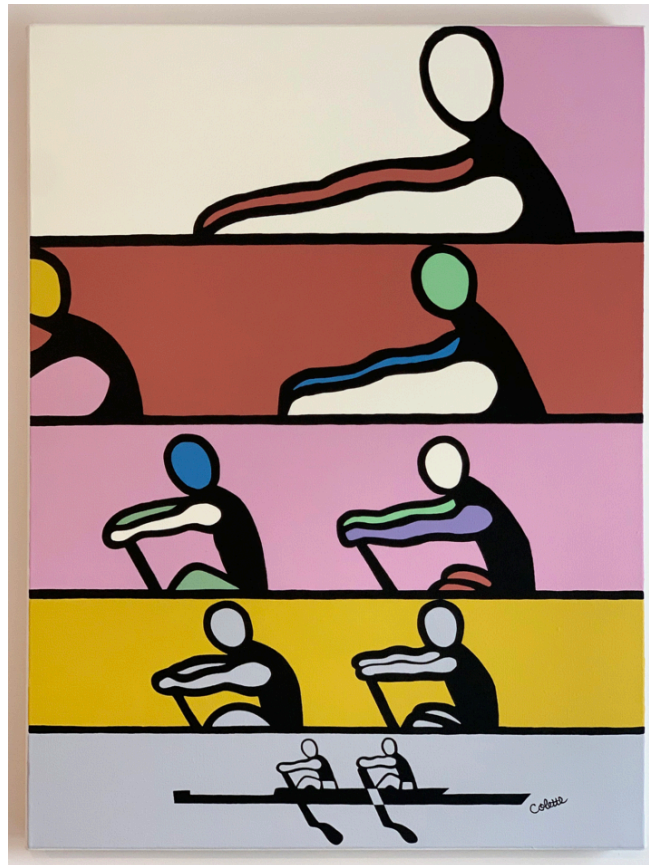
John Phillip Abbott (Albuquerque): Since relocating to Albuquerque 10 months ago, we're still trying to get settled and have unpacked only a handful of works from our collection. My wife, Stacey Heim, hung up our small, gem-like Lisa Beck painting at the end of a narrow hallway. It is the first work we installed in our new home. Framed by the white walls, doors, ceiling, and wood floor, Lisa's painting projects a physical presence and visual stability we're finding ourselves grateful for during these increasingly unsettling times.

Through the most economical and direct means, Lisa creates a poetic space that is as much about the origin and development of the universe as it is about reconciling our place in it. But it's also very much about line, shape, and color, and I often think of the alchemical power of these elements in the hands of a master like Lisa.

Before moving back to Albuquerque, we lived in rural southwestern New Mexico, where Lisa's painting spoke directly to the vast, empty desert landscape and clear night sky. Now that we are living in a city again and have been relegated to spending more time inside, I'm

finding a connection to an internal landscape. The reflective surface also acts a bit like a mirror and changes throughout the course of the day.

When I am confronted with Lisa's painting, I find myself taking a deep breath, straightening my posture, and stepping outside of my own head. It's incredibly grounding and centering during this time and we are so grateful to live with it.



Rachel Hecker (after Colette), "Untitled" (2017), oil on canvas, 24 x 18 inches (image courtesy Dana Frankfort)

Dana Frankfort (Houston): The first time I saw this painting, it was on eBay. I liked the horizontal bands of color, the black lines that are simultaneously separations, horizons, and boats, the negative spaces (sky) that become positive (arms) and then back again, and the V formation of athletes. The rowers are bent over, in motion, and yet they are still, like in a comic strip. They have arms but not faces, or arms but not oars. The pink behind the top rower is like the sunrise, and the bright white in front of this rower is like light from the coming day. The artist signed her name 'Colette' with a single black line that loops and curls like a wet noodle. This painting was listed for auction with no date or artist

information, only described as a ‘modernist oil on canvas painting.’ I was outbid but printed a color photo that I hung on my studio wall.

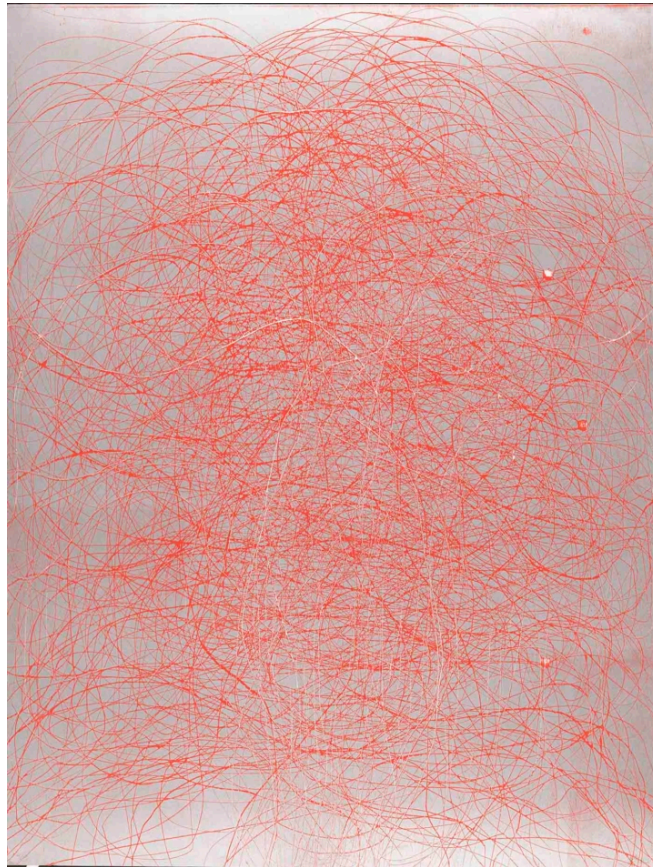
The second time I saw this painting was two years later. I mentioned to Rachel Hecker in passing that I once saw a painting on eBay that I did not buy, but I kept the printout. A week later she surprised me with an exact replica, because making things that look like other things is something Rachel does easily, and well. I hung the painting on a wall in the entry of my home, a location that allows maximum visibility to guests coming through the front door. I have enjoyed this painting for three years now, most often thinking about the hard edges of mustard-y color.

Sometime during the third week of the quarantine I began to rethink my living space by bringing things I ‘needed’ closer to where my daughter and I spend most of our days. This painting found its way onto a wall in the kitchen, which is the center of our home. In addition to the meditative rhythm of Colette’s composition, I have started to look at this as an artwork made by Rachel Hecker, an object that is both real and fake. Like the best things artists collect, this painting now serves as a rich reminder of my connections: to Colette, to Rachel, to my community of painters. Finally, while looking at a painting of a printout of a screenshot of a photo of a painting, I am acutely aware of how everything is interconnected. I like to imagine seeing the original and this new original, based on everything that came before, side by side.



Haim Steinbach, “Particle Board Panel with Black Shapes #11” (left) and “Particle Board Panel with Black Shapes #22” (right); both works: 1977, oil stick on particle board, 23 x 23 inches (image courtesy Steel Stillman)

Steel Stillman (New York City): This pair of Haim Steinbach’s “Particle Board Panel with Black Shapes” pieces hangs over the living room couch in my wife’s and my Lower East Side apartment. I’ve had them since they were made in 1977. Haim had been my teacher at Middlebury College, and we’d become friends. My recollection is that I bought one and that he gave me the other. In hindsight these works fit between Haim’s elegant geometric paintings of the early ‘70s and the found-object-based sculpture and installations he’s been making since the end of that decade. I’ve long loved the game-board quality of the “Particle Boards” and the inscrutable patterns the black shapes trace along the panels’ peripheries. Today, in the Covid-19 era, the “Particle Boards” have taken on a new role – and a surprising surrogacy — as the visual backdrop for Jane and me as we sit on the couch having Zoom or FaceTime drinks with our equally quarantined friends.



Giljan Gelzer, “Body Electric VIII” (2018), woodcut on Hahnemüle vellum, 64 ½ x 48 ¾ inches. Printed and published by Michael Woolworth, Paris; edition of 10 (image courtesy Peter Soriano)

Peter Soriano (New York City/Paris/Penobscot, Maine): Two works I currently live with have gained new meaning and depth while in this current crisis. Both works are dominated by lines. Both works make me think about line as the most intuitive way of mark making, one that embodies limitless freedom and celebrates touch.

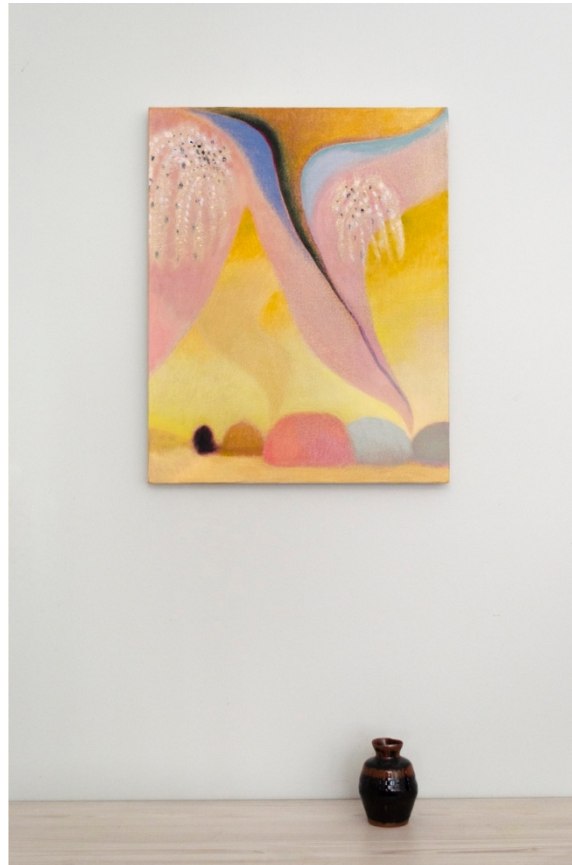
Gilgian Gelzer's "Body Electric VIII" (2018) is a very large woodcut made by carving a sheet of plywood. Gilgian gouges the plywood with a multitude of lines, maintaining a looseness of gesture as if the wood was as yielding as paper. The pressure to carve lines like these in wood requires a relaxed but forceful hand. The contrast between the resistant material and looseness of gesture wonderfully captures a hard-won freedom.



Ferdinand Hodler, "A Study of the Joy of Nature" (c.1910-1913), oil (?) on canvas pasted on paper, 16 x 13 ¾ inches (image courtesy Peter Soriano)

The other work is a drawing by Ferdinand Hodler titled "A Study of the Joy of Nature" (ca. 1910-1913). The drawing is made by the tip of a round brush with the barest amount of red paint. I have always admired Hodler's large frieze-like compositions, for which this is a study, but I have never, until now, focused on his depiction of touch. Three women move across the suggestion of a green hill. Their long dresses, articulated with two or three brushstrokes, perfectly define the careful movement of their dancing feet. The middle woman leads the figure on the left by the hand and at the same time reaches out to the figure on the right, who appears to recoil in response. Looking at the drawing now I see that touch, not three dancers on a hill, is the subject of the drawing. With the tiniest amount of paint, Hodler captures the subtlest intricacies of human contact.

In “Body Electric VIII” and “A Study for the Joy of Nature,” Gelzer and Hodler reflect on the idea of freedom and touch. These two works have become especially meaningful in this time of contagion, when we are denied both our physical freedom and the use of our hands to connect with others.



Kristy Luck, “Tornado” (2017), oil on canvas, 20 x 16 inches (top); Theaster Gates, untitled (2015-2016), ceramic pottery, 4 x 3 x 3 inches (bottom); (image courtesy Robert Burnier)

Robert Burnier (Chicago): Time spent with my collection at home reminds me of the values I place in art that are sometimes in dissonance and resonance with the times. Artistic pleasure, in particular, has a way of meeting me where I am, moving me, regardless of what is happening. Two examples of this are a painting by Kristy Luck and a ceramic by Theaster Gates. Both acquired by mutual trade, they are an embrace of friendship and mutual support. But they also signal to me the undeniable importance of aesthetics, even as they grapple with mysteries, conundrums, and pain.

Kristy Luck’s rich, subtly dynamic paintings evoke a mythic symbolism. She approaches representation only suggestively, from personal observation of things close to her everyday experience. Her work has a biomorphic, visceral sensuality and a talismanic, architectural

integrity to go with their dreamlike color spaces. Luck, whom I also know from graduate school, has always struck me as preferring the action of making over talking. For me, an artist who is sometimes fond of words, it is an important reminder of where everything is supposed to go, that the words must at some point fall away. The particular work I have, “Tornado,” speaks of something like a beautiful chaos. For better and for worse, when we are at a loss to explain something, aesthetics is one place to look for some clues about ourselves and our situation.

Theaster Gates’ small brown ceramic was a gift in exchange for writing a “Letter on Black Progress” in his catalog for *How to Build a House Museum* at the Art Gallery of Ontario. This kind of exchange with Gates and participatory gesture typifies his continual community engagement, but also signals, in its modest way, how renewal is as important as critique. Gates’ last show at Richard Gray Gallery, *Every Square Needs a Circle*, also brought pottery into his conceptual framework. Within a large, steel grid structure stood multiple sculptures and ceramics that signaled places of personal and group strength within the challenge of a larger space. We may not soon live in a world free of the need for these tensions to be presented in art, but even in better times, the record of that struggle would serve us indefinitely.



Joan Linder, “Businessman” (1997), oil on canvas, 12 x 8 inches (image courtesy Kate Petley)

Kate Petley (Longmont, Colorado): This small painting has been with me since 1997, when I purchased it from a Houston gallery that worked with Joan and me. I liked it because it made me laugh. I could envision Joan making this piece, possibly sketching from a television commercial. It is the only figurative piece in my house.

“Businessman” has taken a decidedly different turn lately. No longer even mildly amusing, he has become emblematic of the positions that underlie the worst of society and government. Wagging his finger in my face, a bloated white guy in a suit is telling me what to do and, as a woman who resists being told what to do, his demeanor triggers me. He symbolizes the failure of government to care about anything outside its own power structure.

As I slip into this position, I am made aware of my own confirmation bias. “Businessman” hasn’t changed, but I have. I feel like a stranger living in a country that has become unrecognizable. In navigating the pandemic and its social consequences, I now find myself unfairly evaluating people’s political positions by whether or not they wear a mask in

public, as if that's all I need to know. Mr. Man does not wear a mask in public. Believing himself to be invincible, he projects his false superiority without hesitation.

He doesn't make me laugh any more, but I leave him in the bookcase where I can keep an eye on him.



Kristen Morgin, untitled (2018), unfired clay and paint, 2 x 6 x 4 inches, in three parts (image courtesy Fran Siegel)

Fran Siegel (San Pedro, California): Kristen Morgin gave me this small clay sculpture in 2018 as a thank-you for speaking to her students during a daylong gathering at her studio in Gardena. I have fond memories of this event; the group comprised students from three local schools (UCLA, USC, and Cal State Long Beach) and included a tour of the sustainable food project by Julie Schustack that supplied the salad we all shared at lunch. I check in each day with this humble sculpture, as it reminds me that we'll need the alternative economy of the barter system to replace conventional monetary payments in our newly slashed university budgets. The creative community is getting me through the sequester, and this sculpture has come to symbolize both collaboration and self-reliance.

I view its painted smirk as optimism for a post-pandemic realignment of the art world's overblown financial power structure. With vast art mausoleums now shuttered, we artists increasingly occupy the same virtual space, deepening our exchanges by sharing readings, conversations, and Zoom studio visits. Creative isolation remains essential but, residing inconspicuously alongside our rocks from global travels, this unassuming little work signals engagement with the external world. I enjoy living with art that integrates with life and is not set apart. These days, Morgin's piece triggers thoughts about the visual surrogate operational in Vija Celmins's "To Fix the Image in Memory," which bring on memories of critiques with Vija as a teacher. Recently, Kristen and I co-critiqued our classes via Zoom, and once again no money changed hands.



Ben Skinner, "Nevertheless" (2017), acrylic marbled silk chiffon over acrylic and graphite on birch panel, 16 x 13 inches (image courtesy Ryan Crotty)

Ryan Crotty (Auburn, Nebraska): In February I acquired a text piece titled "Nevertheless" by Vancouver artist Ben Skinner. It is an unquestionably gorgeous art object, part painting, part sculpture. Acrylic marbled silk chiffon hovers just over acrylic and graphite on birch

panel, suspended by a built-in frame. This work, perhaps selfishly, fulfilled some shallow nostalgia, because it shared the title of my first solo exhibition in New York City.

My *Nevertheless* was a riff on the Mies van der Rohe modernist adage, “less is more,” and suggests that there is more to consider and explore in minimalist color field painting. I chose the title because it felt distilled, shortened, as if it could be followed by ellipses, as if there was more to be said. I haven’t escaped the notion that the full phrase spelled out in Ben’s work was the completion of the exhibition title. Gently obscured by the veil of marbled silk, the text reads: NEVERTHELESS IT IS ALWAYS MORE.

The piece sits atop our pantry, supported by various cookbooks. I notice it daily and the thought crosses my mind, I should properly hang this. It has some heft to it and I’ll need to hit a stud in the wall to bear the weight. Nevertheless, there is always more on the priority list, a hundred things that have to get done, not to mention that we are in the middle of a fucking pandemic. The pandemic, a death pall shrouding everything, always lurking in the periphery. What is the current death toll at? Check the news, hoping for less, nevertheless it is always more.

I’ll hang Ben’s work soon, display it properly, but for now it is balancing — present and hanging on.