

‘Angst and humanity:’ Norwalk exhibit examines psychological impacts of pandemic



"Forced Separation" by Kathie Milligan will be included in the exhibit. Photo: Courtesy of Kathie Milligan / Contributed photo

By Joel Lang April 11, 2021
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The Lockwood Mathews Mansion Museum's "Socially Distant Art: Creativity in the Lockdown" exhibit features 25 artists and runs through Aug. 29.

When Susan Gilgore, executive director at the Lockwood Mathews Mansion Museum in Norwalk, began thinking about a pandemic-related art exhibit, one of the first works that came to mind was a 1919 painting by the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch.

This wasn't Munch's famous, frightening "Scream." It was a self-portrait, showing the artist seated in an invalid's robe and blanket, almost defeated by the Spanish flu. His pale face looks out from the canvas; only the circle of his open mouth reminiscent of the more lurid "Scream."

None of the some 50 works by 25 artists in the Lockwood exhibit depicts illness so directly. Their new work, as is suggested by the exhibit title "[Socially Distant Art: Creativity in the Lockdown](#)," probes the psychological impact of the now year long COVID-19 pandemic.

A pair of paintings by Rebeca Fuchs, a native of Spain who now lives in Fairfield, shows hollowed out figures on what the titles indicate are the local Jennings and Penfield beaches. They are not holograms. Rather, the beach-goers are so transparent, so emptied of self, their only substance is sand, sea and sky.

Another piece, an almost 4-foot square photographic collage titled “On the Edge,” shows a population of people seemingly suspended in mid-air, all separated from one another. A woman pushes a baby stroller. A man in a business suit walks a tightrope. Another, seated on what might be a girder, hunches over a cell phone.

It is by Alan Richards, an audiologist by training who lives in Roslyn, N.Y. and who lists Rene Magritte and Edward Hopper among his influences. A second photographic piece by Richards in the exhibit, of a waitress and a customer in a red-boothed diner, does evoke Hopper’s isolation.



"On the Edge" by Alan Richards is on display at the Lockwood Mathews Mansion Museum. Photo: Courtesy of Alan Richards / Contributed photo

But “On the Edge” is more Alexander Calder mobile, its cut-out people connected by thin wires, left to twist as air currents dictate.

As Gilgore envisioned it, the artists in the Lockwood exhibit would necessarily share the same impulse as Munch and other artists who responded to the mass catastrophes of their eras.

“I was thinking, wait a minute. This is something that has happened for centuries, where artists have depicted our collective angst and humanity,” Gilgore said. “I was curious. I thought just as powerful as all those works have been for generations, what are artists producing today that we’ll remember and think about? Will generations after us look at paintings from this pandemic and be moved the way we are when we see Munch’s portrait of the Spanish flu?”

The Lockwood cast a wide net for artists, sending the prospectus for the exhibit to most area art organizations, big ones like the Silvermine Art Center and the Greenwich Art Society and smaller ones in Easton, Darien and Stratford.

Gail Ingis, the Lockwood trustee who curates art exhibits, made the selections from works submitted online without knowing much more than the artist’s name. There were surprises. One winning entry, a photographic self-portrait, came from Charlotte Saunders, who turned out to be an advanced placement art student at Stamford High School.

In her photo, Saunders’ face is washed-out gray, but it is surrounded by spiky pink scratches. In a biographical note submitted later, Saunders wrote that she added acrylic colors to suggest the emotions of isolation. She intended the scratching as her attempt to claw her way free.

A pair of imposing paintings by Simone Agoussoye of Arlington, Va. both show a dark-skinned woman in profile, but are otherwise opposites. In one titled “Black Beauty,” the woman wears a colorful head scarf. Meanwhile, the whole painting shines as if coated with lacquer and glitters with embedded chunks of what may be glass or plastic.

Agoussoye’s other portrait, “Beauty Mark,” is flat and monotone. Someone who is clearly young, perhaps not yet a teenager, gazes sideways, away from an over-sized iPad, fallen blank and useless in her lap. No amount of screen time can fill the pandemic vacuum for this girl. Gilgore said she admires it as a powerful portrait of individual forlornness.

Candidates for the darkest images in the exhibit are a pair of nature photographs by Carol Bouyoucos of Mt. Kisco, N.Y. Both have uprooted trees in the foreground, the kind you might find in any town nature preserve after a long, wet winter. But these trees are in a scrubby, leafless woodland, captured in razor-sharp detail.

In one, “Crossing Borders,” the sky is dark, with white showing through the scrub growth. In the other, “Borderline,” there are pinkish clouds in a sky that appears painted, waxen and scratched. In her artist statement, Bouyoucos writes she seeks to photograph “totems in the woods” and that in the past year she has found moments of humility and beauty in nature. Her woods at the Lockwood look storm-stripped, however, waiting to come back to life.



Megan Chiango's piece "No. 1" is part of her ongoing "Love Warrior Project" series. "No. 1" is on display at the Lockwood Mathews Mansion Museum.
Photo: Courtesy of Megan Chiango / Contributed photo

By what can only be pure chance, the exhibit does include one image that conjures Munch. It is a vivid painting based on a photograph that shows a frontal view of a woman screaming with her mouth wide open. It is one of four images in the exhibit from the "Love Warrior Project" by Megan Chiango, a Burlington, Mass. artist.

Pandemic inspired and ongoing, the project is Chiango's attempt to record the stresses and emotions of women as caregivers and mothers trapped at home. The photographs were taken by their children that Chiango then painted in a palette of oranges and purples.

By another coincidence, the Lockwood has mounted a second exhibit, this one historical, that is an illuminating companion to the new art exhibit. Titled "Health, Healing & Addiction in 19th Century America," it was planned first, but postponed by the pandemic shutdown.

Artifacts, some of them from important national collections, are distributed through rooms on the mansion's first floor. There's a surgeon's cap that looks like those worn by railroad conductors, operating room hand towels for wiping away blood and heavy syringes that would cause modern day flu vaccinees to faint.



William Evertson's "Rota Fortunae" is on display in the "Socially Distant Art: Creativity in the Lockdown" exhibit. Photo: Courtesy of William Evertson / Contributed photo



Simone Agoussoye's "Beauty Mark" depicts a teenager with an oversized iPad in her lap. Photo: Courtesy of Simone Agoussoye / Contributed photo

Context is crucial. As Gilgore notes, the medical world was just beginning to recognize microscopic germs as causes of disease in the post-Civil War era when LeGrand Lockwood built his Norwalk mansion. It was summer retreat, but also an escape from cholera epidemics that ravaged New York. In recognition of the importance of sanitation, he had it built with 40 sinks and a special ventilation system, she said.

The "Health, Healing & Addiction" exhibit is curated by Kathleen Bennewitz, who is also the Westport town curator. It runs through Oct. 17. The "Socially Distant Art" exhibit runs through Aug. 29. Both can be seen as part of mansion tours.



Barry Guthertz's "Norwalk Storm." Photo: Courtesy of Barry Guthertz / Contributed photo



"Reflections V: Jennings" by Rebeca Fuchs depicts hollowed out figures on a beach. Photo: Courtesy of Rebeca Fuchs / Contributed photo