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SEVERAL HOUSES

by

Anthony Cudahy

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts Studio Art, Hunter College
The City University of New York

2020

12/10/2020

Date

Lisa Corinne Davis

Thesis Sponsor

12/10/2020

Date

Susan Crile

Second Reader

Acknowledgments:

To my husband, Ian Lewandowski, and family who have supported this work and provided me home.

Thank you to the faculty of Hunter MFA, especially Lisa Corinne Davis and Anthony Hawley, for encouraging, critiquing, and molding the ideas behind this paper.

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∞

Last summer, the white dog ran by us on the opposite side of the street; its neon pink lead trailed behind.

It was 10PM and I was putting the leash on our own dog. We had just parked our car when I saw the flash of white in the corner of my eye. Halfway down the block an elderly woman screamed, begging for someone to catch her dog. Ian ran in pursuit.

I walked with the woman for a block or two. She asked every person we passed if they had seen her dog. Eventually, I wandered back to where we had parked and waited. Ian wasn't answering his phone, but fifteen minutes later he called me out of breath. He had caught the dog. I had returned to where the woman had initially lost her dog, so I told Ian to walk back there as I wandered the surrounding blocks looking for her. She was nowhere to be seen. I took our dog home and then met up with Ian. He had run after the dog deep into Borough Park. The dog had no name tag, just an ID number. Ian decided to call her Janus. We called 311, but no animal centers are open that late, and the operator on the line suggested taking her to the East NY center at 8AM. A form on the dog license website allows us to enter the ID and leave a message, but no way to directly contact the owner.

We tried to lead the huge husky around, testing if she wanted to walk up any porch in particular, leading us to her home. After this failed, we decided to take Janus home for the night. We didn't know her status with vaccines or her temperament with

other dogs, so I slept in the bedroom with our dog, and Ian slept on the couch with Janus. We both fantasized about our future second dog. Why was the owner so hard to reach? Why did the dog have no tags? Maybe this is meant to be.

In the morning I took Janus to East NY. When you find a dog and take it to an animal center, they make you sign a form stating that if the owner isn't found and no one adopts the dog, you consent to the center putting the dog down. I asked them to contact me well before that.

By the time I made it to work and called the center to check in, Janus' owner had picked her up.

∞

In a dream, I pass a friend in a crowd. We're in a truncated and rearranged Downtown Brooklyn. The sidewalk is brimming with strangers, but I recognize Bristol and she attempts to hug me. It's then that a wave of anxiety hits me. Why am I here? Why are any of these people outside? I try to explain to Bristol why I can't hug her, but she continues to get closer and closer. I lay down on the sidewalk, holding my hand five inches above my head. "*This is six feet.*"



Figure 1. Studio photograph of abandoned, in-progress painting, 3/11/20.

∞

On Wednesday March 11, 2020 I put in as many hours of painting as I could physically, attempting to get as far as possible on the two canvases I had in progress in my studio. One is very large: six feet tall, and eight feet wide. My friend messaged me “where are you sailing?” after I posted a picture of the surface in an early, gessoed state. The other is smaller, a tall window-like proportion. Earlier that day, the news broke that CUNY/SUNY classes would be moving online for the duration of the semester, a precaution to combat the spread of COVID-19. Convinced that I would imminently lose access to my studio and these unfinished oil paintings, I stayed into the night. I wanted instead to look into my phone for hours, doom-spiraling. There was no desire to paint. When I felt like that apathy was outweighing my ability and short-circuiting the pieces, I finally left.

The next day, I went to my day job. By the end of the shift, the suggestion to work from home became mandatory to all but the managers. By the weekend, a coworker told HR someone she had dinner with the previous week tested positive for the virus. The office was completely closed. By Monday, most of my friends with service jobs were laid off. The unemployment website crashed, and then crashed again the following day. I worked as many hours as I could from home, reaching my cap. My fear was that, while I'm unbelievably privileged my job transitioned to work from home, I wasn't sure if the company could sustain itself remotely a month or two into this crisis, and I would eventually lose that income.

Events seemed to move both incredibly fast and interminably slow. On the 17th, Governor Cuomo said the peak of NYC infections was still 45 days away. I remember being bewildered by that length of time, which months later seems like nothing. Everything had already changed that first strange week, yet I was mostly impatient. I didn't desire the seemingly inevitable, but the purgatorial suspension was insufferable. It felt then like we were rushing at breakneck speed into disaster *and* that we were also perpetually two weeks/ten days away from the *real* descent, armchair experts resetting that clock daily. Even with consistent moisturizing, the obsessive hand washing ignited eczema across the back of my right hand.



Figure 2. 1-2 Stills from Ingmar Bergman, *The Seventh Seal*, 1957 (1:32:33, 1:29:51).

∞

When I place my figures at tables, they are often waiting, one or many making eye contact with the viewer. I always think about the penultimate scene of Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*. The main character, a knight, has spent the film trying to

outsmart or outrun Death, in order to make it home to his wife and family before dying. He does in fact make it home, but Death has followed him and kills them all together, including the travelers that joined the knight along the way. The scene that made a mark on me is when Death is at the door. Everyone who had been sitting at the reunion dinner stands to see who is there. The camera takes on the vantage point of Death, so we, the viewers, are in his position, as he pans across their fearful faces, several making direct eye contact with him/us (Bergman).

The large canvas I left unfinished in my studio has two figures on the right-hand section sitting at a table, one figure is cut off, the other makes direct eye contact. The space these two inhabit has a reddish tint. I wish I could keep painting into it. I didn't get the atmosphere I wanted---one more dim, stuffy. The glow comes from outside, behind the head of the engaged figure. He is sitting here waiting.

Waiting, waiting, waiting.

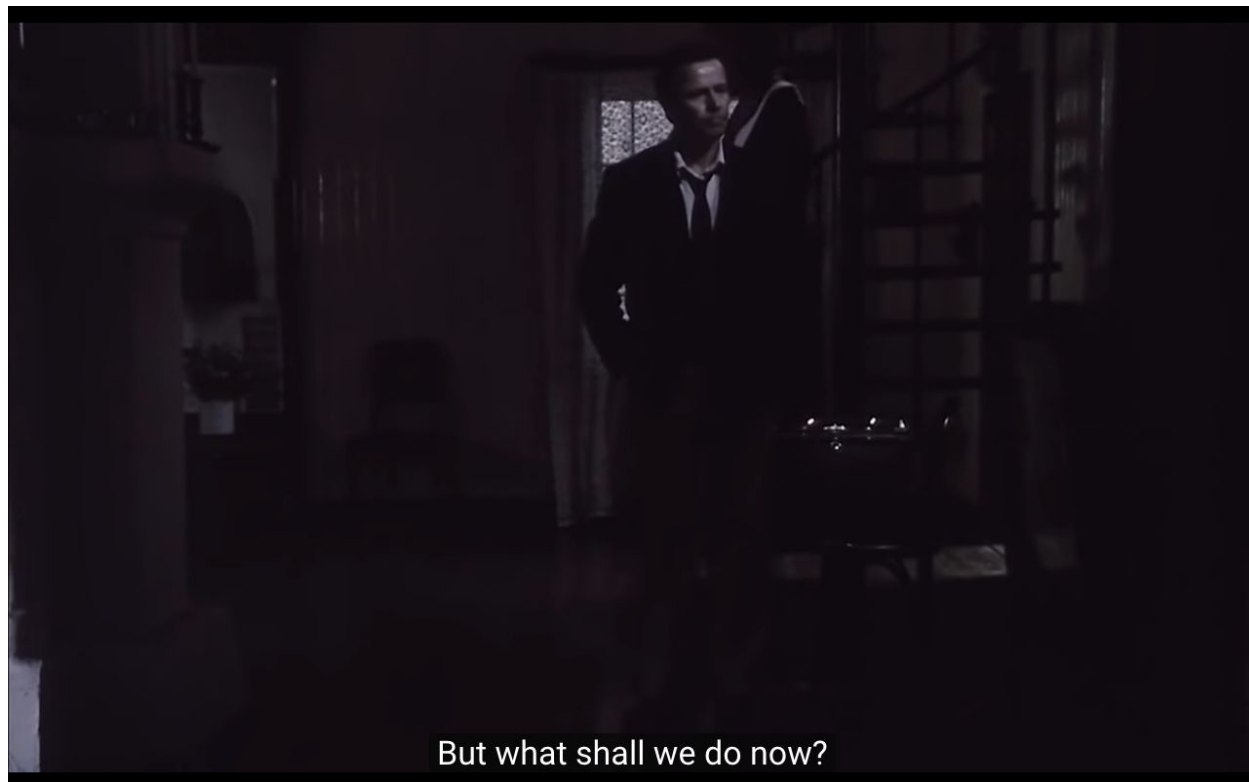
∞

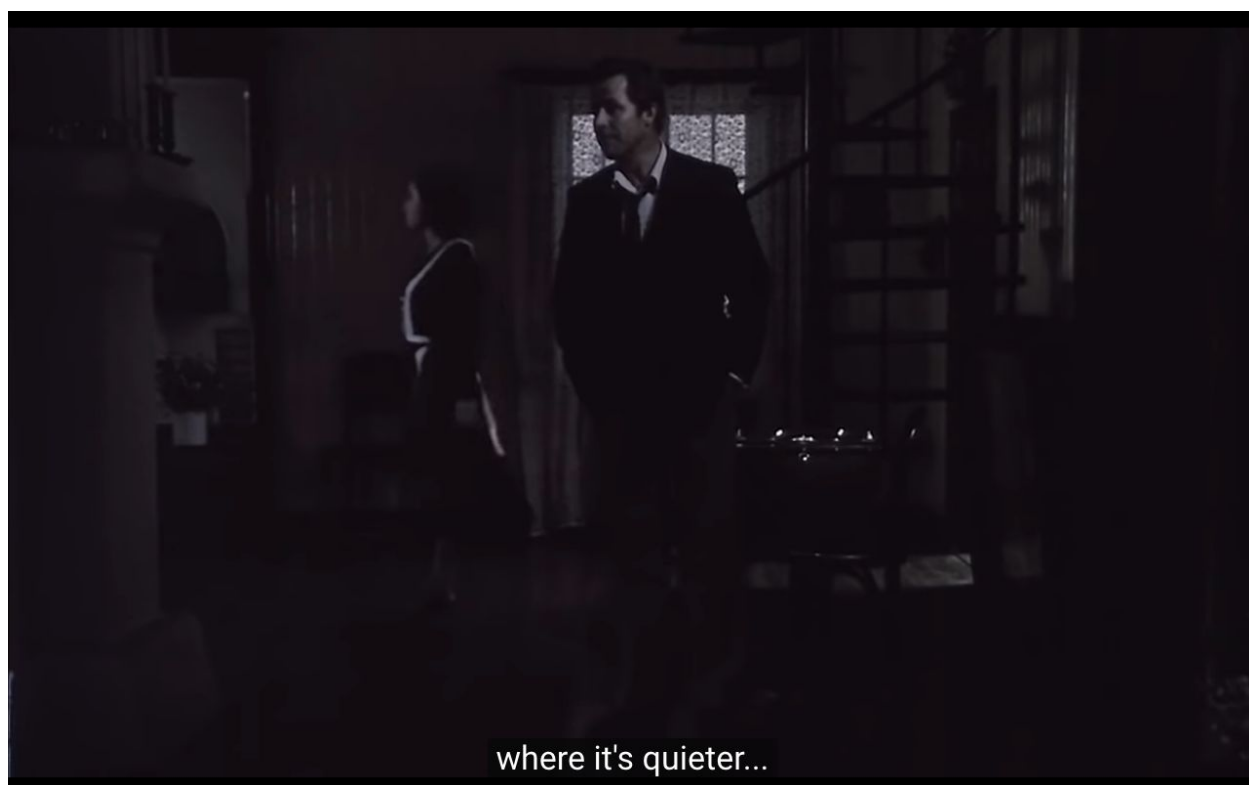
In 2015, Ian, my husband, found a lump on his neck while shaving. It was September. He had just turned 25. A swollen lymph node. We cycled through everything it could be that week. He had just had an intense cleaning at the dentist. Sometimes that can make a node swell. Maybe it was a cyst? Even a cyst in that position would require surgery that could paralyze part of his face. Couldn't it just be some benign fluke that would disappear on its own? Ian couldn't wait (luckily) and the following day took a break from work and quickly entered a walk-in appointment with a nurse at CVS. Without performing any tests, she said she thought it was Hodgkin's Lymphoma and he needed to seek care immediately. Her warning was completely (thankfully) unprofessional. A month of specialty ENT visits and a surgery to remove the node eventually proved her correct.

A network of connections happens when someone has cancer. Everyone's friend of a friend of the family is briefly (or maybe long-term) connected to the new inductee, and stories are shared. Ian's sister's friend, at a similar age but in rural Indiana, took well over a year to be diagnosed. Her purgatory stretched out and diminished the effectiveness of her care. Ian's month-long race towards a diagnosis was itself interminable, but even with a planned, specifically targeted treatment, waiting became a constant in our lives. Two months of chemo, followed by a brief break, and if the scans were clear, two weeks of daily radiation. Then scans every few months, then twice a year, then not required going forward.

∞

The Seventh Seal, so appropriate for a pandemic, wasn't the first film I thought to re-watch. Instead, I spent my first night self-isolated slowly making my way through Tarkovsky's *The Sacrifice*, stopping every few minutes to refresh various news sites or friends' feeds. In this film, a retired actor has his family and neighbors gather at his rural home to celebrate his birthday. However, before dinner is served, a governmental warning is issued. Nuclear war across the globe is imminent. There is no safe place to be. Everyone must just wait the night and see if the world still spins in the morning. The actor gets on his knees and begs god to restore safety to the world. He bargains, and says that he will burn his home and kill his youngest son if the apocalypse were not to occur. When his neighbor tells him that a housekeeper of the actor's is a witch, and that if they have sex, she will grant him a wish, he sneaks away from his wife and rides a bike to the woman's house. She hasn't had her television on and doesn't know about the danger. She resists his advances until he threatens to kill himself, manipulating her into performing the task. The next morning, the world is still there. It seems like nuclear war has been avoided. The actor convinces his family and friends to go for a walk. His son is missing. While everyone is gone, he sets the house on fire and is taken away in a car by men from a psych ward. The vehicle passes his son outside as it winds down the road (Tarkovsky).







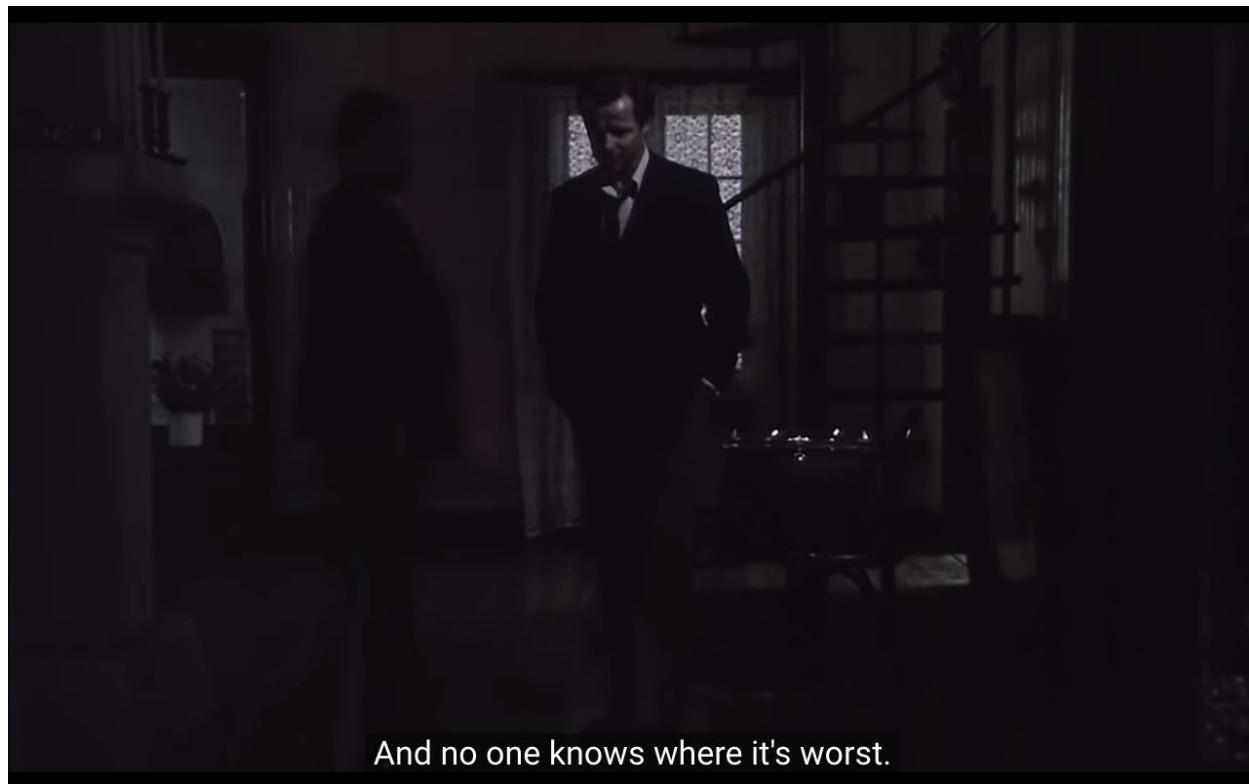


Figure 3. 1-7 Stills from Andrei Tarkovsky, *The Sacrifice*, 1986 (1:07:52 - 1:08:17).

∞

To return to a normal requires a sacrifice. The world will never be the same. While writing this, I perform the painful task of reading through messages sent to a friend while Ian was being diagnosed and treated. Even early on, it's clear I could feel the sides of the beast we'd have in our lives from that point forward. That waiting, and trauma, may luckily offer us a reprieve but they mark everything.

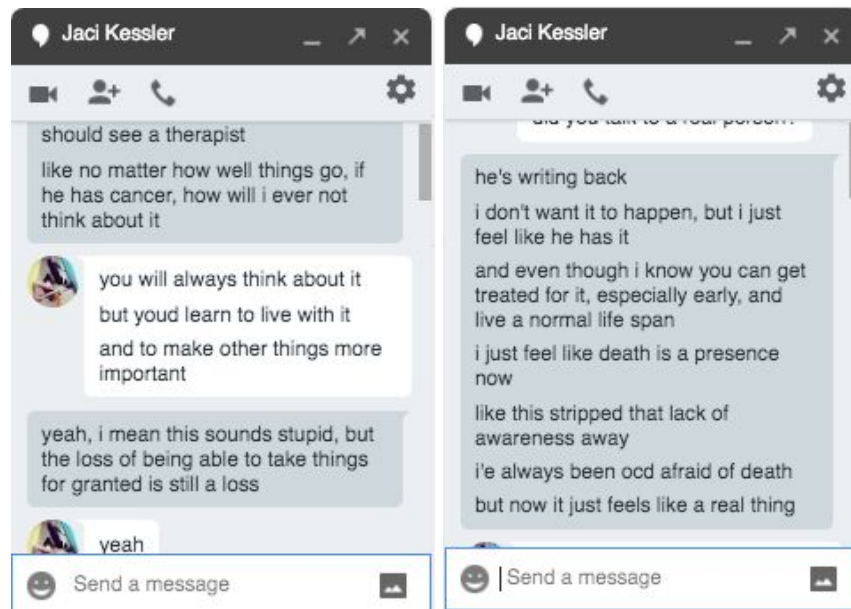


Figure 4. 1-2 Screenshots of a 2015 gchat conversation.

Reading Tarkovsky's own writing on *The Sacrifice*, I am struck that the original idea was much less global in scope. "The focal point was to be the story of how the hero, Alexander, was to be cured of a fatal disease as a result of a night spent in bed with a witch." (Tarkovsky 217).

Tarkovsky himself would die of cancer the year *The Sacrifice*, his final film, was released.

∞

The left side of the large canvas in my studio is still in flux. A demon that was doubled in the preparatory collage felt like the wrong tone, so I replaced those monsters with a reflected figure. Between him and his double is a mutant flower.

During Ian's recovery and those tenuous first months of remission, I slowly began to paint and draw again. I tried to make a lexicon for discussing his cancer and the dread and uncertainty I felt around it. I painted figures singled out in crowds. Knots. He photographed chains to represent the lymphatic system. There were paintings I made of the *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*. The mutant flower became a symbol to me of our relationship, but also of the inflection cancer left. It's romantically mirrored but, like a free radical cell, is doubling dangerously. Eventually Ian had the flower tattooed on his hand. I've drawn him a few times and include the tattoo, now a few levels of representation later.

At the bottom of the new painting, I have positioned Ian. I rarely take my own photographs for a painting, but I needed a specific pose. I had Ian get into this position, while I looked at Caravaggio's *Narcissus*. I wanted the pose to be a few seconds later, the figure entering a new zone, one that leads out of the painting's frame. Now thinking about it, when Narcissus gets too close to this zone, he drowns.

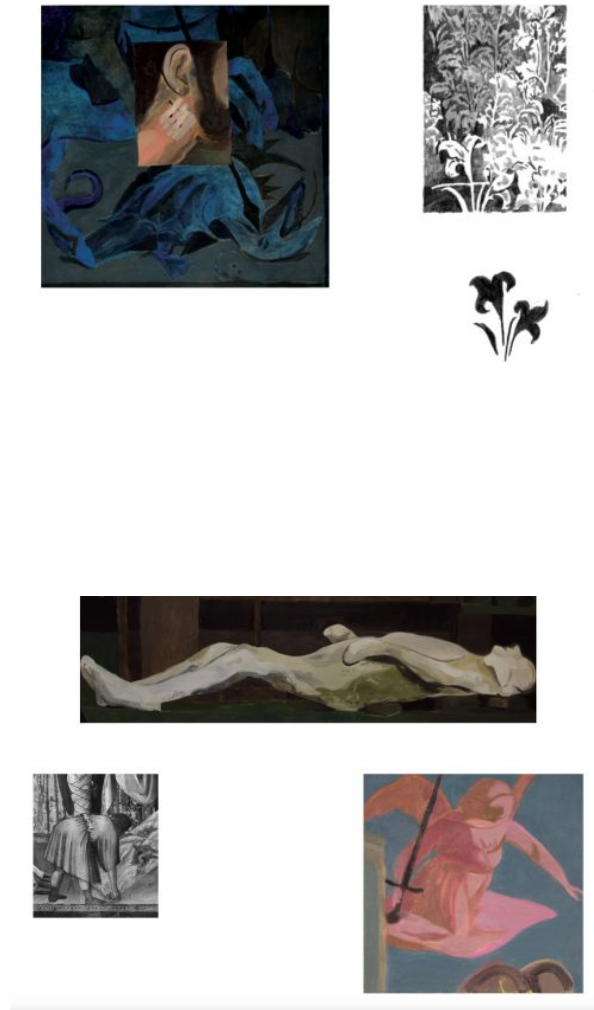


Figure 5. Collage of work made in 2016.

∞

This is all to say that I understand the actor's desire to make a deal with god, and to return to a previous safety. But a sacrifice is still made to return. The house is burnt to the ground. It's been over four years now since Ian has been in remission. The vast majority of recurrences occur within the first two years. His oncologist said he was in the "cured" camp. Still last year, when Ian felt what ended up being just a normal part of his neck, we were back in that terrible state of waiting. Currently, we wonder if Ian's lungs, forever slightly damaged by chemo, put him in the worrisome category of higher risk for COVID-19.

On this viewing of *The Sacrifice* I noticed that the actor's house was so open the entire film. The ground level doors seem to always be ajar. He has to go outside and climb a ladder on the exterior of the house to get to his private office. People are constantly entering and leaving. Even before the fire, the house was not a sealed-off, safe space. Maybe that safety was just a fantasy all along.



Figure 6. Still from Andrei Tarkovsky, *The Sacrifice*, 1986 (2:19:01).

∞

Day 40-something of our semi-lockdown, I had the urge to reread Kobo Abe's short novel, *The Woman in the Dunes*. The story follows a 31-year-old teacher and amateur entomologist, Niki, as he takes a weekend trip to a remote Japanese seaside village hoping to discover a new species of beetle. As he walks to the beach away from the town center, he notices individual houses half-buried. Eventually there are houses in 30 foot holes in the sand. At the end of the day, a townspeople lures him into staying the night with a host. In one of the subterranean houses, an unnamed woman makes him food and lets him sleep on a mattress on the floor. In the morning, the rope ladder is missing. This begins his imprisonment. He slowly realizes that he has been tricked into becoming the surrogate husband to the woman. The townspeople and the woman never speak directly of their intent. He is never afforded their reasoning. Days and weeks pass.

The most oppressive phenomenon is not that he is at the bottom of a hole, but the constant wafting in of sand from the dunes. Every few minutes centimeters of sand collect. At night, when it's cooler, the woman and he must shovel the day's worth of accumulation into buckets the townspeople pull up. When they sleep during the day, they must cover their faces even inside to avoid aggravation. There is barely any water rationed to them each day. Abe describes the discomfort of sand and heat in such detail that my skin crawled while I read.

Niki attempts at one point to hold the woman hostage until the villagers will let him up. They refuse him water for days and he unties her. He then tries and almost

succeeds at an escape a few weeks in, creating a rope to leave the hole and run, but is tricked into quicksand by the villagers in pursuit.

Most of the novel, which traces the events of more than a year, takes place in the first few weeks. There is a time warp to this imprisonment. As Niki gets used to his new routines, time flows faster.

Many more months pass. His awkward and confusing relationship with the woman turns physical and she becomes pregnant. Secretly, he focuses on devising a method accumulating a bucket full of water each day behind the house, which would make him less reliant on the villagers and more able to bargain. When the woman has a medical emergency related to the pregnancy, the townspeople pull her out of the hole to take her to a regional hospital. Niki notices that in their haste they left the rope ladder unfurled. He climbs to the top and looks around, seeing no one. Instead of leaving, he thinks of his water-collecting invention that he hasn't finished, and returns down the hole.

∞

Certain types of insects and spiders, when unexpectedly attacked, fall into a paralytic state, a kind of epileptic seizure . . . an airport whose control tower has been seized by lunatics . . . a fragmented picture. He wanted to believe that his own lack of movement has stopped all movement in the world, the way a hibernating frog abolishes winter. (Abé 54).

∞

Right when quarantine began, I received an email from Italy. It was from an opera director and set designer, Fabio Cherstich. He had seen my work online and one piece in particular reminded him of the deceased painter, Patrick Angus. I had seen a piece from Angus in Yossi Milo's 2018 *Intimacy* show. It had stood out to me in the cluster of salon-hung works, but I hadn't looked into his paintings any further.

Fabio sent me articles about Angus, and a catalog from a show he himself helped put together. Years ago, his friend had introduced him to the little-known body of work, and Fabio searched and searched for information or more work from the artist. A regional museum in Arkansas put him in touch with Angus' mother, Betty. When Fabio had first reached out to Betty in 2012, it had been 22 years since someone had contacted her about her son's artwork. Fabio made his way to the U.S. to see the mother's collection.

In a *BOMB* article about his experience of Betty's home, Fabio says:

When we arrived at the small house where she lives, I realized that she had created a kind of home museum, starting with the garage, which was filled with paintings. After becoming a widow, she had painted all the walls in white and organized the works with very clear parameters: in the living room the abstract paintings were combined with handmade doilies. In another room were Patrick's portraits of her and her husband, in the kitchen the food paintings, in the guest room—called the Dolphin Room because of the motifs printed on the bedspread—were views of the harbor of Fort Smith, and then in the corridor portraits and self portraits. It's a nearly unknown collection.

The hyperobject¹ of COVID-19 warps my viewing of the catalog Fabio sends me. Angus painted people together, alone. People watch and are watched, Angus' deft line itself a

¹ In the sense of the word that Timothy Morton dissects in *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World in relation to Global Warming*

record of intense looking. I am drawn to his deeply felt individual portraits. His specific and strange color palette, more muted than Hockney but linked, finds spots across the sitter to let the hue sing. When I worked for Billy Sullivan, he described painting flesh as touching the figure. When the figures in Angus' paintings are in groups, they often are watching pornos in theatres or performances on stages. The desire to see, to know, and to touch seems to me the crux of his work.

Angus died in 1992, victim to another mishandled pandemic that also dramatically changed ideas about the safety of physical contact and the specter of contagion.

Fabio, like us, slightly before us, was self-isolating in his home, teaching his students remotely. I could remark on the relative good news out of Italy days before he could remark on the relative good news from NYC.



Figure 7. Screenshot of a PDF of a Patrick Angus article in Apartemento magazine, issue #24.

∞

In 2017 and through 2018, I painted several group scenes from a photograph I found on the online ONE Archives. It was an image taken by gay activist and documenter Pat Rocco of a 1973 gay and lesbian retreat in Mount Baldy, California. My friend Marcelo Yáñez wrote a short essay on the works when they were exhibited. We both were deep in conversation about ideas of queer utopia and potentiality. We drew heavily from José Esteban Muñoz's 'Utopia's Seating Chart.' I was interested in painting and repainting this image in a multitude of iterations to point to the richness of recovering the past, and to suggest that the past itself isn't a sealed certainty, especially when dealing with histories that have purposefully been obstructed. As Muñoz describes, "...rather than being static and fixed, the past does things. It is in this very way that the past is performative." (Muñoz 28).

I still am interested in that, but I'm increasingly worried about the concept of utopia. As slippery a word as others that artists (myself included) commonly place alongside it, like 'queer' or 'community', I wonder if it is a word too broad to mean. Lacking a specificity, utopia is often portrayed in hedonistic or regal placeholder tropes. I worry that conceptions of utopia are also predicated on the idea that the creator's ideology and desires are pure and right, risking an unquestioned feedback loop.

Toni Morrison's 1997 novel, *Paradise*, traces the history of two adjacent communities. One is the insular, all-Black Oklahoma town of Ruby, founded in response to extreme racism, colorism, and exclusion, but which over generations becomes strict and violent itself. The other is a former convent outside of town, where five disparate

women find themselves over years, each escaping an aspect of her life, and forming an uneasy, but ultimately loving, commune led by the matriarchal figure, Connie. Its lack of conventionality is too dangerous for the patriarchs of Ruby, and they decide to destroy the group, murdering the women (Morrison).

Jan Furman analyzes this novel in "Utopia and Moral Hazard: Paradise," writing

... "the idea of paradise," flowed from a second observation about the limitations of utopian societies: they are seductively safe but dangerously cloistered. As Morrison says, "the isolation, the separateness, is always a part of any utopia." (Furman 93)

She later paraphrases Morrison, stating "One generation's paradise may be the next generation's prison." (94).

∞

Janus, the double-headed Roman god looks to both the past and future. A surreal task to give yourself: scroll through random Instagrams until you find an optimistic post from January 1, 2020.

∞

Apocalypse feels particularly tied to the present moment, but it has loomed over human experience throughout time, regardless of place and situation. Eleanor Heartney, in her 2019 book *Doomsday Dreams: The Apocalyptic Imagination in Contemporary Art*, examines in exhaustive detail strains of Revelatory thought within the practices of several recent artists, but also gives a comprehensive history of Apocalyptic thought, showing that it has been used throughout history by groups and leaders, both religious and secular, of any position on a political spectrum to both damn others or ascribe redemption to themselves. She notes:

Apocalypse has been used to justify genocide, nuclear holocaust, ethnic cleansing and total war. These horrors are twisted into necessary preludes for the purified and harmonious new social order that will arrive after the end of time. (Heartney 9).

The end of the world is impossibly tangled with the notion of utopia. The same exclusionary impulse drives both, with a saved or moral group, as well as “...a preoccupation with evil as an active force in the world.” (72). Like the town of Ruby in Morrison’s *Paradise*, groups can enact the worst of humanity in attempts to preserve the best. Heartney, near the conclusion of her book, potently asks:

Humans thrive on hope, which is why modernity’s progress narrative had such a long and fruitful run. But as the history of the apocalyptic imagination suggests, even hope can be destructive if it reinforces our most divisive impulses. The apocalyptic narrative offers an equivocal promise of renewal. Is there a way to imagine the End that doesn’t consign huge swaths of the human race to death and destruction? Is there a way to reconfigure Paradise and its promise of regeneration without succumbing to sectarianism and strife? Or does humanity’s ultimate survival demand that we move beyond our doomsday dreams? (217).

Toni Morrison and Donna Haraway both provide escape hatches from this seeming certainty of human thought.

The Convent in *Paradise*, as a structure, mimics the shared usage of disparate groups of apocalypse and utopia. The grifting launderer who built the novel's mansion filled it with ornate sexual details, from the door knobs to the art on the wall. The nuns engaged in a half-hearted iconoclastic streak when they took the building over, trying to smash as much of the lewdness away as possible. Under the mostly secular reign of Connie, the house holds the remains of the previous two lives in limbo, some is left up, some is in storage. One of the most "disturbing" scenes the Ruby men see is what is missing in the former chapel. "Clean as new paint is the space where there used to be a Jesus." (Morrison 12).

Before the violence enacted by the men of Ruby, the women at the Convent reached a state of actualization, a complex transformation that was met not by shying away from the details or contradictions of their pasts, traumas, and personalities, but by sitting with them and accepting the nuance. Furman notes, "Consolata's lesson is 'Never break them [the temporal and eternal] in two. Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary's mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve.'" (Furman 98). Unlike the limiting, purity-seeking behavior of Ruby, "the women are no longer tethered to a punishing past that sabotages present and future. After months, the women Consolata once labeled frightened, lying girls are strong and assured." (99).

After their deaths, the women's bodies disappear. Two other characters have a vision of a floating door or open window by the Convent. Morrison shows us the way out

of endless ideological revisions of the same structure, by embracing and sitting with “trouble”², rather than limiting and editing away.

Donna Haraway, ecofeminist scholar, argues passionately for “staying with the trouble” when it comes to thinking about and attempting to mitigate the climate crisis, which “... requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings.” (Haraway 1). She resists negative, nihilistic responses to the collapse of the world’s ecosystems, but also refuses to give in to flat, optimistic fantasy. In her 2016 book, *Staying with the Trouble*, she expresses the complexity of not only our current global crisis, but that of the non-hierarchical symbiosis we humans (or as Haraway would label, critters) are in with all of the other critters, bacterial to mammalian. We cannot think about our world as us versus nature, or simple cause and effect. Instead, Haraway notes:

... everything is connected to *something*, which is connected to something else. While we may all *ultimately* be connected to one another, the specificity and proximity of connections matter---*who we are bound up with and in what ways*. (173).

A tragic, but potent, example of this interconnectedness is given by Haraway in the recent history of a species of orchid (*Ophrys Apifera*) which evolved over time to mimic the likeness of the bee species that would pollinate it. That species of bee has, like many others, gone extinct.

Once embraced by living buzzing bees, the flower is a speaker for the dead... The practice of the arts of memory enfold all terrain critters. That must be part of any possibility for resurgence! (69).

² Donna Haraway notes that the word “trouble” originates in a “French verb meaning ‘to stir up’...” (Haraway 1).

The orchid will also eventually die out now that the bee is gone, but for the moment acts as a painting for its lost partner. Its act of representation, an attempt to remember.



Figure 8. Detail of an *Ophrys Apifera* flower in my painting, *Tapestry Gazers*, 2020.

∞

Of my parents' parents' generation, I knew almost no one. My mother's mom died when she was 13. Her dad when I was 4. My father's parents died not long after. The only person I did know was my (great)uncle Kenny. He was loving and suffering from dementia. The year he died, we spent the summer in his Long Island home, sorting through a lifetime of belongings and readying the house to go on the market.

He was always an avid photographer, but most of his decades of photographs were never printed. The film canisters and binders filled with negatives came back with us, split between my mother and aunt, the latter scanning some of the archive over the years. But mostly, the images waited in our homes.

My own husband is a photographer. The first time we went home for a holiday, I showed him the negatives and scans. I had already made some paintings from images Kenny took. They were images I loved, but Ian gave me confirmation: Kenny was an extremely talented photographer, and despite not sharing his work while alive, he had left behind a prolific archive. We asked my aunt and mother if we could take his negatives home with us, to one day properly organize.

In the years since that trip, we've both created work from archives formal and informal. He often finds a pose and has a friend or a friend-of-a-friend recreate it for a portrait. I often find a pose and integrate it into a composition I'm painting. Last year, we were periodically visiting The Pat Parker/Vito Russo Center Library and exploring their archives, specifically that of *Out Week*, a news magazine from 1989 to 1991. We both made several pieces from these images.

By the time we were self-isolating at home during the COVID-19 pandemic, Ian had already organized Kenny's images by year and film format. The scanning and spotting, however, really began in earnest in this new stage of our lives. He often stayed up into the late hours of the night spotting. The images felt activated. I began to make new paintings from moments in them. Ian started to shoot images on Kenny's wavelength.



Figure 9. Photograph by Kenny Gardner, ca. 1990.

∞

The Villa of the Mysteries' wall frescoes are by some readings an allegory for marriage or an initiation into the cult of Dionysus (Lobell). It's this unknowability that has always drawn me to the paintings paired with the visceral red before which the figures present themselves.

In what now feels like another time, Ian and I made it to Naples, Italy in the summer of 2019. I had received a Kossak painting grant to see the Villa in particular. We took an early morning train to Pompeii, walking from the station to the already-crowded entrance. I had printed out a book's worth of maps and information about the sites. The ruins have several scrappy dogs that beg the visitors for food. I pictured a desolate night town Pompeii, empty save for a spare security guard, the dominion of a society of dogs.

We avoided the main direction the tours were heading, and set our path directly on the Villa, which is outside of the main city and up a winding path. Even within the Villa, the room with the murals is only found after snaking through the entire building, briefly exiting the back, and rounding a corner to reenter. When I caught a glimpse of the scene, it was a visceral shock. I stood there and slowly took in the entire scene, barely sticking my head into the fenced-off room. The incomprehensible scene is visually flat, but complex in its players. Some figures make direct eye contact, some are deep in conversation, others turn their back to the viewer. Fabric billows on those who seem to be message deliverers, while figures next to them are unmoving and statuesque. Violence permeates the group, some figures hunch with a Masaccio

shame. One portion of a wall is deteriorated, time and air the violent intruder. I'm aware that my own breath could contribute.

A man with a camera around his neck looked into the room as I did. At one point, he motioned to me and put his index finger to his lips, then stepped over the stanchion rope, and quickly took a series of photographs of the room in a circular twist.

I thought about his body in the empty room as a perverse inversion of the now iconic white plaster forms of the victims of the Vesuvius eruption. Archeologists first excavating the ruins had noticed air pockets in the material of the dirt-pact rooms, and filled them in with plaster, discovering a negative body.

∞

The other day I saw a man walking down the grass path on Ocean Parkway in a hazmat suit. I was walking in the same direction, but blocks behind. He looked a bit like Big Foot.

∞

Early in the pandemic, I mostly walked our dog, Seneca, in quick bursts into the outside world, but late at night I would take her for long walks down the parkway toward Brighton Beach. This was when there was practically no one out, just occasional masked and gloved bus riders getting on and off from the back doors. It's a walk I've been making for years. Early in the walk we pass a building that I've noticed (in regular times) every week or two has an entire apartment's worth of furniture left out on the curb. I was sad to eventually realize it was a senior living center. March. . . April. . . May . . . every night I walked past this building there was a new set (or sometimes two sets) of cabinets, bed frames, mattresses bagged and leaning, shelves, sometimes a kitchen sink.

∞

I'm thinking about *Ophrys Apifera* as Ian continues to scan Kenny's negatives. How the frozen embedded image of the bee continues to sprout and grow in new, confused orchids. How Kenny took hundreds, if not thousands of images, and printed almost none. They sat, rolled poorly in old film cases, waiting.

In her 1999 essay, "Posthumous Lives", Chris Kraus details the attempts of two artists, Carolee Schneemann and Penny Arcade, to preserve the work and legacy of their deceased artist friends. She discusses Schneeman's installation, *Mortal Coils*, which functions as a memorial to 15 such artists (Kraus 65). Kraus also explains how when Penny Arcade's friend Jack Smith died from AIDS in 1989, she first attempted to continue to pay his apartment's rent to "preserve and maintain" an installation there. After a year and a half, she photographed the rooms and then paid to store the contents a subsequent eight years before MoMA PS 1 held a Smith retrospective and utilized her documentation and all of the items she held onto (68). Arcade also holds the archive for a still less-known Sheyla Baykal, a photographer who was friends with Paul Thek and Peter Hujar, and documented much of the Lower East Side scene (69). Close to her apartment, Arcade rents storage space within a store.

It's in the backroom of this storefront, in boxes stacked on temporary shelves, that Arcade stores the prints and negatives that comprise three decades of Baykal's photographic work. The boxes were collected from the street. When Baykal died in 1995, there was no money left in her estate for professional conservation. Still, her legacy remains preserved so long as Penny keeps this up. (69).

Kraus gets to view this archive with Arcade and activate the images in wait. She writes, “The photographs are visually stunning. Everyone is dead now, but captured in their self-invented splendor at the height of rococo.” (69) I think of the deep reds, vibrant purples, acidic greens of the *Ophrys Apifera*, sitting in wait for that familiar buzz that signals renewal and life.

Maybe the orchid is also an empty bathroom.

In Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia* chapter, ‘Ghosts of Public Sex’, he considers photographer Tony Just’s 1994 series of cruising bathrooms:

The project began with just selecting run-down public men’s rooms in New York City, the kind that were most certainly tea rooms before they ... were shut down because of the AIDS/HIV public health crisis. Just then proceeded to do the labor of scrubbing and sanitizing sections of the public men’s room. ... Just’s labor exists only as a ghostly trace in a sparkling men’s room. ... The urinals, tiles, toilets, and fixtures that are the objects of these photo images take on what can only be described as a ghostly aura, an otherworldly glow. (Muñoz 40-41).

To Muñoz the image of the bathrooms are both a historical remembrance and a call to new potential pleasures. The series plays on the queer potential of negation of which Muñoz speaks of throughout his book, stating the emptiness in Just’s series “...is meant to make room for other worlds of sexual possibility.” (42). At the same time, these “queer specters... haunt gay men on both sides of a generational divide that is formed by and through the catastrophe of AIDS.” (41).

Just’s early work now is its own kind of ghost. Outside of academic papers, it’s incredibly difficult to find images from this series online. Those that can be accessed, already stylistically hazy, are small on the page. These have a hyper-specificity to them

despite their atmosphere, and therefore carry an aspect of criminology photography.

The imposed criminality of the actions that took place in these spots is embedded in the content.

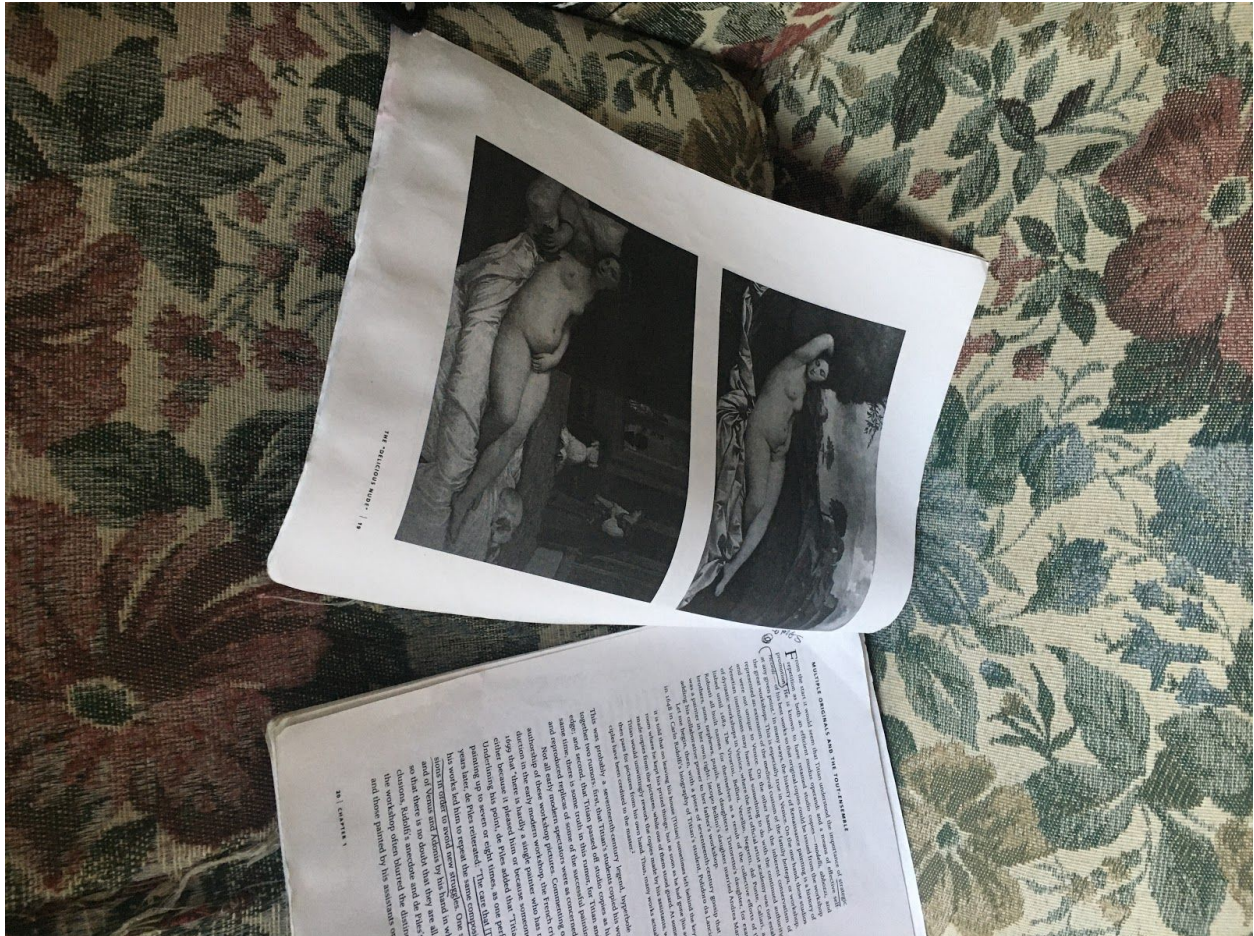


Figure 10. Cellphone photo of a printed chapter of Maria Loh's *Titian Remade*.

∞

The repeat paintings I made from Pat Rocco's gay and lesbian retreat photographs follow an iterative mode of working that I have fixated my practice. Outside of any archive I may work through is my own "archive", its current form a Google Drive folder with hundreds of images, some I've digitally held for a decade plus. I return to these images, each carrying something potent, again and again, often painting several versions, changing dimensions, media, crop, and narrative.

Maria Loh has written extensively about quotation within painting history, specifically about how this affects the viewer's experience when noticing referent moments. Writing in *Titian Remade*, about a Padovanino painting which utilizes a sleeping Venus pose that Titian popularized:

A telescopic, almost vertiginous, feeling arises from the tension between the act of looking at this picture and the act of filling in the lapsus that is generated by the elements within it. Looking at Padovanino's painting, one cannot help but see other images. A meta-picture is created in the mind of the beholder, a *musée imaginaire* where multiple images slip in and out of view. (Loh 17).

Loh suggests that there is a "...'*whole* existing order' that shifts, adjusts, and redefines itself every time a new element is introduced into the paradigm." (22). Paintings across eras and genres reverberate off of each other and affect the viewing, so that "...rather than focusing the gaze upon a singular, closed image, the spectator imagines the generic possibilities in which significant meaning is produced simultaneously from multiple intentions." (26).

Billy Sullivan's painting and photography oeuvre involves five decades of self-citation, as he paints from his own photographs repeatedly over the years,

collapsing time by placing the moments together on a continuum. I think this is best articulated in *Still Looking*, a large catalog published by Edition Patrick Frey in 2016. The book's dimensions standardize the scale of his drawings, paintings, and photographs as the work is paced organically and non-chronologically. William J. Simmons describes Billy's practice as a "trans-historical collage" and an "amassment of complementary and competing selves" (Simmons 276, 275). He goes on, describing a particular composed image that incorporated model reference shots from different decades, that nonetheless could describe the entire project:

We have both fact and fiction---a genre painting composed of disparate pieces that come together to tell a story, as in a tapestry or a filmic flashback (276).

∞

On the phone, my mother sounded despondent. She had just returned home from her storage unit. At that point, she had sold the house and was staying in her sister's apartment, storing most of her belongings in two units in town.

Living on the Gulf Coast of Florida, hurricanes are a consistent disruption. Late summer is the worst. Like most years, my hometown was spared a big storm by a stroke of luck. Power went out for a few days, but most of the real damage happened upstate.

Days after the storm, the storage company called my mom and asked her to come in. One of her units had flooded during the storm, but as it hadn't leaked into the hallway, it went unnoticed. The stagnant water pooled for two days in the heat while the storage building had no power. My mom described bloated furniture and the horror of what happened to the large rug. A family heirloom of my dad's side, she had held on to it for years after my parent's divorce to someday give to my brother or me. It was immense, filling our entire living room growing up. The women of my dad's mother's generation had made the various diamond-framed images that composed the rug on hand looms, eventually piecing it all together. When the manager pulled the rug up, it dissolved in his hands, a slimy mess.

Sometimes when I can't sleep, I try to recall all the images. A rabbit running. A happy pig skipping. Names and wedding dates.

∞

Uncle Kenny sang in my family's band, Guy Lombardo and His Royal Canadians. His voice was beautiful. Try all I can to find words for it, but there's none better than "sweet".

∞

On June 1, 2008 there was a backlot fire at Universal Music Group that affected several significant musicians. Listed in the destroyed or unaccounted masters was Guy Lombardo.

∞

Every year, for almost fifty years, Guy Lombardo played the broadcasted New Years' ball drop in New York City. The song they played right at midnight was "Auld Lang Syne."

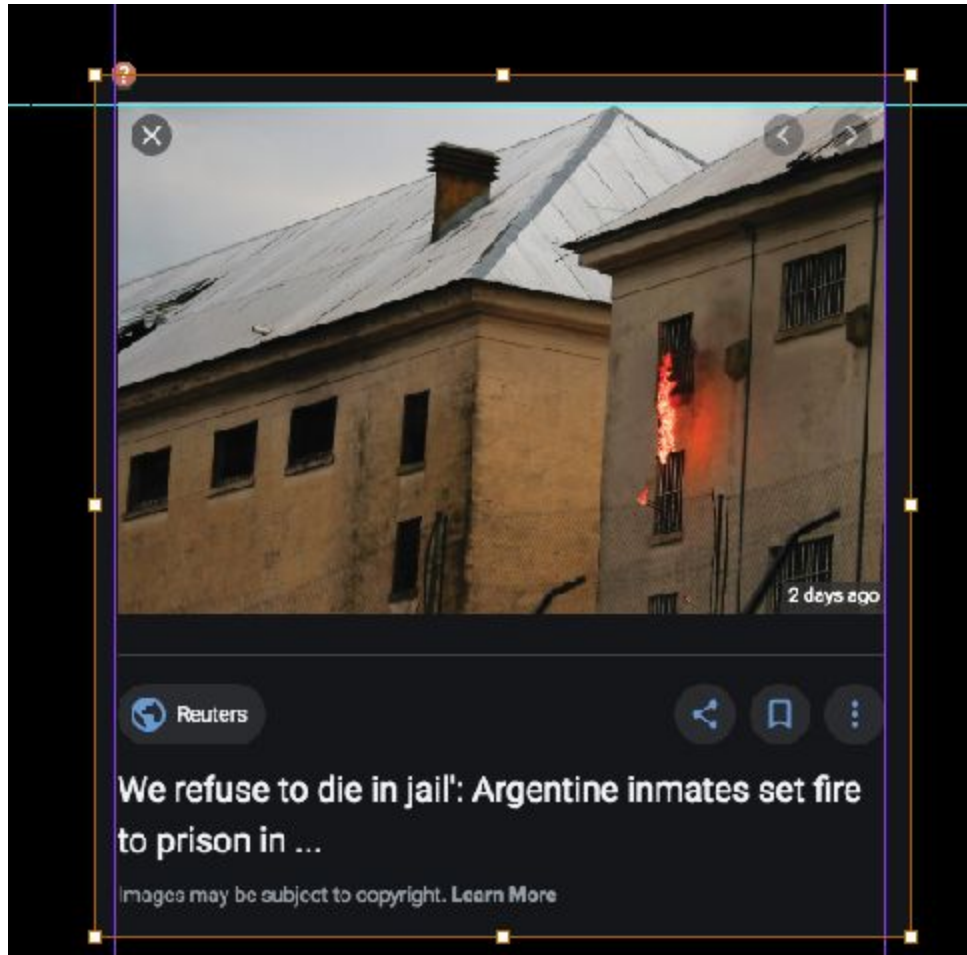


Figure 11. Screenshot of a news image thumbnail of a prisoner protest in Argentina during the COVID-19 pandemic, 4/24/20.

∞

Werner Herzog's *La Soufrière* (1977) found the director and his crew racing to an evacuated Guadeloupe to find a man he saw on the news who refused to flee an imminent eruption of the archipelago's volcano. When he locates him, the man is sleepy and uninterested. He had completely resigned himself to his fate. The volcano does not erupt (Herzog).

In 2016, Herzog returned to volcanos, to the people who live with them and who study them, in the documentary, *Into the Inferno*. In one aside, the figure of Ludger Sylbaris is introduced. He was a man imprisoned in a solitary confinement cell in Martinique during a horrific 1902 volcanic eruption. 30,000 people died from that disaster, but Sylbaris was one of three who lived, protected by the walls and the position of the prison (Herzog).



Figure 12. "Remains of the cell where Ludger Sylbaris survived the eruption", but Wikimedia Commons user Shroedingerskat, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Remains_of_the_cell_where_Ludger_Sylbaris_survived_the_eruption..jpg.

∞

Marcelo had reached out to the ONE Archives to ask for permission to print Pat Rocco's image in the small-edition zine we published for my show. A representative there told Marcelo that he had to contact Rocco directly. Eventually, on the phone, Marcelo received a quick 'yes.'

Rocco passed away in November of 2018. The first website to run an obituary of him featured an image of the aged man bent slightly, holding a railing for support, but still joyously waving to the camera. In the background is the Mount Baldy cabin. The writing briefly mentions that he and his husband moved back to this location shortly before he died.



Figure 13. A photograph of Pat Rocco waving to the viewer at this Mount Baldy cabin posted on his obituary page, <https://www.wehoville.com/2018/11/10/pat-rocco-gay-film-pioneer-co-founder-la-pride-died/>

∞

Researching the figure of Janus, I learned that Louise Bourgeois' famous mirrored phallus piece was titled after the god. Another theme that recurred in her work was a woman's body merged with a house, sometimes the figure standing strong and totemic, sometimes the figure weighed down and debilitated by the structure.

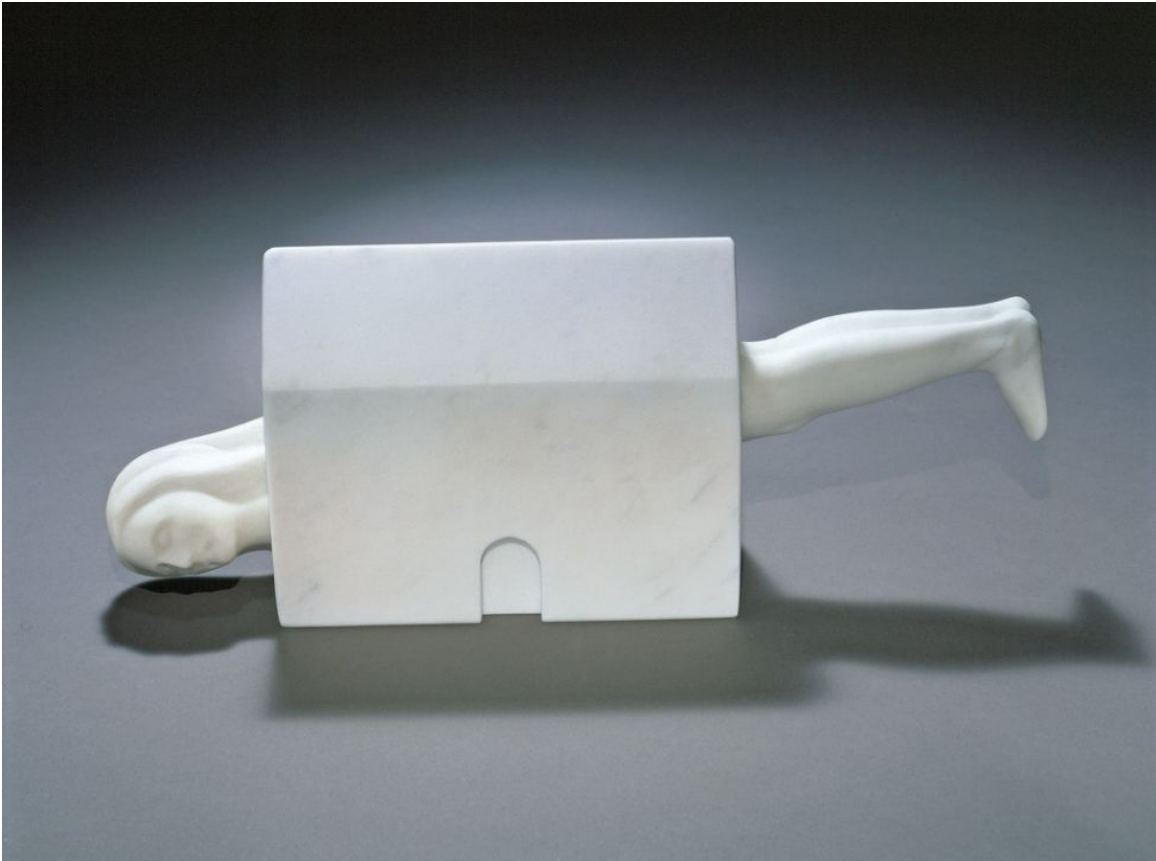


Figure 14. Louise Bourgeois, *Femme Maison*, 1994; White marble, 5 x 12 1/2 x 2 3/4 in.; Collection of Louise Bourgeois Trust; Art © The Easton Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY, Photograph: Christopher Burke, accessed: nmwa.org/blog/women-house-femme-maisons/

∞

Martin Marafioti's (aka Anthony Malone) long-term zine project is titled *For Everard* and functions as a research project and memorial to the nine men who died in the 1977 Everard bath house fire. He works by way of a chain of context clues and blind hunches, as the history requires. Many visitors of the baths would sign in with a fake name, or a friend's name. Newspapers initially reported varying numbers of casualties, incorrect (and misspelled) names, and ill-researched information about the victims. He has consulted with research librarians of a college to help him access archives and yearbooks; he has visited the gravesites and childhood homes of the deceased. Many times, he has left a request for identification and information on a public Facebook account and waited several months sometimes for someone to respond.

Last year, I worked with and around imagery from the 1977 bathhouse fire, and periodically met with Martin to discuss his project, especially the challenges and pitfalls of working with images of a tragedy decades old. His final zines are spaces made for the dead, to honor them, to ensure that they are remembered in a meaningful, albeit humble way. Friends and family members weigh in on how the person would have wanted his zine to be laid out visually, allowing collaboration to enter the process. In my paintings, I'm often thinking about the desire for and a negotiation of safety.

There is a queer inflection to this negotiation and the Everard fire can be used as an encapsulation. The Everard was a gay bathhouse on 28th and Broadway in New York City. By the time Koch closed it down in the '80s, the baths had been operating for

almost a century, and rebuilt from two fires. Sometime in the 1910s or '20s, it shifted to a primarily homosexual venue (Kohler). The fire that killed these nine men was exasperated by the fact that the windows to the Everard were boarded shut, both to make the space as dark as possible during the day and (I'm projecting) to keep the eyes of the straight world out. Nothing in the bath was up to code; in fact the owner at the time of the fire had received an extension from the city, past the original deadline, for upgrading the facilities (Shafir). Like any underground gay space of the time, it's been claimed to have been run by the mob with heavy police involvement (Ryan 159-160).



Figure 15. Scan of a 1977 Reading Eagle article “Their Bath Interrupted by Blaze”, found on back2stonewall.com,
<http://www.back2stonewall.com/2020/05/may-25-1977-gay-history-everard-baths-fire-nyc.htm>

∞

In late June, Hunter was still uncertain on paths towards reopening, and I decided to join Ian in his studio which is walking distance from our apartment. There I was finally able to work on large-scale paintings again. Like I had done in the aftermath of Ian's remission, I wanted to attempt to process the feelings that dominated my thoughts months into a negligent government's handling of a pandemic, feelings that bridged the gap between the incredibly micro (bubbles and personal behavior adjustments) to the dizzyingly macro.

The first painting I knew had to feature Ian and me as a couple, a source of comfort in this crisis and also a wellspring of anxiety and fear. Could an action as small as adjusting a mask while outside cause me and then Ian to contract COVID-19? What are the percentages on partner-to-partner transmission? Should Ian again work in a darkroom? Is he exposing me?

I found an image posted on danceoftheclothes' instagram³ page of two men making out behind a building. I adjusted the pose and took reference images of Ian and myself in position. The wall, as a structure, seemed to suggest protection while leaving the figures outside, actually exposed to risk. Positioning the drawing on the canvas, I began to think of Pierre et Gilles, and their images of sailors, fantastical and romantic but always allowing a bodily rot to coax its way gently into their settings. I first attempted to place the sea in the distance around the side of the wall, but ultimately painted over

³ a loose archival project focused on "macho gay, gay disco, late 70's early 80's"

it. Laying the canvas on the floor while pouring the first layers of acrylics to pool and dry, I thought of Helen Frankenthaler's process and then of her painting, *Jacob's Ladder* (1957). I traced the lines of that discreet ladder central to her composition and placed it in the landscape now replacing the sailor's sea. I see it aspirationally, an option to remove ourselves from this limbo, like the open window vision in Morrison's *Paradise*. At first it appeared like stained glass shining, but I eventually pushed it back, muting the colors to overlay the landscape beneath. A path cuts diagonally through the ladder. Later, on top of all this, I layer a tree from a segment of the 14th Century French Apocalypse Tapestries. It's both comforting and worrisome that the dread of the end of the world has always been with us as humans. To that end, I finally add a lion eating its own tail on top of it all, floating in the branches.

Relatively the side of the canvas with Ian and myself is lightly touched, but I eventually add a ledge near our feet and include an orange, quoting the fruit on the floor of Édouard Manet's *Young Lady in 1866*, which I've long loved as one of the most viscerally pleasurable passages in painting history. The acidic colors that surround us also point to pleasure, despite the ominous world around the side of the wall.

With this connection-making and layering, I think of Haraway and another early meaning she found for "trouble": "to make cloudy." (Haraway 1). That layering paint like this often leads to visual qualities labelled "muddy" is relevant. Her thinking on the interconnectedness of our planet seems to me a beautiful metaphor for the process of conversation that happens when painting and thinking about painting:

More precisely, com-menting, if it means thinking-with, that is becoming-with, is in itself a way of relaying... But knowing that what you take has been held out entails a particular thinking "between." It does not demand fidelity, still less fealty,

rather a particular kind of loyalty, the answer to the trust of the held out hand. Even if this trust is not in “you” but in “creative uncertainty,” even if the consequences and meaning of what has been done, thought or written, do not belong to you anymore than they belonged to the one you take the relay from, one way or another the relay is now in your hands, together with the demands that you do not proceed with “mechanical confidence.” [In cat’s cradling, at least] two pairs of hands are needed, and in each successive step, one is “passive”, offering the result of its previous operation, a string entanglement, for the other to operate, only to become active again at the next step, when the other presents the new entanglement. But it can also be said that each time the “passive” pair is the one that holds, and is held by the entanglement, only to “let it go” when the other one takes the relay. (34).

I began to notice that the new paintings all featured only one or two figures, reflecting my quarantine experience. The notion of a group changed this year. In the past when I painted the figures in the Pat Rocco retreat, I thought of a communal safety, with figures protecting each other. Instead this summer, images of groups together in New York City carried a notion of dangerous negligence, and were shocking. Whether in West Village, various city parks, or Fire Island parties, images of unmasked people clustering were met with judgement and scorn after months of death and fear. Many were prior to the Black Lives Matter protests of this summer, which clarified that outdoor transmission was considerably lower risk than indoor. Every time one of these moments of gathering went viral, I saved the images, sometimes out of anger, other times just out of curiosity. I felt like the distance from which I viewed others was similar to Breugel, who perpetually seemed to have a solitarily vantage point on a hill, overlooking the townspeople below. I took the screenshots from various news outlets and Instagram exposés and collaged them into a frantic web. The painting, *Crowd (day and night)*, I make from this collage encompasses a duration of time. Several figures in the group are

in varying lighting scenarios, from a glowing daylight comprising the bottom third, to a red nightclub lighting on the top left, to an X-ray inversion of the far-away figures to the top right. The differing light reflects and refracts on figures across the canvas, like a diamond. The largest figure bends over to touch an *Ophrys Apifera*. I paint this flower again and again. In *Tapestry Gazers* the orchid bends into frame, mimicking the three men leaning forward, observing a cropped segment of the Apocalypse Tapestries.

Another image that I began to repeat was that of two figures cropped from an image of a large outdoor crowd. One man, viewed from behind is visually intertwined with a man facing him. Their bodies, to me, looked like they fulfilled an infinity symbol. I made a small painting of the duo, *When We Came Back*, and they appear in the background of *Two Inside (common fence)*, both times outside, in the night. In the larger painting they are in direct comparison to the warmth of the two “inside” figures. After months of outside being a source of planning and anxiety during COVID-19, my paintings began to show exteriors as fearful, unsafe places. Inside, and the solitary figure or small groupings of people, began to carry an aura of safety.

To that end, many figures spiral or fold into themselves. Two of the figures of *People Spiral* radiate out of another glowing figure. This occurs on one face in *Ear Knot*. The wooden floor pattern of *Glowing figure* spirals to a point directly next to the prone figure.

This domestic safety is challenged in *CUT THE WORLD*, in which a figure holds a knife in her left hand and glares at the viewer, who might take the role of intruder. The painting takes its title from the musician ANOHNI’s 2012 song, which includes the lyrics:

For so long I've obeyed

That feminine decree
I've always contained
Your desire to hurt me
But when will I turn
And cut the world?

Several times I painted Janus figures, focusing on the detail of that mythic iconography, the moment when the ears of the figure looking to the past and the one looking towards the future meet. In *Janus above*, this appears as an apparition above a crowd. The Janus symbol is one of uncertainty. It matches the mood of *Ian on the border*, in which I painted Ian leaning on a metal fence, the bones of that barrier placing his lower body into a different zone. Here the demarcation of the fence is ambiguous. What lays before him?

I painted the infinity duo one more time, in *Red knot*, larger and by themselves. I was thinking of Maria Loh's notion of the "meta-picture", and how the three variations of the duo inflected each other. This time, I painted them in a rosey light. They are lost in their own conversation. The world around them is cropped out; it may not exist. They change the previous two paintings, elaborating another outside that is not dangerous or worrisome. Their integrated bodies form the structure of another kind of house.

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