

Art Now L.A.
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Esther Pearl Watson
Safer at Home: Pandemic Paintings
Documenting the Everyday

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by Jody Zellen



As of this writing (12-24-2020) we have been living with Covid-19 for more than 250 days. How do we account for the time, the changes in life and lifestyle? Esther Pearl Watson began making small (around 8 x 10 inch) paintings in January, 2020 documenting the events in her life in her folk-artsy signature-style. In the gallery, she presents these works chronologically in uneven grids interspersed with black cloth banners hand sewn with white numbers representing the count of Covid-19 deaths in the United States. Over time, the numbers grow (as do the banners size) from hundreds in March, to hundreds of thousands by November 2020. The diaristic paintings link Watson's personal experience to this haunting reality.

A painting toward the beginning of the timeline *January 24, There is a New Virus*, states, "*January 24, 2020: There is a new virus in China, The flu is more dangerous we are told. I get a flu shot*" and depicts a car and a few people in front of a medical center. *February 26, CDC Confirms a Case, 2020* reads: "*CDC Confirms a Case of Covid-19 community spread in California. There is the flu going around too. Some of my students were absent. Some students wear masks to class.*" The accompanying illustration is of an Art Center College of Design building, cars and people in the crosswalk and street against a starlit and cloud-filled sky. For March, Watson clusters the paintings as one piece, collectively called "*Safer at Home – Month of March.*" These 19 paintings also include four similarly sized black banners with the numbers 250, 500, 1,000 and 2,500.

As time went on, the restrictions on life continued, testing began, protests occurred, there was an election and much political turmoil. Reading through short blurbs scrawled in the top left corner of each dated painting gives a sense of how Covid-19 impacted Watson's life, as well as those around her. She describes her concern for her mother at a senior living facility and the fact that "*hugs were a no*" in a painting from April 12, 2020. Images of streets full of unmasked people give way to images of empty roads and mask-wearing dog-walkers. Watson depicts protests as in *June 7, La Pintoresca Park Protest, 2020*. Here she paints people of varying ethnicities, all wearing masks and carrying 'Black Lives Matter' and 'RIP George Floyd' signs as they gather in front of a local laundromat.

The virus, coupled with protests and fires takes its toll on Watson and her family. She allows this anxiety, desperation and frustration to enter into the work. For example, in *September 14, Pandemic Brain Fog* she writes “*Pandemic Brain Fog has returned in our family. We worry global warming and fires are the new normal.*” The painting features four masked people in an empty field that abuts a strip of green trees behind which are flames in the distant hills along with a hovering helicopter. On September 27, Watson laments the possible cancellation of Halloween that was revised to “*not recommended*” with a whimsical painting of a house flanked by two skeletons, a jogger with her dog and signage for free masks. On October 8, Watson created a painting of the long line of cars waiting for Covid tests at Dodger Stadium. A painting commemorating Ruth Bader Ginsburg was created on September 25 as Watson presents a house in Culver City with a large painting of RBG on its garage.

The final works in the exhibition date from November and include a painting about election day, November 3, and one from November 9 displaying a bus filled with masked riders passing by a store whose sign states “*Beauty 24/Pharmacy*” against the backdrop of downtown Los Angeles. It reads “*There is now a vaccine that will one day be available. For now, my mom gets a flu shot.*” These pieces are hung alongside the largest black banner in the exhibition, commemorating 238,000 deaths.

Watson’s matter of fact, colorful and simplistic style shares affinities with folk artists like Grandma Moses. Her process is to document the everyday, that which surrounds her and is simultaneously banal and in these dire times, disconcerting and unusual. The pieces are at once familiar, stemming from observation, yet also surreal. Her “*Pandemic*” paintings were created quickly and together create a narrative that traces the uncanny spread of the virus and how it affects the individuals, students, families and communities of Los Angeles.

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