

reinvention
creative pivots in the pandemic 
ARTISTS' STATEMENTS

SLIDELL CULTURAL CENTER
JULY 23 – AUGUST 27, 2021

FOREWORD

There's no denying that arts have the power to lift our spirits especially during challenging times. At no time has this been more evident than when the world shut down due to Covid-19. Through lockdowns, quarantines and social distancing, people turned to the arts to escape the harsh reality of everything that was happening locally, nationally and globally.

So many people found much-needed catharsis via arts experiences delivered to their living rooms by way of the internet. There were virtual choirs whose performances were unhindered, despite members being located in separate locations as they sang. Streamed theatrical performances from Broadway and beyond transported viewers to other places and times with rich stories, elaborate settings, enthralling characters and stirring music. The world was welcomed with virtual tours of museums, art galleries and artists' studios. Musicians performed on front porches or makeshift stages, sans audiences, to share their talents and their passions. Literary artists offered virtual live readings and discussions, and visual artists taught lessons virtually, helping many of those shut down in the pandemic discover artistic gifts of which previously they may have been unaware.

Arts became our universal language of hope.

Given the profound impact of the pandemic in our community and around the world, I believed it was important that this moment in time was captured through the *Reinvention* artists' works and stories, so that in the future, the story is not limited to a few paragraphs in a history textbook, but instead is experienced on a much deeper level. The exhibition has provided the public an opportunity to become part of each artist's world through shared experiences and a glimpse into creatives' mindsets as shaped by the pandemic and social limitations.

Images of the artists' works and their stories will be included in a time capsule, to be housed in the Slidell Museum. The community also is invited to contribute their stories to the archive, all of which will connect the present and the future in a meaningful way.

The "Reinvention: Creative Pivots in the Pandemic" exhibition follows in the tradition of prior experiences with local artists that I have curated to commemorate historic moments in time.

In 2015, "Hope for Habitat: Katrina X" focused on ten years of post-Katrina destruction and recovery while also serving as a fundraiser for East St. Tammany Habitat for Humanity.

In 2016, the "Stop the Madness. Artists' Voices. Critical Conversations." exhibition focused on many of the polarizing issues facing the nation and the world. Subject matter addressed included global warming, political dissention, social divides and high crime rates.

As is the case with "Reinvention," each of those exhibitions included artists' statements addressing how their lives had been impacted by those historic times. The exhibitions and accompanying statements all share a common message: Arts matter.

--Kim Bergeron, Curator

CONNIE BORN

The Krewe of MisChief went into Covid-19 lockdown on March 12. No more fun-loving tourists to pass through the Gallery. My cultural inspiration went into lockdown, too. The Spirit of Louisiana went dormant for me that day.

The following nine months are a blur now. Uninspired, I lost my creative desire. How did the Covid-19 affect or change my creative process, you ask? My creative brain went into mindless slumber only to wake up again in November when inspiration came via an Etsy sale. A new collector in Chicago, who purchased three creations. I boxed 'em, shipped 'em and days later received a message.

“I have been so depressed and miss being able to travel to NOLA,” she said. “Found your creations and they remind me of that special city. They have arrived and I love them. They make me smile! I am buying three more.”

So it began...my inspiration slowly returned. I couldn't see my new friend but I could read her words and I had made her smile. She now owns what I call the Newman Collection of 52 MisChief Artdolls, all unique and many custom-made just for her. The Art world opened back up that day for me. Communications between us inspired me back into my home studio and I began creating anew. Many other sales started to follow from my collectors around the world and my inspiration came back.

When invited to be part of this exhibit I was inspired but confused. What would I make? How had Covid-19 changed my creative process? It numbed my creativity and put it into slumber for months. I did not create anything until November and my newly found inspiration woke me up. So I asked myself what angered me the most about the Covid imposed slumber. Death, loss of freedom, tourists, festivals, Jazz Fest (I had been juried in), gallery lockdown, and the wearing of masks. I've always associated mask wearing with Mardi Gras and Halloween, so I really struggled with the notion of mandated masks.

I chose to create MisChief Masquerade “Let Them Eat Cake” as a reminder that mask wearing is for joyful occasions. Freedom from the mandated mask wearing has been heavenly.

MARY CHRISTOPHER

When the pandemic hit I went outside. The public tennis courts were locked up, but I was blessed to find a way to feed my addiction with some friends each morning, one of whom had friend with a private court.

“I am so happy to be here right now”, someone would always say. “I feel so incredibly lucky!”

The court was by a golf course and every morning there was a free concert of sights and sounds and smells that never failed to carry me right into the ZEN mode. The green velvet grass was the perfect stage for all kinds of sparkling patterns of dew that glistened and danced and morphed as the day progressed. It was a spectacle!!! The birds would chime in with their chorus at different times each day as the clouds, the breeze and the light helped to conduct their songs. Everything was blooming!

Sometimes after tennis I paddled my trusty kayak down our beloved bayous, spending the rest of the day completely taken aback by such remarkable beauty. It was as if I'd never seen a bayou before. I kept thinking that this was by far the most amazing spring we have ever had. I still haven't quite figured out if this actually *was* the prettiest spring ever, or if somehow I just never needed to experience it in such a way before. In any case, Mother Nature came through with her medicine in a big way, helping me to cope with the fears, the sadness, the constant reminders that too many human hearts were breaking, trapped in the foxholes of Covid-19. My art has always been an expression of gratitude for the beauty all around us, but during the pandemic, it became my lifeline.

Family (clay sculpture)

I found myself working with clay a lot because of the immediacy of the medium. Somehow it made more sense to do something I could sink my hands into and not only see but also feel the results that very same day. It is an ancient art and is as close to mother earth as you can get!

In the Weeds (acrylic on wood)

Everything that grows has its own beauty and symmetry. Every weed provides comfort and proof that life is miraculous.

Come Play! (acrylic on board)

Who can resist a sea turtle? And the beautiful world she lives in!

CHARLOTTE LOWRY COLLINS

Both my media and my methodology changed drastically during the Covid pandemic. It was a matter of practicality and necessity. My studio became Covid Elementary, where my grand-niece and grand-nephew were home-schooled during the pandemic. We had lots of fun art classes, but I decided to work on a small scale at home during that time.

I worked on paper with traditional media, pencil color, oil pastel, and acrylics, instead of the lengthy process of HMCP (hand-made cast-paper). I also decided to try working within a standard rectangular format, without my signature organic forms billowing outside the picture plane. My work, often six to twelve feet in height or width, shrank to fit my lap. I have been wanting to change my scale, but the sizes always ballooned before my eyes. One of the many silver linings was that the scale of my work finally changed.

Overall, the two works included in this exhibition are about hope and the positive side of human beings.

The imagery in the two paper pieces came from experiences while working from home during the pandemic. One was a conversation with my principal, who was a welcome voice of reason amidst all the confusion and angst during that phase of our career. Another came from a phone conversation from a student who had been schooled online for years due to a medical condition. His philosophical acceptance of pain and isolation from this young man taught me to look for the silver linings.

ROBERT DUTRUCH

My statement is a rather simplistic one.... My inability to visit my beloved Paris and Provence had caused great sadness and a longing for my second home. Although the majority of my art work is rooted in the monochromatic palette, these trying times have obliged my revisiting some of the more colorful images acquired during my sojourns of the last ten years...

KELLY LANDRUM HAMMELL

My creativity and motivation were greatly affected by the social isolation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Not being able to teach and interact with fellow artists in my studio, I found myself unmotivated and creatively stifled. Because of this, I created very few pieces during the pandemic. Works that were in progress when the pandemic began, were difficult for me to complete.

I found myself being very indecisive as I tried to create new work. This indecisiveness led me to reinvent my creative process. As I start creating a piece, I now know that my vision for the piece may change several times. I am currently able to start pieces and put them aside unfinished, aware that if I am patient as I revisit the work each day, a creative spark will eventually ignite.

Stifled

A grouping of unfinished pieces that has become its own entity as a statement of my stifled creativity caused by social isolation.

Gumball Machine

A functional candy dispenser that waited seven months before being glazed. I changed my glazing plan approximately twenty times before getting the creative spark that truly satisfied me.

VANESSA HOCK

It wasn't a sprint, it was a marathon. Endurance and the ability to reinvent and pivot quickly was key in getting through this challenging time. Although I had to make a few difficult pivots along the way to keep my studio running, I was able to continue to make art and to stretch myself artistically. Exploring new creative ideas and clinging to my faith, which was often the inspiration behind my artwork, were my lifelines.

I wasn't sure if the studio would survive, but I was determined not to go down without a fight. Unpermitted to hold classes or to allow co-op members to work in the studio, the first pivot for me was making pottery to sell online, offering digital gift certificates for future classes, and learning to utilize the website and social media as creatively as possible to keep the studio visible to the community. The studio co-op, an amazing group of local artists, continued to support the studio by working from home and dropping off their artwork for me to fire. We got by with these new changes until the studio was allowed to hold classes again. Under the mask mandates, however, a whole new set of challenges were created.

2020 Unmasked

Realizing the magnitude of this historic time, I felt compelled to step back from my typical wheel throwing to sculpt something that would document the pandemic. Because I felt like I was in a battle, I chose to make a bust of a strong soldier-like man. I used a metallic glaze to suggest the appearance of armor and strength, but I left him shirtless because the reality was that we were all so vulnerable. Covid-19 left no one unscathed, hence the battle scars all over him. Finally, I added a mask. Meant to cover up our faces, ironically, these coverings unmasked the most passionate responses in people. The discord and tension that followed was like nothing I had seen before.

Still Above Water

After months with seemingly no end in sight, I began to wonder how much longer I could stay afloat. Then one day I came across this Scripture: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; And through the rivers, they shall not overflow you." (Isaiah 43:2). This was so timely and encouraging. It gave me peace about the future and new strength to keep going. And it inspired my next project.

"Still Above Water" was made with stoneware, but there were elements that I felt would be better represented using something different. Contrary to "2020 Unmasked" I wanted "Still Above Water" to be soft and serene - peaceful. I began to experiment with paints, powders and resin. Ultimately, I decided to use acrylic and oil paint and resin for the water.

Run With Endurance

As mandates were lifted and classes began to fill again, hope of an end to this pandemic was in sight. Feelings of exhaustion, relief, and pride to have reached the finish began to flood my mind. I compared how I felt to a runner crossing the finish line. These thoughts and a passage in Hebrews 12 which speaks of "running with endurance the race set before you..." resulted in my desire to make "Run With Endurance."

There were two things I wanted to experiment with at the time that led to some of the choices for this sculpture. One was a porcelain slip technique that I ended up using for her shirt. The other idea was to use some dark brown clay I had for a larger sculpture. I originally bought the clay to make pottery, but I kept thinking it would make a perfect dark skin tone and it did.

This Covid journey was not easy, but I am thankful for the things I learned and grew from that will forever affect how I view art and the role it plays in my life.

MATT LITHLITER

When approached about participating in this show, my first inclination was to avoid. Not because it's a bad idea for a show, it's quite good, I just have mentally exhausted myself on the subject of Covid and was avoiding all mention or memory of the lockdowns.

I have very negative feelings on the matter. I remember when the lockdowns started it all seemed like a very bad dream. What seemed like small sacrifices for the common good of society devolved in misinformation, fear, chaos and division. We, as a society, was exposed in this process. We turned on each other and irrecoverably obliterated the social contract. This wasn't at all like my experiences with Katrina's fallout. We came together to rebuild in that time. What was damaged was seen as simply not as important as our lives. Slowly businesses that lost their fronts returned to their former glory. People rebuilt and we became stronger as a community through faith and a shared experience.

What we have now is a divided landscape...a "cold" Civil War. Tension and distain bubble underneath our shifting eyes, and why? Because we chose politics over community. This is not a time for me to reminisce. I chose, like I did during the lockdowns, to focus on my mental state and organize my priorities.

During lockdown, I was a wreck. I had always used art as an escape but now it was to keep my mind from unraveling. What should I do? I turned to work that made me feel better. I looked to old notes and projects I'd set aside and chose to paint something simply for me and my betterment. I had done a quick portrait of Morgus the Magnificent years back and was happy with the result and the feedback. I got to meet the man because of it. It was a triumphant and surreal time for me. I wanted to revisit that moment. I didn't want to do another portrait of him, I wanted it to look more unique. If this piece was for me I would try new techniques and ideas as well to keep my mind busy and distracted. I found some old EC Comics that I had in my closet. They were reissues of Tales from the Crypt and Vault of Horror comics from the 50's. They, like Morgus, were my gateway to horror, a movie genre I love very much. I set forth to make an EC Comics accurate comic only with Morgus and his cohorts as the star.

It was completely different from anything I did before then, and considering the unique circumstances, it seemed appropriate. It made me happy while I tried to put on a brave face for my little ones. I don't know if I'll ever paint about the Covid experience. I never imagined there would be anything I wouldn't want to tackle in that way but, Covid has remained a raw and uncomfortable thing to think of and dwell on. Even now, events 3 months from now hold vague uncertainty. Life remains in cautious limbo. As I even type this, my 7-year-old daughter lies in bed with Covid. She's fine and will recover, but the idea that Covid may pass over our house and spare us and my children has to be put to rest. My real concern is with us as a community. Will WE ever recover?

MANDIE MANZANO

The pandemic was definitely a huge shock to all of us. My hubby and I seemed like we had our entire year planned as we were newly married and planning a wedding later in the year for all of our families and loved ones to attend as they are in diverse places. We figured we'd have time to travel and go here and there and we learned that nothing is ever set in stone. Once the pandemic hit, all of our plans seemed to explode! As a teacher, it was very devastating not to see my students and also worry about their well-being and as an artist, to know that my livelihood will most-likely be affected by this unknown monster. Still I had faith and a little surprising light shined on us in 2020.

My pearl in the pandemic was our newborn child! I will admit it was very scary being pregnant during this time, but I trusted God and continued to work on my art. I was thankful for a dream that I was given to help quell my fear and I was very inspired! A different emotion swept over me: I was going to be someone's mommy and this body is creating a masterpiece from heaven. I clung to the words in James 1:17 about this being a "good and perfect gift from above" and to not be afraid. As I begin to create art, I noticed me and my art changing more and I realized I wanted to do more faith-based work that would minister to others as it was ministering to me.

I was thankful for the company I worked with that takes my art and changes it into diamond puzzles as it was being used to help people all over deal with the pandemic, anxiety, their PTSDs, and many other reasons and needs. Because I was no longer working as a teacher, I was able to create more pieces and to talk with others about their experiences and how art and crafts has helped them through many trials and circumstances. It has inspired me to create art that will always carry a message of hope, love, and light to others. Connecting with people and helping also helped me out of my darkest times during that year as well. I believe that this is what God intended when He created us: to love one another and to live our lives for others in such a way that love magnifies and multiplies...and it's amazing how even art can do just that!

I believe art is healing, and if it brings any healing to another person in any way, then I am truly happy! Just very thankful.

Love One Another

My heart was heavy seeing so much hatred and divide bubbling up amidst a pandemic where people really needed to care about others. I created this piece with tears flowing down my face! We must look at others the way God sees them! When we look through His eyes, we see the beauty in everything! I loved watching the students play at recess. There is just so much joy, wanting to be loved and love in return. I also love our precious bayous here in Slidell, so I created these two kiddos just loving one another and enjoying the beauty of God's creation! (Seeing each other and everything through His eyes.)

AL REISZ

For this exhibition, I created “Pandemic Redemption,” a wood turned art sculpture made from black walnut wood given to me by someone long before the pandemic actually hit. I had made a few pieces from it and found them to be majestic in grain and color but this piece had been on my mind for quite a while.

It was originally termed Kintsugi Art but it differs from that form in the sense of substance and style. Kintsugi is actually taking historically significant pottery pieces that have been broken and then repaired using lacquers mixed with gold powders. The repair, in some peoples’ minds, actually adds substance and sensibility to the broken object. In the past, I have turned pieces of wood that were bowls, urns, jars and obelisks but I had remembered years ago seeing a piece that was a face carved into a wooden slab that was sawed into quarters and then glued back together in a staggered or off-kilter fashion.

It must have made quite an impression on me because it had stuck with me all these years.

Before the Covid crisis hit I had been used to taking my mini lathe and setting up demos at fairs and celebrations here on the Gulf Coast. As of today, July 12, 2021, I haven’t done a demo of any kind in almost two years. Suffice it to say that I miss those days being able to turn wood out in public and talk to anyone that has an interest in the craft. The pandemic ended all that.

A few months ago, I had begun to turn wood, some of it Zeta wood, named after the storm that damaged our community last year; but some of it was a resurrection of an old idea. Pandemic Redemption is the culmination of one of those ideas. It was a pivot from my other work in the sense that most of my pieces were turned into completed, functional types of forms and then finished in a way that enhanced those pieces.

“Redemption” was different. It represented taking a completed piece and then destroying its continuity in order to make it into something that hadn’t been there before. Rising from a black walnut base this broken wheel, this broken shield, this broken plate asks the question- what is it or more importantly, why is it. Of course, there is no correct answer here. I leave it up to the viewer to decide. If I’ve created something that has left meat on the bone, space between the lines, then in my mind, it has fulfilled its mission.

ROSE MARIE SAND

“Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time.”

A meme circulated in the early days of the Covid pandemic claimed Shakespeare wrote 'King Lear,' 'Macbeth' and 'Antony and Cleopatra' as London reeled from an outbreak of the bubonic plague in the early 1600's. The meme was intended as a throwdown to do something meaningful with one's lockdown time, but it set the bar impossibly high for someone who's first inclination was to binge watch everything on Netflix, Hulu and Prime. Twice.

I've always known that when I'm not in touch with creativity I'm in the high weeds. And the fear, anxiety and world conditions of 2020 meant survival became a matter of both safety and sanity - safety from rampant fear of an unstoppable disease while remaining at least as sane as I claimed to be pre-pandemic.

As the weeks stretched into months and eventually over a year, art was a constant and welcome companion. Online platforms offered tours of the world's museums, live broadcasts from musicians, and a plethora of online classes and lectures to feed my hunger for creative energy to give life purpose and meaning, now more than ever.

I've always been an eclectic mosaic artist; mixed media appeals to me on all levels and I enjoy the process of learning as much as the process of creating. I pulled out long discarded opening chapters of novels and half-finished stained-glass projects, searching for the silver linings of some of the cloudiest days in my history. My daily to-do list was full of Zoom lessons and projects as I dreamed of the day that I could see my family and friends in person again.

As I turned out satisfying watercolors, sewed doll clothes for a fund raiser, learned new ukulele chords, savored reminiscences for memoirs, failed miserably at an architectural drawing class, made note cards for shut ins and medical personnel, and wrote ten songs in a workshop with a Grammy nominated songwriter, Celia Woodsmith, I felt tested, rewarded, uplifted, terrified, but alive doing mindful artwork.

Two challenging projects shown in "Reinvention" are a charcoal portrait entitled "Michael" and a children's book named "Ginarose Does New Things." The instructor for the portrait class was Florida artist Heather Clements, and the children book writing workshop was led by Lisa Soland of Climbing Angles Publishing.

The inspiration for my book was a photo of my niece Shelby Rose Crosswhite in her very first dance review, a virtual event that happened during the pandemic months. Her graceful pose in a sparkly tutu is the stuff of dreams and lovely memories. I strove to capture her bravery in the words of the book, but it was when my sister, Judy DiGiovanni Cook, came on board to give the character of Ginarose life in watercolor drawings, that my dream of starting a series of children's books came to life.

The character of Ginarose will continue to try new things in future books in the series; Judy and I are happily writing and drawing the next adventure where Ginarose will take the plunge in a swimming lesson. The year 2020 became about feeling the fear and doing it anyway, and I hope that the Ginarose series of books will help others to find their courage and joy.

ABBY SANDS

During the pandemic I was gifted Time with my children, Time to reflect, Time to take advantage of empty streets.

The Black & White MIND SHOW piece was shot on Bacchus Sunday at Preservation Hall. They joined in on the 'Yardi Gras' festivities which I *knew* I had to take advantage of. As we rolled in to the Quarter, I kept driving closer and closer to Preservation Hall. On Bacchus Sunday, I was able to park *right across the street* from Preservation Hall!! It was extremely convenient yet so surreal! We had the entire street to ourselves, so we took advantage of the situation. However cool it was to have this opportunity to shoot on St. Peters effortlessly with no crowds, I don't ever want it again. All I could think was *we need our heartbeat back!*

I am certain Bacchus Sunday will be in full swing 2022 with happy people galore, music pumping out of every door and window, beads being thrown...laughing, stumbling, dancing, living life! And THE MIND SHOW characters will be there second lining, merrily along!

KIM BERGERON, CURATOR

I've always considered myself a creative writer first, a visual artist second. My favorite works tend to be those that bring together both words and images, with preferences leaning toward mixed media and digital art.

However, as was the case with many, the pandemic brought to a temporary halt any of my desires to create; instead, I opted to consume arts via the many offerings available on the web.

It was via the web that I also learned of a relatively new wave of arts and artists, and the creation of digital works to be hosted on the blockchain—non-fungible tokens, aka NFTs.

What I learned is that NFTs are part of the Ethereum cryptocurrency blockchain, and they can take many forms, from digital art to music to animated works and more. While the works are stored on and intended to be viewed via the internet, several specialty frame options are also available which provide a direct connection to the original NFT and proof of ownership. (That's somewhat of a simplified explanation of a complicated system.)

Having already been intrigued by the art of animation, I had a desire to learn how to do so someday in the future. The pandemic shutdown became my "someday," and I learned to create the illusion of movement via Photoshop.

Though a Photoshop user for nearly two decades, prior to this new experimentation, I was largely unaware as to its animation feature. For me, this was an exciting new discovery. The resulting works, while relatively simple, laid the foundation for exploration still to come. Framing the works for inclusion in the exhibition presented several challenges, but also intrigued me as I envisioned moving images in lieu of static works.

Give Peace a Chance

This animated gif is an adaptation of a prior work, bringing the still to life via animation.

Zen in Motion

Fractals, bright hues and cycling layers created in Photoshop come together for this hypnotic animated creation.

Rock Garden in Bloom

The third work I created for this exhibition is a reinvention of a series I created called "Rock Garden." The former included prints on wood, with guitar pick "flowers" sprouting from the side of a guitar. "Bloomin' Rock Garden" transforms the original series into a multilayered, 3D trio of flowers layered in glass atop a hand painted sky background. The shadows cast by gallery lighting add yet another dimension to this work.

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