

HYPERALLERGIC

INTERVIEWS • WEEKEND

Artists Quarantine With Their Art Collections

“Sometimes we’re so overwhelmed in the present that it seems impossible to think a future beyond it – but the work of imagination must always continue.”



Stephen Maine August 1, 2020



Kenneth Cogley, “Butterflies (Solomon Islands, 1942-44)” (constructed: late 1950s), butterflies, cotton, glass, wood, hardware; 4 panels, each 24 x 12 inches (image courtesy Mike Slack)

AUTHOR’S NOTE: The protocols and other pressures of living in this perilous time continue to reshape the

significance of once-familiar artworks. For this [series of articles](#), I've asked artists who collect other artists' work to tell me about recent encounters with the images and objects they've been looking at for a while, and the unaccustomed meanings that have emerged. My questions are: In the context of rampant disease, do you look at your personal collection differently now, and which works in particular? Is there one that especially resonates with you at this weird, frightening moment? And does it take on new meaning?

Helen Rae, untitled (2018), colored pencil and graphite on paper, 24 x 18 inches (image courtesy of Pam Glick)

Pam Glick (Buffalo, New York):
Helen Rae is an artist who draws with pencils and crayons from fashion magazines. She is so free

in her drawing, that complex,
surprising shapes emerge from
her wanderings within the forms.
When I first saw this work I
marveled at its originality and
spontaneous composition — the
formal aspects of the piece. Now I
see it as an image of dire
emergency, a human in trouble,
alone, and submerged.

Now there is a viral pandemic and
a police state.

A female figure in a full
architectural dress glows in
shades of yellow and orange,
colors of light and happiness,
surrounded by undulating shards
of blue. The dark mass of her hair
morphs into a black grid
resembling a skyscraper, shapes
from a deluge of a city streaming
with more dark grids of windows.
The masterful linear shapes and
strokes loosely define an
underwater space. There is a
lower leg and a foot and a face.
The model faces us head-on,
making full eye contact, yet there
is neither struggle nor swimming.
She stops drowning for a minute
to pose? Maybe to be above it all,
all-powerful, almighty, fearless. As

viewers, we can make this happen.
In our minds the same life power
can look like dead sinking or
romantic floating.

Or is she going to a watery grave
— going under? To be able to
inhale water is the equivalent of a
flying dream, a superpower.

Now “I can’t breathe” is a call to
arms and a description of our
collective anxiety, a physical
attack. Breath and breathing are
the core of being alive. Yet it may
take a ventilator or a knee
removed from one’s throat.

Frauke Schlitz, “Eine Insel (An Island)”
(2014), ink and watercolor on graph paper, 7 x
11 inches (image courtesy of Nikolai Ishchuk)

Nikolai Ishchuk (London, UK):
The off-white walls of my West
London flat are as unadorned as

they were when I moved in 13 years ago. My personal art collection currently consists of only five pieces, ensconced heirloom-style in portfolio boxes interspersed within my archive of prints and negatives. These works will never blend into the background of my humdrum domestic life; every encounter with them is an encounter consciously sought.

I'm holding a drawing by Frauke Schlitz, whom I met in 2014 during the Art Omi residency in upstate New York. On a sheet of orange graph paper, a rectangle of dark wash sits toward the right edge like a misaligned overlay. Inside, an irregular gemstone-like shape with a translucent red-tinted core floats, veined with hesitant lines that radiate from an off-center horizontal axis. The nodes of the outer boundary shun the divisions of the background grid, and the contour is then oddly repeated in a thick stroke a shade denser than the containing field. Everything about this drawing is so endearingly askew that one wonders why it should have been made on graph paper in

the first place. “‘Eine Insel’, für Nikolai” (“‘An Island’, for Nikolai”), reads the inscription on the back.

Similar to the way outlines of three adjoining sides can produce an appearance of a cube projecting outward or receding into an illusory depth, depending on one’s cognitive disposition, I feel that Frauke’s work pulls me in a different direction than before. Previously I’d see it as a form dreaming itself expanding, like a Christo island, ethereally augmented. These days I wonder if it’s a form in retreat instead, its outer layers eroded, cracking under pressure and struggling to prop up a periphery that can no longer hold. Sometimes we’re so overwhelmed in the present that it seems impossible to think a future beyond it – but the work of imagination must always continue. I put Frauke’s drawing away, hoping that, when I retrieve it next, my perspective will flip again.

Jedd Garet (New York City):
When looking at a twice-exposed photograph of the same image,

Found chair in the Colonial style (early 21st century), wood and black paint, 36 x 25 x 24 inches (photo by J. Garet, image courtesy J. Garet)

moved only slightly, your brain wants to cling to one or the other of the exposures. The magic happens when you surrender and let both in. I don't know if this works by alternating quickly from one to the other, or an actual synthesis.

A couple years ago I moved into a loft in the financial district of Manhattan. It had the unusual quality of not having been remodeled. It had remained raw but for the minimal alterations necessary to make it inhabitable. One feature of this construction was a loft platform such as those so prevalent in the early days of industrial-space living. This

platform was of interest to me only for its potential as an area for something theatrical...

A solitary chair was my solution to give the space a quality of occupation. A ghost, a relative, a shadow.

Then the unexpected: I fell in love, and after a lifetime of living alone, I decided to share my space with another human being.

When Covid-19 arrived and we locked ourselves in, the chair began to take on new meaning. It became an odd symbol of my independence, my stubbornness, and the chilling idea of how difficult and unpleasant quarantine would have been without him. The empty chair perched up in the air was becoming a metaphor for my arrogance and pride — more of a cautionary tale than a tableau of mood and mystery.

Now I must recognize both ideas emanating from the chair. I must make peace with its origins and its instruction.

Avery Z. Nelson (Brooklyn, New

Ann Craven, title and date unknown,
watercolor on paper, 12 x 9 inches (image
courtesy Avery Z. Nelson)

York): During the winter of 2006, I was freshly out of undergrad and working the register of Utrecht in the East Village for \$9.50 an hour. My friends and I had an unspoken game of trying to pack shipments as creatively (slowly) as possible because fuck exploitation, and we were really bored. One day Ann Craven walked into the store with a stack of 100 or so watercolors that she needed to get framed. Ann was one of my mentors in school, and I was thrilled to see her. Much to my surprise, she showed me the stack and told me to choose one.

Over the past four months I have returned to Craven's painting frequently. As I listened to the

incessant sirens shriek death up
First Avenue in April, I found
serenity, beauty, and decay in
Craven's flower. As I marched in
the streets of Manhattan and
Brooklyn during the mayor's
bullshit curfew and police
bulldozed into us, arrested us,
beat us, and continued to do their
daily job of terrorizing and
murdering Black lives, I began to
see the three flowers as a single
flower in motion, either bleeding
down into the earth or floating up
into the sky — maybe both at
once.

I've thought about getting Ann's
watercolor properly framed, but
as I've watched the rich get richer
and most of my friends on
unemployment redistribute as
much as they can each month to
those ineligible and more
vulnerable, keeping the painting
in the crappy Utrecht frame that I
took it home in seems absolutely
right.

Charley Friedman (Lincoln,
Nebraska): In 2007, Antonio Caro
gave my wife and me a signed
serigraph of his legendary piece,
“Colombia,” during a family visit

Antonio Caro, "Colombia" (1976), silkscreen,
22 x 31 ½ inches; photo: Charley Friedman
(image courtesy Charley Friedman)

to Bogotá, Colombia. Caro is one of the most influential and respected artists in Latin America. Coming of age in the mid-1970s, he is somewhere between Beuys and Warhol in approach and style. The piece utilizes the most identifiable trope of Pop Art, appropriation. By substituting the ubiquitous Coca-Cola logo with "Colombia" on a flat red background, Caro illustrates the symbiotic and, perhaps, parasitic relationship between colonizer and colonized.

"Colombia" has a prime location in our living room between David Kramer and Carrie Skoczek. I glance at it every day while Nancy and I have coffee in the wee

morning. Societies like Colombia's are bombarded through mind, body, and spirit by foreign products, from toothpaste to candy bars. Colombians are intimately aware that colonization continues to take place, as the products they are taught to desire and fetishize, often from world powers like the United States, have an enviable status over local, less costly versions.

Living through pandemic and political turmoil in Nebraska, the center of the country, I have realized that this artwork beautifully parallels my present reality. Lincoln is a moderately blue city in a sea of red. I am continually reminded how the material items I own, from my Subaru to my folksy straw hat, are ideological markers that make people stare with contempt or approval. Ultimately, "Colombia" is about manipulation: Willingly or unwittingly, we are coerced and seduced into a products ethos, affirming to others how we *want* to appear. In our country's polarized moment, it becomes almost a sport to make

assumptions about a person's politics, assumptions that I make all the time.

I often test myself at the checkout line at Leon's Market based on a person's food choices and personal attire. I listen for clues and am often totally wrong.

"Colombia" reminds me that we are, kind of, what we eat, but also that identity is more than the products we use or our political affiliation.

Xylor Jane, "1,1,2,3,5,8,3,1,4,5,9 one way"
(2003), ink on paper, 19 5/8 x 13 3/4 inches;
below: 3 painted boxes, New England, c. 1830-
1850 (image courtesy Cary Smith)

Cary Smith (Farmington, Connecticut): During these deeply unsettling times I've been feeling a chronic low-grade anxiety about what is to come. With the Covid-19 pandemic, the

acceleration of global warming,
and the current
administration's lack of
sensitivity to human struggle of
all races, it feels like we
are potentially in for an extended,
very stormy period.

I've been continuing to make my
own work but I sometimes
wonder if it is futile to make
abstract paintings at a time when
the future of the world seems so
uncertain.

I've always loved a great view of
big space, like you sometimes see
at the ocean, or in the mountains.
I find it restorative. I let it work
on me, instead of looking at it too
specifically.

I look at the art we've collected
similarly. I have been attracted to
things that exude a rigorous
generosity of spirit and deep
visual inventiveness. Xylor Jane's
drawing is a particularly good
example. I've stared at this
drawing for hours and hours, not
asking anything of it, but
rather just letting it give me what
it has to offer.

Mike Slack (Los Angeles,

Kenneth Cogley, “Butterflies (Solomon Islands, 1942-44)” (constructed: late 1950s, detail of left panel), butterflies, cotton, glass, wood, hardware; 4 panels, each 24 x 12 inches (image courtesy Mike Slack)

California): My grandfather caught these butterflies in the Solomon Islands during World War II, and they have been in my life for as long as I can remember. Stationed on a medical unit with the US Army in the early 1940s, he was in the South Pacific during and after the Guadalcanal Campaign. He somehow caught and mailed the butterflies (packed in gauze and formaldehyde — apparently using medical supplies) back to the Midwest, where they sat unopened until the late 1950s. When my mom was a kid, he finally opened the box, constructed these wooden frames, arranged the specimens, and

mounted them behind glass. For decades they hung in a cozy den in my grandparents' house in Muncie, Indiana. I was enchanted by them throughout my childhood in the 1970s — these strange, iridescent treasures my grandfather had brought back from a faraway island — and I later inherited them. They now hang in my living room in Los Angeles.

Chasing butterflies in a war zone. This image of my young grandfather (even if to some degree it's a simplified myth formed in my childhood mind) has always intrigued me as much as the insects themselves. What was he thinking and feeling? Why butterflies? The Covid-19 pandemic is not exactly a world war, but in those first anxious weeks of the city-wide lockdown I craved getting out of the house and disappearing into the nearby mountains and woods (the flora and fauna of which were still unfolding, as they always do, at their own pace) and making photographs. Was this an echo of my grandfather's behavior nearly 80 years ago? Horror and joy

always co-exist in equal measure,
and these delicate artifacts are a
reminder, a lesson: Don't forget to
chase the butterflies.