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*COVID-19 Anxiety - Location, Refuge, and Loss: A Visual Essay*

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The Government of Canada Public Health Agency noted, in reference to the COVID-19 pandemic, “With social distancing and repeated lockdown measures, feelings of isolation and loneliness... [have caused an] increase [in]... anxiety and depression”. This anxiety has seeped into our digital classrooms. How, we asked, could we work in creative and productive ways to examine this pandemic phenomenon?

Using ourselves as research subjects, we chose to model the ways anxiety could be redirected and used as a resilient creative practice. Beginning June 2020, inspired by generative and co-participatory activities with students, we pushed ourselves into new directions. An irrepressible, manic curiosity consumed us, a kind of “anxiety of dissolution” (Loveless 49). To address this, we asked deeply reflexive questions about how we, as artists/researchers, could learn from this heightened pandemic anxiety. How might this moment alter our imaginings? How might curiosity guide us?

Responses to these questions spoke to our autoethnographically-informed creation-research strategy(ies) for producing “bodies of evidence” (Horn qtd. in Ray 15). We addressed issues of location, loss, and refuge by engaging in critically collaborative deliberation as we developed visual and time-based work.

COVID-19 exhibitions have proliferated since March 2020, such as “COVID-19 Portraits” curated by Phil Anderson at Gallery 1313, Toronto, and photo-essays such as Alexandra Pope’s “The Pause: A Pandemic Photo-Essay” in *Canadian Geographic*, or Ryan Boulton’s “Vacant Queen Street West: A Pandemic Photo Essay”. We add this to the collection. Our intent is, in

this essay, to comment ‘confessionally’ on our conceptual and visual practices as artists and engage in reflection for teaching.

## **Epidemic/Pandemic: Generational Anxiety – Pam Patterson**

Sites redolent with foliage and vivid with memory – gardens, parks, beaches –have become refuges for many during COVID. My spring term students talked about “a walk in nature” as restorative. However, due to overcrowding, some of these sites became overregulated.

Other problematic intersections already exist around these sites. Often, they were historically represented by artists as vacant, unpeopled, and silent. This portrayal resonates for me around the particular absences of Canada’s First Nations, Métis or Inuit people, people of colour, those living in poverty, people with disabilities.

Located in Canada as Settler, descended from Irish farmers, I, as disability artist, have photographed and manipulated images taken in the Irish village where my ancestors were purported to have lived, and at Grosse-Île, the historic St. Lawrence Seaway immigrant arrival site. There are no records of any of my ancestors passing through or inhabiting these sites, except in family stories.

Canadian cultural theorist Natalie Loveless notes that spaces are being made for practices grounded in literacies that tell other stories, with the potential to carry within them “*other ethics*”. In my case and others, these stories are often painful, recording loss of health, refuge, and life. Indigenous scholar and storyteller Thomas King said in his 2003 Massey Lectures, “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are (2)...I tell [these] stories...to suggest how stories can control our lives... for there is a part of me that has never been able to move past these stories, that is chained to these stories for as long as I live” (9).

The work I developed addresses the intergenerational trauma of disease and loss. Many who left Ireland during traumatic times returned years later with their pain unresolved. Their perception, as Nuala O’Faolain said in a 1988 interview, is “flattened out” making it almost impossible for them to comprehend their location and identity (Clare). COVID-19 has triggered these memories, pointing to familial absence, delusion, and suicide.

*Bench*, made from photographs of Shankill Castle, Ireland, is the first in a series of 10 panoramic diptychs using the metaphor of the castle garden (see fig.1). To be in such a garden is to stand amidst a vision of the world—the garden itself is a cosmological statement. Within its symmetrical plan and ordered framework, particularity seems varied, fertile, and hospitable. But here this image of a distorted garden bench creates a disturbance inviting us to see, through a contemporary pandemic lens, the past ruptured and reassessed through famine and expulsion trauma.



Fig. 1 Pam Patterson, Bench – 3’ H x 10’ W, photo-digital print, 2019.



Fig. 2 Pam Patterson – Cholera: Grosse-Île, 3’ H x 10’ W, photo-digital print, 2020.

The panoramic diptych *Cholera: Grosse-Île* reveals the history of Irish cholera epidemic deaths in the 1850s (see fig. 2). The Irish Memorial National Historic Site on Grosse-Île is the largest Irish cemetery worldwide. Ousted, starving, and homeless. then sent in “coffin ships” to Canada, many died on route or in the cholera room on the island. As with the “Indian problem”, key British parliament members hoped to address the “Irish problem” either through deliberate neglect or by enabling the spread of disease (Coogan).

As an educator, I’m attentive to how this pandemic has generated new pedagogies, but even more so, how it has initiated significant dialogues. With each epidemic and pandemic,

generational anxiety can build. It may seem redundant to refer here to already well researched historical events and past epidemics and their accompanying government-mandated constraints. But rather than being resolved, these past traumas often become deeply embedded in culture, story, and memory and can re-emerge with a present stressor. I now use these works as touchstones for classroom discussion.

## **Informational Anxiety: Instruction as Visuality, Vulnerability, Curiosity – Daniel Payne**

During the Summer of 2020, the art and design university I worked at pivoted to a remote instructional environment, so the required first-year visual and material culture course was offered asynchronously. In response, the instructor adapted the curriculum to help students navigate this new and potentially disorienting learning space. The final essay, for example, asked students to select an iconic artwork, reproduce it as a tableau vivant, then use scholarly sources to support and, if necessary, justify alterations to the original.

Knowing that students were working in isolation, as an academic librarian I was compelled to create a video on research strategies addressing the assignment requirements. Additionally, in a studio-based learning environment where students experience personalized research support at the library's reference desk, I sought to recreate the dialogic vulnerability of interactions between student and librarian in what Paulo Freire calls the "critical pedagogy" of the "practices of freedom" (qtd. in Giroux 715). With some trepidation, I decided to create my own tableau vivant to accompany the video tutorial.

Through my own contemporary contextualization of Clara Peeters' self-portrait (see fig. 4), I experienced insight by viewing the still life artform as both a "product and process" (Woodall 979). Juxtaposing the two terms "still" and "life" (Woodall 980) also took on a new, dichotomous relevancy. The tensions between life and death, wealth and scarcity, all presented within the domestic sphere, resonated strongly for me in the self-isolation imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic; a virus largely fuelled by globalization. This latter phenomenon has built a world driven by communication technologies that sustain, reproduce, and enhance our lives; but are these capitalistic enterprises a "process" that has enabled the virus as "product"?

Based on my research, I depicted myself in my own domestic environment (see fig. 3). I hesitated to replicate Clara Peeters' identity as a woman; however, feminist art theory empowered me to find positionality given that it opens "new ways of 'reading' visual representation" which encourage viewers to interpret images using their own social relations of class, race, gender, and sexual identity (Baddeley et al.). As a member of the LGBTQ2S+ community, I feel authorized to empathize with Peeters' self-depiction, especially in how she celebrates the



Fig. 3 Daniel Payne, Vanitas painting: Homage to Clara Peeters. A librarian seated at a table with precious objects in the time of COVID-19, 2020.

objects used to galvanize her career yet, almost synonymously, disparages them by looking away in such a purposeful manner.

Strewn across my kitchen table are items used to survive the pandemic, including toilet paper, cleaning products, and “flour” bags portrayed in lieu of the bouquet Peeters depicted. For the glass bubble presented in Peeters’ work—a testament to her technical skills as a painter—I transposed it into a clock; a prominent feature of our new COVID-19 reality. The laptop, however, is given prominence; it is simultaneously a lifeline to my existence and an object of resentment given its primary role in negotiating self-definition and self-expression in my new social reality.

Overall, I am *not* defined by the sum of these objects: I am a human being, yet I must resolve that these objects are needed to *live* as a human being in this current culture while preserving and nurturing the community of researchers I serve at my university. Overall, I feel that by embracing artistic vulnerability driven by curiosity, I was able to use visuality to



Fig. 4 Vanitas painting. Possibly self-portrait of Clara Peeters, seated at a table with precious objects.

embody affective, ethical, and active agency in information literacy.

## **Shifting Grounds, Human Vulnerabilities, and Pandemic In/Tolerance— Joanna Black**

As the cyclone of COVID-19 emerged in winter 2020, our lives changed furiously: the pandemic swiftly moved into North America, first with announcements it was spreading, and then discernibly in mounting illnesses and deaths. On March 12, the first presumptive COVID-19 case was announced in Manitoba, Canada. On Friday the 13th, I ceased face-to-face interaction with people with whom I worked. My professional life moved online. A state of emergency was declared one week later. It took only 15 days from the first Manitoban COVID-19

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case to the first death (CTV News1). Almost half a year later, by September 6, 2020, we faced over 27 million cases of COVID-19 worldwide (@Worldometer).

I grew up in the 1960s. The Baby Boom generation lived under threat of nuclear annihilation, yet the world otherwise looked hopeful, and many viewed it as a prosperous and economically stable time (Hamilton and Hamilton 1). Indeed, the Boomer generation is often considered a lucky one in which young people lived for the moment (Hamilton and Hamilton 2; MacKay 62). 1960s youth believed they could transform the world, leading radical societal change through civil, feminist, and human rights protest.

The 1960s were the era of Pop Art, artists celebrating mass production, common culture, and advertisements. Attractive bright colours, layering, and repetition were common pictorial techniques. In America, life experiences inspired artists (Tate Gallery). In the artwork, *My Generation* (fig. 5), I pay homage to Warhol's artistic design while depicting 2020 youth. I find apt today The Who's lyrics about teenage angst from over half a century ago,

Things they do look awful c-c-cold  
I hope I die before I get old ...  
Why don't you all fade away  
Talkin' 'bout my generation  
—The Who, "My Generation"

Guitarist Pete Townshend reflected on this song: It "...was very much about trying to find a place in society. I was very, very lost" (Rolling Stone).

I ask myself the same question for youth today confronting COVID-19. Much has changed. The disparity between rich and poor is accelerating in our neoliberal age (Democracy Now). Worldwide, COVID-19 has caused economic catastrophe, mass unemployment, poverty, illness, mental health deterioration, and deaths. Meanwhile, Noam Chomsky warns that humankind's greatest risk is global warming and nuclear warfare (qtd. in Democracy Now). Yet, humankind can be creative, collaborative, trusting, caring, generous, and altruistic. These qualities allow us hope.

Instagram's image-based site is popular amongst teens. Depicted in *My Generation* are two lovers during COVID-19 in an Instagram image: showing their togetherness, their expressions, and the protection of masks. As a parent concerned about our young adults, I ask: What will they write about their generation and their experiences? How do they perceive their place in our society today?

COVID-19 has taught me, as a researcher/educator, how vulnerably we live in a world of unstoppable alterations and great challenges. We grapple with waves of COVID muta-



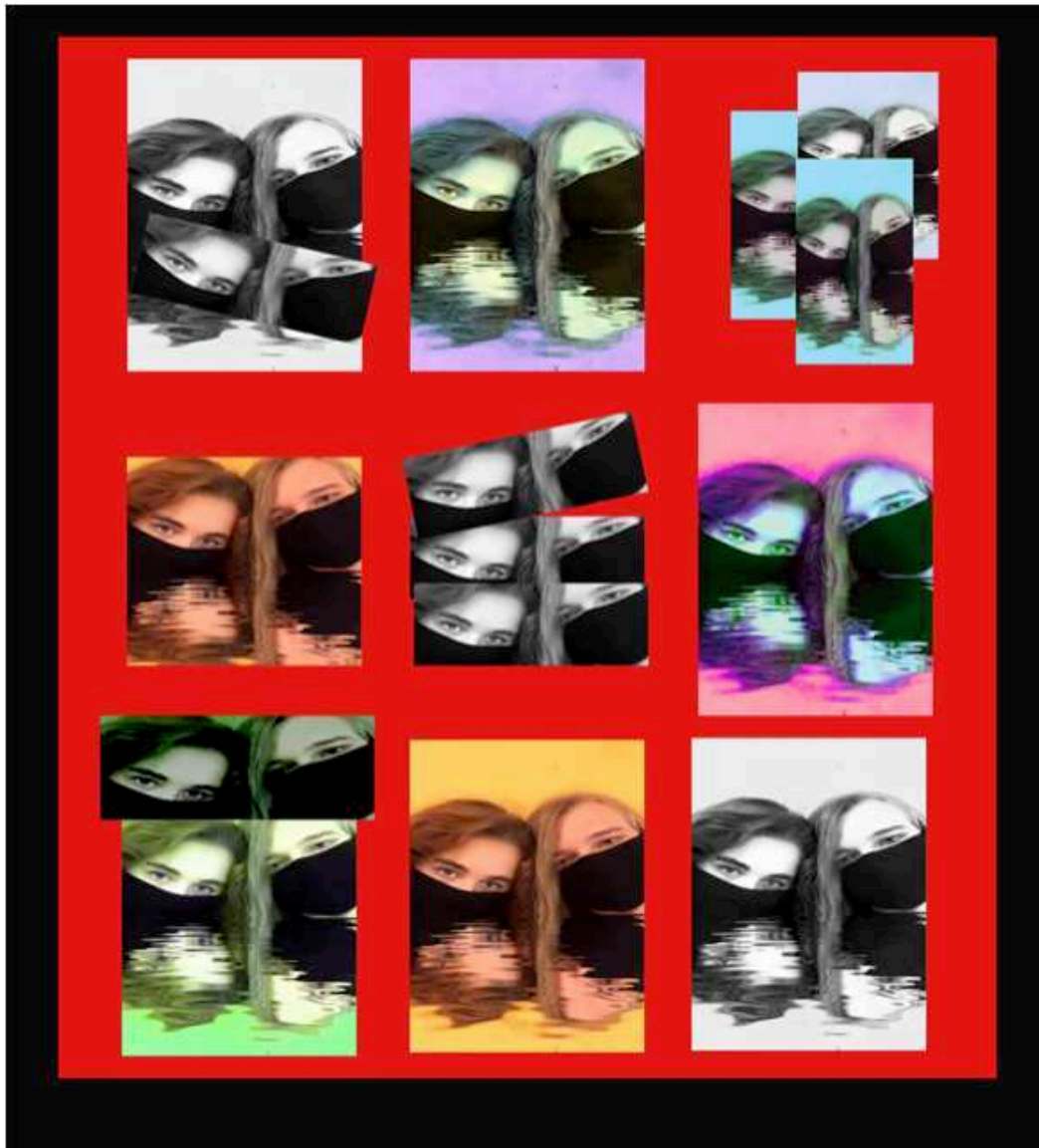


Fig. 5 Joanna Black – My Generation, 44” H x 40” W, photo-digital print, 2020.

tions, changing scientific knowledge, political sway, and human vulnerability, in the face of differing levels of public tolerance of pandemic restrictions. Educators lived through their own challenging eras, confronting great impediments. As teachers, we must learn from past solutions while using our imagination to overcome great difficulties, to guide our students

and ourselves in confronting COVID-19 obstacles, deeply personal losses, and anxiety in a transforming world.

## Conclusion

The pandemic has aggravated discrimination and curtailed human rights, ravaging the aged, the poor, the disabled, and health-compromised (Lederer A012).

As artists/educators/researchers, we created artworks that personally respond to our remote and isolated lives. We recognize the importance of attending to normalized words such as isolation, quarantine, and regulation. Delineated are the closures, fissures, openings, and ultimately transformations experienced since COVID-19 began. We have turned to our individual pasts to shape, remould, and illuminate our present. Our fostering of artistic research communities of agency applies key concepts that speak to collective and personal memory. These narratives shape learning and classroom discourse through personal trauma, collective experience, and aesthetic identity in art.

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