

Still, Life!

Meaning and Mending in Contemporary Art



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Cover: **Valerie Hegarty**
Fresh Start, from the series *The Covid Diaries*, 2021
Canvas, wood, epoxy resin, papier-mâché, armature wire



“... we need new words for time because the old ones no longer work.”

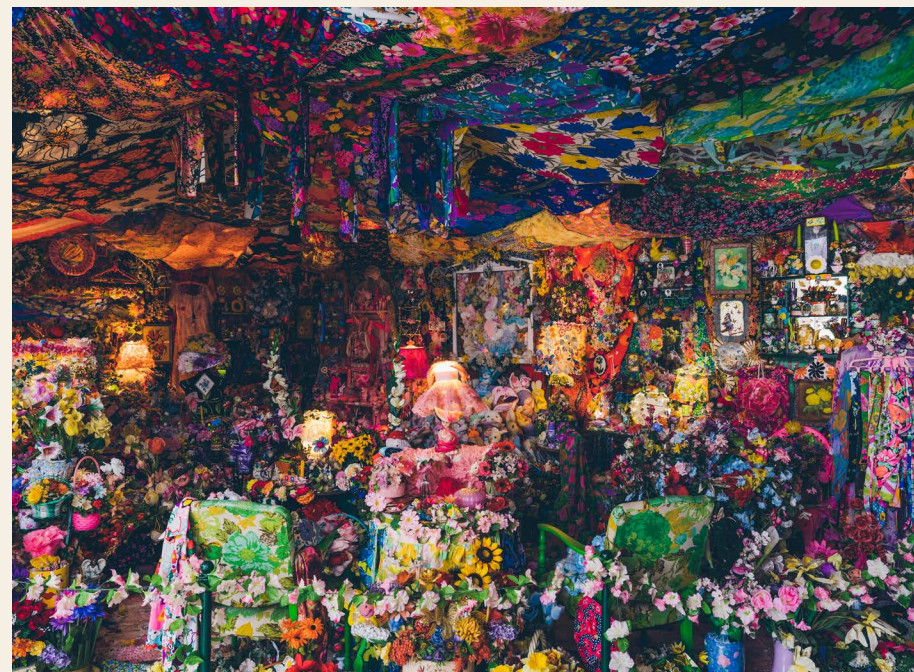
— Douglas Coupland
We Weren't Very Careful About What We Wished For

According to *chronos*, or the measurable, linear perception of time, several years have now passed since we were swept into the maelstrom of the pandemic, wherein we continue to reckon with vulnerability and injustice. Within the intersections of global conflict, disease, civic protest, and the climate crisis, we are called to mourn and memorialize; to address the legacy and reality of insecurity and inequity; and to find meaning and purpose within pervasive uncertainty. As illustrated by the works featured in this exhibition, contemporary art can offer insight and inspiration, or act as balm or beacon, in shaping current and future conditions.

Flowers have often served as a centerpiece of the centuries-old still-life genre, symbolizing, in bloom and decay, the brevity and cyclical nature of life. From depictions of wilting bouquets and of flowers in arrangements or in the wild by Valerie Hegarty, Elena Dorfman, Tiffany Calvert, and Hung Liu, to textiles covered in patterns of flowers or sewn together in dizzying, dazzling geometries by Natalie Baxter, Ebony G. Patterson, and Zak Ové, to gardens presented as alternately magical, mysterious, and menacing, by Portia Munson, Thaniel Ion Lee, Zachari Logan, and others, the floral imagery on view reflects and refracts our heightened awareness of vulnerability. The garden, in both living form and artistic reproduction, also represents the persistent human struggle for control over nature, and at times, for dominion over land and domination over others. Munson's expansive, site-specific installation, *The Garden*, explodes the illusion of control, enveloping the viewer in a kaleidoscope of floral dresses, furnishings, stuffed animals, fake flowers, and other objects of artifice. This is a woman's bedroom,

envisioned as a fantastical memorial to excess, a shrine-like site at once mournful, celebratory, and disquieting. The artist explains: “*The Garden* elucidates connections between hostility to feminism and the continued destruction of our environment. A claustrophobic den of beautiful refuse, the installation amplifies capitalism's vision of bourgeois femininity, where the act of acquiring to meet societal standards fuels the momentum of hyper-consumption and climate crisis. *The Garden* proposes that disrespect for the environment runs parallel to disregard for women, inviting viewers to meditate on the irony of manufacturing a regressive notion of beauty while simultaneously annihilating our natural world.”

Portia Munson
The Garden, 1996-2019
Mixed media room-size installation



The roots and recurrence of the parallel threats to the environment, to society, and to individuals have been laid bare since the advent of the pandemic. The trauma and violence of toxic sexism and racism are the subject of Baxter's floral, flaccid automatic rifle, *Midnight Garden*, one of a series of works subverting symbols of American machismo such as guns and flags. For Hegarty, as for many people, an increasing awareness of injustice and illness seeped into her unconscious, inspiring her 2021 series, *The Covid Diaries*. The artist describes the origins of her monumental wall work, *Fresh Start*:

“At night I dream I am in a museum at midnight and there is a storm. The lights are out but when the lightning flashes, there are opiates on the ship with human cargo in the hull. In another flash, silver vessels bare the bones of their miners while a vanitas painting has died so many times its rot sows seeds. When I wake I wonder what has been planted in the museum's painting and if it will grow.” *Fresh Start* was commissioned for an outdoor exhibition in Riverside Park during the spring of 2021. Says the artist, “I explored the genre of vanitas (where flowers often symbolize the transience of life) by creating the ruins of a Dutch flower painting encased in an ornate gold frame. The painting appears as if heisted from the Metropolitan Museum, hidden, then abandoned during the pandemic. As spring arrives and vaccinations climb, the painting blooms flowers and grows roots from its decay. The message of hope is underscored by the albino pigeon, who like the dove from Noah's ark, holds foliage in its beak as a sign life is returning to the city after so much upheaval, sickness and loss.”

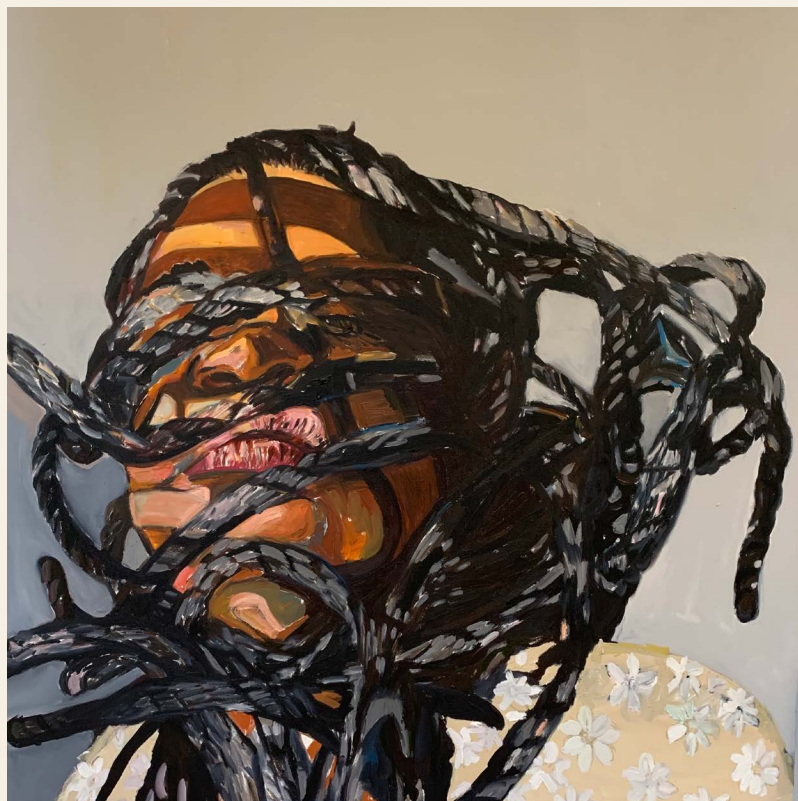


Valerie Hegarty
Fresh Start, from the series *The Covid Diaries*, 2021 (detail)
Canvas, wood, epoxy resin, papier-mâché, armature wire

An invitation to pause or bear witness is evoked in other works that pay homage to past losses, sacrifices, and trauma, while acknowledging how those histories shape the present moment. A heavy black rope figures prominently in many of the paintings that Beverly McIver created during 2020-21, including her self-portrait, *Defiant*. “Black friends interpreted the rope wrapped around my head as a noose and white people saw the rope as my dreadlocked hair blowing in the wind,” recalls the artist. “The interpretations of the two worlds I straddle daily, collided.” Collisions of pain and promise also animate Whitfield Lovell's portrait drawing of a woman, paired with an architectural model of what might be a religious or academic building, *Spell no.10 (Heab'N)* elevates the anonymous subject to one whose unknown story is worthy of reverence; while Omar Victor Diop's photograph of a group of Black men adorned with white flowers is entitled *Selma, 1965* in remembrance of the sacrifices of Civil Rights protesters. The budding spring landscape of a former Louisiana plantation is the subject of photographer Dawoud Bey's historical investigation, *In This Here Place*, which the artist says is

“inspired by a desire to examine aspects of African American history and to bring that history into a contemporary conversation; to provoke a reconsideration of that history through an act of radical Black imagination.” The past pulses into the present in Bey’s poetic compositions, propelling the viewer’s perspective backwards and forwards in time and place: the view offered by *Branches, Leaves, and Cabins* is dominated by the curving branch of a tree, on which new flora are growing, evidence that the roots of a more just future were planted here, alongside the cruelties of enslavement. Bey explains that “the other part of the plantation narrative is that in spite of the dehumanization, through their own will, through their own powerful spirit, through their own profound self-determination, Black folks have prevailed and excelled in ways that prove that the project of the plantation was not successful.”

Beverly McIver
Defiant, 2020
Oil on canvas



Zak Ové pays homage to the history and heritage of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora in his vibrant doily paintings, made with hundreds of lace doilies sourced from vintage European textiles and custom-embroidered by contemporary Syrian refugees. Transforming a domestic object associated with female labor into large-scale compositions whose geometries reverberate with the realm of the celestial, Ové translates the diasporic experience into a celebratory acknowledgement of both his predecessors and of today’s migrants, weaving their stories and their presence into homages to human resilience. The palette of the doily paintings recalls the bright colors and sounds of Canboulay, the Caribbean carnival tradition that was conceived as a form of resistance against the colonizers; like Bey, Ové offers a meditation on the transcendence of trauma.

Mourning, both collectively and individually, can be experienced as transcendent. Inspired by what she describes as “the aesthetics and conceptual identities of post-colonial Macau, cross-generational memory, trauma, and the Taoist afterlife,” Heidi Lau creates ceramic funerary works that forge connections between the living and the dead. *The Blue Robe* is a clay chainmail version of a Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) burial garment, accompanied here by three burial vessels, which in Taoist mythology, contain provisions for the dead. Lau’s vessels, which she conceives as containing energy, grief, or memories, bring metaphorical provisions for the living into the funerary space. The ceramic chainmail gown, an homage to the artist’s late mother, resembles bone fragments, each piece connected to the surrounding pieces, as Lau is connected to preceding generations of family, and to those who will follow, even as they disperse across the globe.



Omar Victor Diop
Selma, 1965, 2016
Inkjet print

The migrant experience animates Cosmo Whyte's series, *The Enigma of Arrival in 4 Sections*, titled in response to Trinidadian writer V.S. Naipaul's celebrated autobiographical novel, *The Enigma of Arrival*. The mixed-media installation presented here, which includes three airline seats covered in floral-patterned domestic fabric, sheathed in plastic and crowned with lace doilies, atop a pedestal strewn with broken ceramic plates, is *Section 3: Carry On*, (referencing both the traveler's physical and emotional baggage, as well as an injunction to move forward, to adjust to a new world). The juxtaposition of materials is jarring, reflecting the combination of shock, nostalgia, and disorientation that Whyte experienced as an immigrant to the U.S. from Jamaica. Reflecting on the genesis of this work, the artist quotes Meena Alexander's writing about her own journey as an immigrant: "The shock of arrival is manifold—what was born in the mind is jarred, tossed into new shapes, an exciting exfoliation of sense. What we were in that other life, is shattered open."

Isolation fosters loneliness and disconnection, but also generates the kind of introspection and reflection captured in Merik Goma's poetically staged, dramatically lit portraits; in Zed Saeed's Hopper-esque nocturnal visions of Louisville, Kentucky neighborhoods, seemingly empty of people; in Sara Olshansky's layered drawings of bodies in motion, and in multiple. Olshansky explains that the "images obscure themselves in an additive subtraction. Instead of a representation of space, the picture plane transforms to time's passage as it "forgets" erased marks and 'remembers' new ones... *An Embrace, of Sorts and Sarah and Stephen* mimics the imperfect ways we make sense of the world with fragmentation, reconstruction, and repetition."

Under the persistent conditions of confusion and uncertainty, might embracing fragmentation offer a new understanding of ourselves and our world? Jonathan Rosen's interactive mirror, *I WANT*, embodies and enacts the fragmentation of our attention and our desires, which has been generated by exponential engagement with media, facilitated by technology, and exacerbated by disconnection from others. Rosen explains that his mirror is "powered by a small computer that randomly displays a database of approximately 1,000 phrases at a frame rate that is synced to the shutter speed of a camera phone." The viewer sees a reflection of themselves captioned *I Want The Almighty / To Be Genderless / My Kidney Back* and so on. The randomness of the text pairings suggests a glitch: something in the technology at work has gone wrong. But the glitch is intentional: Rosen says his works are intended to "act as self-discovery tools to unlock the subconscious, distinguish aspirations, and realize our individual potential in today's world." As critic and curator Legacy Russell writes in *Glitch Feminism, A Manifesto*: "Glitch is something that extends beyond the most literal technological mechanics: it helps us to celebrate failure as a generative force, a new way to take on the world."

The glitch aesthetic is present in other works that explore how we arrived at the present moment and how we might move in new directions. Humor is at play in Federico Solmi's critique of nationalism, *The Revolutionary*, in which the flag-waving extremists look like toy soldiers in a video game, and Adam Mysock skewers today's polarized politics and the demonization of immigrants in his depictions of the Founding Fathers as aliens with oversized brains emerging from their skulls (a reference to the fact that all seven of the first presidents of the United States were all born British citizens). The pajama-clad, silicone figure by Cajsja von Zeipel, *Pack Nap*, resembles both someone familiar to anyone who experienced quarantine during the pandemic, and an alien cyborg, a humanoid glitch. And yet, there is pathos in their slumped pose and tired expression, as well as a resistance to the contemporary culture of productivity and profit. As critic Elizabeth Wiet writes, "They collect scraps of capitalism, and in turn, imagine new worlds."

Glitching historical imagery is an effective tool for envisioning new worlds: Tiffany Calvert combines analog and digital aesthetics in her interventions into traditional still-life painting, effectively interrupting the image, and pressing pause on the plethora of information presented in the original, in order, says the artist, "to create a new opening for the viewer." Utilizing archival images from the media, Esiri Erheriene-Essi recombines visual and text material in works like *It wasn't how it was supposed to be, but it was how it was*, a painting of two men, one in a suit and one in formal dress. The relationship between them is unclear, the ambiguity intentional: the artist is remixing images and narratives, questioning accepted history and suggesting a range of potential scenarios.



Dawoud Bey
Branches, Leaves, and Cabins, 2019
Inkjet print

Anachronism is an analog form of glitching, and juxtapositions of imagery and materials from divergent sources in works by Kajahl and Zak Ové reveal the potential inherent in reimagining the past to create the future. In his *Royal Scepter* series, Kajahl appropriates the historical figure of the Blackamoor, transforming images of decorative sculptures of Black subjects in servile positions into depictions of warriors, scholars, scientists, oracles, and other mythical and mystical beings, like *Huntress in Oasis (Astride a Crocodile)*. Reflecting on his complex engagement with history and with his own vision, Kajahl says, "My fantasy is gazing back at their fantasy. I am their fantasy and they are mine." His paintings render imagery of what was once inanimate as dynamic and powerful figures traveling in different temporal directions.

“What was African culture prior to the onset of the major religions?” asks Zak Ové. “How was it in Ancient Egypt or the Dogon culture of Mali, both with a strong connection to space, an alien connection, and a belief that life comes from beyond Earth? For post-colonial people, the question ‘where did we come from?’ connects to these people from the beginning of time who come from future time.” Ové’s *Skylark* is a repurposed vintage fairground ride, piloted by a mannequin wearing resin case masks, the exterior embellished with trumpets and acrylic wings. The artist cites the role of oral traditions in the development of diasporic mythologies; without access to images or objects from their African origins, they relied on and combined folkloric stories, enacting a mythic emancipation from documented history, science, and religion. An amalgam of found materials, *Skylark* is imbued with talismanic power, heading towards an unknown constellation.



Nate Lewis
tuning the calibration of his weather, 2022
Hand-sculpted inkjet print, ink, graphite, frottage

The mysterious and metaphoric figures Nate Lewis sculpts in paper belong at once to the realms of science and the imagination, illuminating both the biology and the aesthetics of the human body. A self-taught artist, Lewis worked as a critical care registered nurse for nearly a decade; the surgically precise patterns that embellish his subjects suggest a deep knowledge and reverence for the body, for how it is both inhabited and how it is judged. Lewis's *tuning the calibration of his weather* is one of a series made in direct response to the pandemic, featuring dancers caught in motion with limbs intertwined against backgrounds of embossed textures, fabric rubs, colored inks and curvilinear shapes, which not only envelop but also respond to the movement, appearing as sound waves and currents. "I'm interested in systems and languages and the relationships between them," Lewis explains. "From the multi-layer systems in our bodies to the systems of weather and the broader relationships of them to movement and cultural output."

The collective experience of time warping and wrinkling during periods of isolation and instability is reflected in these works that highlight and celebrate the notion of the glitch, positing new pathways to a future in which time itself might be understood and experienced in novel ways, informed by ancestral knowledge and new revelations: mysterious, undefined, uncontrollable, but still, life!

Alice Gray Stites

Chief Curator, Museum Director

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21c Museum Hotels, an award-winning hospitality company based in Louisville, Kentucky, is pushing the boundaries of both the museum and hotel worlds to create a new kind of travel experience.

The company was founded as a single property by contemporary art collectors and preservationists Laura Lee Brown and Steve Wilson, whose mission was to share thought-provoking contemporary art with the public and participate in the revitalization of downtown Louisville. The couple opened the first 21c in 2006 along downtown's West Main Street, rehabilitating a series of 19th century warehouses to create a union of genuine hospitality, thoughtful design, and culinary creativity—all anchored by a contemporary art museum that is free and open to the public every day of the year.

21c is one of the largest contemporary art museums in the U.S., and North America's only collecting museum dedicated solely to art of the 21st century. 21c presents a range of arts programming curated by Museum Director, Chief Curator Alice Gray Stites, including both solo and group exhibitions that reflect the global nature of art today, as well as site-specific, commissioned installations, and a variety of cultural events. The organization collaborates on arts initiatives with artists and organizations worldwide, including Speed Art Museum, North Carolina Museum of Art, Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Creative Time, For Freedoms, and others.

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