



Volume 16
Issue 1
2021

In Times of Crisis, Art Is Our Greatest Antidote: An Interview with Tatum Dooley and Margaux Smith, Organizers of Canadian Art in Isolation

Rachel Lallouz

As the coronavirus pandemic began to spiral out of control in the spring of 2020, when lockdowns and physical distancing measures were implemented, one after the other, with increasing severity in neighborhoods, cities, and countries across the world, writer-curator Tatum Dooley and artist Margaux Smith began to collaborate on what was initially envisioned as a small project to solicit, collect, and provide artworks to long-term care homes in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Now, having accumulated hundreds of artworks, Dooley and Smith have placed these works in multiple GTA facilities, including Castlerview Wychwood Towers, Wesburn Manor, Fudger House, and Wyndam Manor. Scattered throughout this interview are examples of some of these pieces.

For Dooley and Smith, Canadian Art in Isolation is an effort to combat the grief, loneliness, and shock that disproportionately affects some of the most vulnerable members of our society: those who are older, often differently-abled and in some

cases, terminally-ill residents who have now long been inhabiting such spaces of precarity.

Rachel Lallouz (RL): Can you explain to me the personal origin story of this project? How did Canadian Art in Isolation unfold?

Tatum Dooley (TD): If we think back to ten months ago, that first lock down was incredibly serious. We didn't know what would be okay. We were spending most of our time indoors—I work from home, and the libraries were closed, so Margaux was also working from home. But we were having very long phone calls at night together.



Sunday Lunch, Keiran Brennan

Throughout those phone calls, a lot of our attention would turn to the people that the pandemic was affecting the most. It was a really organic and natural progression for us to start thinking, “Well, how can we help them?” It came up that it would be a very easy and natural progression for us to donate art to long-term care homes.

RL: What are your personal connections to art as they relate to the pandemic?

Margaux Smith (MS): As a painter, I was at the studio a lot. I was spending long hours there, really enjoying the kind of extended time alone to focus on painting. We were thinking how lucky we were to have access to our own disciplines, so that brought us a lot of comfort and engagement during the first lockdown. It's a bit more lonely a year into it, but during that phase this was the initial instinct we both had, to try and share that pleasure and enjoyment and comfort we both had from painting and writing and our own artistic engagements.

TD: With my practice writing and curating art, it just fit so well. It's so nice to have an artistic collaborator like Margaux. I had also just finished an essay for Patel Brown Gallery, about artist reactions to the pandemic, and



Night Garden, Teri Donovan

community sharing and mobilization, and so I was really in this headspace asking, "What does it mean to be an artist and work in the arts and how can this contribute to making this time a bit easier for people?"

MS: I would also add that it was a way for me to feel socially engaged, and to be doing something tangible, because there's something special about making art and living with art in real life that you can't get from a virtual experience or a Zoom call.

Tatum and I are both believers in the power of the physicality of art—*living with art*—so it was a way to stay social and connected to our community during that first lockdown. We both have a conviction that the arts can make a difference during a time of crisis. Even if it's not solving major problems, it can keep a spirit of optimism and community alive, so that was one of our goals.

RL: That's amazing. Can you speak a bit about the response you've received from care homes in implementing this project?



Lambton Pines, John Lynch

MS: We plan on going and visiting when this is all over. We occasionally get photos of residents who have selected their art works—each long-term care home has a different process for working with the residents to select works that they like. [But] these care homes have been in and out of outbreaks, so it's been a really slow process [hearing back]. We've gotten a lot of positive feedback, though, and so much gratitude from administrators. This art draws out and engages the residents.

TD: Some institutional settings can be very monotonous—all of the walls, for example, can be very neutral shades, [and] there are limited elements of personalization in some of these care homes. So

having a piece of art on the wall, just from a very aesthetic point of view, something that presents a lot of colour and illustration, or if it's an abstraction that people can project onto that painting, or if it's a pastoral scene—what it can evoke from memory—from that aesthetic point of view, art is something to look at every day that is beautiful and engaging. I certainly feel that from the art that I live with in my home. But also, in a more abstract or metaphorical way—the art [suggests] a sentiment that somebody has taken the time to make you something, has donated it—some of this work takes a lot of time to make—that someone cares enough, is thinking about you, and wants to do it ... there's an empathetic care that [residents] might feel.

MS: It's hard to speak generally about the affective impact of the work, because we didn't prescribe any parameters about the kind of work that people could donate. So if you look at the collection, you'll see that there's all kinds of images, and we leave it open to the residents to decide what they want to live with and what's going to be meaningful to them...but I think it's also been really meaningful for artists.

What I really miss is just connecting with strangers and community members on the street that are not part of [my] immediate family or social bubble. So, I think it's a really nice way of showing that kindness and that relationship of connection with someone that you haven't already met. There's a lot of people that submitted in our own generation, cohort, of artists. But there's a whole, kind of less visible, population of artists [that submitted]. We received a lot of donations from them, along with letters, and for some it was

their first time exhibiting work. So, it was a meaningful way for seniors to connect with other seniors, or people dealing with health issues and isolation. I think [the project] had a different role in everyone's life.

RL: Reaching to a broader question in relation to this project, why do you think art is necessary in our world today given the current social climate?

TD: For me, art translates the world around us. It allows people to articulate their experiences and their world-views [through] multiple different mediums. That act of archiving feeling and sentiment and our surroundings is important. The reactions

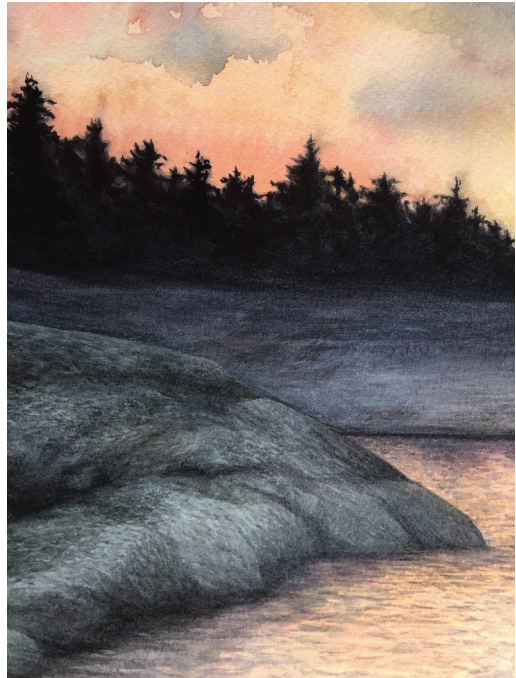


Image 0, Emily MacLennon

people have to art are important. And for me, what art is—and I've written about this as well—is permanence. An artist is looking to art history and the past to influence their work, and they are making that work in the present, and this piece of work will be propelled into the future. This is an act of optimism in our world today, especially during a time when we are all very much living in the moment, and it's

hard to think to a year or ten years ahead. Making art is the most optimistic thing a person can do, because it's saying, "I'm here. I'll be here in 20 years." I find that very touching.

RL: I really appreciate hearing that. In a time when many definitive strangleholds on art are emerging, did you or this project face any challenges?

MS: I think organizationally, we were just overwhelmed. We thought it was just going to be a small volunteer project, but the scale just kept on expanding. It was hard to plan because everything was so unpredictable. People just kept reaching out and saying they wanted to start this in their town. It seemed like the need was expansive and we had to figure out how much we could commit to that.

TD: To add on to that, there was also the issue of physical storage. It's such a logistical thing, but if we have 300 pieces of art, where are those going

to be stored before they can be dropped off? And the drop-off process also meant working closely with long-term care homes in a safe manner. We didn't go into the care homes—they would bring a cart out and we would stack all of the art onto it, and they would isolate the art, making sure everything was up to par in terms of health and safety. At one point, we had so much art in our homes we couldn't accept any more, physically.



Study for a Fly Trap, Emma Welch

RL: Thinking to the future, how do you see this project evolving given the unknown or the uncertainty of the coronavirus? What are the different dimensions or spaces this project might evolve into?

MS: [This summer] we put together, with [University of Toronto] students, a DIY document for anyone else who wants to do something similar, and we have been forwarding that to people in different cities outside of Toronto. I think this phase of the work [for us] is completed now.

TD: Thinking about more efficient ways to do it in the future, we'd love it if the city of Toronto saw the project as something to be implemented permanently, and [could make] a budget for it. That would be amazing.

It may be easier to do some sort of programming in which people are mailing this art to long-term care homes. We're open minded about where it goes from here.



Joane, Margaux-Smith

About the Authors

Tatum Dooley is a Toronto-based writer and curator whose work can be found in *Artforum International Magazine*, *Border Crossings Magazine*, *Canadian Art*, *Garage Magazine*, *The Globe and Mail*, *Lapham's Quarterly*, and *The Walrus*. She has curated shows at Dianna Witte Gallery, General Hardware, and the Drake Devonshire (upcoming). She received an MA in Literatures of Modernity from Ryerson University in 2016, where she wrote a Major Research Paper on accessibility in the art world.

Margaux Smith is a Toronto-based artist who uses layers of paint, drawing, and collage to convey the body's state of constant transformation. Smith received a BFA from OCAD University and went on to complete a Master of Information degree at the University of Toronto. Throughout her works on paper, Smith incorporates grids, graphs, and data alongside portraiture and figuration.

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