

REFLECTION

MFA @ Home: “MFA in Covid Times”

by Siana Smith

“All season has something to offer.” —*Jeannette Walls, The Glass Castle*

March 2020. As COVID-19 hit America, we started Shelter in Place (SIP). No longer could I go to school or my studio. Instead of in-person interactions with fellow artists and teachers, I stared at an 8 ½ by 12-inch screen. When it rains, it pours. Soon after SIP, SFAI notified us that they are closing the door and we need to find another institute to finish our MFA program.

Jeannette Walls says that “when God closes a door, he opens a window, but it’s up to you to find it.” When SFAI closed its doors on me, CCA opened theirs. I came to CCA with gratitude knowing I could continue my study with supportive faculties and staff. However, the screen is still my only connection to the outside world. With more time in solitude, looking at my paintings, I started to connect the individual paintings and sense my emotions flow through them.

In *Lure of the Skin* (2019), a painting from my commodity series I started in 2018, I painted on the colors layer by layer, trying to catch every nuance of the surface. A bulge, a fold, or the low sheen gleaming under light, or the reflection on the smooth, buttery surface; I want to record everything that arouses the desire to hold it, touch it and gaze over and over again. On the upper left corner, a skull head rests on top of the green cross.

These large-scale paintings depict consumer products in more detail than a life-size rendering, suggesting that an object’s function is more significant than its actual usage in my imaginary world. I can almost walk into the world of purses. At the same time, I feel the pressure and threats from the large size. These objects seem to have the magic power to fill the emptiness within. One day, while looking at my commodity series, I noticed that I use red a lot—maybe it’s part of me growing up in China, where people love red, or perhaps it’s a way to warn myself of the danger I am in. Searching for the meaning behind the form produces questions for me: What is the truth underneath all that fetishized surface? Can I grasp my authentic self in the hallucination, or does it become a symbol of me? The subtle change of relationship to ownership insinuates a pressing question: Do I own the commodities, or do they own me?



Lure of the Skin, 2019.

In a patriarchal society, the body is objectified as a vessel and carrier for the commodities. Merchandise weaves together the fabric of social, economic, and class distinctions and sexism and psycho-socialism. By incorporating the body with commodities in my paintings, I want to engage a conversation of conventional beauty in the context of femininity, sexuality, and the male gaze. Are these items really for my enjoyment, or are they bondage shaping the body and thoughts as part of this spectacle society’s phantoms?



Mitigation, 2020.



Pink Backpack, 2020.

I was working on *Mitigation* (2020) when SIP started. This acrylic painting depicts a woman's bandaged right hand holding on to her left. The middle finger of the left hand, pointing at the woman's chin, is compressed by a stack of rings with precious stones. The finger is turning purple due to a lack of circulation, while the ring finger is missing a band, leaving only the indentation of the ring. The figure's half-opened mouth shows teeth smeared with red lipstick. This painting utilizes the symbols of jewelry, asking, "Is she showing off and tolerating the pain caused by the rings, or is she using this pain to alleviate other unspoken sentiments?"

The jewelry and all the commodities glow and sparkle, yet they fail to comfort, heal, or fill the emptiness inside. Their impact stops at visual recognition. It was the fantasy of imagination with which I bestowed them seemingly cure-all capabilities.

It's time to wake up.

Responding to the uncertainty and heaviness I encountered in 2020 regarding the pandemic and political, environmental, social, and economic uncertainty, the subject matter in my painting practice changed. *Pink Backpack* (2020) is the first painting in my Apocalyptic series. Because of COVID19, my daughter, along with millions of college students, was sent home by her university. Frustrated by the shelter-in-place order, quarantined at home, and unable to gather in public places for months, she and friends explored graffiti art sites in the Bay Area. In this painting, she is standing firm in bleak darkness with her head held high and light from above washing over her, including the world on which she is standing. The blackness separates the light and earth while she is in between worlds. I am with her in that space of ambiguity, ambivalence, and vulnerability, seeking clarity and security in life and spirit to fight for freedom from oppression and not being contained by it.

She is carrying the pink backpack, which we bought together when she was ten years old. She likes the water bladder and drinking tube in the bag so much that this pink backpack accompanies her everywhere for outdoor activities, camps, or trips. The pink backpack witnessed her at summer camp as a camper for many years and a confident camp counselor in high school. Now she is three thousand miles across the country, living independently and pursuing her dream. She is carrying her weight as a young woman in this imperfect world. The pink backpack she left behind is hanging in her closet. The name tag I made for her nine years ago is still in the inside pocket.

Some things in life cannot be fixed or avoided. They can only be carried, just like the pink backpack.

Life, for me, is unpredictable with immense beauty and great sadness. It's a moving pattern of possibilities, including good and evil, uncertainty and inevitable truth, courage, and fear. Instead of resisting, I embrace the unknown and bleakness with her as I paint.



9.9.2020, 37.70184614419476, -122.40675640172758, 2021.

9.9.2020, 37.70184614419476, -122.40675640172758 (2021) is a painting that depicts a girl running over a heavily tagged ruin under the orange apocalyptic sky. The date is 9.9.2020 – Sept. 9, 2020. California wildfires in the heat of summer broke out at more than three hundred locations and decimated millions of acres of land. Tens of thousands of people evacuated. Houses were destroyed, and lives were lost. The fires generated plumes of smoke, blanketing the San Francisco Bay Area for weeks. On Sept. 9, 2020, the whole world witnessed beautiful San Francisco become an eerie, ghostly, post-apocalyptic scene: the sky turned disturbing shades of dark orange. The air quality was worse than biohazard level, and most people stayed home with doors and windows tightly shut. 37.70184614419476, -122.40675640172758 is the location of Bayshore Roundhouse. Built between 1907 and 1910, the Roundhouse functioned as a

stable and daily steam engine service for Bayshore Railroad. After closing down in 1982 and sold in 1989, a fire in 2001 burned down a significant portion, leaving only a quarter standing.

My daughter and her friends got there and parked far away. They had to walk a mile along a small narrow path through fields of grass taller than adults and several tent encampments. What went through her young mind while she was journeying to this ruin? Loneliness? Frustration with the pandemic? Fear about what her future would be like in this world? I got it wrong. She was excited about this weird phenomenon. Despite the very toxic air quality, she insisted on carrying out

what she planned for that day. As her mother, do I criticize her imprudent recklessness or applaud her defiance against the difficult situation she has to face?

She came out of that experience feeling confident and more ready to handle challenging situations. Seeing graffiti and thinking of others who came here before her to leave their mark gave her a boost under the orange sky - she knows she is not alone. Maybe that's how young people test boundaries and grow. Their rebelliousness, curiosity, and explorative nature help them gather meaning from that which seems meaningless and see the sublime in the apocalyptic environment. Their courage to explore the bleak present brings vitality and hope for the future. Without fear, there is no courage.

One day, when I was about to empty a trash basket filled with crumpled-up tissues used for wiping tears, snot, sweat, or frustration, my epiphany came. Before dumping it, I paused, took a close look, and saw gripping patterns among the mess. In Eastern culture, white is the funeral color, signaling mourning, death, sadness, and loss. Western culture uses white for weddings and considers it pure, holy, peaceful, and joyful. These white tissues in my basket took on the complexity of both. These simple forms—the mosaic of every day, the overlooked mundane—transform under my paint brushes,



Shades of White, 2020.

emerging as flowers and fluorescents, like ghosts, faces, and spaces. Tissue boxes and trash baskets are containers of time and reflect what living life is all about. In various shades of white, those tissues reflect a kind of eulogy in their complexities and elegance. There is a quiet sadness experienced during the passing of time, a chronicle of what was and what might have been. Happy or unhappy, I can always find richness in life.

When I pulled the tissues out of the box, I release them like a birthing process. The tissue serves its purpose and fully experiences its glorious moment of pulling, wiping, blowing, and throwing. After witnessing deep emotion, it sits quietly in the trash bin. In a way, I look at the used tissues in respect to my own life, seeing the good, the bad, the beautiful, the frustrating, and the complex. Ultimately, hope emerges from that complexity. Looking at this bucket of trash, I sense my despondency, irritation, and suffering dissolve into the tissues. I feel the lightness of unloading and get on with my journey.

Turning a bucket of trash into a beautiful, spiritual, incandescent luminous presence is my way of finding meaning in the meaninglessness. Despite the fallen world children inherit from generations before, they still discover and find something worthwhile in the wreckage. In our different ways and our separate environments, we are both trying to recreate purpose from waste. I locate that connection between us in my artwork.

This piece is part of a series of reflections by graduating MFA students on their experience of completing school at home.