

ART SPIEL

Reflections on the work of contemporary artists

MAY 27, 2020 BY CATHERINE KIRKPATRICK

Artists on Coping: Deborah Wasserman

During the Coronavirus pandemic, Art Spiel is reaching out to artists to learn how they are coping.



Deborah Wasserman in her studio, The Pool, CalArts 2018, photograph by Rafael Hernan

Inspired by her rich South American and Middle-Eastern background, Deborah Wasserman makes personal and visceral art stirred by Ecofeminist themes. A graduate of the California Institute of the Arts and the Whitney Independent Study Program, she has exhibited nationally and internationally, and is a grant recipient of the Experimental Television Center, Aljira Center for the Arts, the America-Israel Cultural Foundation, and is a Skowhegan fellow. She received an IAP Social Practice fellowship from NYFA in 2017, a

grant from the Puffin Foundation in 2018, a grant from Citizens committee for New York in 2019, a Queens Council On The Arts New Work grant in 2020, and a Su-Casa award from the New York State Department Of Cultural Affairs every year since 2015.

AS: How are you coping?

DW: I live in Queens, New York, two blocks from Elmhurst Hospital, “the epicenter of the epicenter” of the pandemic. My neighborhood is the most diverse zip code in the United States, if not the world. Here, where 800 languages are spoken, and every street feels like a different culture, we live in close proximity to one another, with several families often sharing an apartment. Many residents have low paying jobs and have to work through the lockdown. Suddenly this lovely, bustling, colorful community–my home–is the perfect breeding ground for the virus, and it’s running amok.

I’m proud and inspired to see my community organizing to help front line workers who show up day and night to save lives, vendors at essential stores, and postal workers. Neighbors are sharing food, information, homemade masks, and running errands for those in need. At 7:00 PM there’s the daily cheer with flags tossed from windows and the national anthem plays loud across the street. We see hospital workers walking down the block at the end of their shift–our heroes–and are grateful for their sacrifice and courage!



Terra Mater, 2019-2020, acrylic, oil and torn clothes on canvas, 48" x 48"

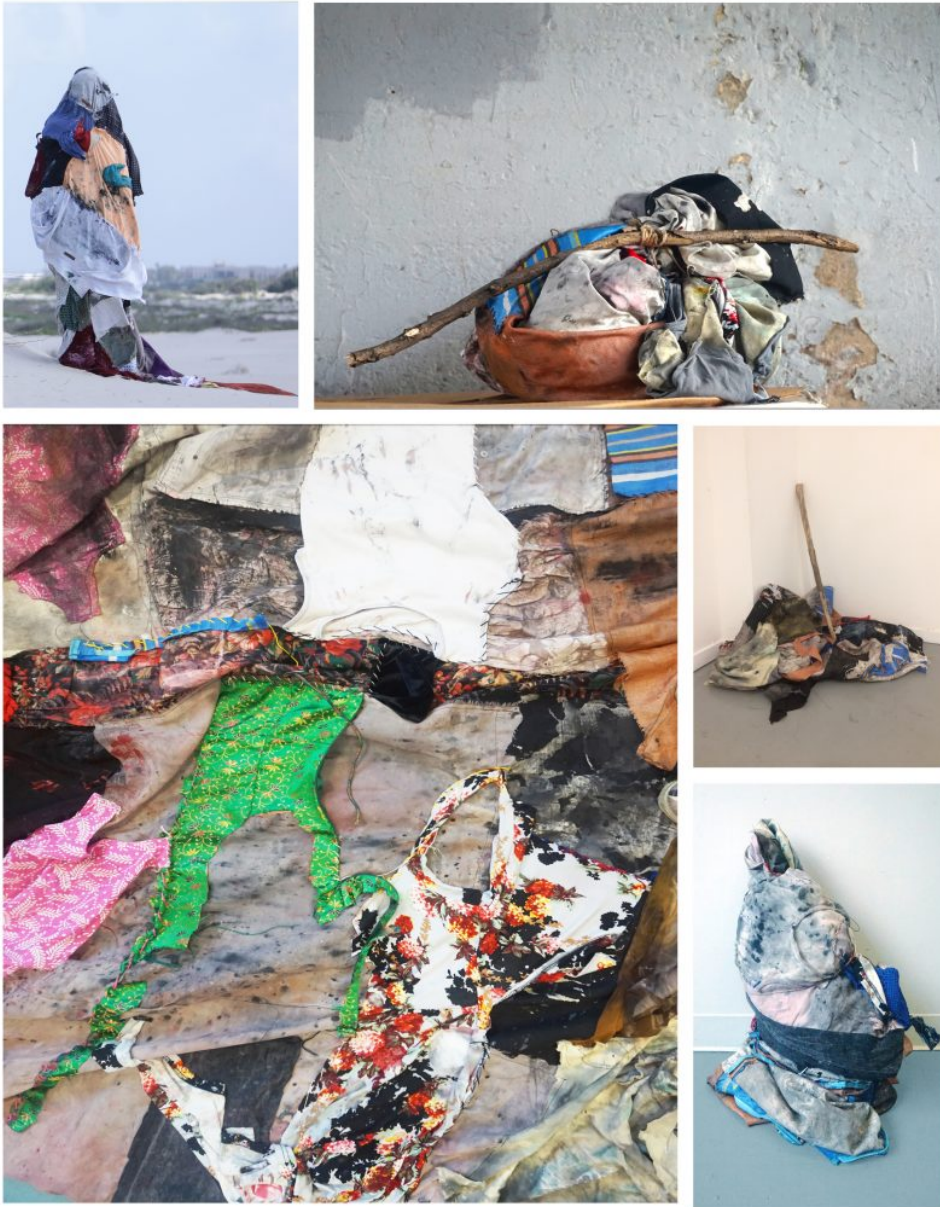
I went through a range of emotions and adjustments when my Su-Casa teaching gig was abruptly terminated, and my local arts program switched to online instruction. There's also worry over the loss of state grants, exhibition plans and income, but I count my blessings and try to focus on the big picture. Keeping my art classes running and educating young students boosts their mood and mine. One parent told me the only activity that truly engages her child during quarantine is art class! My family has also been cheerful and uplifting.



The Lost Path, 2019, ink, acrylic, oil and torn clothes on canvas, 48" x 72"

AS: Has your routine changed?

DW: Not dramatically, as during the financial crisis in 2008, I launched my own independent arts program, and confined my activities to our local area to keep life easy. It's challenging going to the studio not only because it's a shared space, but because my recent large pieces depicting natural disasters seem so prophetic with their sense of apocalypse. There's a feeling of everything falling apart both in the work and the sirens blaring outside. My schedule used to be packed with activities, but the overload, speed and juggling are gone. I'm reminded of the Shunryu Suzuki quote: "To live is enough." To adjust to this new reality, I've started a quarantine diary of writing, drawings and photographs.



Bindle (bundle), 2017-2020, various modes of wearing and displaying the Bindle, (a 'security blanket' made out of women's and children's torn and stained clothes)

AS: Can you describe some of your feelings about all this?

DW: I grew up in Israel where we consider ourselves strong and resilient, but the pandemic has taken away my sense of security. A headache, a few coughs, and I lose my cool. I have many emotions—loss, anger, rage, pain—and many questions too. When I see Josef, a local homeless man, smoking, I want to warn him, but fear getting too close. My stomach churns as I cross to the other side of the street. Social distancing is flattening the curve, but can feel cold-hearted and cruel. I try to remain a witness, seeing clearly though the disbelief and shock, but keep asking why?

I think mankind is undergoing a major shift towards creating a more just and enlightened society, but what if I'm wrong? What if this holocaust caused by stupidity, unfit leaders and careless nations has been in vain? What if all the sacrifice and pain has been for nothing? For better or worse, the world will never be the same. Somehow we must live day to day, waiting patiently to see how the global drama evolves.



Deluge, 2018, acrylic, oil and torn clothes on canvas, 48" x 48"

AS: What matters most right now?

DW: To be the best we can. To practice compassion, help others, be cautious, stay positive, be resilient and take it one day at a time. Showing love and care to family and friends is of utmost importance too. To stay alive to witness our current reality, then be

part of the rebuilding phase will be a great privilege and shouldn't be taken for granted. We're all needed for this task.



Amazon Dreaming, 2019, ink, acrylic, oil and torn clothes on canvas, 48 "x 36"

AS: Any thoughts about the road ahead?

DW: There are deities in many cultures whose sole role is to lash out and punish mankind. This time it's us—we humans—who laid the ground for this upheaval: our capitalist value system and spiritual bankruptcy, our exploitation of natural resources and fellow humans. I hope this crisis makes us acknowledge our vulnerability and codependency. The disregard

of universal laws, Mother Earth and the animal kingdom has tragic consequences! I pray for a new worldwide consciousness, a new era that will be more just, enlightened, and aligned with the best of humanity.



The eyes in the tents, 2019, ink and acrylic on paper, 30" x 22" each



Catherine Kirkpatrick is a writer and photographer based in New York. She wrote the introductions to Meryl Meisler's two books, and is currently working on an oral history about recent changes in photography.