

Making art during a pandemic

Students at OCAD University found creative ways to complete final projects from home.

BY SHAUNA MCGINN | JUL 02 2020

In Ilene Sova's portrait painting class at OCAD University, students normally submit a proposal for their final piece, detailing the medium, materials and theme — but the sweeping impacts of COVID-19 forced a change of plans this year. When students were given just a few days to collect supplies and told to work from home, Ms. Sova and other faculty members decided to drop the parameters around final projects. They allowed students to create however they wanted with whatever they could access, and the result was a flood of submissions inspired by the radical, ongoing shifts caused by the pandemic.

For some students, this meant using found materials — like blending spices to colour a painting. But for most, it was expressed in tone, with works that reflect the anxiety and isolation that so many are experiencing. Ms. Sova, who serves as the Ada Slight Chair of Contemporary Painting and Drawing, felt it was important to display the work and created a page on the OCAD U website called [‘Art in the time of coronavirus’](#).

“You hope as faculty that you’re educating your students to be responsive, to be citizens who look at the world around them and create in response to social justice, or to a crisis,” Ms. Sova says. “To see that they were able to do that was so fulfilling for us as educators.”

First-year painting and drawing student Ashley Waithe submitted her piece for the online exhibition — a self-portrait of the artist wearing a medical mask. She says the final painting drastically shifted from its original vision as her feelings about the pandemic unfolded. “I focused on changing the aspect of how I see myself, versus how others are going to see me when I go out,” Ms. Waithe says. “I purposely made the eyes bigger and more dramatic, because that’s the only thing you’re seeing; the fear and the anxiety, not necessarily each other, because we’re disconnected from everything now.”



First-year student Ashley Waithe painted her final assignment, Quarantine Self-Portrait, while self-isolating at home. Photo courtesy of Ashley Waithe.

Ms. Sova says that the ingenuity students showed was not just inspiring; it has also challenged the faculty to think more deeply about sustainability. “If students are making art out of what they can find, things are not going into the landfill, and they’re not just buying things that are mass-produced,” she says. “The pandemic has accelerated our thinking and our movement around those goals, because we’re kind of forced to, and I think that’s really a positive that can come out of this.”

For Ms. Waithe, the main benefit of seeing her classmates’ work has been the proof that, despite the isolation, no one is truly alone in their fear and uncertainty. “This is a universal feeling and everyone’s taking their emotions into their art,” she says. “And even though we’re apart, human emotion is connected no matter what.”