



OCAD is putting coronavirus on the curriculum this fall

In response to the pandemic, the art school is launching two classes about creating work in times of crisis

By Kevin Ritchie Jul 6, 2020



Courtesy of OCAD University

OCAD student Emerald Repard-Denniston painted the mural *We Are In This Together* on a boarded up store window in Vancouver.

When government restrictions locked third-year drawing and painting students at OCAD University out of their studios, they opened the refrigerators and closets.

Instructor Julius Manapul restructured his six-week spring course Pixel Pusher, which examines painting in digital spaces, so his 34 students could continue creating work remotely from home. That meant improvising with whatever materials they had on hand – tea, coffee, Sriracha sauce, vegetables, the clothes in their closets.

“The pandemic has really pushed our creativity as instructors and forced us to think through sustainability,” says Ilene Sova, the Ada Slight Chair of Contemporary Painting and Drawing at OCADU. “Both in terms of what’s affordable and what is around us that we can make art with.”

The work was showcased in an expansive [online exhibition](#). Instructors also noticed students across all years were reacting to the pandemic by [posting work on Instagram](#) at the end of the winter semester, from drawings and paintings to video and textile work. Thematically the work touched on the psychological and emotional effects of the pandemic and the change in daily routines – alienation, insomnia, anxiety and technology.

While the spring class made a quick pivot to pandemic-inspired art, the university’s drawing and painting department has spent the past three months weighing how to respond to the coronavirus pandemic – thematically and practically – in the year ahead.

Ontario universities and colleges are [preparing](#) to offer online instruction or a hybrid of in-class and virtual lessons when the fall semester begins in September, but administrators are still waiting on specific direction from the provincial government.

Since international students will likely be unable to return to Canada to continue their studies, OCADU must offer virtual courses whether or not students and faculty return to classrooms in September. That means sourcing non-toxic paint materials or using different materials entirely.

Another challenge is logistical: oil and painting materials are toxic, so students are not encouraged to use those at home. (OCAD has HVAC systems that cleans the air four times an hour.)

“We pushed the heavy painting courses to the winter in the hopes that we might have access to the studio,” says Sova. “And if we don’t, at least we have four months to create really rich, great programming and produce videos, demonstrations and lectures.”

This fall, OCAD is also putting coronavirus on the curriculum. The school will offer students two new online classes about making art during the COVID-19 crisis and adapt traditional painting classes for virtual learning. Both were fast-tracked through the school’s approvals process.

Sova will teach the third-year class COVID-19 Responsive Art, which allow students to experiment and create work in response to the pandemic while learning about the ways artists have reacted to crisis of the past – from the Black Plague to both world wars and the AIDS epidemic.

The second-year class Working From Home will be taught by Michelle Forsyth and will focus on how artists who must work from home can be safe and create provocative space to make art. Specifically, the course will be a

chance to explore themes of identity and “the political implications of home” depending on a student’s race, gender and economic position.

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Kevin has worked in journalism for 20 years, first as a general assignment reporter before being sucked into the glamorous life that is arts and entertainment coverage. Kevin now contributes to music, tv, film and culture.



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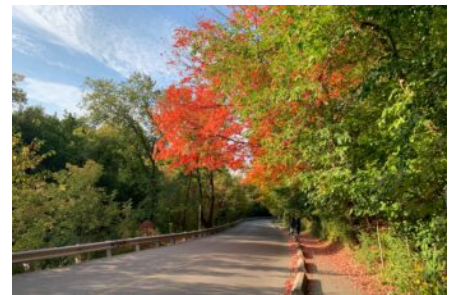
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Art in the time of coronavirus

Part of the COVID-19 Responsive Art calls will focus on the ways students can present their work online to viewers and press. That skill will be increasingly important as museums and galleries reopen and curators turn their focus to the pandemic.

The crisis has upended touring exhibition schedules and, in response, institutions worldwide have put out artist calls for COVID-19-related work.

Museums and art galleries have **started reopening** as part of stage 2 in Ontario's reopening plan, though so far only the Aga Khan Museum has announced plans for a coronavirus-related exhibition.

In late May, the Bentway launched **It's All Right Now**, a city-wide exhibition displayed on billboards around town, including along the Gardiner Expressway and at Yonge-Dundas Square.

Sova is the founder of Toronto's **Feminist Art Collective**, which is hosting an online exhibition on Instagram and Facebook that explores the ways the pandemic has exacerbated inequalities and created space for social change. The call for work resulted in more than 50 submissions.

"It's interesting – most of the work is about self-care and mental health," she says. "There is a lot of work based on issues of isolation and being alone. There's a lot of pieces about disability rights."

The show has featured work dealing with access to ventilators in jurisdictions like Spain and Italy, which saw health-care systems overloaded with COVID-19 patients and doctors having to make life-or-death calls over who would get ventilated.

Other emergent themes include the ways immunocompromised people must rely on the will of the public to follow collective rules; and how women with kids have shouldered extra workloads between home schooling and their jobs.

While large institutions require long lead times to plan exhibitions, expect more real-time artistic responses to coronavirus in online spaces – whether connected to a gallery or independently organized.

"The students can reflect on their own positionality in Toronto and what is affecting them most and how can they express that," explains Sova. "We know our students are under stress so we want them to be able to respond creatively to the pandemic."

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