

SAFER AT HOME

PANDEMIC PAINTINGS



ESTHER PEARL WATSON

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY'S

Richmond Center
FOR
Visual Arts

PRESENTS

ESTHER PEARL WATSON'S
MOST RECENT BODY OF WORK:

SAFER AT HOME:
PANDEMIC PAINTINGS

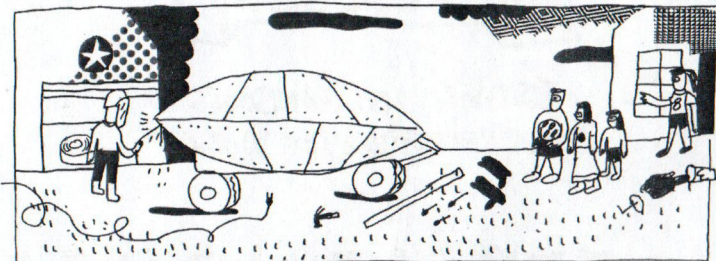
SEPTEMBER 23 — NOVEMBER 14, 2021

A SHORT BIOGRAPHY

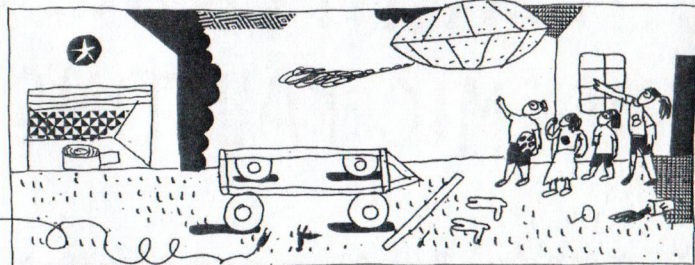
ESTHER PEARL WATSON



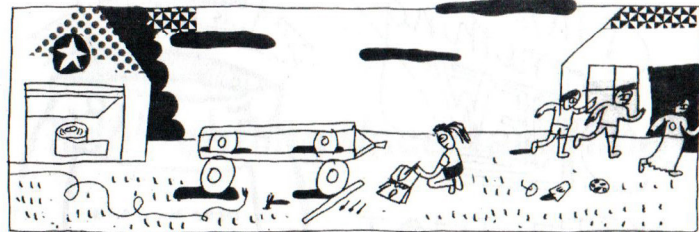
- ① I GREW UP IN THE DALLAS/FORT WORTH AREA OF TEXAS IN THE 1980'S.



- ② MY FATHER WAS OBSESSED WITH BUILDING FLYING SAUCERS IN OUR FRONT YARD.



- ③ HIS VISION OF THE FUTURE WAS FOR ALL OF US TO USE FLYING SAUCERS INSTEAD OF CARS.



- ④ I BEGAN TO KEEP JOURNALS DOCUMENTING THE WORLD AROUND ME.



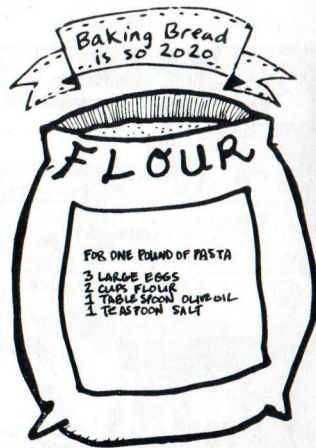
- ⑤ I STILL RECORD THE WORLD AROUND ME IN THE FORM OF PAINTINGS AND COMICS.



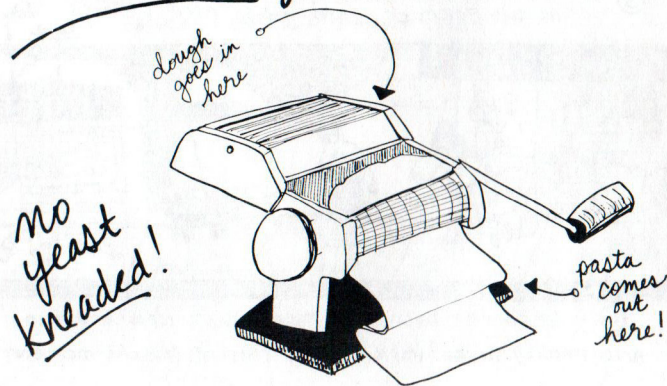
- ⑥ I BEGAN TO DOCUMENT THE WAYS MY NEIGHBORHOOD AND FAMILY WERE IMPACTED BY THIS HISTORICAL MOMENT.

TRY
Something
NEW

WITH THAT
50-pound
bag of
flour



make pasta!



Transforming Uncertain Time

Indra K. Lācis on Esther Pearl Watson's
Safer at Home: Pandemic Paintings

On view at the Richmond Center for Visual Arts,
September 23 – November 14, 2021

The year 2020 sped by in a blur and dragged on like an unwinnable, slow-motion race. Esther Pearl Watson's recent body of work, *Safer at Home: Pandemic Paintings*, provides time and space to digest this unforgettable moment and its lasting impact. Created through a focused interdisciplinary research process (the artist's personal experiences, cross-referenced media and U.S. Center for Disease Control reports, and observations of community reactions), *Safer at Home: Pandemic Paintings* both extends and diverges from the artist's major bodies of work to date. While sky, for

example—long a subject onto itself in Watson's work—remains center stage in these *Pandemic Paintings*, missing are the flying saucers seen in so many of the artist's iconic "memory paintings." Location and geography also provide key content and context within each intimately-scaled painting; in this series, however, the city of Los Angeles replaces the bucolic fields and small towns of the artist's upbringing in rural Texas, which figure prominently in the artist's best known works. And while in previous paintings, memory as an operative device infused meaning in a more purely autobiographical way, here it works differently. Despite the series' clear, first-person narrative voice, the more than 100 paintings and memorial banners comprising *Safer at Home: Pandemic Paintings* prompt the viewer to remember.

Given her experience as an illustrator and graphic novelist, Esther Pearl Watson's ability to tell complex stories with unusual ease is perhaps unsurprising.¹ In this series, short text segments in the upper left quadrant report events consequential both personally and for the public at large, from shelter-in-place orders to the hope of a vaccine. Situating the visual in direct relationship to language, Watson transforms the amorphousness of these early pandemic days into manageable, factual accounts of present experience. The Richmond Center's gridded installation of these small-format paintings references the rigid order imposed by Covid-19 protocols for social interaction, e.g. equidistantly placed physical distance markers in public spaces, Plexiglass dividers, or neat sets of rectangular Zoom windows on the screens that connected (and continue to connect) workers, families, and

friends alike.² Each panel in Watson's *Pandemic Paintings* echoes the form of an individual page, a frame or a boundary, acting as a portal or window into a surreal reality, simultaneously familiar and strange. Journaling has long been central to Watson's practice and in this series, condensed textual statements seem to embody sets of opposite sentiments; these are mundane but extraordinary moments. One day in June last year, for example, against the backdrop of a five-lane highway dotted with only a few cars and numerous Amazon Prime delivery vans, Watson reported, "I can't tell what day it is anymore."

Never flashy or affected, Watson's vivid, dense compositions fit within a rich history of artists who take the urban landscape as muse. Think French Impressionism's fixation on what poet Charles Baudelaire referred to as "the painting of modern life," for example, or the gritty streetscapes of New York City's Ashcan School painters during the early 20th century.³ Better known as Grandma Moses, Anna Mary Robertson Moses' bustling, teeming scenes also bear mention, as others elsewhere have pointed out.⁴ And while the breadth and length of this particular series, its serious narrative with allegorical undertones, tempts comparison with contemporary forms of history painting, Watson's *Pandemic Paintings* fit more precisely within the genre of realism. Although the work is autobiographical, its immediate, unbridled approach to documenting a fluid, constantly changing era grants broad relevancy.

Throughout *Safer at Home*, Watson documents changes

occurring at schools, businesses, and stores small and large. Several places are pictured again and again—La Fiesta Party Store and Party Masters, two among several. In still other panels, Watson pictures persons without permanent shelter, one of whom is a family member. Again and again, however, Watson returns to paint several homes—her sister's group home, her mother's senior living facility, her own home and neighborhood, and Pasadena ArtCenter College of Design where she teaches, among other places. Although artists have taken on the practice of painting and repainting multiple versions of one scene from ancient to contemporary times, Watson's reasons for doing so seem removed from aesthetic aims. Many of these repeated scenes read like longing, like a balm to calm anxiety, or like the act of reaching toward something out of reach.

Within the urban landscape, home is not only structure but also a site/sight of memory, comfort, identity; it is the host of everyday life. As for so many during the pandemic, home transformed into a catch-all space where living, working, studying, and recreating occurred side by side. On March 26, 2020, for example, the artist described, "Now that the four of us are home all the time, we have a new routine: we zoom in our rooms, bleach clean floors, and walk with a mask outdoors." Yet Watson's audience is never witness to what goes on inside the domestic, intimate, private sphere. Instead, exterior walls describe not only the space of "home" but all interior spaces—locations wholly dictated by division from the outside world. Only the road or sidewalk connect home with every other exit or entrance, an apt metaphor for the feeling that this

contemporary moment seems to stretch on and on and on, with barely an end in sight.

Several cultural commentators have noted the pandemic's tendency to delete and divide.⁵ Masks cover nearly half of one's face—ostensibly everyone's most distinct, individualized characteristic. This erasure in turn echoes the emptiness of streets and stores, but pales in the face of the ultimate earthly absence of those who succumb to Covid-19. This latter loss is broadcast crisply in the gallery with increasing fatality counts sewn by hand in white numbers on black banners. Like tombstones they dot the gallery walls. Elsewhere in Watson's work, divisions and deletions are accessed more subtly; in many paintings, stasis—waiting, biding one's time—becomes the action. The filmic element of durational time is profoundly palpable. And although each painting in *Safer at Home* is individually defined, as a group the series feels more like a time-based work of installation art, a medium historically known to put forth among the most compelling expressions of domesticity and the space of home.⁶

Methodically created over the course of a year and still growing as a series, *Safer at Home: Pandemic Paintings* resonates unexpectedly not only with forms of installation art but also with durational art, a term typically used to describe performances that take place over a period of time and often in front of audience. Painters, however, have taken on similar objectives in the privacy of the studio. Japanese conceptual artist On Kawara's *Today* series paintings, (1966 – 2014) for

example, each focus on, and picture, only one date. Completing these in single day or otherwise discarding them, On Kawara would often store the finished work in a cardboard box lined with a local newspaper clipping of the day.⁷ Like Watson's individual *Pandemic Paintings*, they record a single day and place in time.

While some might argue that painting, to remain true to its so-called essence, should be classified as spatial art (like sculpture or architecture) rather than temporal (like theater, dance, and music), Watson's work complicates the easy demarcation between traditional categories of medium specificity. Cinema greatly problematized the divide between spatial and temporal works, and in this series Watson as well allows the two indexes—space (place) and time—to likewise intermix.⁸ In part this stems from the fact that the artist based many paintings on snapshots captured from her car window while *en route* to her studio, the store, or to see family. Here the relationship between the author and her subject (the painter and the painting, as object or image), and the physical act of painting itself magnifies tensions not only between time and space but also between painted and digital images. Perhaps most perceptible is the notion that viewers are made aware that each image—while recording the present—embodies also all the moments that came before and will come after. In this sense, Watson's *Pandemic Paintings* are anything but purely spatial or two-dimensional works of art.

These broad thematic contexts—the urban landscape, home, and the passage of time—may, in the moment of this writing,

help establish context for the complexities addressed by Watson in *Safer at Home: Pandemic Paintings*. Yet these terms represent categories that are ultimately too closed off and incomplete. One quality Watson sought to capture in nearly every frame was the fleeting, constantly changing nature of the moment. Acceptance of the unknown is, after all, one of the primary lessons the pandemic seems to push onto each and every one.

Particularly moving and meaningful in this series is how Watson emphatically and empathetically elevates moments absurd, transformative, heart-rending and heart-breaking. While the stop-motion feel of the entire series stresses the figure/ground relationship, especially as it pertains to painting, the work seems to unfold like a graphic novel, slowly, frame by frame and page by page. These paintings are meant to be explored at an unhurried pace, a tempo that in fact runs counter to how most pandemic reports are typically digested—quickly and in one bite. As new headlines and remembrances of the pandemic continue to scroll one past the other on social media and news outlets, this body of work offers an opportunity to travel inward, however briefly, and recall unique experience of one's own. A rarity in cotemporary painting, the possibility of mutual experience, shared between artist and audience, feels especially significant during a time that congruencies with strangers remain uncommon. As lived memory and as memorial, *Safer at Home: Pandemic Paintings* creates an immersive, experiential (re)encounter with a year that upended, even as it uncovered, many intense facets and the inner- and outer-workings of community and daily life.

Trained as an art historian and curator, Indra K. Lācis, PhD, is Director of Exhibitions at Western Michigan University's Richmond Center for Visual Arts in Kalamazoo, MI.

Acknowledgments

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NOTES

¹ Esther Pearl Watson's illustrations have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Rolling Stone*, *Lucky Peach*, *Inc. Magazine*, and *Bust* (2004-2019), among others. Based on the lost diary of a sophomore girl that Esther found in a gas station outside Death Valley while on a cross country trip, her comic *Unlovable* is printed as three graphic novels with Fantagraphics Books; *Unlovable* was also animated as a short for the Cartoon Network. Most recently, in July of 2020, *The New York Times* featured a large comic spread by Watson which focused on her neighborhood during the pandemic. (See "An Artist Captures 4 Months of Sidewalk Chalk Drawings," as part of the *Times'* Diary Project, July 17, 2020. Accessible online, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/17/arts/esther-pearl-watson-diary-project.html>, accessed October 1, 2021.)

² See Paula Burleigh, "Square Roots, Paula Burleigh on Zoom and the modernist grid," *Artforum*, June 22, 2020, in which the author analyzes the unsuspecting ways in which the modernist grid and minimalism reverberated across pandemic culture. Accessible online, <https://www.artforum.com/slant/paula-burleigh-on-the-zoom-grid-83272>, accessed October 1, 2021.

³ Charles Baudelaire's essay, "The Painter of Modern Life" was written in 1860 and published in 1863 in installment form in the French daily newspaper *Le Figaro*. Though the text focused on illustrator Constantin Guys, its publication coincided with the infamous Salon des Refusés and Édouard Manet's public debut. My mention of the essay considers Baudelaire's suggestion that circumstance brings about originality in unexpected ways and also that observation, combined with detailed but quick sketching and then later memory, is key to accurate, effective illustration. See John Mayne's translated and edited version of Baudelaire's essay online via Columbia University, http://www.columbia.edu/itc/architecture/ockman/pdfs/dossier_4/Baudelaire.pdf, accessed October 1, 2021. For a primer on the Ashcan School, see H. Barbara Weinberg's essay on these realist painters in The MET's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ashc/hd_ashc.htm, accessed October 1, 2021.

⁴ See, for example, a review of Watson's work in Hyperallergic, Jennifer Remenchik, "A Painter Illustrates the Charm and Tragedy of the American Dream," July 8, 2018. Accessible online, <https://hyperallergic.com/450703/esther-pearl-watson-tire-universe-susanne-vielmetter/>, accessed October 1, 2021.

⁵ See Spencer Kornhaber's, "The Pandemic Has Made a Mockery of Minimalism," in which the author writes that while the virus "cannot be seen, the crisis it's created has, in a horrifying way, tidied the world." Kornhaber also notes that pattern and symmetry have emerged as marked aesthetic qualities of the pandemic. (*The Atlantic*, April 23, 2020.) Accessed online, <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2020/04/corona-virus-has-made-mockery-minimalism/610297/>, October 1, 2021.

⁶ While I am not claiming *Safer at Home: Pandemic Paintings* as "installation art" proper or *per se*, nor suggesting that this series is solely or exclusively focused on the concept of home as such, it may be worthwhile to compare at another time the political, mystical, and transitory notions of home as explored by a wide range of installation artists.

⁷ In an effort to make sense of the situation as it unfolded, Watson also incorporated into this body of work information from newspaper articles from across the country and internationally, cutting snippets and collaging these into numerous volumes.

⁸ The bibliography on this divide/merger of time and space and medium specificity in art and cinema is exhaustively long. Most recently, I take inspiration from comments by Bao, Weihong, Natalia Brizuela, Allan deSouza, Suzanne Guerlac, Sansan Kwan, Anneka Lenssen, Angela Marino, Jeffrey Skoller and Winnie Wong, "Reflections on Durational Art." *Representations*, no. 136 (2016), p. 132 – 172. Accessible online, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26420582>, accessed October 1, 2021.



HOW TO...

BE AN ARTIST DURING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

TRUST
your
ideas!

1. Stay positive & be confident!

2. Keep making. Feel stuck? Try a ^{NEW} = medium!

3. Take notes if the **SPARK!** to create
needs INSPIRATION!

4. Learn how to take
excellent
photos of your artwork



USE THE TIMER
TO ELIMINATE
HAND SHAKE



5. Learn how to build a website.

PRO TIP!

6. visit online exhibitions
www.wmurichmondcenter.online

Richmond Center FOR Visual Arts

GALLERY
INFORMATION

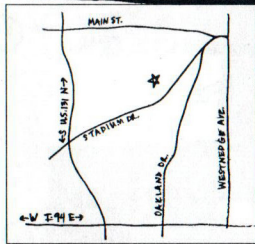
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Admission is free, always.
Face masks are required for all
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Richmond Center for Visual Arts,
regardless of vaccination status.

TUESDAYS - SATURDAYS
10:00 AM - 3:00 PM

WITH SPECIAL EVENING HOURS:
TUESDAYS + THURSDAYS
5:00 - 7:00 PM

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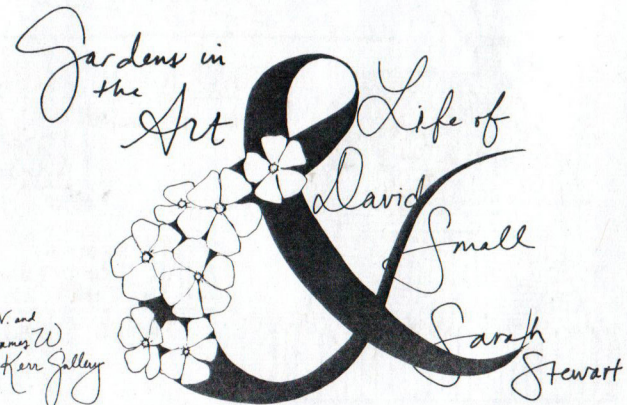
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While
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SEPTEMBER 23 -
NOVEMBER 14, 2021



Mimi Kato
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ABOUT THE ZINE

THANK YOU!

To:

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AND

Olivia Gauthier @

Vielmetter Los Angeles

AND many private lenders

AND

Katie Platte @ Kalamazoo Book Arts Center
for printing the cover

IT'S BEEN A PLEASURE
TO WORK WITH YOU!

The hard-working & dedicated
Richmond Center gallery crew:

Olivia Ford

Katie Mumby

Mickey Williamson

Many thanks!



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INDRA K. LACIS, PHD

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TANYA BAKIJA

#175/375

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