

LORE DEGENSTEIN GALLERY

SELINGROVE, PENNSYLVANIA

Susquehanna
UNIVERSITY

COMMON PLACE ATTACH MENTS

SUSQUEHANNA
UNIVERSITY

SEPTEMBER 4 -

OCTOBER 24, 2021

ARTISTIC PRACTICE
DURING THE COVID-19
PANDEMIC

EXHIBITION OPENING

SEPT. 4, 2011, 7:00PM,
LORE DEGENSTEIN GALLERY

Join us for a conversation with exhibiting artists:
Geandy Pavón and his collaborator Imara Lopez-Boada,
Brett Wallace and Scott Brodie.

GUIDED TOURS OF THE EXHIBITION

TUESDAY, SEPT. 14, 21, 28 AND OCTOBER 5 AT NOON
WEDNESDAY, SEPT. 29 AND OCTOBER 6 AT NOON

Join us for one or all of the 20-minute special tours
of the exhibition led by art history majors and
museum studies minors: Sara Bailey, Dorian
Hansen, Mary Moran, Jamie Saunders, Lauren
Waring, Kimberley C. Wilkinson.

EXHIBITING ARTIST SCOTT BRODIE IN ZOOM CONVERSATION WITH ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR ANN PIPER M.F.A

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 17, FROM 12:30–1:30PM

Event takes place during an Introduction to
Art History course. SU classes are welcome and
encouraged to join the conversation. For ZOOM
login information please email Dr. Galliera prior
to the event at galliera@susqu.edu.

EXHIBITING ARTIST GEANDY PAVÓN IN ZOOM CONVERSATION WITH ASSISTANT PROFESSOR IZABEL GALLIERA, PH.D.

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 21, FROM 2:30–4:00PM

Event takes place during a Women in Art course.
SU classes are welcome and encouraged to join
the conversation. For ZOOM login information
please email Dr. Galliera prior to the event at
galliera@susqu.edu.

EXHIBITING ARTIST BRETT WALLACE IN CONVERSATION WITH PROFESSOR JOHN BODINGER DE URIARTE, PH.D.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 21, FROM 10:00–11:30AM
LORE DEGENSTEIN GALLERY

Event takes place during a Socially Engaged
Art class. SU classes are welcome and encouraged
to join the conversation.

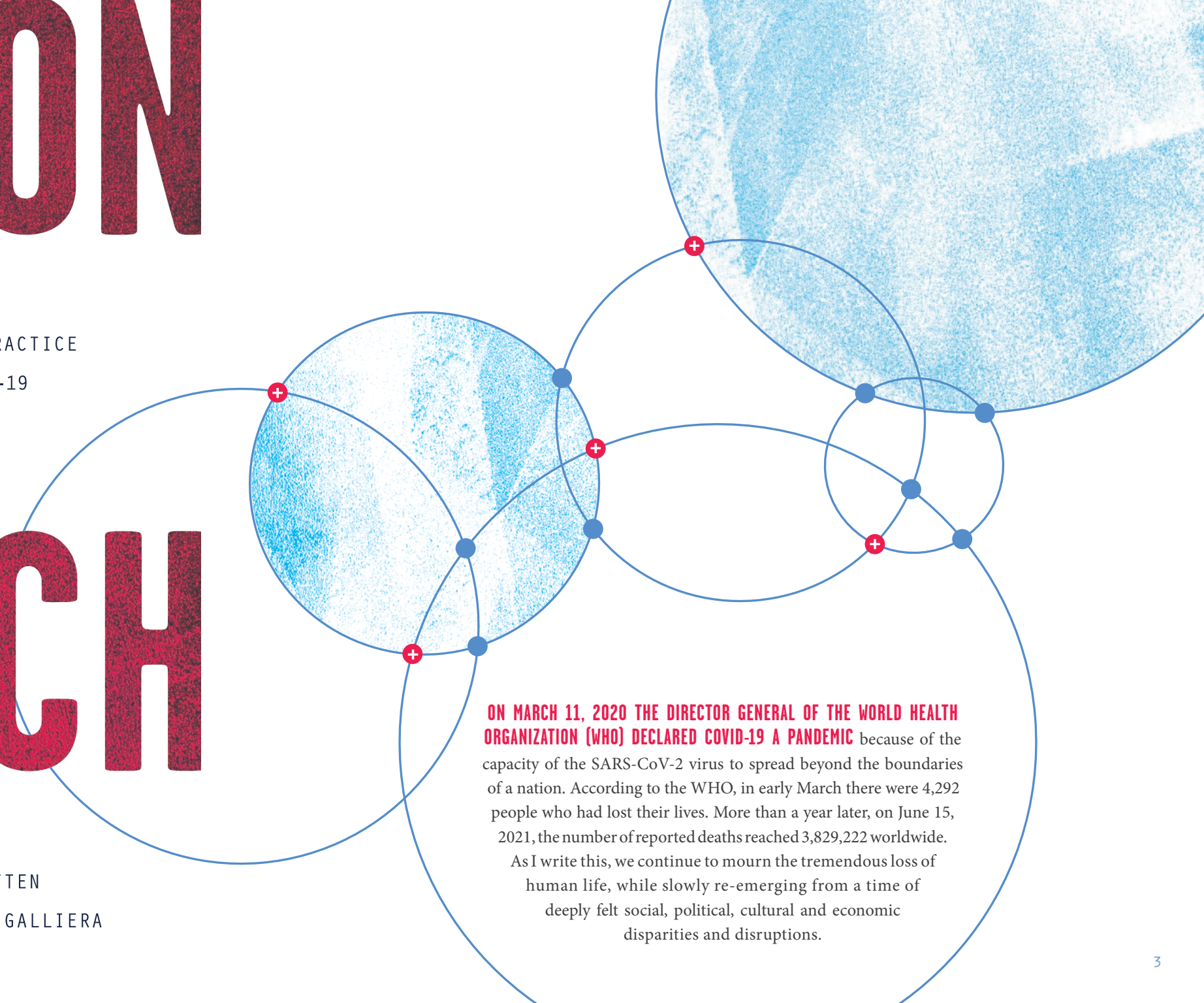
Brodie, *Bug Guard Plus, et al*, 2020.



COMMON PLACE ATTACH MENTS

ARTISTIC PRACTICE
DURING THE COVID-19
PANDEMIC

CURATED AND WRITTEN
BY IZABEL GALLIERA



ON MARCH 11, 2020 THE DIRECTOR GENERAL OF THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION (WHO) DECLARED COVID-19 A PANDEMIC because of the capacity of the SARS-CoV-2 virus to spread beyond the boundaries of a nation. According to the WHO, in early March there were 4,292 people who had lost their lives. More than a year later, on June 15, 2021, the number of reported deaths reached 3,829,222 worldwide.

As I write this, we continue to mourn the tremendous loss of human life, while slowly re-emerging from a time of deeply felt social, political, cultural and economic disparities and disruptions.

THE EXHIBITION

COMMONPLACE ATTACHMENTS: ARTISTIC PRACTICE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

brings together works of art created by artists living in America in the midst of the pandemic. They invite us to reflect on the complex, uneven and multilayered impact of the most extensive health crisis in the 21st century.

The paintings from Scott Brodie's series *Household*, *Beached in the Backyard*, *Waiting* and *Single Stream* evoke at once the serenity of safe environments and a sense of anxiety triggered by isolation and physical distancing, measures nationally mandated to safeguard the public against the virus. *Quarantine: 40 Days and 40 Nights*, a collaboration between photographer Geandy Pavón and his partner Imara Lopez-Boada, draws upon a shared bank of Western civilization canonical images, myths, and stories to reflect on our contemporary moment. It communicates the strength and resourcefulness needed to continue a creative process during the pandemic lockdown. Brett Wallace's ongoing multi-media work *American Labor in the Pandemic* documents specific labor events and strikes revealing the precarious conditions of numerous front-line workers in America as a result of capitalist exploitation profoundly exacerbated by the pandemic.

While different in form and concept, the works of these artists entail both direct and oblique messages in response to the conditions triggered by a pandemic experienced differently throughout the world. In the US, the COVID-19 virus has revealed the fault lines of a nation riddled with other profoundly ingrained and visible viruses that over centuries have nurtured systemic racism, political divisiveness, and socio-political injustices. Reflecting on the protest marches in May 2020, following the killing of George Floyd by police officer Derek Michel Chauvin, Dr. Ebony Hilton from the University of Virginia's hospital, said:

For Black men, one in every thousand is at risk of dying in his lifetime from an encounter with the police officer. If you think about that number, that's what leads Black people to say it's worth me dying and going out to this protest and saying enough is enough. Police brutality is almost like a pandemic, a generational pandemic. It's a feeling -I'm going to die anyway, so I might as well risk this virus that I can't see, to speak about the virus of systemic racism that I can see.¹

The Covid-19 pandemic is the latest in a long history of pandemics that include, for example, the Antonine Plague (from 165 to 180 AD) also known as the Plague of Galen because of the physician who treated patients. In 24AD, the Cyprian Plague was first reported and it was named after Saint Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage who observed and documented the signs, symptoms and progress of the plague as he himself suffered from it. Between 1346 and 1353 the Black Death, named after the black and painful swellings around the armpits and groin that would burst and release a pungent odor, decimated the population of Europe by sixty percent. In more recent history, the Spanish Flu killed an estimated one hundred million people between the spring of 1918 and the summer of 1919. Because of the similar method of contamination through air droplets and damage caused to the respiratory system, the Spanish Flu pandemic has been compared with the COVID-19 virus.² And yet, despite a century long of technological advancement, the same measures - mask wearing, social distancing, lockdown – have been in place to slow down the virus spread before a vaccine was discovered.

Moreover, similar societal responses have characterized both the 1918 and the Covid-19 pandemics in the US, further underscoring the deeply seated political divisiveness and the lack of a collaborative effort to fight a common enemy and overcome a collective trauma. For example,

during the 1918 pandemic, in San Francisco, a downtown attorney argued that the mask ordinance was “absolutely unconstitutional” because it was not legally enacted. There were drastic consequences for refusing to wear a mask, as indicated by the title of an article dated to October 28, 1918 from the *San Francisco Chronicle*: “Refuses to Don Influenza Mask; Shot by Officer.” We learn that a deputy health officer greatly wounded a horseshoer in front of a drug-store for refusing to wear a mask.³ Such events echo the anti-masks and anti-lockdown rallies driven by the predominantly politically conservative population and supported by former President Trump. The latter publicly declared in April 2020 that wearing a mask is voluntary: “I don't think I am going to be doing it.”⁴ Likewise, the title of the 2020 article by Luke Mogelson “Letter from Michigan. Nothing to Lose But Your Masks. Groups protesting lockdown measures see the pandemic as a pretext for tyranny – and as an opportunity for spreading rage” is quite descriptive.⁵ The detailed report informs the reader of the first major anti-lockdown demonstration in Michigan in early April 2020 and several other protests at the state capitol organized by the Michigan Freedom Fund and fueled by a belief in the protection of individual liberties at all costs.⁶ Fake news and conspiracy theories have fostered resistance towards safety protocols implemented on a national level and have discredited the authority of scientists. As American physician-scientist and immunologist Dr. Anthony Fauci said in a January 2021 interview: “I believe we have an anti-science trend, which leads to an anti-vaccine trend.”⁷ At the time of this writing, in June 2021, 43.9% of the total U.S. population is fully vaccinated.⁸ As we slowly begin to reemerge from an incredibly devastating year, we need to recognize the privilege that allowed many of us to shelter in safe homes and continue to have a steady income while many others have battled the pandemic on the frontlines.

Pavón, *Day 40*, 2020.



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GEANDY PAVÓN IN COLLABORATION WITH IMARA LOPEZ-BOADA: HISTORICIZING THE PRESENT

Previously displayed at the Art Museum of the Americas (Sept-Oct. 2020) and at the Coral Gables Museum (Dec. 2020-Jan. 21, 2021), *Quarantine: 40 Days and 40 Nights* created by Cuban-Americans Geandy Pavón and Imara Lopez -Boada is currently featured at Lore Degenstein Gallery at Susquehanna University. These artists present us with a photographic living document of the first 40 days of quarantine, which they experienced together in Imara's home in Buffalo, NY following Pavón's trip from northern New Jersey in early March, 2020. The title of the series alludes to biblical moments of seclusion and isolation, such as the 40 days that Jesus spent in the desert and the 40 days that the Hebrews spent in the wilderness. As Geandy said: "We wanted to do it while we were living it."⁹

The eclectic iconographical content of the photographs draws upon various classical Western myths, religious and historical stories, as well as contemporary moments specifically connected to the pandemic. Using commonplace items, such as flashlights, aluminum foil, and cardboard to create a home photo studio fitted with lightboxes, Geandy and Imara were at once the creators, protagonists, and spectators of the series. While he identified the key concepts and themes for the images, she was responsible for the costumes, settings, and actions that brought the ideas to life.¹⁰ As Geandy recalled: "It was a challenge to come up with both an idea for an image and the tools to create that image each day;

we worked together and we pulled through [...]"

The use of everyday objects and settings, the often tightly cropped compositions, the dark backgrounds and the use of chiaroscuro (the strong contrasts between light and dark) convey Geandy's fascination with the painterly techniques and dramatic effects of Baroque painters, particularly, Caravaggio and Velasquez. Trained as an academic painter and refusing any digital manipulation, Geandy seems to literally paint his photographs with light as they maintain an evocative pictorial quality. For instance, in *Day 39: People*, the use of stark contrasts between blacks, greys, and whites to depict the silhouettes on the wall behind the masked and dressed-in-black Imara is a sober reminder and record of human loss. The photographs created in quarantine invite the viewer not only to decipher their specific stories, but also to decode the ways in which their two creators subvert their original meaning by reconnecting them to their immediate reality. For example, on *Day 3: Perseus and Medusa*, the gender roles in the original story are reversed. Imara becomes Perseus and Geandy Medusa. The work portrays an allegory of the art of photography with its capacity to help us mediate and navigate moments of tragedy and horror.

Art historian Lynnette Bosch described the series as "a reflection on the contemporary world but in dialogue with a historical continuum."¹¹ Yet, in appropriating past images from different historical moments, the series also breaks the linearity of a historical continuum. In fictionalizing historical narratives while combining and blurring the boundaries between various artistic media such as photography, painting, performance and cinematography, *Quarantine: 40 Days and 40 Nights* is infused with a postmodern sensibility. It recalls the postmodern aesthetic of the large photographs of Jeff Wall and Cindy Sherman where a significant

part of the creative act unfolds in the process of reframing the borrowed images and items.¹²

On one hand, the images collectively form an epic journey through simultaneously occurring moments of fear, loss, grief, danger and violence. On the other hand, they inspire a sense of hope, renewal and love despite the terrible monsters lurking in every corner. For example, in *Day 17*, we encounter the protagonists enacting the story of Apollo and Daphne. In the classical story, the lust-driven Apollo pursues Daphne, whom preserves her chastity by metamor-

phosizing into a laurel tree. By contrast with the powerful presence of Apollo in the well-known classical representations such as Gian Lorenzo Bernini's marble sculpture *Apollo and Daphne* (1622-1625), the Apollo in this 21st century image is hidden and appears as a dark shadow behind Daphne who is confidently embarking on her self-transformation.

An ominous sense of fear, loss, and grief overcomes a number of the photographs. The skull is a recurrent visual motif. It prominently appears in *Day 12: Vanitas* and is also visible on the lower left-hand side of the composition *Day*



Pavón, *Day 13*, 2020.



Pavón, *Day 36*, 2020.

13: *Pieta* and again in *Day 36: Six Feet*. It is a clear reminder of the fragility of human life and the inevitability of death. As Geandy reflects: “Every aspect of this pandemic is telling us we are going to die, we are vulnerable, it is a reminder of our own mortality [...]”.¹³ As such, these images recall the traditional symbols of *vanitas* still-lives in which elements, such as skulls, candles, butterflies and dragon flies feature as *memento mori*, emblems of human ephemerality. In the 17th century Netherlands, vanistas motifs paradoxically demonstrated not only a concern for living a modest and moral

life according to Calvinist values, but also a celebration of the newly gained economic wealth of a growing middle class.¹⁴ Everyday riches during the 21st century pandemic includes safe shelter, one’s health, as well as the means and freedom to create art. The latter become modes of survival in a time when death is no longer a distant metaphor but an everyday reality.

It is this sense of imminent death that also connects *Quarantine: 40 Days and 40 Nights* to works of art created during historical moments of past plagues. Following the 1348 Black Death, Europe saw a cyclical series of epidemics

every two to twenty years. A significant number of works of art created in the 15th century functioned to secure protection by presenting prayers to plague saints, such as Saint Sebastian and Saint Roch, underscoring the human need to regain control over their environment.¹⁵ In 1630, during the outbreak of the plague that hit Northern Italy, century Baroque painter Guide Reni created his *Votive Processional Banner*, which offers a vivid image of his native city of Bologna. Onlookers behind the protective city walls watch sticklike human figures dressed in white carrying the sick on covered stretchers, while dead bodies are lying in a closed cart led by men in black. Though detailed, the city-

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scape appears as a small depiction on the bottom of the silk banner, which is dominated by the almost life size representations of Bologna’s patron saints.¹⁶

Likewise, *Quarantine: 40 Days and 40 Nights* presents not only gruesome images of death but depictions of protective saints as signs of salvation. In the series, Catholic saints, such as the Virgin Mary in *Day 13: Pieta* co-exist with Yoruba deities, such as Ochun associated with water, purity, fertility and love in *Day 29: Ochun*. Such references

to multiple sacred figures allude to the religious movement of Santería which originated in Cuba, and combines African and Roman Catholic elements. Imara explains: “The combination of Catholicism and African religions have always been part of my life and has played a role in my family for generations.”¹⁷ As such, the series conveys both the universality of hope for divine interventions in moments of crisis and the specificity of rituals associated with Cuban culture. The sound track accompanying the photographic series also references the Cuban context. Performed by Paquito D’Rivera *La Bella Cubana* (The Beautiful Cuba) is an enchanting clarinet melody that seems to radiate the visual complexity of the photographs.

Moreover, the love the protagonists share both as partners in life and as art collaborators communicates strength and hope. Such partnerships gain particular significance during lockdown and social isolation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, worldwide access to virtual platforms has provided vital forms for connection and communication. It is

not accidental that *Quarantine: 40 Days and 40 Nights* began with a photograph posted on Facebook, which resulted in numerous and various responses from viewers. As Geandy recalls in an interview with me, “our friends and viewers expected an image each day [...] on social media I had an exhibition opening every day.” As such the series is at once a collaboratively produced photographic experiment, a living document, a way to connect and communicate, a memorial to those lost, and a tribute to those who survived the pandemic.

SCOTT BRODIE: MEMORIALIZING THE MUNDANE

The forty oil-on-canvas and panel paintings by Scott Brodie displayed in the *Commonplace Attachments: Artistic Practice During the Covid-19 Pandemic* exhibition are part of different yet closely related bodies of work. *The Waiting*, *Households*, *Beached in the Backyard* and *Single Stream* were almost all created during the Covid-19 pandemic. Brodie experienced the lockdown and quarantine in his home in upstate New York. As a retired painting professor from The College of Saint-Rose College in Albany, Brodie was already used to the isolation and the self-discipline of solitary work in his home studio. He began the *Household* series a year before the onset of the pandemic and continued to create work within its framework through the first part of 2020.

The brightly colored bottles of various cleaning solutions depicted in Brodie's paintings gain a renewed significance during the pandemic. Even though the *Household* series was not triggered by the onset of the pandemic, the works nevertheless invoke images of empty store shelves as official guidelines issued by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the WHO urged the importance of disinfecting surfaces and using hand-sanitizers to help stop the spread of the virus. Media broadcasts of local distilleries heroically using their manufacturing capabilities to help with shortages co-existed with viral DIY YouTube videos showing meticulous and safe ways to clean surfaces and grocery items. Aiming to educate, they have also fueled mass anxiety and panic. The Covid-19 pandemic

has not only caused tremendous loss of human life, it has also taken an unprecedented toll on mental health. As revealed by articles published on the Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA) website, numerous studies indicate significant increases in the prevalence and severity of depression and anxiety, as well as increases in post-traumatic stress disorders and substance abuse.¹⁸

Despite being stripped of labels showcasing brands, the commonplace objects depicted in Brodie's still-lives are unmistakably various cleaning supply bottles and products. We recognize them by their shapes and colors. Mostly represented against a solid backdrop, their apparent diversity of elements is, in fact, the result of various configurations of a limited number of objects. For example, the spray grey bottle with an orange cap and orange label is repeated multiple times and appears, for example, in *Painting in the Time of the Plague*. *Rust Block*, partially hidden in *Painting in the time of the Plague*. *Softens*, and again in *Painting in the Time of Plague*. *Bug Guard Plus*, et al. The intentionally limited number of objects evoke the need of control as a way to keep anxiety at bay. As Brodie reflects: "This made choosing the still-life objects an exercise in low anxiety." The artist paints while standing. He utilizes a tall table upon which he sets up his still-life objects in the desired configuration. Instead of natural light, Brodie uses artificial light sources generated from clip-on lamps that he attaches to a rack made of plastic pipe.

The unidentified yet carefully arranged compositions at once elevate and negate these objects as commercial items. On one hand, the artist retains the objects' consumerist status through some of the titles, including *Avon*, et al. and *California Gold*, et al. On the other hand, the series foregrounds the craftsmanship and attentive labor of the painter. Brodie upholds their



Top: Brodie, *Avon*, et al., 2020.

Bottom: Brodie, *California Gold*, et al., 2020.

status as valuable objects by turning them into the main subject of experiments in color, light, form and composition. His meticulous creative process includes covering the canvas with a burnt sienna or burnt umber ground pigment

before wet-sketching the image with a brush. This attentive pictorial depiction of mundane things places Brodie's works in conversation with the modernist paintings of Giorgio Morandi, titled *Natura Morta* (Still Life) from the late 1930s and early 1940s. Brodie's rich impasto technique appears to activate even an olfactory dimension, seemingly turning these two-dimensional renderings into three-dimensional objects that we can almost touch and smell. Likewise, the household items in Brodie's paintings also recall the work of Andy Warhol, in particular the *Campbell's Soup Cans* (1962). The latter features 32 canvases, each depicting a soup can of different flavor. Like other American pop artists, Warhol created work by appropriating familiar images from popular culture as a way to challenge notions of originality and what it means to be an artist.¹⁹ By representing the same image of a can in each of the canvases, Warhol draws attention to the repetition of consumer products and advertising. Similarly, Brodie refers to consumerist products and culture, even if the artist's simplification of form and particular use of color obscures the object's labels.

The rather explicit refusal of material excess is likewise evident in Brodie's *The Waiting* and *Beached in the Backyard* series, which reflect another dimension of the historical moment of the Covid-19 quarantine. As the title suggests, *The Waiting* conveys a sense of transition and uncertainty about both the present and the future. On the one hand, commonplace objects, such as a coffee pot, a stack of cookbooks, a lawn mower, green chairs and bottles of wine evoke the privilege of a safe interior. On the other hand, however, the serenity of the various domestic objects appears to be a meditation of once vital items that have been left behind. They evoke a sense of loneliness, emptiness, and loss as traces of once lively human activities. Created and understood within the context of quarantine in a global pandemic, some of the objects also evoke a longing for exploration, as in the depiction of a yellow backpack, a red scooter helmet, a pair



Brodie, *The Waiting-Empty*, 2020.



Brodie, *The Waiting-Shelved*, 2020.

of black binoculars, and a pair of black shoes. Similarly, the two lone tree branches on a bed of green in *Beached in the Backyard – Summer 2020 No.6* appear as a still-life in nature echoing the stillness of the commonplace objects in an interior. Rather than elaborate compositions riddled with symbols of death Brodie's stand-alone objects convey an air of anxiety provoked by a foreboding feeling of uncertainty.

They gain an existential dimension within the context of a pandemic, becoming memorials to the unknown conditions of their users. At the same time, Brodie's choice for commonplace objects in his own home reveals an implicit yet reluctant joy of retreating into the solitary studio, leaving behind social engagements and immersing into a creative process during a deeply felt global crisis.

BRETT WALLACE: FIGHTING FOR A JUST AND INCLUSIVE ECONOMY

American Labor in the Pandemic is an ongoing body of work by New York-based artist Brett Wallace that began in early 2021. It is comprised of three different yet closely interconnected mixed-media installations that offer insight into the labor conditions of workers in Bessemer and Brookwood, Alabama and Hunts Point in the South Bronx, New York City during the Covid-19 pandemic. The work displayed at the Lore Degenstein Gallery is the latest in Wallace's long-term and site-informed investigations into the shifting labor conditions of various workers in America.

As an on-going rather than complete project, Wallace's work offers viewers a unique opportunity to enter the artist's creative process and research as it is unfolding. We encounter video footage of intimate moments of workers on picket lines, voicing their goals, sharing stories, communicating the joy of being together as a community, and revealing their exploitative labor conditions during the pandemic. Complementary photographs capturing specific moments in time and other commonplace items, such as produce boxes, protest signs, dirt and letters act as records and traces of particular actions in specific sites. In the installation of the Hunts Point Produce Market, the major distribution warehouse for fresh produce in the New York area, we hear from a few individuals out of approximately fifteen hundred unionized workers of Teamsters Local 202, most of whom are Black and Hispanic. In January

2021 they gathered to demand a \$1.00 raise, which was initially denied. Following a week-long protest their demands were met. In another mixed-media installation, we hear from a group of Amazon workers in Bessemer, Alabama who made historical efforts to establish the first union within the Amazon company. They continue to strive for this goal even though their unionization was voted down in April 2021. There were 1,798 votes against joining the Retail Wholesale and Department Store Union and 738 votes in favor of the union.²⁰ Using a two-screen video projection, Wallace offers a powerful visual contrast between the reality experienced



Sign at Hunts Point strike, The Bronx, New York City, 2021.

by the majority of Black workers and the rhetoric of Amazon representatives advertising the benefits and opportunities of their “hero” workers. In the images and video from Brookwood, Alabama we witness the dangerous working conditions of miners who descend 2,000 feet underground in the Warrior Met Coal Mine. In April 2021, over one thousand and one hundred miners, representing locals 2245, 2397, 23 68 and 2427 of the United Mine Workers of

The public recognition of “essential workers” provided the impetus for a number of workers to make their voices heard through strikes which revealed the intersectionality of various registers of capitalist violence.

America, began a strike against the unfair labor practices and the lack of a fair contract that provides adequate wages, a six-day week, safe working conditions, and paid sick days.

Wallace makes use of an “observational documentary” type of filmmaking, a term coined by documentary theorist Bill Nichols in his 2001 book *Introduction to Documentary*. Based on the various goals of documentary filmmakers, the different relationships between the filmmaker and their subjects, and various expectations from the audience, Nichols establishes six different types of documentary film.²¹ “Observational documentary” or direct cinema references a filmmaking approach in which one spends long periods of time on site in the midst of the communities in order to produce a living document of real stories by real people,

without any moralizing undertones or messages. In January 2021 Wallace joined the picket lines alongside the front-line workers on strike at Hunts Point Produce Market. The heartfelt and emotional story of Krys Tyborowski, a Local 202 member who started working at the market in 1994, is a testament to the passion and trust the worker felt to open up in front of the camera and share his experiences. Since March, Wallace spent two months living in Bessemer. He re-

turns frequently and builds relationships with workers and organizers, while documenting and participating in events. As Wallace said in a recent interview with me: “I am grateful for the way these folks welcomed me into their lives and homes.” While not an essential worker, the artist uses his own privilege as an outsider to further the workers’ cause by bringing

awareness to their struggles. Moreover, Wallace’s detailed blog on his website offers up-to-date information and footage of the sites he investigates, further underscoring the artist’s aims to reveal the hidden and precarious reality of working conditions in various localities.

Through its observational and community-immersive approach, *American Labor in the Pandemic* recalls the work of a number of artists, including Barbara Kopple, Allan Sekula, Martha Rosler, and Mierle Laderman Ukeles. For instance, in the 1976 film *Harlan County, U.S.A.*, Kopple captured the harsh reality of coal miners in Kentucky with a genuine sensibility. The film lacks a sensational or moralizing undertone usually associated with documentaries engaging with this subject matter. Similarly, Wallace aims to bring



Top: Hunts Point strike, The Bronx, New York City, 2021.

Bottom: Warrior Met Coal, Mine No.5, Brookwood, Alabama, 2021.

awareness to the exploitative labor conditions of workers in various sites across America. Despite capturing images of workers from different industries, the three separate installations are deeply interconnected through the concerns and

questions they raise regarding precarious forms of labor, the dignity of workers, safe working conditions, and the demand for adequate pay that includes paid sick days.

The strikes of the workers documented by Wallace implicitly opens up discussion on the significance of American unions within a global capitalist world. After World War II, when most workers labored together in large numbers on factory floors, labor unions ensured that their members maintained relatively permanent jobs, received fair wages, and were offered pensions upon retirement.²² In the 1990s, with increased global competition, deregulation of industries and outsourcing of jobs overseas, trade unions faced rapid declines in membership and new legal hurdles. According to digital economist Nick Srnicek, “platform capitalism” in the 21st century, has become the latest business model and source of wealth. It entails extracting, monopolizing, analyzing, and using large amounts of data through digital platforms based on pattern recognition algorithms and audio transcription services. Powerful technology companies, such as Google, Facebook, and Amazon incorporate such platforms to gather and process data with the aim of matching specific advertisers with potential consumers. For example, Amazon is the largest employer in the digital economy, employing over 230,000 workers and tens of thousands of seasonal workers, most of whom have low wages and highly stressful jobs in warehouses. Moreover, as stated by Srnicek, the company “has invested in vast data centers, robotic warehouse movers and massive computer systems [...]”²³ While services such as Amazon Prime are a not a profitable revenue source, the fast and inexpensive delivery service that requires thousands of workers working in warehouses is one of the many ways in which Amazon entices its users onto its platform in order to extract profitable data.²⁴

The Covid-19 pandemic made visible the invisible labor force of millions of workers across America, especially after the US President issued a coronavirus guidance in March

2020. It stated that “essential critical infrastructure workers” that support such industries as medical and healthcare, telecommunications, information technologies, systems defense, food and agriculture, transportation and logistics, energy, water and wastewater, and law enforcement have “a special responsibility to maintain a normal work schedule.”²⁵ Despite their essential worker status, many workers around the country have been deprived of adequate pay and safe labor conditions during the pandemic. As Francisco Flores, a Local 202 member and worker at the Hunts Point Produce Market, recalls: “We have been here since the pandemic started as the Market never closed. We had many members get sick and die from Covid-19.”

At the same time, the public recognition of “essential workers” provided the impetus for a number of workers to make their voices heard through strikes which revealed the intersectionality of various registers of capitalist violence. As an act, the strike exposes the invisibility of the workers’ labor conditions. As a process, the strike accumulates force from below, morphing into a collective platform for empowered workers. They contest an economic violence manifested, for instance, in inadequate pay. Shayne Olmstead, a third-generation miner from Brookwood, Alabama expressed in the UMWA Miners on Strike video footage: “They are only paying us for a seven and a half work day when we work an eight-hour day.” The strike also reveals the violence of exploitation exemplified by the unsafe labor and environmental conditions, both during and after the pandemic. For instance, Wallace documents the pollution of Texas Creek nearby the Warrior Met Coal Mine No.7, possibly caused by a leak of the mine’s chemical and waste water.²⁶ According to political scientist Veronica Gabo, the strike allows us not only to “understand the reconfiguration of contemporary capitalism – its specific modes of exploitation and value extraction” but also “the dynamics that resist, sabotage, and challenge it.”²⁷ The solidarity of workers affiliated with

unions represents a vital and powerful way to resist and challenge oppressive measures. As captured in Wallace’s footage, the unionized workers at Hunts Points in New York endured a cold week in January as a joyful community that was ultimately able to have its demands met. The coming together of various groups and political representatives in support of the workers’ union in the South Bronx, the way the Amazon drive in Bessemer ignited labor movements around the country, and the endurance of miners in Brookwood demanding a fair contract, could be an inspiration for workers across the country to join a union and continue their fight against capitalist exploitation.

IN CONCLUSION

While giant corporations, such as Facebook, Apple, Microsoft, Google, and Amazon thrived and greatly increased their profit over the course of the pandemic, workers have been forced in short-term and unsafe labor conditions. According to the poll, *The Impact of Coronavirus on Households, By Race/Ethnicity* conducted by NPR, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health conducted in July-August, 2020, Latino, Black, and Native American communities have been disproportionately impacted by Covid-19 with high rates in cases, hospitalization, and deaths. 72% of Latino households, 60% of Black households, and 55% of Native American households, report facing serious financial problems during the coronavirus outbreak by comparison with 37% Asian households and 36% White households.²⁸ Even if we all shared the same historical moment, social and racial groups in the US have weathered the pandemic in drastically different ways. It is against such a manifold background that the artists in *Commonplace Attachments: Artistic Practice During the Covid-19 Pandemic* reveal their shared yet distinct ways to connect, navigate and survive our collective yet separately experienced trauma. +

ENDNOTES

¹ Ebony Hilton quoted in Lawrence Write, “The Plague Year,” *The New Yorker*, January 4 and 11, 2021, 49

² David Anversa, *History of Pandemics* (2021)

³ Catharine Arnold, *Pandemic 1918: Eyewitness Accounts from the Greatest Medical Holocaust in Modern History* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2018), 167-8.

⁴ Donald Trump quoted in in Lawrence Write, “The Plague Year,” *The New Yorker*, January 4 and 11, 2021, 48

⁵ published in the August 24, 2020 issue of *The New Yorker* magazine,

⁶ Luke Mogelson, “Letter from Michigan: Nothing to Lose but your Masks. Groups protesting lockdown measures see the pandemic as a pretext for tyranny – and as an opportunity for spreading rage,” in *The New Yorker*, August 24, 2020, 40

⁷ Anthony Fauci quoted in Lawrence Write, “The Plague Year,” *The New Yorker*, January 4 and 11, 2021, 52

⁸ “How is The COVID-19 Vaccination Campaign Gong in Your State?,” accessed June 30, 2021 <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2021/01/28/960901166/how-is-the-covid-19-vaccination-campaign-going-in-your-state>.

⁹ Geandy Pavón in “Quarantine: 40 Days and 40 Nights” Virtual Panel discussion on October 19, 2020, Museum of the Arts of Americas, last modified June 10, 2021, <http://inartwetrustmuseum.org/40days40nights/videos.html>.

¹⁰ Lynette M.F. Bosch, “Introduction: Quarantine: 40 Days and 40 Nights,” accessed June 15, 2021, <http://inartwetrustmuseum.org/40days40nights/ex/1.html>.

¹¹ “Conversation between Genady Pavón and Lynette M.F. Bosch,” virtual panel discussion at the Coral Gables Museum, October 19, 2020, accessed June 18, 2021, <http://inartwetrustmuseum.org/40days40nights/videos.html>.

¹² Terry Smith, “The Postmodern Return to Figuration” in *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (London: Prentice Hall, 2011), 46.

¹³ Geandy Pavón in “Quarantine: 40 Days and 40 Nights” Virtual Panel discussion on October 19, 2020, Museum of the Arts of Americas, last modified June 10, 2021, <http://inartwetrustmuseum.org/40days40nights/videos.html>.

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¹⁵ Louise Marshall, “Manipulating the Sacred: Image and Plague in Renaissance Italy,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 47, no.3 (Autumn 1994): 485

¹⁶ Catherine R. Puglisi, “Guido Reni’s Pallione del Voto and the Plague of 1630,” *The Art Bulletin*, 77 (September 1995): 402-12.

¹⁷ Imara Lopez -Boada in “Quarantine: 40 Days and 40 Nights” Virtual Panel discussion on October 19, 2020, Museum of the Arts of Americas, last modified June 10, 2021, <http://inartwetrustmuseum.org/40days40nights/videos.html>.

¹⁸ Gordon J.G. Asmundson, PhD, R.D., “COVID Stress Syndrome: 5 Ways the pandemic is Affecting Mental Health,” Anxiety and Depression Association of America, November 13, 2020, last modified June 15, 2021, <https://adaa.org/learn-from-us/from-the-experts/blog-posts/consumer/covid-stress-syndrome-5-ways-pandemic-affecting>.

¹⁹ “Andy Warhol, *Campbell’s Soup Cans*,” Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), New York, accessed June 30, 2021, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79809>.

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²¹ Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001)

²² Nick Srnicek, “The Long Downturn” in *Platform Capitalism* (UK: Polity Press, 2017), 15

²³ Nick Srnicek, “Platform Capitalism” in *Platform Capitalism* (UK: Polity Press, 2017), 60-61

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²⁵ “Memorandum on Identification of Essential Critical Infrastructure Workers During Covid-19 Response,” U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, March 2020, last modified June 18, 2021, <https://www.cbia.com/resources/coronavirus/coronavirus-state-federal-updates/departments-homeland-security-essential-industries/>.

²⁶ Brett Wallace, “Labor and Economy,” May 7, 2021, last modified June 2021, <http://brettwallace.com/labor-economy/>.

²⁷ Veronica Gabo, “#WeStrike: Toward a Political theory of the Feminist Strike” in *Feminist International: How to Change Everything* (London and New York: Verso, 2020), 12

²⁸ National Public Radio (NPR), Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, “The Impact of Coronavirus on Households, By Race/Ethnicity,” September, 2020, last modified June 28, 2021, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1XoV6pqzvtg4E9YQeLRT-vHaWAIN-s830/view>.



GEANDY PAVÓN is a multi-disciplinary artist who explores the ills that plague global society. His observations into totalitarianism and displays of power are expressed through paint, photography and video. An example of the provocative work that brought his name to light is *Nemesis* (2010-2012) - a part of a body of work that entails guerrilla projections of photographs of renowned dissidents and political prisoners on the facades of their corresponding embassies and consulates. His work has gained praise and positive critical reviews from esteemed figures such as Holland Cotter, of *The New York Times*. Pavón's work has been featured in solo and group exhibitions such as *Caribbean: Crossroads of the World*, at The Studio Museum of Harlem and PAMM; *The X Files Bienal* at El Museo del Barrio; the Annenberg Space for Photography as part of *Pacific Time LA/LA*; and at the USF Contemporary Museum of Art in Tampa, Florida. His photo series *The Cuban-Americans* was recently added to the permanent collection of El Museo del Barrio.

IMARA LÓPEZ-BOADA was born in El Vedado, Havana, Cuba. Her artistic education was in Music, Dance and Theater. One of her grandfathers, was a violinist with and founding member of the Orquesta Sinfonía Nacional, in Cuba. Her mother was also a violinist for the Teatro García Lorca. Her sister, Lázara Martínez, also a violinist, played for the Camerata Romeu. López grew up in the milieu of Teatro García Lorca, observing and participating in its productions. In 2001, López left Cuba for the Dominican Republic and, in 2006, taking advantage of "Wet Foot/Dry Foot," she arrived in Puerto Rico, after two failed attempts to reach the island. From Puerto Rico, she made her way to Miami, to New York City and Buffalo. (Biography written by Lynette M.F. Bosch, Ph.D.)

Interview with Geandy Pavón and Imara Lopez-Boada

IZABEL GALLIERA (IG): *The Covid-19 pandemic has greatly impacted our planet. We have been mourning the tremendous loss of human life as we slowly recover from the uneven and deeply felt social, political, cultural and economic disruptions. To what extent has the Covid-19 pandemic influenced your practice? Could you talk about the early stages of your research and work currently on display at Lore Degenstein Gallery at Susquehanna University? What factors shaped your decision-making process about this project?*

GEANDY PAVÓN (GP): This series, I would say, transformed and reshaped completely the way I envision my work moving forward. I was trained as a painter since I was 8 or 10 years old. In the household that I was raised in, there was a painting studio that belonged to my uncle Felipe Zayas, a classically trained painter. He was my first teacher. Later, I received a more formal education at the local elementary fine art school in my native province of Las Tunas. In 1989 I was one of the few students to be accepted at the National School of Fine Arts in Havana. I graduated in 1994. I first learned photography in order to be able to document my work as a painter. Then, around 2010 I started to take some more artistic photographs. Around that time, I met one of Cuba's most relevant photographers, Juan Carlos Alóm. After seeing potential in my photographs, he encouraged me to start taking photography more seriously. I did just that.

I tried to escape the studio. I needed to go out, meet people, I needed to take my art outside and to create in the world. I did not want to close myself up in a studio to produce art. Most of my early work as a photographer are photographic essays and documentations of certain events.

I interviewed people, built relationships and people opened up to me. For example, in *The Cuban-Americans series*, I follow in the tradition of Robert Frank, whose seminal book, *The Americans*, unveiled a more nuanced and certainly less congratulatory view of American society. Cuban-Americans are trapped by stereotypes. My series *The Cuban-Americans* takes off from a concept put forth by Cuban-American writer Gustavo Pérez Firmat: “a hyphen that both binds and sets apart—nominally and culturally—the Cuban and North American identities. This in-between realm, almost a no man's land, creates a sort of atemporal existence and, hence, a strangeness, a complex, undefinable and anachronistic space, the key element in this series.”

During the winter of 2015, I traveled with my camera to La Cruz, a small Costa Rican town near the northern border with Nicaragua, where 6,000 Cuban migrants were stranded on their way to the United States. Suddenly and without notice, on November 15, 2015, the Nicaraguan government decided to close their borders to Cubans. Cubans who dare to leave their country through Central America usually sell everything they have to pay for their journey, which is often very long and dangerous. Many migrants fall victim to the coyotes who take their money and belongings, to the military, to the Colombian guerrilla, and to the drug cartels that physically abuse and extort them. Some cases of rape have been reported. Migrants face these dangers amid a scarcity of food and a lack of sanitary sleeping conditions. *Quo Vadis Cuba* is a series of photographs portraying what I believe to be the most important Cuban migration crisis since the massive Mariel boatlift in 1980.

For the *Vae Victis Vanitas* photographic series I documented the lives of former Cuban political prisoners currently residing in exile in the United States. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the revolutionary government of Cuba jailed over 35,000 political prisoners for their ties to the dictatorship, their involvement in the revolutionary army,

or for being outspoken civil activists critical of the government's leaders. Some of these individuals had engaged in violent armed conflict while others were peaceful resisters; as a result, they reflect a diverse ideological and social spectrum. Many of the imprisoned served sentences of more than 20 years. Upon their release, they were forced to leave their homeland, and most of them migrated to the United States where they continue to live in exile today.

The series *Quarantine: 40 Days and 40 Nights* brought me back to the intimacy of my studio as I was forced to go back to my studio. Living during a pandemic you have to isolate yourself from most of the world. It also forced me to use my skills as a painter to create my photographic work. *The Quarantine: 40 Days and 40 Nights* series has greatly influenced all the work that followed as I have continued to employ the same methodology. I now have all the tools. When I did the series, I had nothing. I had to create the tools in order to be able to create each of the images. From the technical point of view, I started using different qualities of light, such as yellow lights and white lights, as well as combinations of both. I was able to create dramatic effects on the subject and scene, which was something new to me. Following the *Quarantine* series, the quality of my work has changed both aesthetically and conceptually. Also, it was the first time that I entered in a collaborative process.

I used to be preoccupied with documenting people's real lives and facts. Now, I am interested in documenting the possibilities of lives, not so much the realities but the possibilities of those lives. Creating this series was like documenting a story that was about to happen. It's like going into an imaginary world and documenting that world. I felt like a photojournalist that entered the mind of a storyteller and took photographs of that world. We think of photography as a tool to record reality. What happens when you use photography to document something that is not real and that exists only in my imagination? This is the path that I have taken

after the series *Quarantine: 40 Days and 40 Nights*. I use art as an immortal tool to record the reality of my imagination. I'm currently working on a new series titled *Aural Images*, which is about the reconstruction of the Western pantheon of symbols and images. Our present time seems to be upset not only with the way history has been told, but also with history itself. I have the feeling that the iconoclastic gestures of our time do not plan to replace a symbol with another, a statue with another. This series is an attempt to fill those empty pedestals with new images.

IMARA LOPEZ-BOADA (ILB): Even though I have an unrelated job, I have always had a desire to express myself in an artistic way. Since I was a child, I have always wanted to act. Growing up, theater was a familiar place. I used to spend long hours accompanying my mother during her rehearsals at the Garcia Lorca Grand Theatre in Havana, Cuba. I was born and raised in an artistic environment. I come from a family with a long musical tradition. My grandfather was a founder of the Orchestra of Modern Music in Havana, my mother, as well as my sister are both violinists. *The Quarantine* series gave me the opportunity to do something I always wanted, that is, to incarnate many different characters and be part of many scenes and stories. I was also able to contribute my ideas regarding costumes, set, and the Mise-en-scène of each photograph.

IG: *Often, in gallery exhibitions we only encounter the final outcome of an artist's work. Only rarely do we get a glimpse into the making of the work. Could you speak about your working process? Are there any behind-the-scenes secrets you might want to share?*

GP: All the photographs in the *Quarantine* series are staged. Staging photographs was something rather new to me as a photographer. I used to stage my compositions only when I

was a painter but not as a photographer. In order to create my paintings, I would first stage the composition, then take a photograph that I would use as a model for my painting. For the *Quarantine* series I created a stage onto which my partner and collaborator, Imara and I would be the subjects. In fact, Imara was the main character of the series. Similar to staging a set in a theater play or a movie scene, I create and illuminate the set for my subjects using spotlights, for instance. So, this series incorporates photography, theater-like staging and performance. Since I traveled to Buffalo when the lockdown was declared, I remained there, at Imara's home. I had no studio and no tools. In order to create the images that you see here, I first had to make all the tools. It was a challenge not only to produce an image everyday but to also to create the tools to do it. We used all kinds of items, such as flashlights and cardboard lightboxes. It was a big challenge but we went through it and really enjoyed the process. We would wake up and prepare the stage for that day. Then we would take the photo and edit it. The process of editing the photograph was as simple as possible. We did not use photoshop. I had an old computer that I had to fix first before I could use to download the large size image files. After my dad mailed me the apple computer to Buffalo, editing the photos became a bit easier. Since we did not have powerful studio lights, the lights from the flashlights took a considerable amount of time for my camera to take the photograph as the speed on the camera was very slow. Imara had to stay still for long periods of time. In terms of post-production work; I have to say that I do not spend much time on the editing process. I like to take a photo and present it as is. None of the photographs in the *Quarantine* series are manipulated digitally, there are no tricks or filters.

We were isolated. I did not know when I would be able to exhibit my work. Museums and galleries were closed. I found in social media an opportunity to display my work. Each day, for 40 days, you could say that I had an exhibition

opening on social media. I published my photographs on the two Facebook pages I have. Lots of people started engaging with me. In creating my work, I have been inspired by the events happening around me. As I posted more and more photographs, people were beginning to suggest things and asking what I will be doing tomorrow. I rarely knew what I was going to do tomorrow. That is why everyday was a big challenge. After the 10th photo, the process started to get really hard. It was difficult to come up with an idea every single day. I soon realized that I have at my disposal a large bank of information filled with stories, myths and legends from Western civilization as well as Imara's world, her religion with roots in African beliefs. Once we realized this vast source of information the process became easier for us. As I published the photographs on my Facebook pages, people started sharing the images and they spread and became known. I was recently thinking about publishing a book featuring the *Quarantine* series. The book design would resemble Facebook and Instagram social media pages. I would like to include the comments under each photograph. Some comments are positive others not so much. For example, one magazine editor commented that it is not proper that I publicly exhibit my private life with my partner, condemning the series as an exercise in vanity. In fact, I think of this series as a vanitas, as these images are reminding us of death and immortality at the same time. It is fitting since we were experiencing a historically tragic time.

ILB: Even though the space and resources we had to work with were very limited, I think we managed to not be repetitive in producing this body of work. Every night we sat together and talked about the next day's photograph, its subject, story and its staging. Geandy would describe what he had in mind, and I would help him create the look, atmosphere, make-up and costumes that he envisioned.

I am reminded of a particular moment in our collaboration.

I was about to enact the character of Magdalene that required me to cry and show tears. Geandy disappeared for a moment and came back from the kitchen with half of an onion. He wanted to rub it in my eyes to make me cry. I got mad, I told him that I didn't need that to cry, I could do it without it and I did. Now we remember that moment and laugh.

IG: *What ideas and practitioners have inspired you in creating this work, both historical and contemporary?*

GP: I have always been interested in Baroque, because I think conceptualism is not an invention of the 20th century, but emerged in the 17th century with the Baroque artists. I think the Baroque period is a culmination of key ideas in art. Baroque works of art depict a perfect equilibrium between an idea and its form. For example, the Baroque period gave emblems or insignias another life. An emblem is a perfect combination of an idea and its formal qualities. My goal with the *Quarantine* series was to achieve that perfect equilibrium between an idea and its form. I wanted to create a body of work that was charged with a lot of concepts and meaning while people would also find it visually appealing.

A number of artists, both historical and contemporary, have greatly influenced and inspired me. I am fascinated, for example, with Spanish Baroque, in particular by the work of Velasquez. He was a painter who painted for other painters. Goya's work is also very powerful. The terrible and amazing things that Goya is capable of portraying for instance in his *The Disasters of War* (1810-1820) have always fascinated me. Also, Delacroix was another brave and fascinating painter. For example, in *A Young Tiger Playing with its Mother* (1830-31), he had the courage to paint a tiger in the most captivating way. My goal is to be able to create as powerful images as those of these great masters. The photographers that I admire the most, like Andres Serrano, Gregory Crewdson or Jeff Wall all have a painterly quality to their photographs.

I am also inspired by the cinematographic qualities of movies, such as those by director Lars von Trier and the videos of Bill Viola.

At the same time, I cannot forget who I am and where I come from. I feel like I come from another century as I was educated in another century. In the world we are living in now, the many things I used to take for granted I no longer do. The paradigms that were in place until the last century are not in place anymore. There have been significant events, such as 9/11 and the war on terror, and most recently the COVID-19 pandemic that have reshaped the way we used to see the world. Also, the critical questioning that was once culturally and socially accepted has begun to shift and change the soil we used to stand on. For example, when I was a child Christopher Columbus was a hero, nowadays he is a villain. The ethical values have changed. We are turning down idols, our pantheon is not as intact as it used to be. There are now empty pedestals. I am not sure whether we will be replacing the old idols with new ones.

In my art I reflect on that. I do not feel satisfied to portray a myth as it was told to me, I need to change it. I feel the necessity to accommodate those myths and legends to the myths we currently have. I think we still need idols as we cannot live without them. Every generation destroys idols and adds or replaces them with new ones. I want to contribute to the creation of those new idols that will be replacing the old ones.

ILB: I also brought to this series my spiritual and religious roots and experiences, which you see in some of the images that depict the Afro-Cuban saints from the Santería religion. I think that Geandy and I are an emblem of the Cuban cultural syncretism. He comes from a white catholic segment of the Cuban society. Even though I also come from a catholic background, for Cubans of color like my family, Catholicism was more of a veil to cover our real faith, the beliefs of our African ancestors. +



SCOTT BRODIE earned his MFA in Painting from Tufts University/School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA. “In five years, only one in ten of you will still be painting,” said Barnett (Barney) Rubenstein to his MFA students. Brodie’s greatest achievement: “45 years later, I’m still painting!” As a representational painter, he prefers the controlled and flexible subject matter of still-lives. Brodie’s work has been featured in several one person shows at venues such as Stavaridis Gallery, Boston, MA; Bess Cutler Gallery, SoHo, NY; and Bill Maynes Gallery, Chelsea, NY. He was also part of numerous group shows at venues including DC Moore Gallery, NY; Andrea Meislin Gallery, Chelsea, NY; Fishtank Gallery, Brooklyn, NY; The DeCordova Museum, Lincoln, MA; The Albright-Knox Museum, Buffalo, NY; Tang Museum, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY; San Diego State University Art Gallery; and the Scottsdale Center for the Arts, Scottsdale, AZ. Brodie’s work was also included in the Chicago International Art Exposition and Die Neue Internationals Kunstmess - Art Frankfurt, Germany. For thirty-four years, until he retired in 2018, he was a professor of drawing and painting and the College of Saint Rose in Albany, NY. Brodie never told his graduate students that “only one in ten would be painting in five years!”

Interview with Scott Brodie

IZABEL GALLIERA (IG): *The Covid-19 pandemic has greatly impacted our planet. We have been mourning the tremendous loss of human life as we slowly recover from the uneven and deeply felt social, political, cultural and economic disruptions. To what extent has the Covid-19 pandemic influenced your practice? Could you talk about the early stages of your research and work currently on display at Lore Degenstein Gallery at Susquehanna University? What factors shaped your decision-making process about this project?*

SCOTT BRODIE (SB): Prior to the pandemic, I was focused on ordinary household cleaning products that echoed the anonymous bottles and jugs found in paintings all the way back to the frescoes of Pompeii. Mundane subject matter can allow color, arrangement, form, space, light, the hand of the painter, and the physical quality of the medium to vie for center stage. With the arrival of Covid-19, cleaning products went from prosaic to precious overnight! Once they became emblematic of the disease, I switched to more personal but ordinary objects found in my home for *The Waiting* series.

The pandemic also meant staying home. Turns out that being free of public engagements and social responsibilities is my near perfect life. Only the worry of dying from the pestilence or dropping into a financial abyss kept me from feeling completely free. *The Waiting* series is a lament both on the pandemic and on the coming loss of personal freedom once the wait is finally over. Take the dress shoes and coffee urn for example. On one hand, they go sadly unused due to the pandemic, but on the other, I'm in no rush to put them back into service!

IG: *Often, in gallery exhibitions we only encounter the final outcome of an artist's work. Only rarely do we get a glimpse into the making of the work. Could you speak about your working process? Are there any behind-the-scenes secrets you might want to share?*

SB: My ideal restaurant menu would list just one appetizer, one main course, and one dessert, there would be no multiple pages with dozens of choices! Decision making—and its anxiety—even at a restaurant is a burden I'd like to shed. *The Households* series, using familiar mundane cleaning products, limited the menu to a few containers that I could swap out from one painting to the next. This made choosing the still-life objects an exercise in low anxiety.

I paint standing up (better for my aging back!), so I built a tall table to raise the still life near eye level. Looking across rather than down is a common practice that can give the still-life monumentality and weight. I am thinking here of Caravaggio's *Basket of Fruit*, 1599, Chardin's *The Ray*, 1728, or Zurburan's *Still Life with Lemons, Oranges and a Rose*, 1633.

Attached to the ceiling above the table is a rack made out of plastic pipe for clip-on lamps, and there are several standing studio lamps, too. I prefer to control artificial lamps rather than work from natural light. When using multiple still life objects, I move them around on the raised table like chess pieces until a “checkmate” moment when no further moves would improve the arrangement. Then, on a canvas colored with either a burnt sienna or burnt umber ground (a reddish dark brown), I quickly wet-sketch the image with a round brush.

Next comes the most lengthy part of the painting process, mixing the color. Before applying paint to the

canvas, I might mix more than a dozen colors. These are light, medium, and dark tones, with shifting temperatures, corresponding to shadows and the stages of light wrapping around objects. I use palette knives and brushes (mostly filbert bristle) to apply paint to the largest surfaces first (back wall, tabletop, etc). Then I work my way into the objects toward greater detail. I also use a kitchen dough cutter and palette knives to scrape off painted areas to make changes. Sometimes entire paintings need to be scraped down and started again, sometimes just isolated areas. Scraping is used at some point in almost all the work.

The same processes were applied to the later *The Waiting* series, except there was only a single object rather than a grouping. In fact, choosing the “right” single object for *The Waiting* from the gazillion things laying around my house, was more anxiety provoking than using the cache of cleaning agents in *Households*. Paradoxically, I was also faced with simply running out of personal things that I wanted to paint—double anxiety! At a certain point, I decided to find another set of objects that would still reflect staying at home. My partner and I often place “single stream” recyclable empties on the kitchen counter before tossing in the bin. Aha!—readymade stay-at-home still lifes. Limiting each painting to few days of single stream recyclables also meant fewer decisions!

IG: *What ideas and practitioners have inspired you in creating this work, both historical and contemporary?*

SB: Of course, I have been influenced by a number of artists, such as Giotto and Piero Fra Angelico and Tiepolo, Vermeer and Hals, Corot and Pissarro, Manet and Cezanne, Chardin and Mondrian, Guston and Porter, Morandi and Mitchell, the list is endless!

But, like many artists, my teacher in art school may have had an oversized impact. Barnett (Barney) Rubenstein, my

painting professor at the Boston Museum School, taught a deep feeling for painting, but also what it meant to be an artist—to sacrifice economic ambition and nice cars(!) for the contemplative life of making paintings.

He also taught painting as an ethical practice, that success is not measured by how great the painting, but how honest the artist. Fibbing to oneself, patronizing an audience, or pleasing the critics are roads to failure, while the “failure” of individual paintings are paths to more successful work. I hope I have applied Barney's teachings to my own work, and passed some of them on to my students over the years.

It is often difficult to see beyond the mythology of the great and famous. El Greco, who painted brilliant passages of turbulent skies and dynamic figures, also flatfootedly depicted bobble-headed infant Jesuses and melodramatic wet-eyed Madonnas. He is a flawed painter—and human—in the pantheon of the greats. He gave early modernists, like Cezanne, license to elevate the awkward. He also gives a working artist, me, permission to be imperfect. I am in awe of El Greco's irregularity.

Matt Chinian is a painter that can be found painting day and night through all kinds of weather in parking lots, back streets, and vacant fields in the Hudson Valley of New York. His paintings are made with a nonchalant brushwork in impasto and a limited color palette. And they are often astonishingly brilliant. Matt has an “I made it, here it is” confidence, while at the same time he has down to earth concerns about the accuracy of the drawing or color of the light. Recently, I have been thinking a lot about Matt's paintings while I work.

Age is also an influence. At 71, I am no longer so dogged by career ambitions. With an increasingly short future in which to work, my ambition is to make the strongest and most honest paintings I can. +



BRETT WALLACE is a New York-based artist and filmmaker exploring work, technology, and the greater economy. He is also the founder of AMAZING INDUSTRIES, a research engine that fosters discussions about work, and a core member of the Amazon Observatory, a virtual laboratory established and working in solidarity with the fightback against Amazon's growing power. He is best known for socially committed projects which explore the practices, spaces, and territories of labor in the 21st century. The lines of inquiry in his practice include how are new technologies, such as artificial intelligence, and new platforms reshaping work? How are the workers that keep society running treated, dignified, reskilled? What needs to change in the future of work to create a more just and equal society? Reviews of his work include *The New York Times*, *Brooklyn Rail*, *Art in America*, *ARTnews*, *Artnet*, *Artslant*, *Hyperallergic*, *Brooklyn Magazine*, and *BmoreArt*. Wallace's work has recently been screened and exhibited at the Socially Relevant Film Festival, The New School, NURTUREart, Our Networks, and Silas Von Morisse Gallery. He is an alumnus of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Harvard Business School, and he holds an MFA from the Maryland Institute College of Art.

Interview with Brett Wallace

IZABEL GALLIERA (IG): *The Covid-19 pandemic has greatly impacted our planet. We have been mourning the tremendous loss of human life as we slowly recover from the uneven and deeply felt social, political, cultural and economic disruptions. To what extent has the Covid-19 pandemic influenced your practice? Could you talk about the early stages of your research and work currently on display at Lore Degenstein Gallery at Susquehanna University? What factors shaped your decision-making process about this project?*

BRETT WALLACE (BW): The COVID-19 pandemic influenced my practice by pushing me deeper into the areas of labor and economy I was previously engaged in, especially on the plight of front-line workers, who were working behind the scenes throughout the pandemic.

I had just finished the film, *Truckers*, in early 2020, when the pandemic gripped New York City. To create this work, I engaged in many conversations with workers over fourteen months visiting truck lots in and around New York City and New Jersey. Throughout the pandemic, I often thought about how many of the truckers in that film kept delivering the goods we needed on their backs. I made rare trips outside my apartment to document and take photos of labor activities, such as postal workers delivering mail, Amazon workers dropping off packages, security guards patrolling empty buildings sites, and medical personnel transporting patients. In Spring 2020, I engaged in the social distanced protests on Staten Island where Amazon workers walked out due to the lack of protection they faced against the virus. I also engaged in and documented events, such as the Guggenheim Union Drive in the fall of 2020. I was able to do this journalistic work primarily because I am not an essen-

tial, frontline worker and had the privilege of working remotely.

By 2021, frontline workers had been working through the pandemic for nearly a year. In January 2021, a strike of 1,400 produce workers broke out in the Hunts Point Produce Market in the South Bronx, New York City. If you have ever eaten fresh produce in the New York area, it most likely came through Hunts Point. Workers were striking for an increase of \$1.60 – a dollar per hour wage increase and an additional 60 cents for healthcare costs. While contract negotiations over wages and benefits are typical, the last strike at the market was in January of 1986, 35 years ago. I joined the picket line talking to and standing with frontline workers, many of whom are from low-income communities of color. Some of these workers were from the South Bronx, where residents have lived through systemic oppression for decades. I learned from one worker that COVID-19 infected 400 of his co-workers, six of whom had died. Another worker told me he caught COVID-19 and brought it home to his whole family. After a week-long strike, workers ratified their contract in a victory.

In February 2021, the campaign ramped up to unionize 5,800 Amazon workers at a warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama. After I was vaccinated, I drove to Bessemer in early March and spent the next two months on the ground, documenting what I witnessed in the union drive. One of the lead union organizers mentioned to me that my previous work on Amazon co-signed me, which helped me build relationships with the local RWDSU (Retail, Warehouse, Department Store Union) organizers and Amazon workers. I was welcomed into the union hall and events by a core group of workers and organizers at the heart of the drive, for which I am grateful for. Bessemer is a small town in Alabama, one of the poorest states in the country. The town is a predominantly Black community, and a post-industrial city, once known for iron and steel production, where good-paying union jobs are scarce.

While the Amazon union votes were being counted, on April 1st, 1,100 UMW miners went on strike at Warrior Met Coal in Brookwood, Alabama. Brookwood was about 30 miles from where I was staying in Bessemer. I visited the picket line the first day of the strike and kept going back. As I write this, the miners are entering the fourth month of the strike. These miners were also deemed essential workers, like the workers at Amazon and Hunts Point Produce Market, and worked through the pandemic, many of them catching Covid-19 underground. They are fighting for a better union contract, including higher wages, more time off, better benefits, and other provisions, after pulling Warrior Met out of bankruptcy five years ago. Brookwood is a small town that would not exist without the mines. Many of the coal miners I have met and spoken to here are 2nd, 3rd, or 4th generation miners.

In each of these cases, essential workers, whether they are picking, packing, or distributing products or goods, or mining metallurgical coal are fighting for dignity and fairness. Each case raises questions about the future of work we want and for whom? Whether in a technologically advanced warehouse, such as Amazon, or in an undergraduate mine, the labor of these workers is extracted to create wealth for owners and investors while they try to get away with unfair labor practices and union-busting tactics.

IG: *Often, in gallery exhibitions we only encounter the final outcome of an artist's work. Only rarely do we get a glimpse into the making of the work. Could you speak about your working process? Are there any behind-the-scenes secrets you might want to share?*

BW: The ongoing research and work presented in the exhibition takes a community-based, boots-on-the-ground approach to documenting and amplifying the stories of workers fighting for dignity. The stories are centered around

three events that have taken place or are still unfolding in 2021 where I had the privileged to be present on the ground. The events include a strike of produce workers in the Bronx, New York, the Amazon union drive in Bessemer, Alabama, and a coal miner strike in Brookwood, Alabama. My intention is to bear witness to these historic events, amplify the stories of the workers who have lived them, and explore what these events reveal to us about the impact of the pandemic and economic crisis across frontline workers and their families.

I had no idea these particular events would occur in 2021, but at the same time, I am not surprised given how the pandemic exacerbated long-standing social inequalities such as the treatment of frontline workers and the systemic issues of unfair labor practices, racial inequality and economic injustice. In a way, given my prior work, I was mentally prepared to go and join in each of these events, but nothing could prepare me for what I have experienced on the ground. My artistic approach follows my documentarian, observation-based impulse. The footage I shot comes directly from workers and their families, organizers, and supporters at the heart of the union drives and contract fights. While living in Bessemer, Alabama, I would wake up and film every day, observing what was unfolding around me in the events with those involved. I interviewed workers and family members, as well as local officials and national politicians to contribute to the observational footage. These folks welcomed me into their lives and homes for which I am grateful. In the case of the Amazon drive and the strike at Warrior Met Coal, these events are still happening, so I still actively participate and document, frequently returning to Alabama. Most recently, I filmed a group of UMW miners visiting New York City to escalate their struggle and educate Warrior Met's investors. Also, recently, I documented the ongoing food pantry for families on strike that was created by the union's auxiliary made up of the wives and family members of UMW

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miners on strike. The video footage, photographs, and ephemera seen in this exhibition *Commonplace Attachments: Artistic Practice During the Covid-19 Pandemic* is really the visual manifestation of my ongoing research and documentation of this subject matter.

IG: *What ideas and practitioners have inspired you in creating this work, both historical and contemporary?*

BW: My work and artistic process is inspired by a number of artists, documentary filmmakers, and writers including Allan Sekula, Barbara Kopple, Robin D.G. Kelley, Frederick Wiseman, Martha Rosler, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Harun Farocki, and many others.

Barbara Kopple's work documenting the lives and struggles of Kentucky coal-miners in *Harlan County, U.S.A*

(1976), and workers at a Hormel meatpacking plant in Minnesota in *American Dream* (1992) has had an impact on my practice. I find her style of filmmaking fearless, intimate, and immersive.

Allan Sekula's epic work, *Fish Story* (1995), has had a large impact on my overall work, including my previous works, such as *Truckers* (2020). *Fish Story* is a film essay, and series of photographs and text documenting the impact of container shipping and globalization on the maritime economy and labor. Sekula's study of the maritime economy and the lived experience of the workers in it has fascinated me.

While I was in Alabama, I read Robin D.G. Kelley's book, *Hammer and Hoe* (1992). While I was living in Bessemer, this book provided me with a lot of historical context on Alabama's long and rich history of labor and organizing. +

CURATOR, IZABEL GALLIERA received her Ph.D. in art history from the University of Pittsburgh. She is Assistant Professor of Art History and is also one of the three faculty members overseeing the interdisciplinary Minor in Museum Studies at Susquehanna University. Her research interests are at the intersection of art, politics and social justice, contemporary art in a global context with a particular focus on activist art forms. In 2017 I.B. Taurus – now Bloomsbury Press – published her book *Socially Engaged Art After Socialism: Art and Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe*. Her research has been published in the *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, *ARTMargins*, an MIT *Journal*, *FIELD: A Journal of Socially Engaged Art Criticism*, and is forthcoming in the *Art Inquiries Journal*, in the *Routledge Companion to Art and Activism in the Twenty-First Century* and in *The Routledge Handbook of Co-creation and Collaboration Museums, Heritage and the Arts*. Often, in her upper-level art history classes, Dr. Galliera employs the innovative pedagogy Reacting to the Past (RTTP) where students are prepared to take the roles of historical figures in moments of historical tension.

GRAPHIC DESIGNER, AMANDA LENIG is an educator, creative director, designer, and illustrator. She earned her M.F.A. in Graphic Design from Marywood University and is currently Assistant Professor of Graphic Design and Chair of the Department of Art + Design. Her work has been awarded and published on a national and international level including *Graphic Design USA*, *Graphis*, *Creative Quarterly*, *American Graphic Design and Advertising (AGDA)*, *American Advertising Awards (AAF)* and the *Association of Illustrators London (AOI)*. Professionally, Lenig's focusses on Branding and Identity Development and personally, she enjoys exploring found object digital collage. Lenig teaches both lower and upper-level Graphic Design courses, including Visual Communications, Branding, Web Design, Package Design and Publication Design. Her classes focus on real-world design solutions, problem solving and design thinking skills that allow students to develop both the tangible and intangible skills they will need to be successful and happy professionals.