The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present, Lockdown*, an exhibition by artists Paula Chung, Nancy Raven, and Ted Rips, at Western Nevada College's Bristlecone Gallery from October 5 – December 22, 2021. CCAI extends its sincere appreciations to the artists, Western Nevada College, and to all those involved with the exhibition. In addition, CCAI thanks our commissioned writer, Chris Lanier, who provided the following essay.*

Coping with History

The works by the three artists in this show – Nancy Raven, Ted Rips, and Paula Chung – were made under historic conditions, both inspired and shaped by those conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic has now surpassed the 1918 flu as the deadliest the United States has seen. How these artists are coping, and what they are thinking and feeling, is part of the historical record. And it may be of interest – and even of assistance – to those unfortunates of the future when the next global pandemic rears its head. Living through history is often miserable business – embedded in the works are ways of making sense of a historic disaster, and strategies for enduring it.

NANCY RAVEN

Nancy, at 91, lives in a retirement community in Carson City. Even under normal conditions, a sense of isolation can be a factor there. She noted that some residents, probably brought there by their children, arrived with a spare psychological infrastructure – "They didn't bring a whole lot with them to keep their lives interesting." Boredom can be an issue, as well as depression – blunted by a lot of TV-watching.

Nancy, by contrast, brought her art and art supplies with her. It was scaled back from her previous home – pinched for space, and not wanting to burden her kids with inherited clutter, she pared down her accumulation of 45 filled sketchbooks to 6 or 7. She sent the rest to friends. The ones she kept ended up being a treasure when Nancy went into lockdown – a period where, as she said, "I holed myself up in my home, creating art. I find I get antsy if I don't have something creative going on in my life." She used the sketches as source material for dozens of prints she made in her 750 square foot cabin – a gift of imagery and memories from her younger self to her current self. Some of the images were almost 70 years in transit from then to now.

The earliest sketchbooks are from the 1950s, before she had children (after she became a mother, her children started showing up in her sketchbooks – you'll see images of them in this exhibition). The sketchbooks were small, the same size as the prints on the wall – she could drop them in her pocketbook and easily take them with her where she went, capturing moments on the fly. You'll find images of shore birds, musicians playing their instruments, studies of people and nature.

The other source of images are drawings that Pete Raven made – before they married and she took his name – as an act of long-distance courtship. Nancy met Pete in the early 50s at Long Beach

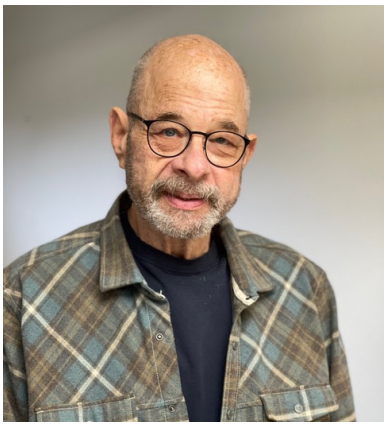
State College, both of them art students. They fell in love, and after graduation, Pete joined the Navy and was posted to Japan. As Nancy put it, "evidently he was smitten" – because during the year he was there, he wrote a letter to her every day – some of them brief, but always with a picture drawn on the envelope. She saved them all, some 300 or so. When Pete came back they were married for eleven years, before going their separate ways. This posthumous reproduction of his work is the first artistic collaboration between the two.

Nancy's technique for translating the drawings into prints is the following. First she uses tracing paper to make a tracing of the sketch. She transfers that to the printing block – each one four inches square, with a surface like linoleum. She cuts the design into the block, inks it with a single color, and usually prints on black paper. The black lines visible on the paper are the cuts made into the block, where the ink doesn't adhere. To add to the visual texture of the dominant print color, Nancy uses watercolor to add shades and highlights, so each print is also a hand-painted one-of-a-kind. The colors are new inventions for the images – the original sketches are line drawings, free of color.

The first thing that was apparent to me in the images was the easy charm of her line. There's a notational, sprightly quality to it – giving just enough information to define the form, while also leaving the form light and airy. The sense of pattern is also quite light and fine – the red dots that give dimension to the baby's shirt in "Jenny Sleeping," or the arrangement of birds in "Shorebirds #4." The latter was printed on white paper, and the economy of the thin black lines (this time applied with a brush) is wonderful – here the stroke lays down a beak, and there it lays down a leg, and there's no mistaking which is which. The drawings after Pete's envelope sketches are more angular, but they seem to have shared a similar graphic sensibility.

Nancy's prints were made to help her stay sane during the isolation of lockdown – they don't address the pandemic directly in their content. I do find some glancing reflections of it in the work, though. The first is the sense of travel that flows through them – beyond the images of Japan, these are images originally drawn in Mexico and Malta. One of the attractions these sketches held was the attraction of flight – as Nancy told me, "We all have this desire to get away – help people get away from this terrible year."

The other reflection is the easy, social innocence of the images. A couple hanging out together at a table over drinks – a girl in ballet class – two girls on the beach playing with a bubble hoop, heedless of social distancing… It's now evident how much we took for granted in those small social interactions that ultimately glue us together as communities – both prolonged and provisional. I have no idea how long it will be before I can look at an offhand photo of people in a café, laughing maskless over some shared and vanished joke, and not be stopped short.



TED RIPS

Like Nancy, Ted – a glass artist – began his body of work as a way of keeping himself occupied. In the early days of the lockdown, he got depressed. "I found myself sitting on the couch, flipping between channels, not really doing anything. Finally one day I said to myself, "I've gotta get up, I gotta do something." He went into his studio, and did the most basic thing one can do as a glass artist – he sat down and began to cut strips of colored glass. He had thin sheets from Bullseye Glass, a supplier in Oregon. He cut the strips a quarter inch wide, and a little more than two inches long. It was, as he put it, "a non-thinking thing."

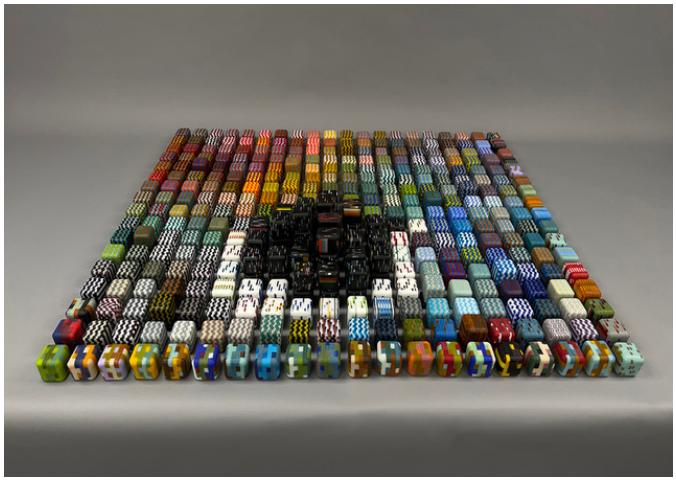
At this time, visualizations of the covid virus were appearing on the news – the mace-like ball, with its protein spike bristles – the structural key that opens the door to the victim cells. Ted thought to himself: "Maybe I can make a covid." To extend protein spikes in three dimensions in glass would have been a challenge – instead, he created a block with rounded corners, suggesting the spiked surface through two-dimensional pattern. His first "covid block" was made with a combination of red and grey strips, crossed on top of each other – the suggestion of the spikes emanates from the way the lines of color are crenellated against each other, like strips of battlements puzzled together.

Ted's method is to stack the glass strips in alternating sequences, building a cube from the bottom up. These stacks are dammed by kiln shelves on four sides, and fired at 1480 degrees in the kiln – at that temperature, without the dams, the glass would melt and flow out. Constrained by the dams, the glass settles into a solid block. After the block cools, Ted begins "cold working" it, using a diamond grinding wheel to smooth the surfaces and edges. After that, the blocks are sand-blasted, and his signature – a Braille lower-case "r," set into a rectangle – is sand-blasted into the surface as well.

It takes about a day's worth of effort to make one block, and Ted decided to make one to mark each day of lockdown. When he posted photos of his covid blocks on FaceBook, he got a positive response – when Bullseye Glass shared them, the response took off. He would go on to make over 400 of them – "It got me off the TV." He actually has a TV in his studio, and claims he watched the entirety of "Law & Order" while making the blocks – but it was essentially white noise, quite different from the fugue state of channel-flipping.

The cubes are solid, with a fair amount of heft – a perfect size to be enclosed in a hand. The smooth sides and edges, and their basic uniformity of size, belies the human variations or "imperfections" that affect their color and pattern. Most of the patterns are assembled in repeating layers or grids,

but the melting process softens the lines. They're not rigid, but a little wavy, organic. The brighter ones suggest candy-colored geologic strata.



Not wanting to repeat himself, he keeps a logbook of what he's made, so that he doesn't make the same block twice. He uses different combinations of colors, and at one level the covid blocks have become color studies, with Ted keeping the color field paintings of Josef Albers in mind. To mark the days when the US crossed the threshold of another 10,000 dead, Ted made black cubes. To acknowledge vaccination landmarks, he created white cubes, which he calls "antibody cubes." The crenelated patterns have given way to other patterns, strips of color that streak through the form like banded dashes of morse code – or even more irregular patches of color, like frozen blooms of lichen. He calls these deviations from the original pattern "mutations."

Mutations, of course, are functions of reproduction – the virus can't reproduce itself exactly each time, and in fact that lack of fidelity contributes to its propagation. Because it can't stand still, it projects itself into the future, creating new strategies of infection, and finding new hosts in which it can find purchase. There's a restlessness of form that finds a strange analogy in the restlessness of human imagination. Ted felt no desire (and perhaps had no capacity) to do the same thing again and again. The idea of mechanical sameness exerts a pressure that his mind feels compelled to push against – reproduction without invention would be mentally intolerable. Variation is a form of escape. And the visual variety of his covid blocks suggests that invention and infection are related forces.

PAULA CHUNG

Paula's work, like Ted's, is a chase after a running number. Paula is stitching circular swirls on long paper scrolls, one for every covid death in the US. There are eleven swirls per row (the paper is eleven inches wide, and the one-inch scale of each figure feels right to her), and the rolls keep going and going (they are 60 feet long, and she's currently on her forty-fifth scroll). On her sewing machine, she has to keep the scroll rolled up at either end so it will fit on the table, with a foot or two exposed under the needle. As she finishes a row, the scroll is rolled down –

she likens herself to a typewriter, except the motion goes back and forth. The spiral suggests the cycle of a life to her – every spiral is unique, as each life was unique – and the swirling allows her to keep in flow, and keep going. Though the threads of each spiral are cut off, you can feel the connection of one swirl to the next, as if there were a continuous, invisible thread running through them all – the thread of Paula's momentum.

She started this project in anger. Now, she says – "It's meditative. Except when it's not." Sometimes she falls asleep while she's sewing, and wakes up to a tear the needle has made in the paper. Maya Lin's Vietnam Veteran's Memorial derives part of its power from the sheer profusion of names, and the stolidity of the granite in which they're set. The nearly 58,000 names there are less than a tenth of the current pandemic death toll – and the Japanese Unryu rice paper Paula is using is somewhat translucent, delicate – and speaks, to me, of the fragility of the lives lost. She is 390,000 spirals in – and anticipates another 2 or 3 years of work ahead of her.

Paula's work is a way of asking what numbers, at that scale, mean. Over the course of the pandemic there have been ongoing attempts to erode the numbers. Some of this is political expediency – New York suppressing number of the dead in nursing homes, Florida fiddling with the timing of death reporting in the middle of the autumn Delta surge. Nationally, we dragged our feet on testing out of fears the numbers would make things "look bad," as if a pandemic were more a public relations problem than an epidemiological one.

More perplexingly, there are many people with no reputation to lose who still, in their free time typing online, try to chip away at the numbers. In August 2020, claims that only 6% of the people who had been counted as covid deaths had actually died of covid circulated widely through social media. It was a misinterpretation of a CDC report about comorbidities – when someone dies of covid, the attendant violence done to the body (respiratory failure, pneumonia, etc.) is also listed as a cause of death, as well as pre-conditions that increase the likelihood of severe illness. That doesn't erase covid as the precipitating factor.

As Dr. Marc Larsen – Incident Command Operations Chair for COVID-19 at St. Luke's Hospital in Kansas City – pointed out at the time, someone who was shot to death might have listed on his death certificate the gunshot wound, as well as hemorrhagic shock and liver laceration. Claiming that the victim really died of a lacerated liver, and not the precipitating gunshot, would be the height of absurdity.

I asked Paula why she thought people were making such strenuous efforts to minimize the death toll – she figured that, if the death toll was smaller, that means you have better odds. Everyone wants better odds.

In early September, I also asked how many of the spirals she is able to embroider in a day. The answer is a thousand. At that moment, that was roughly the number of people who were dying each day – of course they don't die like clockwork, evenly spaced out in sequence, but there was an eerie correspondence during that period where she was almost enacting the death toll as it happened. Now as I type this, a couple weeks later, the average daily death toll has exceeded two thousand – pushing past her ability to even keep pace.

What I'm most grateful for, concerning this work, is Paula's ability to create it against the grain of this cultural moment. There have been attempts to memorialize the covid death toll, in both political and artistic contexts, but I feel like the dominant American response is to forget it even as it's happening.

The writer and philosopher Walter Benjamin tried to make sense of his historic disaster though the lens of art. He wrote his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" during the Second World War, which he himself would fall victim to. The most famous passage was inspired by his long meditations on a monoprint by Paul Klee, which he had bought in Munich, and which he claimed was his most treasured possession. He wrote:

> *A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.*

Benjamin's figure may have been invoked enough, by now, to have become a little shopworn – but the image hasn't been far from my mind this past year and a half. I'm certain Benjamin's angel isn't a native of this country – if he were, his back would be turned the opposite direction, away from the disaster, oblivious to its scale and dimensions. It would be a cultivated, and not accidental, oblivion – crafted in hope that its lack of friction would aid in the speedy movement forward, forward, forward. And I can see Paula at his side, calmly and insistently tugging his sleeve.

Chris Lanier
September, 2021
Reno, Nevada

The Initiative is funded by the John and Grace Nauman Foundation, Nevada Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts, Nevada Humanities and the National Endowment for the Humanities, Kaplan Family Charitable Fund, U.S. Bank Foundation, Southwest Gas Corporation Foundation, Steele & Associates LLC, and CCAI sponsors and members.

The Governor's Office of Economic Development provided additional support through its Nevada Pandemic Emergency Technical Support Grant for 2021.


N. Raven '20