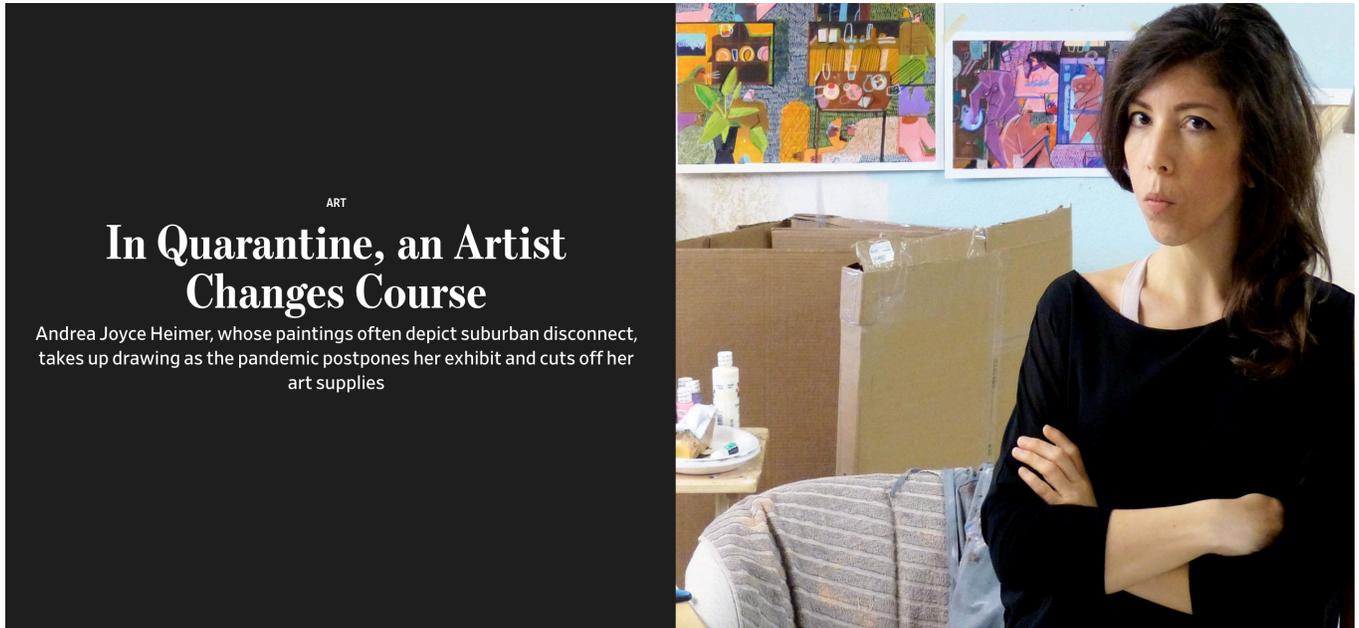


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ART

In Quarantine, an Artist Changes Course

Andrea Joyce Heimer, whose paintings often depict suburban disconnect, takes up drawing as the pandemic postpones her exhibit and cuts off her art supplies

By *Kelly Crow*

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Andrea Joyce Heimer, an artist and former horse trainer, paints folksy figures who live side by side, yet are isolated. [Ms. Heimer's suburban subjects](#) cook, sew, exercise and sleep in rooms that evoke cramped dollhouses, but their blank expressions convey an unsettling strain.

The coronavirus pandemic now has the artist living out that very scenario at her home and studio in Ferndale, Wash., a small city almost 100 miles north of Seattle.

Ms. Heimer spent the past year making paintings she shipped to New York in mid-March for a solo show that was to open last week at Half Gallery. The public-health crisis postponed the exhibit and left her sequestered at home with an empty studio and no easy way to restock her art supplies.

"I paint my disconnected feelings," she said, "so this is a subject matter I know well, but I still felt suddenly lost."

NINO MIER GALLERY

LOS ANGELES | COLOGNE

Ms. Heimer, who is 39 years old, is emblematic of an entire generation of artists caught up in quarantine. New York artist [George Condo](#) is making a series of crayon-pencil-and-ink portraits called “[Distanced Figures](#)”—with titles like “Together and Apart.” [Vaughn Spann](#), who lives in New Haven, Conn., had stepped away from his signature series rainbow paintings a few months ago but said he returned to them amid the lockdown because he’s been thinking more about society’s need for “continual optimism.”

Artists accustomed to collaborating with foundries or fabricators, or managing studios buzzing with assistants, must now cope with whatever materials they have at home. Many have turned to hand-made art to express their feelings about a world turned upside down. “For artists, it’s all about art therapy now,” said Half Gallery owner Bill Powers. “It’s the only terrain where they still have any control.”

It is unclear if, or how, the pandemic will affect the overall trajectory of art history, but it already is changing Ms. Heimer’s practice. Growing up in Great Falls, Mont., the artist said, she struggled with clinical depression made worse by the “strained relationship” she had with the family who adopted her. She did manage to bond with her grandmother, who kept a kiln and invited her to paint pottery. “Making things was almost the only time I got praised,” she said.



Ms. Heimer’s 2020 acrylic-on-panel work titled ‘Sundays Were For Dealing With Our Hair In The House.’

PHOTO: ANDREA JOYCE HEIMER

NINO MIER GALLERY

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Fifteen years ago, she moved to Washington from Montana. She went on to train horses for a living but turned to art around 2012 when her therapist encouraged her to paint her emotions. Instead, Ms. Heimer began painting panoramic memories from her small-town adolescence, such as slumber parties and pillow fights as well as crushes on boys and neighborhood disputes that disguised racial tensions. For some, her work is reminiscent of Grandma Moses's folk paintings or Thornton Wilder's play, "Our Town," but with an added layer of goth-girl sass.

In a 2015 painting that depicts people coupling in rows of cars under a sky curlicued by jet contrails, her lengthy title tells the tale: "Local Children Born in April Were Known as 'Blue Angels' Because It Was Very Likely They Were Conceived During the Annual Air Show That Featured the Fast Blue Jets that Dazzled Us All."



Ms. Heimer's 'Waiting 4,' an oil pastel on paper completed this year.

PHOTO: ANDREA JOYCE HEIMER

Her interiors often feature ornate wallpaper, she said, in part because painting patterns relaxes her. Over the years, her tiny characters have evolved from looking like lithe figures on Greek vases to chunkier, Lego-like villagers from the videogame "Minecraft." Ms. Heimer said she has been influenced by Pieter Bruegel's medieval peasant scenes as well as 19th-century drawings by Native Americans.

NINO MIER GALLERY

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“I’m drawn to people who make giant worlds in the smallest spaces,” she said.

One painting she shipped to New York for her now-postponed show depicts people lying in beds or brushing their teeth in a house surrounded by birds that appear to be making a racket. The title is “The Migrating Swans Always Woke Us Up At Dawn During The Month Of March And Made The Dogs Bark Too.” Recent works such as this one sell for up to \$20,000.

Half Gallery plans to mount Ms. Heimer’s show this summer. The gallery’s Mr. Powers said he has opened [an online viewing room](#) so people can see at least one of her works before the exhibit.

Now, she spends days with her cat Meatball for company, texting friends and pledging to make and trade artworks with fellow artists. Looking around her home studio, Ms. Heimer realized she had used all the wood panels on which she typically paints. Ordering more would have to wait, since the craftsman she uses is under quarantine in Seattle.

Before, she said, she never really sketched ahead of making her paintings. These days she is practicing with oil pastels and a sketchbook she had handy. Ms. Heimer said she tries to spend up to eight hours each day completing one drawing.

In sharp contrast with her signature style, the new drawings depict oversize people crammed into rooms too small for them, clustered together rather than living apart.

“Bodies have become more important to our conversations now,” Ms. Heimer said. “We’re constantly thinking about how clean our hands are and how close we are to others.” She is calling the new series “People Waiting.”