

Different boats, same storm: art as a unifier during times of crisis

Maiya Butcher

It is a Tuesday afternoon at the Hive Café in Concordia University's Hall building. The atmosphere is suffused with the murmuring of visitors, golden light spilling through the windows and the sweet scent of coffee brewing.

It is a pleasant scene from first glance, but what catches the eye almost immediately is the displayed collection of art pieces that adorn the blank walls like jewels. This is the art exhibition titled "HOME-MADE-STUDIO: A WINDOW INTO OUR CREATIVE SPACES THROUGH TIMES OF ISOLATION".

The exhibition was organized by Concordia's Art Hive in partnership with its Creative engAGE Living Lab and the Hive Café. Composed of multiple artists' work, from both Concordia students and the Living Lab's members, the collection is thematically tied by one prompt: create a piece that portrays your creative space of the last two years.



(One wall of the art exhibition "HOME-MADE-STUDIO: A WINDOW INTO OUR CREATIVE SPACES THROUGH TIMES OF ISOLATION" that is on display at the Hive Café until April 22nd / Maiya Butcher, Concordia News)

The idea was first conceived in mid-February. Monica Escobedo, Art Hive facilitator and an organizer of the exhibition, came across a painting on Facebook of a home art hive that inspired her to post it on the Hive's Facebook.

"I asked if people would care to portray their own space and share it, and they immediately rose to the challenge," Escobedo says over a Zoom interview.

The Hive Café soon after reached out to her colleague Rachel Chainey in want of art to showcase in their space. Chainey decided to revisit this idea of a "home-made studio" as the theme of the

exhibition, to make the transition between creative spaces at home to those that artists inhabited before the pandemic.

“Now that we’re ready to go back to the outside spaces, I think it’s important to acknowledge the spaces where we have created for the past two years. They held us and helped us survive,” Escobedo says affectionately.

Escobedo’s idea ties into a broader theme of artmaking during the pandemic. A study from the project *Art & Well-Being* reported that around 85 per cent of the population was consuming different types of art as a coping mechanism during the pandemic, with 69 per cent doing creative activities daily or two to three times a week.

Art in the virtual realm

The home-made studios exhibition is not the first time the Art Hive was uniting artists in these times of isolation. It began conducting Zoom art meetings during the pandemic for students and seniors from the Creative engAGE Living Lab.

Natali Ortiz, a graduate from Concordia in Art Therapy, has been facilitating these online gatherings for the past year. She had not met most of the participants until the exhibition.

“Most of the people who participated were also meeting each other for the first time, so it was really special to get the chance to meet people you had been seeing online for so long,” Ortiz says, seated in the cozy Art Hive office downtown.

“It was like an ‘Oh, you’re real!’ kind of moment,” she adds with a smile.

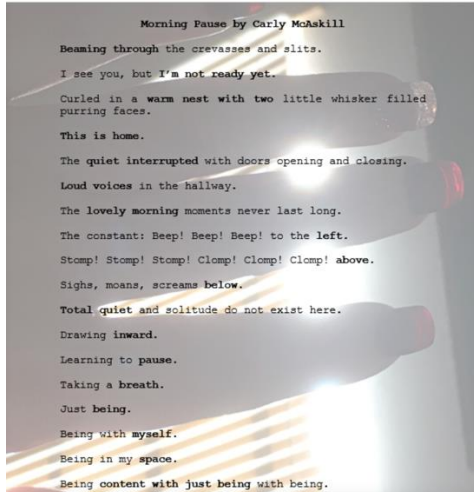
The Hive also allowed artists to submit their work digitally, providing a hybrid model for those not comfortable returning to in-person yet. Even now that the university has opened in-person again, Ortiz continues to facilitate the Hive online once a week. She says it is their way of honouring the transition the world is still experiencing.

Finding introspection

An article from Science Direct about art and psychotherapy showed that art was made for various reasons during the pandemic. The four main categories that were found were artmaking for self-regulation, artmaking as embodying mental states and emotional expression, art as enabling creativity, imagination, experimentation and play and artmaking as related to time.

For two student artists involved the exhibition, sharing their artwork and seeing others’ work was an opportunity for self-reflection, similar to the second category of this study.

Carly McAskill, PhD student in Communication Studies and research assistant with the Lab, submitted a poem written pre-COVID that epitomized the theme of the exhibition for her.



(McAskill's multi-media piece titled "Morning Pause" that introduces the online format of the exhibition / Carly McAskill)

She sees a creative space being more than just one with an easel and art materials.

"I think my creativity throughout the pandemic was embodied in these quiet moments, when you wake up and are present in that moment. I was also thinking about what other peoples' experiences were like, having to spend a lot more time in your space, and how to honour, witness and embrace that space," McAskill explains in an online interview.

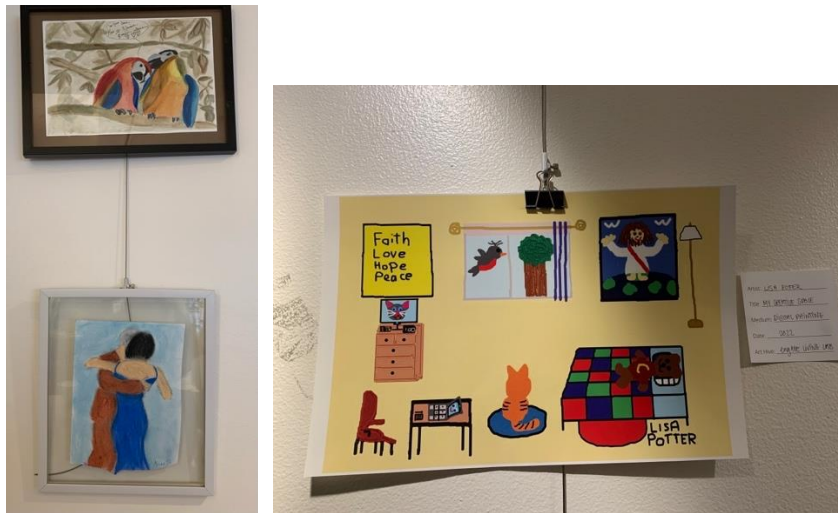
Moh Abdolreza is an interdisciplinary Concordia student and also a research assistant at the Lab, who became interested in the exhibition based on the idea of the home versus public space.



(Abdolreza's piece titled "Where is my body?", which focuses on the idea of absence and presence of body / Maiya Butcher, Concordia News)

"During the crisis, we were mostly working online and talking to each other's images, not bodies. We were also working in a way in which our bodies were not connected. I started seeing my body as a fragmented thing beside technology, and how technology could both enable and disempower me," Abdolreza says over Zoom.

Micheline Desmarteaux and Lisa Potter are members of Concordia's Creative engAGE Living Lab who also found a sense of grounding in being a part of the Hive's activities. They were interviewed together over a group Zoom meeting.



(Desmarteaux's pastel drawings that bring the theme of love (left), and Potter's digital painting titled "My Creative Space" (right) / Maiya Butcher, Concordia News)

"Art was the link between everything. It was very important to me during the pandemic because everything stopped at once, but the Hive came to us at home," Desmarteaux says.

"I feel really involved and bonded by sharing my art, and it puts a smile on people's faces," Potter says.

For Gertrud Antoine Barwick, another senior who became involved with the exhibition through a neighbour at the Lab, art is her outlet for emotions.

"In sadness and happiness, in normal life and in pandemic, art is a wonderful thing," she remarks over a phone call.



(Barwick's two mixed-media pieces titled "A Jungian Kaleidoscope", which explored the idea of the unconscious versus conscious mind / Maiya Butcher, Concordia News)

This pandemic is not the first time people have turned to art as a coping method in crisis.

An interview with Columbia University professors Franco Mormando and Thomas Worcester from *Columbia College Today* discusses the role of arts in the context of pandemics of old, such as the bubonic plague. The plague occurred frequently in 18th-century Europe, during which time artmaking was always present.

"In times of crisis, people like to see their experience mirrored through another medium [...] which is visually striking, which moves to the heart. Art in times of social disaster represents reality and helps people understand that reality," Mormando says in the article.

Times of crisis as opportunities for connection

For the artists and organizers of "Home-Made Studios", the gallery served as this means of mirroring their shared reality. It brought them together in a singular way.

"When we go through personal crisis, it feels like we're alone in it. This crisis was different; we were all hit differently depending where we were in the world, but we all went through the same thing. I hope everyone will share the art they made during this time," Monica Escobedo says.

"In this exhibition we have different people with different backgrounds, but they can still gather together and express their ideas through art," Moh Abdolreza observes. "I think one side of art is transforming our collective experience to our collective consciousness," he adds.

"Everybody intentionally put their art in this exhibition, wanted to come together and share in this theme [...] and I think that's the thread that links us all together," Carly McAskill says.

"Art doesn't have to be beautiful or realistic...it's more about the power of doing art together in a group context. In the online group, I didn't meet these people but I still felt that we created a community," Natali Ortiz shares.

"HOME-MADE-STUDIO: A WINDOW INTO OUR CREATIVE SPACES THROUGH TIMES OF ISOLATION" is open to visitors until April 22nd at the Hive Café in Concordia's Hall Building.