Throughout history artists have worked in isolation for a variety of reasons, both voluntary and not. In 2020, months spent in lockdown and quarantine due to COVID-19, have also seen the confrontation of the systemic racism and social injustice that plague our society. The artists of Facing Darkness confront these simultaneous crises, their selected works coming together in a collective effort to envision paths to move forward.

Artists have grappled with pandemics and illness for centuries, seeking refuge in art. In New Spain, for example, a group of Indigenous artists and writers worked together under the leadership of Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún (c. 1500–1590) on a twelve-volume manuscript documenting Nahua culture, today known as the Florentine Codex (c. 1575–77).\(^1\) The artists continued to work on the manuscript amidst a small-pox epidemic in 1576. Cloistered in isolation, they illustrated texts including those about the Spanish conquest for the twelfth and final book. In doing so, the collaborators created a historical testimony of the devastation of war and disease they experienced, but also their rich history, language, and culture. In Europe, ongoing outbreaks of plague beginning in the fourteenth century led to quarantined artists such as Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641) creating devotional paintings for patrons in the hopes that saints would intercede on their behalf.\(^2\) Just two examples out of many, such works demonstrate the ongoing impetus to create art, especially in times of crisis.

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2 See for example, Van Dyck’s *Saint Rosalie Interceding for the Plague-stricken of Palermo*, 1624, in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York [71.41], and *Saint Rosalia*, c. 1625, in the collection of the Museo del Prado, Madrid [P001494].
A striking feature of many of the works in Facing Darkness that represent human subjects is the lack of gatherings. Instead, works by Yrneh Gabon, Leo Garcia, Sheila Karbassian, Marcus Kuiland-Nazario, Lionel Popkin, and Daniela Schweitzer focus on sole figures, emphasizing the solitary nature of this particular moment in history. As exceptions, M Susan Broussard and Alexandra Dillon each unite single figures into an overarching composition. Broussard’s drawings of isolated individuals from art historical sources occupy a single sheet of paper, imagining a shared space. The central figure of Saturn references a mural by Francisco de Goya (1746–1828), now in the collection of the Prado, which itself was painted on the private walls of the artist’s residence outside of Madrid, a fitting reference in times of sheltering at home. Similarly, Dillon’s painted brush portraits bring together a disparate group, united by their identities as women and immigrants. The combination of portrait and paintbrush brings to mind a surrealist photomontage by German-born Grete Stern (1904–1999). In Stern’s Sueño No. 31: Made in England, Stern—an immigrant herself living in Buenos Aires—superimposes the head of her daughter, Silvia, onto the handle of a paintbrush with the manufacturer’s inscription, “Made in England” (also a reference to Silvia’s birthplace). Stern’s series of Sueños (Dreams), created for the popular women’s magazine Idilio, illustrate a feminist stance in response to the patriarchal authorities of Peronism.3 Broussard and Dillon invoke community through their works, whether a group of historical subjects or vulnerable yet resilient contemporaries, and provide a model for collectivity that is formed by Facing Darkness as a whole.

The art historical precedents for these so-called unprecedented times underscore the importance of art not only as a path to survival and rebirth, as this exhibition poses, but as a visual record of a turbulent period. To experience this exhibition remotely, from the confines of our own homes, the viewers of Facing Darkness enter the virtual space created by the artists, both extending the experience of isolation and engaging with the communal aspirations of the art. •

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Page 1

Page 2, from top to bottom


Rachel Chu, *Mother’s Hand .03*, 2020. Eucalyptus berries encased in epoxy resin. 6.5” x 3.5” x 3”. Courtesy of the artist.

Page 3, from top to bottom


Page 4, from top to bottom

