



Art

Los Angeles: A Year in Review in Art and Culture

These are the stories that left their mark on me during 2020, for better or worse.

by **Elisa Wouk Almino**

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Sheila Klein, "Vermonica," reinstalled in 2020 (photo by Ian Byers Gamber)

Hello, I'm Elisa Wouk Almino, a Hyperallergic senior editor based in Los Angeles. I'll be spending these last days of December 2020 listening to "[Chez Baldwin](#)" and [Erroll Garner](#). Let's make this the coziest holiday season yet — by not leaving the house.

For the past many years Hyperallergic has put together an annual list of the [best art exhibitions across Los Angeles](#). But as we all know, this wasn't your usual year. A top exhibitions list wouldn't make sense for a lot of reasons: For one, museums in the county have been shuttered for the past nine months. So, instead, I decided to take a moment to reflect on all the tireless coverage we've done, and not just of art shows.

Below is a version of 2020, told through some of Los Angeles's artists, art spaces, and art schools — how they responded at turns brilliantly and inadequately to moments of crisis and reckoning, from the coronavirus pandemic to the Black Lives Matter protests to the California wildfires. These are the stories that left their mark on 2020, for better or worse. These are the stories that illuminate the work that needs to be done in art communities, but also how creative and resilient this city's artists can be.

Let's begin.

Before jumping into the hell that was March, let's unearth some positive news that was announced way back in January. (Remember January? Me neither.) The new [Lucas Museum of Narrative Art acquired a whopping 37,000 items of Black film memorabilia](#) — one of the largest collections of its kind.



The Wiz (1978) (image courtesy the Lucas Museum of Narrative Art, from the Separate Cinema Archive)

But before we knew it, lockdown arrived, and just weeks into it, the **Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Los Angeles announced that it would be laying off all its part-time employees** — which made up half of the museum’s total staff. A week after that, the museum **furloughed most of its staff**. It was one of the first museums in the country to take such a drastic measure, but sadly, several followed suit in the months to come.

I know I’m not alone when I say that **artists were an inspiring force during the early months of the pandemic**. Two projects that stood out are:

Mary Beth Heffernan’s PPE Portrait Project

In the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak, Mary Beth Heffernan, an LA-based artist and Occidental College professor, brought back an ingenious project that she developed during the first Ebola outbreak. Working with healthcare workers around the country, she has helped them to print photos of their smiling faces, so that patients can see what their providers look like behind all the protective gear. Since we covered Heffernan’s project back in April, she is now supporting over 20 hospitals in the US and beyond.

The PPE Portrait Project is being used at the UMASS Memorial Medical Center. Above is Michaela Essam Agbesi, RN, MSN, ACNP-BC, UMASS Palliative Care, on April, 2020 (image courtesy UMASS Palliative Care).

Alan Nakagawa's "Social Distancing, Haiku and You"

For this project, developed in collaboration with the Orange County Museum of Art, Nakagawa put out an open call for anyone to send an audio recording of their quarantine-themed haikus. The results, **which are free to stream on SoundCloud**, are still poignant.

Alan Nakagawa, "Social Distancing Haiku" image (2020) (image courtesy the artist (c) Alan Nakagawa)

As for galleries, the situation was looking pretty dire in early May, with sales plummeting across the board. In Los Angeles, **a unique initiative took shape called Gallery Platform LA**, in which 80 or so galleries banded together to support one another. Since May, the website has hosted artworks for sale and featured articles and curator's projects. While galleries (unlike museums) were able to reopen over the summer and make up for some of the lost sales, Gallery Platform is carrying on. It's unclear whether it will be the staunch support system it set out to be, but it's still a testament to the sense of community and collaboration within LA's art scene.

Art schools, like any college or university, had to improvise this year. Luckily, artists are creative. Despite being unable to host in-person MFA thesis shows, **students at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) and Otis College of Art and Design showcased their work online.**

Tianyi Sun, "Unable to Sync Recent Audio [Ep 2]" (2020) (image courtesy the artist)

In June, in the wake of George Floyd's murder, **millions of people protested in the streets, including in Los Angeles.** The ways in which cultural institutions responded — or failed to respond — to these historic Black Lives Matter protests

were telling and mostly disappointing. **In an open letter, hundreds of current and former staff of the Getty accused the museum of racial insensitivity and bias.**

Alexis Hunley, hundreds of protesters gather in front of City Hall in downtown Los Angeles (May 30, 2020) (image courtesy the artist)

It wasn't the best year for museums.

Amidst of all this, the **Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) managed to move forward with its demolition project** to make way for a controversial expansion that is, in fact, shrinking gallery space. **LACMA also came under fire for having Tom Gores, the owner of a prison telecom company, on its board.** After rising pressure from activists and local artists, Gores resigned.

In July, **the Marciano Art Foundation settled a lawsuit** after it had abruptly closed in late 2019 and laid off all 70 of its visitor services associates, following their announcement to unionize. **A week after settling, it was reported that Gagolian would be taking over part of the Marciano's old building** (because that's what we really need: *another* Gagolian).

Over the summer, thanks to a grant bestowed by the Sam Francis Foundation, **Hyperallergic commissioned a series on Los Angeles artists and art**

movements. Rosa Boshier reflected on the legacy of Latinx punk; Caroline Liou tracked the evolution of Asian American cultural landmarks; Jennifer Remenchik wrote about art as a spiritual practice, particularly in 2020; and Matt Stromberg spotlighted the long history of art and activism in southern Los Angeles.

Each week since early May, artist Lauren Halsey and the Summaeverythang team have sourced, packed, and distributed hundreds of boxes of organic produce (photo courtesy SLH Studio).

As summer drew to a close, wildfires raged across California and photographers documented the devastation and hazy, red skies.

Jamil Hellu's bathroom, tinted red due to the effect of raging wildfires (photo by Jamil Hellu, used with permission)

As mentioned, museums still haven't opened in Los Angeles, but galleries have (by appointment), and **there have been some strong, soul-nourishing shows**. A couple of standouts are:

Patty Chang: Milk Debt at 18th Street Arts Center

Back in March, Patty Chang put out an open call for our fears, and as you can imagine, there were plenty. In this bold and honest video project (still up through January 2021), performers recite the submitted fears while pumping out breast milk, which Chang calls one of the most “empathetic” acts one can do.

Installation view at 18th Street Arts Center (photo by Patty Chang)

Amir H. Fallah: Remember My Child at Shulamit Nazarian

For this bright and imaginative solo show, Amir H. Fallah wondered what portraiture would look like without a portrait. Made for his five-year-old son, the portraits collect a father and son's shared memories of children's stories, movies, and more. In Caroline Liou's words, these personal portraits move away from "essentializing the subject to a single image" and ask, "How is identity formed?"

Amir H. Fallah, "I Got So High To Fall So Far" (2020), acrylic and collage on canvas, 72 x 72 inches

In October, the **She Loves Collective staged a series of memorable performances to raise awareness of the war in the Armenian-populated Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh (aka Artsakh)**. With black rifles printed on their white dresses, the women announced: "We Are the Rifles Our Ancestors Didn't Have." Los Angeles is home to one of the largest Armenian communities in the world.

Liana Grigoryan, "The Rifles" (2020) (image provided by Liana Grigoryan and the She Loves Collective and used with permission)

While I'm sure we're relieved the election is over, let's not forget all the effort that went into getting people to vote. **Artists pulled their weight to raise awareness around this election, including Constance Hockaday**, who invited 50 artists to each create a five-minute presidential address for *Artists-in-Presidents: Fireside Chats for 2020*, a project produced with UCLA's Center for the Art of Performance and Stanford Live. **You can still listen to these imaginative speeches** — written by Eileen Myles, Coco Fusco, Mel Chin, and many others — online.

Every year, stunning ofrendas appear around Los Angeles for Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead). Despite 2020, this year was no different: **beautiful memorials blossomed across neighborhoods, especially honoring those lost to COVID-19**.

The author found an altar while stopping off at Milpa Grille for a crispy pork belly breakfast burrito by gourmet taco popup, Macheen (photo by Lexis Olivier-Ray).

In a mostly dark year, **it was a beautiful thing to see Sheila Klein’s iconic lamppost artwork, “Vermonica,” shine in Los Angeles again.**

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