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How Artists Stayed Creative During the Lockdown

Edmund de Waal, Barthélémy Toguo, Mary Mattingly and Jeffrey Gibson discuss how the coronavirus has changed their work.



Barthélémy Toguo's 2016 installation 'Overcome the Virus!' was inspired by the battle against AIDS and Ebola.

PHOTO: FABRICE GIBERT

By Susan Delson

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When the U.K. went into quarantine on March 23, the artist Edmund de Waal had just opened "library of exile" at the British Museum—an installation featuring 2,000 books

Galerie Lelong & Co.

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by exiled writers from Ovid to the present, along with his own works in porcelain. Since then, Mr. de Waal has been able to work in his studio in south London, but the assistants who usually keep it humming were quarantined in their homes, and a slate of pending projects was put on hold. It was the first time in 25 years, he said, that he'd been completely alone in the studio.

Mr. de Waal found that a new body of work emerged from the lockdown experience, sparked by an immersion in poetry. “I was thinking about all the poets who lived entirely as hermits,” he said, especially Han Shan, a Chinese poet associated with the Tang dynasty (619-907). Han Shan’s Cold Mountain verses are “beautiful, beautiful poems about what it is to be alone—to let the experiences of life just wash over you and keep going.”



Edmund de Waal’s installation ‘library of exile’ opened at the British Museum in London shortly before the U.K. went into quarantine.

PHOTO: EDMUND DE WAAL. COURTESY THE ARTIST, GAGOSIAN AND PRIVATE LENDER PHOTO: HELENE BINET

Looking ahead, Mr. de Waal admitted that he is “slightly dreading” a return to daily life and is exploring ways to preserve his creative solitude. Studio assistants will “have to come and work at strange times of the day and night,” he said with a rueful laugh. “But

actually, the heart of this has to be done in silence. And that’s quite something to find.”

A number of artists have had similar experiences during their periods of Covid-induced hibernation. Like Mr. de Waal, the Cameroonian-French artist Barthélémy Toguo had full access to his studio during quarantine—but not the studio he expected. About to return to Paris when the pandemic struck, Mr. Toguo and his family ended up spending the spring in Bandjoun, the Cameroonian town that is home to Bandjoun Station, the art center and organic farm that he founded more than a decade ago. Mr. Toguo’s Bandjoun studio is large and well-equipped for photography, printmaking and ceramics as well as painting. “The ideas are limitless with a space like this,” he said via email. “I cannot have that in Paris. I am on another planet here.”

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Responding to the pandemic, Mr. Toguo embarked on a large-scale painting that takes the coronavirus as its theme.

“Germinations

After Covid 19” is his second project to focus on deadly viruses; his 2016 installation “Overcome the Virus!”, created as a tribute to scientists battling AIDS and Ebola, features 18 oversize porcelain vases embellished with depictions of the viruses and other motifs.

Mr. Toguo sees his quarantine-imposed studio time as an opportunity to focus on the new painting “with more precision.” At the same time, “I can be more expansive in this situation and push things further,” he said. “It changes the visual and formal result of the work.” Next week, Mr. Toguo will finally return to Paris to prepare for his solo exhibition at the Quai Branly Museum, now scheduled for early 2021.

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Mary Mattingly (right) at work on 'Swale,' a 2016 project in which she created a garden with edible plants on a floating barge.

PHOTO: CLAUDIO PAPAPIETRO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Brooklyn-based artist Mary Mattingly is best known for large-scale public projects that tackle big issues, like “Swale” (2016), an industrial barge that she turned into a “floating food forest” filled with edible plants for harvesting by visitors, which addresses food insecurity and sustainability. But in the first weeks of lockdown, health issues pushed her art in another direction.

Although the building housing her studio remained open, Ms. Mattingly was reluctant to risk exposure to the coronavirus because she has an autoimmune condition and was preparing for abdominal surgery. “‘Paranoid’ might be the best word,” she said wryly. “I probably didn’t leave the house for two weeks.” Instead, she set up a provisional studio in her apartment and pursued another project: wearable sculptures that double as survival suits.

“I thought, ‘This is how I’m going to feel like I can survive in a dangerous scenario,’” she said. “I felt better when I sewed the first sculpture.” Weeks later, with the surgery safely behind her, she again turned to her more public projects. Perhaps the most ambitious is the “Ecotopian Library,” an expansive archive of “books, soil, plants and objects, from fossils to touchable artwork,” as Ms. Mattingly put it. She envisions the project as a resource for pondering questions of sustainability, ecology and climate change from different perspectives, including art and geology. As pandemic restrictions loosen, Ms. Mattingly expects to resume developing the project in small workshops and exhibitions around the country, before eventually bringing the full library to New York. Meanwhile, she mused, perhaps the lockdown has “given us time to let ourselves imagine” the future on a broader scale.

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Jeffrey Gibson, 'Trouble Don't Last Always' (2019).

PHOTO: COURTESY OF ADAM REICH

Time in lockdown presented different opportunities for Jeffrey Gibson, whose exhibition “When Fire Is Applied to a Stone It Cracks” is scheduled to run through January 10 at the Brooklyn Museum. That museum is closed indefinitely, but upcoming shows have kept his team of 12 assistants working, at reduced capacity, both in their homes and at his studio, a spacious former schoolhouse in upstate New York.

During the first month in lockdown Mr. Gibson deliberately made no creative decisions. “I wanted to feel, and allow myself to feel, whatever was coming up,” he said. He spent more time “with my kids, with my husband, taking care of us as a family,” and following the pandemic’s progression among Native American communities. “My tribe, the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, is being hit pretty hard right now,” he said.

Indigenous textile arts are a foundation of Mr. Gibson’s work, and he has long collected old quilts. Moved by their imperfections—irregular hand-stitching, stained and faded parts, and a sense of “the mended whole”—he is working on a series of quilt-inspired paintings.

More recently, he has been experimenting with incorporating objects into works on paper and making life-size figures. So far only the figures’ armatures have been constructed, but he plans to cover them with “things that have some sort of history, some sort of life to them,” he said. “I’m looking at my clothes, my kids’ clothes.” As with so much of life in lockdown, “everything has become material that could potentially go into these.”