



## COVID CHRONICLES, A SOCIAL PRACTICE

Ellen Shattuck Pierce

Linoleum is a sketchbook for me, a meditative place. Making a linocut allows me to slowly carve lines that are very certain in this uncertain time. Since March 16th, 2020 I have created imagery related to the pandemic, resulting in the *Covid Chronicles*, a series of sixteen relief carvings. The carvings, each 18 by 24 inches, chronicle my experience of the pandemic in Boston, Massachusetts and its wider impact in the United States. Making the *Covid Chronicles* pushed my printmaking to be a social practice and source of healing.

As a mother and a public school art teacher, I have had a window through which to view the pandemic's effect on families' lives. With the pivot to online teaching, I zoomed into two hundred and thirty homes to teach art to kindergarteners through fifth graders. Making the linocuts gave me some sense of agency. By recording the pain, anxiety and grief I witnessed, I aimed to escape despair and make sense of the chaos. Nearing what we are starting to hope will be the end of the pandemic, the series serves as a remembrance and a validation of our shared experience, along with a cautionary tale of what we hope not to repeat when the United States faces its next pandemic.

Recounting a narrative during periods of intense social upheaval has long been a tradition in printmaking. Francisco Goya's *The Disasters of War* and Kathe Kollwitz's *War* are both harsh indictments of war as told through a cycle of gut-wrenching images. Unlike her male peers,

Kollwitz chose not to include scenes of combat or material ruination, but took the perspective of home and the war's devastating effect on mothers and children. Her unique vision sustains me in my own efforts to recount the effects of the pandemic on the home front and in our schools.

Composing images for *Covid Chronicles*, especially in the first year, was in part responding to the overwhelming challenge of processing so much horrific news in so little time. Each of these prints holds a lot of information, packed close. The compositions are visual expressions of what I woke up to every day. In disbelief I would look at the news and say to myself, "All this is happening, all at the same time and all of it true."

My first print refers to a time that seems hard to remember now. We were all set for a two week disruptive adventure, sent home from work and school. My pre-pandemic self would never have believed that I am now carving images seventeen and eighteen, in hopes of ending a three year project. When I began, I only had two formal considerations: the size of the blocks and the color of the ink. I felt reacting to events in real time demanded new amounts of space and effort not required of me ever before, so I chose to work with large blocks. I also felt black and white would match the mood and keep attention focused on the imagery. It was not a time to linger in a cooperative print studio, printing multiple blocks of color. I could proof my blocks using only black ink. Occupying shared spaces could be a death sentence. Limited time and space in the studio still prevent me from doing editions.

From news bits and screenshots of data, I print, cut and arrange, together with my sketches, a large collage. I keep



moving the pieces and drawing until the collage coalesces, at which point I make the final drawing on tracing paper, which I transfer to a block to carve. Preparing imagery for the fifteenth print, I wept as I felt a curtain being pulled back and watched my mind make a parallel to a childhood experience. What played before my eyes were all the belongings my mother had given me from my sister, who died at four years of age and whom I never met. What lay on my studio table were newspaper headlines, sketches, photographs and tracings. I felt I'd been tracking and collecting items of grief my whole life, trying to organize them in an effort to understand and become a part of my family's grief or the nation's grief. It was as if rearranging the contents would lead me to striking the correct composition, unlocking a key and releasing me. And it does in some way. I feel deeply satisfied when I have sorted through all the chaotic news and taped it all together to hold. I feel I have gained some knowledge or at least agency over the things I cannot know. I wondered if this process, of making meaning through images, could help others.

I had begun to envision *Covid Chronicles* like the *Bayeux Tapestry*. While the cycle of prints reaches only 32 feet (not 224), the idea of a continuous narrative appealed to me and I imagined installing the prints as a record of time and events. Covid posed problems for in-person exhibits, but I could share the work on social media, and the response from viewers connecting with the prints was gratifying. I love the democracy of print as it is replicable and relatively low cost so many people can have access. I wanted people to have my prints if it brought us closer, but they were too large and too many to share easily. Thus

I printed mini-prints and sent them to anyone who asked with the request they answer a question related to the print on the postcard. The graphic nature of print and its ability to capture exacting detail made the *Covid Chronicles* read like tarot cards. Viewers responded to my written prompt and had visual reminders of the pandemic with which to make meaning. The conversations that transpired helped me metabolize the pandemic. I received responses capturing moments of resilience, mutual aid, beauty, humor and pain. I plan on printing a *Covid Chronicle Workbook* of the prints, writing prompts and space to respond so people can tell their own Covid story.

History is messy, unpredictable and uncertain when experienced firsthand. The pandemic may seem like a jumble in our minds or so painful we just want to forget. The *Covid Chronicles Workbook* is a means of building a narrative around a traumatic experience that we can absorb. When sifting through my sister's things, I found I could not control her absence in my life but I could choose a response; I put her possessions together in my mind to make her real to me. Participating in memory-making is an act of resistance; it helps us gain some agency over our grief.

I hope the *Covid Chronicles Workbook* provides images, space and time for considering the pandemic and our response so that it helps us develop clear narratives and deep knowledge. The next generation will ask us what it was like. The story we tell will shape their response to future epidemics by passing to them the knowledge of things that helped carry us through.



**Artist Information**

Ellen Shattuck Pierce is an artist living in Boston, MA. She loves printmaking and its history as a decorative art, medium for protest, and for distributing knowledge. She embraces all three of these aspects by using relief cuts to create allegorical scenes of American life in her prints and wallpapers. Her work has been shown in France, the UAE and Cuba. Her printwork is included in the 11th International Printmaking Biennial and 5th Global Print in Douro, Portugal. This year she was awarded a Mass Cultural Council Artist Fellowship. She attended the School of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, graduated from UMass Boston, and received her Ed.M in Arts Education from Harvard. Being part Canadian, she longed to spend time in Canada and moved to Toronto to complete her MFA at York University.  
 ellenshattuckpierce.com/  
 esp195@mail.harvard.edu

**Image Documentation**

photo credit: Will Howcroft  
*Half a Million Today*, relief cut, 18" x 24", 2021  
*Get Used to It*, relief cut, 18" x 24", 2022  
*Pandemic Month 11*, relief cut, 18" x 24", 2021  
*Circling Around*, relief cut, 18" x 24", 2021  
*Hot Vax Summer*, relief cut, 18" x 24", 2022

