



Hope for artists in a COVID world

By Janis Commentz

Special to the Hi-Desert Star

In April I answered a call to reflect on COVID's affect on my art! At the time, we had isolated for three weeks. Now, months later, I respond again.

Since March, I have kept a COVID diary. The first moves were to cancel teaching in-person workshops, and soon we discovered the Zoom app. I began meeting for book groups, exercise and bible studies. As a painter, social media became an important lifeline.

There have been upsides, despite the vivid and widespread tragedy of 2020. My social media contacts spread farther afield, reaching painters on other continents. The entire art world began to create virtual workshops, exhibits and events.

I launched my online Etsy shop (French Press, based on my travel sketches at etsy.com/shop/ArbyJanisCommentz, and Etsy sales spiked world wide in 2020.

Movements to sustain isolated artists appeared. In March 2020, British artist Matthew Burrows established "Artist Support Pledge" in response to the pandemic to create sustainability for artist and makers globally. Artists pledge to purchase art valued at \$200 (pounds, euros or dollars) when they have sold \$1,000 worth. I was able to sell and buy using social media and to encourage artist friends.

My 2020 plans included teaching art camp at Camp de Benneville Pines, and that became virtual.

By July, I knew I needed to "rehearse" and asked former workshop attendees to attend free Zoom art sessions. This grew into a small, but very encouraging circle that meets weekly. I provide a lesson, and we paint and share progress. This will continue during 2021.

I soon realized I needed to replace my poor quality laptop camera and speaker. Who would have dreamed last year that we would need separate speakers, a mic and camera?

As the COVID world continued, we deeply craved community.

Over the years, our local desert art world has grown accustomed to monthly art walks and openings, opportunities to greet many faces, socialize, share food, music and our passions. Concerts and theater were once an integral part of our life.

In January, Cheryl Montelle hosted the largest gathering ever for "Desert Stories," a Mil-Tree spoken word fundraiser. This gala event was the last time many of us saw the Joshua Tree art world

under one roof.

The annual Hwy 62 Open Studio Art Tours evolved from humble beginnings 20 years ago, to an over 200-artist, three-weekend event! It was not just the tour, but prep, expectation; and ritual. This October remained strangely quiet.

Some groups adapt better than others to the virtual formats. The critique/dialog group with whom I met since 2013 did not make the transition easily, and I am hoping it will during 2021.

Virtual meetings jumped state and national borders. I attend exercise classes hosted by a childhood friend living in Seattle and have bartered art as payment. Online bartering and exchanging supplies has also increased.

Because of the rollercoaster nature of 2020, art was affected by the political world, climate change, the Black Lives Matter movement and more. No artist was immune, and Instagram and Twitter exploded.

Artists are able to interact with colleagues in a more intimate and immediate way than before. One can often have brief "conversations" with these new friends sharing COVID experiences, fears, doubts, encouragement and what season they are in! How fun to watch summer painters in the southern hemisphere during December!

Podcasts also multiplied creating global camaraderie. Locally, Dawn Davis' "Desert Lady Diaries" gained traction, and I was pleased to be featured on the podcast in July. I have a list of podcasts I listen to regularly. To fulfill virtual exhibit formats, I have dabbled in movie making and have even created a YouTube channel. All of the creative world, visual arts, music, books, hobbies, travel, dance, theater; has been affected.

We reflect on our past and must have hope for the future. What are artists to do in 2021?

I suggest you be kind to yourself and pat yourself on the back when you make small progress. Keep creating. Work small. Create several times a week rather than forcing a huge project!

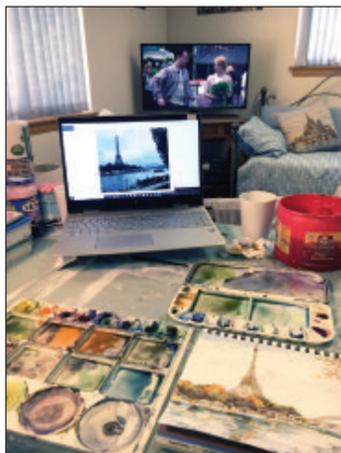
Watch your health. Sleep, exercise, a healthy diet and spiritual nurturing are crucial! Follow the COVID essentials of social distancing and mask wearing.

Kindle new interests, learn new skills, teach or share what you know, reach out, locally and globally.

We are not only missing hugs and contact with others. Artists miss the tactile elements. It is not easy to see the depth of brushstrokes, the thickness of paint,



Janis Commentz enjoys painting in her own back yard in May of last year.



COURTESY PHOTO

Commentz has set up her studio to have a computer with her photograph of the Eiffel Tower while she creates a fall scene with a movie on in the background.



HILARY SLOANE PHOTO

Janis Commentz stands with her painting "Cherry Tomatoes of a Good Friend."

the characteristics of a medium, or even to know the size of a work.

Ask questions! Interact with artists online or with old fashioned devices, a note or phone call. I received a COVID collection of cards this summer; and I treasure them. My Etsy business specializes in notecards and paper items with a personal touch and a French flair.

A virtual meeting over a meal contains the elements of breaking bread with another.

If spirituality is part of your life, cultivate those connections. I meet weekly with women for Bible study and prayer.

Keep a journal or diary which includes gratitude.

Meditative hands-on activities such sewing masks, remodeling our rental (lots of scraping, sanding and painting) and making meals became important to me,

connecting to the lives of ancestors. I often ponder how they lived with simple items.

This year I found it important to embrace the USPS! When I requested package pickups, I left 3 x 5 inch notecards saying "#usps" or "#IloveUSPS." My carrier picked them up! At Christmas, when I gave her a calendar, I learned she loves the French Impressionists! Another positive connection as a result of COVID!

Create home comfort centers. Typically, artists collect a lot of stuff. Neaten up! Clear out! Read for information or imagination! Place chairs, tables or baskets with your needs conveniently: pencils, colored markers, notepads, journals, inspirational books, Kleenex...

I hope we, as creative thinkers, can turn problems into opportunity, peace of mind, satisfaction, and contentment during 2021!

I was reminded of Henry David Thoreau's words in Walden. May we take note, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived, I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion."

To connect with Janis Commentz, visit janiscommentz.com.



COURTESY PHOTO

Commentz is proud of her COVID card collection and has it prominently displayed on the mantel.