

An Austin Gallery Owner Patiently Waits Out The Pandemic

Sheltering in place when your home is also an art gallery



grayDUCK gallery owner Jill Schroeder with husband Mark Lynch and their dog Etta, on a sofa where normally the gallery's reception desk stands. Schroeder operates the gallery out of a renovated 100-year-old house that also contains the couple's living quarters. With the gallery closed, the separation between living space and art space has relaxed some. Photo courtesy Jill Schroeder

By Barbara Purcell - April 22, 2020

For many of us, sheltering in place means a morning commute from the kitchen to the couch, coffee in hand. But for Jill Schroeder, curator and owner of Austin's grayDUCK Gallery, it's just another day at the office.

Sort of.

Schroeder runs her commercial art space in a renovated 100-year-old house on the east side, which she also lives in with her husband. A steady rotation of exhibitions keep them company both on and off hours.

Yet even when home and work are so cozily consolidated, staying socially quarantined still poses the same pressing pandemic question: when will things return to normal?

For Schroeder, she's wondering if the operations of her gallery will need to change in the not-too-near future – possibly skip the openings and in-person artist talks, and just let a few people in at a time. Before the closure, she had experimented with producing an artist talk podcast. And she's even keeping her fingers crossed about the current exhibition.

"Maybe some miracle will let me open the gallery back up before the show closes," she tells me over the phone. "I spoke to the artist recently, and there's honestly no hurry to take it down."

Sarah Sudhoff's "Point of Origin" opened on March 6, though less than two weeks later, the gallery shut down following the city's restrictions on non-essential businesses. The exhibition is based on actual patient data collected from tracked ambulance rides in Houston, turning the empirical into abstraction: black speakers emitting breath, handwoven stainless steel, white monoprints, "data-driven kinetic sculptures" mimicking medical equipment such as EKGs and, eerily, ventilators.

The pieces are stark, often symmetrical, an elegant balance of black lines and white space that create an immaculate environment fit for an operating room – or a wedding reception, one was held in the gallery the night after the opening.



Installation view of Sarah Sudhoff's solo exhibition "Point of Origin" at grayDUCK Gallery. On the left is "Life Support," made of ventilator bellows.

The eye can also easily lose itself in Comminos's surprising, multisensory textiles. Experienced up close, Comminos's squishy surfaces and gumball colors delightfully disconcert my sense of sight, touch, and even taste. The artist works primarily in tufting, an industrial technique used to create rugs and tapestries. In a recent email, Comminos described her tools as "a cross between a sewing machine and a hand ... drill."

That mix of precision and power comes through in the textiles' pulsating, peeling lines and shapes, which border on slight psychedelia without feeling retro or haphazard. The works are inspired by the artist's abstract drawings, but they gain much by entering three dimensions: Comminos collects yarns from around the world, and they offer an impressive range of tones and textures.

"This worked out very well," says Schroeder. "There are definitely certain shows I don't want to have up for weddings."

Sudhoff's "Life Support" (2020) is a noisy ode to life-saving measures, its four glowy ventilator bellows vertically breathing heart rates recorded on Life Flight rides. "Black Box" (2020) gives an EKG-like reading of patient data, printing out as a single slip of paper slowly piling on the floor. "Vitals" (2020) is a graphite drawing also depicting breath rates and heart rates collected from Life Flight patients, matters of life and death distilled into delicate draftsmanship.

How strange that an exhibition exploring medical information would be left up just as the world shut down. Waiting out this deadly virus will one day perhaps be measured in the COVID calendar as BC (before coronavirus) and AD (after distancing).

Schroeder agrees, but finds Sudhoff's work to be soothing in the meantime, particularly the artist's three white kites, "Mechanics of Flight," hanging from the gallery's ceiling. They tend to twirl as light and air move through them.

"Their black strings represent actual Life Flight routes from the hospital helipad – the point of origin – to whoever they were picking up," Schroeder explains.



Installation view of Sarah Sudhoff's "Mechanics of Flight" at grayDUCK Gallery. Photo courtesy rayDUCK Gallery.

Another oddly apropos aspect of the exhibition: Schroeder's husband, Mark Lynch, is an Austin paramedic. When he's not installing shows and helping run the gallery, Mark is busy saving lives.

"I know he's doing a good job, so I'm worried and comforted all at the same time," she tells me. "When you're sheltering in place, things start to skew in your mind and become scarier than they should be – not that this isn't a serious situation – but he comes back from out there and brings the real world to me."

Schroeder goes on to describe donning and doffing, two terms she, too, had never heard of prior to the pandemic.

"There is a very specific protocol when first responders and healthcare workers don on protective equipment and doff off, as to avoid exposure to the virus," she tells me.

Donning and doffing, I point out, sounds like the title of an exhibition for 2021.

Schroeder is already looking to push several previously-scheduled exhibitions into next year, while trying to finagle a few upcoming events, including The Contemporary Austin's Crit Group show, hosted by the gallery each summer.

Even grayDUCK's 10-year anniversary celebration, slated for May, has been put on hold.

"It makes me sad, we had a big show planned and a bunch of events, but we'll have to postpone," Schroeder says. "We just moved a wedding reception from June to January as well."

Renting out the gallery space, she notes, is a significant source of revenue for her business.

I ask her if COVID-19 feels like a professional holding pattern or something deeper, a personal existential threat.

"It changes hourly, to be honest," she says. "I read that Austin's unemployment will be 25% and that it's going to be a two-year recovery. What scares me most are property taxes – they might go back to 8% rather than be capped at 3.5%."

How apt, the vague possibility of death and the harsh inevitability of taxes, going toe to toe.

The good news is, living and working under the same roof does lower one's business overhead, and for that Schroeder feels very lucky: "I get to wake up each day and see the work whether I'm open or not."

Another added benefit of living with a gallery? Getting to roll out your yoga mat amongst the art.

"I try to work out every day, warming up by running around the space, then doing some weight training and a bit of stretching. My dog Etta loves it." All that activity must make those hanging kites move just so.

I ask her what she's been reading and listening to, given all the newfound time on her frequently washed, very clean hands.

"I bought a 'This Mortal Coil' album right before everything happened; it's a blast from my past and seems like the right thing to listen to," she says.

The name is a phrase borrowed from the "To be, or not to be" speech in Shakespeare's Hamlet, referencing the daily struggles of life. As an 80's British music collective, known for its goth sound which metaphorically dons and doffs wraithlike sadness throughout each song, "This Mortal Coil" does seem like the appropriate soundtrack for this moment – if only for their ethereal Cocteau Twins take on dream, a totally plausible playlist when trapped inside until further notice.

But it's not all doom and gloom for Schroeder as she lays on her yoga mat in the middle of the gallery: "When I want to cheer up, I listen to Patsy Cline."

As far as books, "Ninth Street Women" is her current read, perfect for a lockdown given its near 1,000 pages in length. The book chronicles five female artists in New York's 1940s and 1950s – Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning, Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell, and Helen Frankenthaler – how their bold brilliance changed the face of American modern art.

"I'm reading about how all of these women had just gone through World War II, and they're talking about the horrors they witnessed, and how that in turn affected their artwork," says Schroeder.

"It makes me wonder how things will change when we finally get to the other side of this."



Jill Schroeder's dog Etta lounges. The gallery's art storage racks are behind her.