

Zappas, Lindsay Preston. "Art in Isolation with Allison Miller," *Contemporary Art Review LA*, 30 March 2020.



In the coming weeks, *Carla* founder and editor-in-chief Lindsay Preston Zappas will be hosting chats with members of the L.A. art community via Instagram live on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.

The following is based on an Instagram Live conversation on March 27, 2020 at 5:30 PST.

Lindsay Preston Zappas: What has your routine been in the last week?

Allison Miller: First off, thank you for asking me to be a part of this new series of quarantined-talks, Lindsay!

I recently moved into a new place that is both my studio and living space—one on each floor, with an amazing back yard. So, this past week has been a continuation of what has turned out to be perfect quarantine-timing: I've been unpacking, setting up the studio, and weeding the garden till I can't weed anymore. I've been planting vegetables as well, for the first time in my life. I've never had the space to plant anything before and, again, pretty good timing to be able to do this.

The other thing this past week has brought with it is my first fully online class. I have to say, it went swimmingly, and it was great to see and interact with my students. Talking about and thinking about art feels like a luxury at the moment, and a necessary one.

LPZ: Is there anything in particular that you've been doing that gives you peace/self-care during this time?

AM: I'd say pulling weeds (not a euphemism) and general gardening has been the mind-saver for this insane time period. So far, anyway. Being in the sun, surrounded by green things and dirt is basically my obsession now. It feels good to be that physical too. I'm doing some online exercise classes too—also good. Feeling like I'm still in the world and in my body...

I'm still unpacking and setting up the new studio, which feels good too. And I've got 12 canvases stretched, gessoed, and ready for painting as soon as I'm ready. These will be heading to New York for my fifth show with Susan Inglett in a year, assuming things are back on track by then. Having a deadline feels important to my state of mind right now too.

LPZ: Once you are set up, how do you think your paintings will adapt to respond to this moment? Or will they?

AM: I don't know, and I love that I don't know. There are so many factors that will affect this next group of paintings: the new studio, the fact that I am living and working in the same location now, my access to a garden and outdoor space adjacent to the studio—a new beginning in general—and then the new world we are now living in... I can't imagine what will happen on the surface of the canvases. I'm wondering if these new works will be more interior, more inside. I wonder if that will be the case for a lot of artists.

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My last group of paintings, which were shown at The Pit in L.A., were made in the wake of my mom passing away, and I had a similar feeling then—though much more acute at that time—the feeling of knowing that my circumstances and state of mind would affect the work, (how could they not?) but that I didn't know what visible form this effect would take in the paintings. And then there's the question of the evidence being seen and understood by anyone outside of myself and how it would function if it were understood by other people.

What's potentially fascinating about this present situation is that whatever work is made inside of, or in the time just after, this insanity—will it carry with it a universally understood psychic presence?

LPZ: It's interesting how so much of our interaction is digital at the moment, and I think more and more we will want to see physicality, and really be missing that.

AM: I agree, and I've thought for a long time that the more technology-based ways we have of interacting, the more we might turn to the more analog ways of making—thinking specifically about ceramics and glass right now (and for a while). What I've found especially fascinating about paintings for the last bunch of years is how physical a painting has now become in comparison to the digital, AI, and other platforms.

A stretched canvas is more of an object now than it's ever been in history, I think. And in this moment, and when we (hopefully) come out of this moment when a lot of us are spending so much time online, I think a painting will have a level of physical presence that I find thrilling to think about—the thickness of the bars, the texture of the canvas, brush strokes, and even the different sheens of paint. The paintings that I generally find the most interesting are locked in a bit of a fight between surface and material anyway...

LPZ: Yeah. I know when I first started Carla, a lot of people were asking me, "Why print? Print is dead." But I always felt that the more digital we get, the more it also swings the other way and people really crave a physical experience.

AM: Exactly. I see this in myself and in younger students too—the interest in the tactile and "real." I like thinking of it as both reactionary and radical, somehow.

LPZ: Yeah, I feel like often we separate paintings from being a physical object, but they totally are. They are dimensional, sculptural, tactile things.

AM: There's a long history of deconstruction in painting—deconstructing the picture plane, but also a literal deconstructing of the materials of painting to foreground the object-ness of them: Fontana, Rauschenberg, Parrino, Gilliam—all the way to someone like Katharina Grosse (to name just a few). But I love that even without any kind of deconstruction, paintings may/will be objects to physically deal with more than ever now.

LPZ: So, you're a teacher—what has it been like shifting your curriculum online, and how have your students reacted? It's interesting how this experience can be something that will unite all of us, despite the generational gap between students and teachers—what's happening now is a defining moment that we will all be able to relate to going forward.

AM: Kind of beautiful, in that way. Hard for all of us to comprehend, to say the least. Though I did tell my last class that they will tell their grandchildren (proverbial or real) where they were and how they dealt with this event—it is so historic—which implies that I have some sort of

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perspective on this, which I don't know if I actually do. Maybe that's one of the many great things about teaching: at least in that moment, you have to have your shit together.

Luckily, I teach what is essentially an undergraduate advanced painting critique class and I also do regular visits with graduate students, so I have had to do less adjusting than someone teaching more nuts-and-bolts studio courses with demos and things, but there is still a huge gap to be contended with. But, so far, the class and the grad student meetings I've had have translated pretty well, and I'm interested in the new kind of flexibility we all need to have now.

Possibly ironically, while I'm thinking about and talking about how much more tactile paintings will be at the end of all of this craziness, I am also feeling much more connected to students and friends and family through online platforms than I ever thought possible. My favorite thing to think, always and about everything, is both things are true: we have the capacity to have emotional, profound connections through a screen and with an object made of wood and fabric and paint.

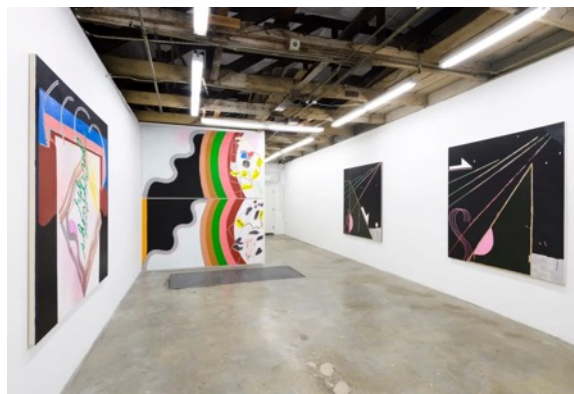
LPZ: Any resources you can share—things you've been reading or thinking about?

AM: I'm interested in history and go through phases with different time periods. Right now I'm deep into the French Revolution (again) and reading a book I've never read before, *Citizens* by Simon Schama. I'm not sure how to apply the lessons of that historical event to ours, but there's something there that I need to figure out. I'm also reading and looking at works based on Greek mythology more and more. I wonder if it's easier to think of our present circumstances through the filter of allegory? As an atheist, Greek mythology is giving me stories and images that feel both useful and poetic right now.

LPZ: What kind of needs do you see in the art community and how can we come together right now?

AM: It's been great to see so many galleries and museums providing new online content, but it's been especially good to see how artists are communicating and sharing in whatever ways they can. I think we should all start doing online studio visits with each other! And sharing what we are working on and thinking about as much as we can—I think we're going to be in this predicament for quite a while.

Other than that, the only thing I can say is we need to all figure out how to take care of ourselves and each other both physically and mentally. I don't know how to separate the two.

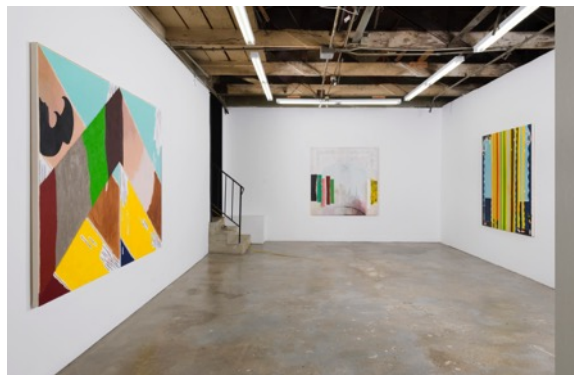


Allison Miller, *CAPRIUS* (2019) (installation view). Image courtesy of the artist and The Pit.

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Allison Miller, *Curl Arch* (2019). Oil, oil stick, acrylic, and marble dust, 68 x 73 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and The Pit.



Allison Miller, *C A P R R I U S* (2019) (installation view). Image courtesy of the artist and The Pit.



Allison Miller, *Corner* (2016). Oil, oil stick, acrylic, and pencil on canvas, 64 x 82 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and The Pit.

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Allison Miller, *Shell* (2019). Oil, oil stick, acrylic, and marble dust, 60 x 58 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and The Pit.