



# 20 Artists on the Work They Made in 2020

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For centuries, artists have responded to pain, grief, loss, and injustice through their art, at times to brilliant and cathartic ends. Even so, it would not be fair to assume that contemporary artists come out of the tumultuousness of 2020 with a masterful new body of work. Yet, in a testament to the deep resilience of the artists working today, many did.

The 20 artists here tell us about the work they made this year and how the COVID-19 pandemic and social upheaval of 2020 affected them personally. Some endured deep disappointment as their exhibitions were postponed or canceled; many buckled down to meet work deadlines despite the crumbling state of the world. Some found solace in new mediums or a slower approach; others navigated childcare and processed loss. While several did admit that their day-to-day lives didn't look so different this year, all of the artists we spoke to touched on the grief they each endured. And yet they all kept creating fresh, new work.

## **Didier William**

B. 1983, Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Lives and works in Philadelphia.

### **Can you tell us about the work you made in 2020?**

The work I completed this year was actually begun in the latter part of 2019. I've been researching early 19th-century landscape paintings by people like J.M.W. Turner, Thomas Gainsborough, and Alexander Cozens.

This body of work is very much interested in cloudscapes and sky formations inspired by some of these paintings. I'm compelled by this moment in particular because these works were being produced concurrently with the Haitian Revolution.

A question I return to often in the paintings is: Where does the retroactive imagination coincide with real time, and what kind of resultant reality is constructed in doing so? This atemporal relationship to narrative I think is particularly true within stories of immigration, which often necessarily include intergenerational family formations and various social, political, and economic connective tissues that collapse the space between "here" and one's "homeland." For me this is a question that certainly underscores a broader immigrant narrative, but one that I've also been personally invested in with regard to my relationship to Haiti, where I was born.

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In addition to dealing with the sudden and disruptive challenges of the pandemic, my husband and I had a baby this year. She’s been such a blessing during this time. This first year of life is so critical anyway that oftentimes it felt like the forced isolation of the pandemic was giving us something we would have needed anyway, a lot of alone time with the baby. I’d sometimes give my husband a break and take the baby to the studio and work while she napped in Bjorn. Making paintings about the complexities of the body while holding a tiny sleeping baby was a slice of heaven.

**How did the events of 2020 impact you as an artist? Did your outlook change?**

Thankfully, I was still able to get to my studio. I live in Philadelphia and our studio building was completely shut down to the public, but our private studio spaces were still available and accessible. In the beginning of all of this, going to the studio felt incredibly strange and I was too distracted most of the time to get any work done. It’s a bit better now.

I think, as has happened for many people, this year has just clarified for me what’s important in the life I’m trying to build as an artist. The things I want that life to include and the things I’m not so interested in all came into hyper-focus this year. I really enjoy and crave a lot of alone time anyway, so the last few months of quarantine didn’t prove to be very difficult. The toughest part was my family in Miami not being able to see my daughter. We’re working on that though. My outlook sharpened this year. With the pandemic happening concurrently with me becoming a father, I’m not sure which life-changing event affected me more. I think in both cases, my ideas about the complex currency that is representation became clearer. I think the crisis of representation is made plain when we are forced into disembodied engagement with one another because of a global health emergency. This moment has changed the way I think about the body. Its function. Its purpose. Its potentials. Its failures. Its mythology. For any artist, there is tremendous risk in one body naming another, and I think the last eight months have reminded us just how risky our bodies can be.