

How the global art world is responding to the COVID-19 lockdown

From Nagpur to New York, illustrators, cartoonists, painters and graffitists are depicting their current world view through their art —while galleries seek out new ways of offering support



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For some stay-at-home inspiration, we spoke to 15 artists, illustrators, cartoonists and graffitists to share with us their works during this lockdown period. Artwork by: Dhruvi Acharya

There’s a meme going around the internet that says, “As you binge watch your thirteenth entire series or read a book or sleep to music, remember. Remember that in the darkest days when everything stopped, you turned to artists.” It hit home for me in a big way. Through India’s three-week (and possibly counting) lockdown, I have been consuming poignant stories through web series, scrolling through powerful illustrations on Instagram and even writing about my own experience about being pregnant in the time of COVID-19 to make sense of everything going on around me. My point is not to prove that artists are more important than other professions, especially healthcare professionals, security forces and essential services workers who are fighting at the frontlines. But I do believe art and storytelling can help us come together, cope and heal in the face of grief and loss in inarticulate yet undeniable ways.

The Sunaparanta Centre of Arts in Goa has launched a Surviving SQ (self-quarantine) programme because curator Leandre D'Souza and programme patron Isheta Salgaocar knew that this period of self-isolation is ideal for art to blossom. They sent out an open call for artists to share their strategies on how to get through this phase creatively and positively and will be streaming a Share Your Quiet series by New Delhi-based video artist Pallavi Paul every Monday on their Instagram handle. Similarly, in the US, Amplifier, a non-profit organisation that describes itself as an “art machine for social change” put out an open call earlier this week looking for artworks around the themes of public health and mental well-being in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Hans-Ulrich Obrist, one of the most respected curators in the UK, has also called for a mammoth public art project (similar to the one Franklin D Roosevelt set up during the Great Depression of the 1930s) in response to the current global crisis.

Artists and Galleries

The organised art world has responded beautifully to the lockdown and social-distancing protocols that are keeping people away from physical spaces. Fairs like Art Basel and Art Dubai have gone online and numerous galleries all over the world have responded to this new reality with online viewing rooms. Case in point: Priyanka and Prateek Raja's Kolkata-based Experimenter gallery, which has launched Experimenter Labs this month, an online platform where artistic research and experiments will be performed in alignment with the core programming at the gallery.

Meanwhile, art history challenges of recreating classic works using home objects like toilet paper and pets are gathering momentum on social media. The idea was started by @tussenkunstenquarantine, a Dutch Instagram account whose name means “between art and quarantine.” The account even inspired the J Paul Getty museum in Los Angeles to put out a similar call for recreations. In another interesting phenomenon, artists have flooded Instagram and Twitter with illustrations, drawings and wool sculptures of a three-legged Japanese monster called Amabie who, according to legend, can ward off epidemics.

For some more stay-at-home inspiration, we spoke to 15 artists, illustrators, cartoonists and graffitists from India and around the world who are communicating their experiences and understanding of the current circumstances through their work. Scroll down for some amazing COVID-19-inspired artworks and the stories behind them.

Rohan Chakravarty, Nagpur

Chakravarty is a cartoonist, illustrator and the creator of Green Humour, a series of comics and illustrations on wildlife and nature conservation. His comics run in three Indian newspapers on a weekly basis and he's collaborated with numerous international NGOs as well as the forest departments of various Indian states for conservation awareness through art. “The COVID-19 pandemic has been linked with the wet markets of Wuhan in China where wild animals are trafficked and sold. However, epidemics, in general, have often been linked to mankind's destruction of animals' natural habitats, which is known to cause stress and weaken immune responses in carrier animals, making the transmission of pathogens easier. This shows not just a flaw in our response to epidemics but also our

failure to acknowledge that existing governing models are in need of an upheaval if such crises are to be prevented in future. This idea is being conveyed as a conversation between two animals linked to the origin of this coronavirus—a bat and a pangolin—in my comic strip.”



www.greenhumour.com

FUNG

Surreal HK, Hong Kong

Tommy Fung is a graphic designer and photographer who was born in Hong Kong, grew up in Venezuela and moved back to his birthplace in 2016. As he was rediscovering the city, he started to create surreal digital artworks to show his perspective using Photoshop as a tool. “This artwork of a passenger with a ‘facehugger’ is inspired by Alien. I like to incorporate elements of movies into what I see in daily life in Hong Kong. Since the virus outbreak, people in Hong Kong have been wearing all kinds of face masks on the street—surgical, N95, gas masks, DIY, etc. That’s why I wanted to create an image of someone using a very scary one; you don’t know if he’s wearing a new type of mask or if he just got a new kind of infection.”



Cheyenne Randall, California

Randall had his first exhibition when he was 13 and continued making art at night and working construction by day. In 2013, while bedridden due to an injury, he started work on a series, Photoshopping tattoos on images of celebrities. He got interview requests from big media houses practically overnight and eventually started wheat-pasting some of the images in abandoned rural spaces under the hashtag #pastingthewest. “There’s no wrong way to feel during this time. As an artist, I vacillate hourly from being excited about the opportunity to be alive during one of humanity’s biggest challenges to being embarrassed that more people feel inclined to focus on the superficial stuff on social media than acknowledge that theirs is a tyrannical system that postures to gobble us all up. But as the saying goes: If you’re not outraged, you’re not paying attention.”



Shwetha Vishwakarma, Bengaluru

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"These particular pieces are part of a new project titled #OnePosterADay where I challenge myself to complete one illustration daily about current affairs or things happening around me. Lull shows how life makes beautiful sense during the lockdown; no ringing in the ears, nothing stinging our thoughts, clear skies and clearer sounds of birdcall—a luxury we are deprived of otherwise. Mood is a reaction to people binging on hand sanitisers."



Rohan More, Mumbai

This contemporary visual artist has been making art for five years and his breakthrough moment was with the series 'Vilayti Shauk', a tongue-in-cheek take on hype culture. "This artwork reflects the irony of the lockdown in India. As humans I think we're beings of subjugation, and animals often bear the brunt of that. Now that we are confined to our homes, the earth finally has space to breathe and animals are hopefully getting a break from relentless human activity. That's what I wanted to communicate through the artwork: that, for once, the captor is now the captive."



David Goodsell, California

A professor of computational biology and research, Goodsell is also an artist. He is best known for his paintings of cells on a molecular level, especially viruses such as Zika, Ebola and now COVID-19. Goodsell was introduced to art by his grandfather who was an accomplished painter, and even dabbled in scientific illustration in graduate school. He released this painting of the cross section of the coronavirus on Twitter in February, which went—for lack of a better word—viral. It is now also available in a colouring book version for kids.



Duyi Han, New York City/Los Angeles

Han's grandparents live in Wuhan and his worry for their safety was one of the reasons he created this piece on the walls of a church in the very city where the coronavirus originated. He trained as an architect at Cornell University and during his employment with Swiss firm Herzog & de Meuron, he learned the positive emotional impact that a well-designed room could give to people who are in fear of disease and death. "To Western and global viewers,

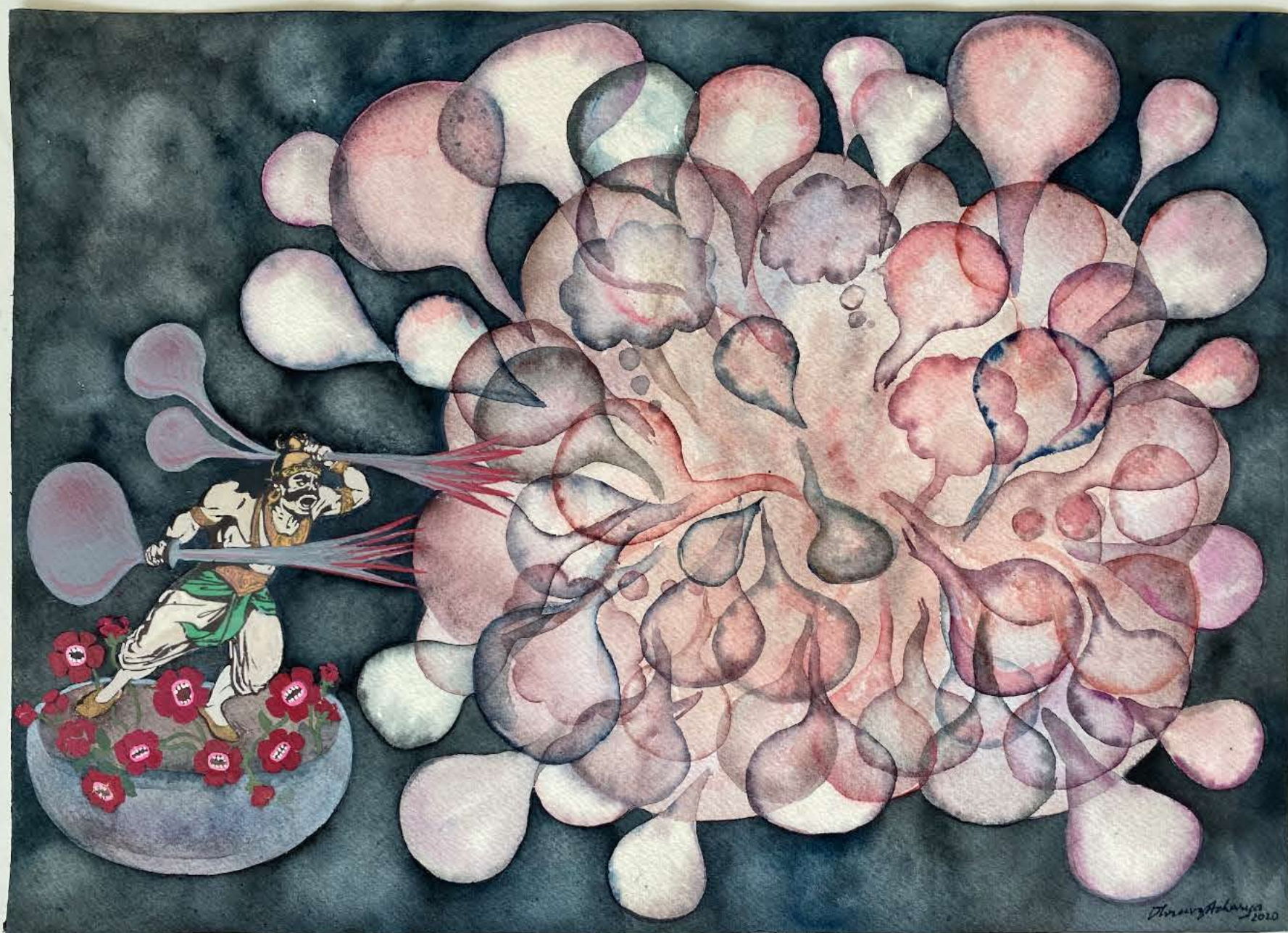
could give to people who are in fear of disease and death. "To Western and global viewers, a church in China may challenge stereotypical cultural assumptions. This piece guides people to focus more on the essential content (medical workers) and not the country itself as an exotic entity, especially at a time when the disease invokes racism and xenophobia."



Dhruvi Acharya, Mumbai

Acharya started painting in 1995, when she moved to the US and became homesick. Her first professional exhibition was in 1998. She describes her work as a visual diary depicting her thoughts, observations, feelings and experiences, focusing on the psychological and

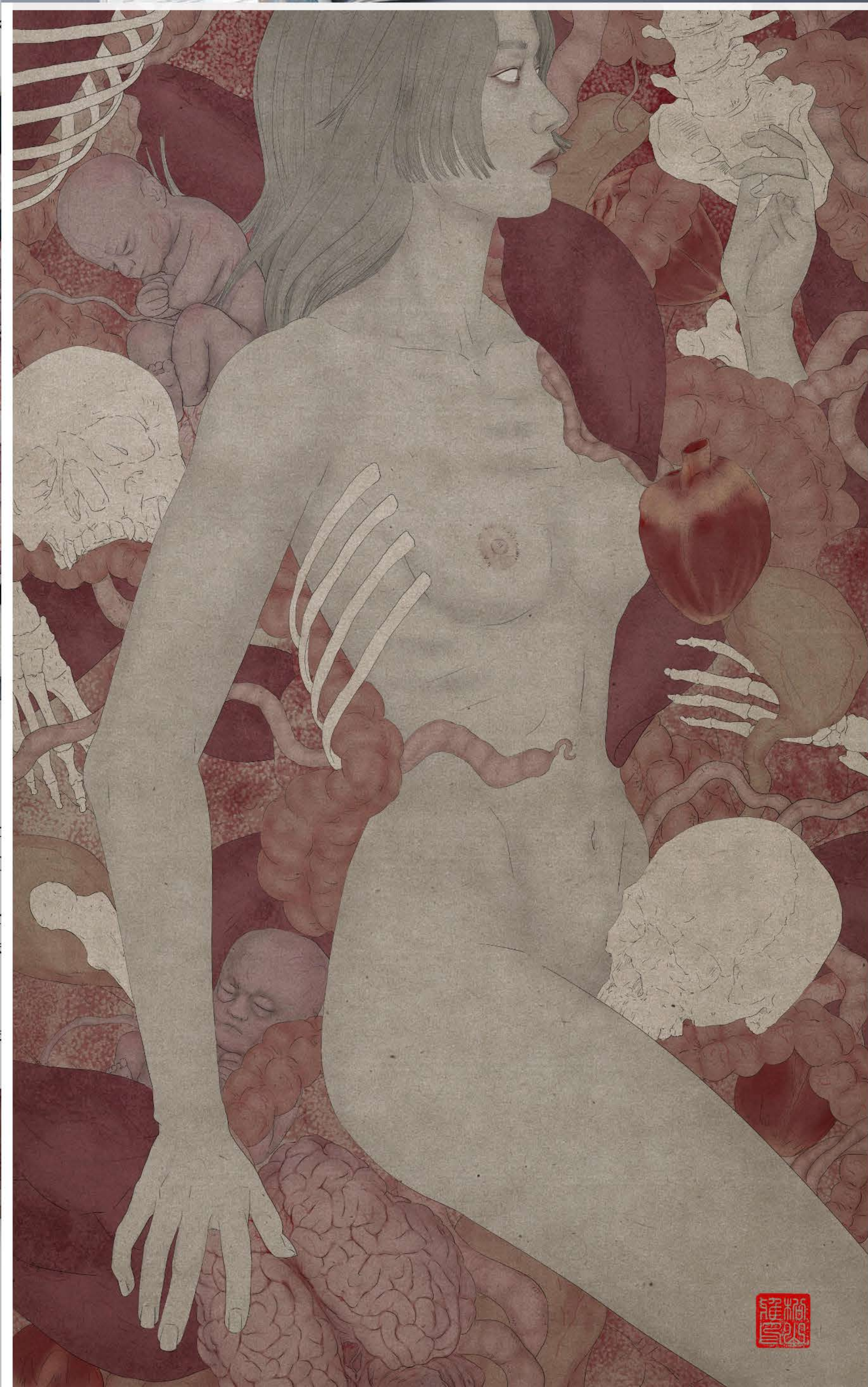
emotional aspects of an urban woman's life in a world teeming with discord, violence and pollution. She's currently working on a series during the lockdown in India. "My current watercolours are in response to a world in the grips of a pandemic, when more apparent than ever are the repercussions of our misplaced priorities and our entitled attitudes towards our earth and all living things. On the day of the janata curfew, in an attempt to get rid of stress, I decided to just go to my studio—which is in the same building as my residence—and paint whatever was on my mind. Since then, I've continued to do so."



Matsuyama Miyabi, China

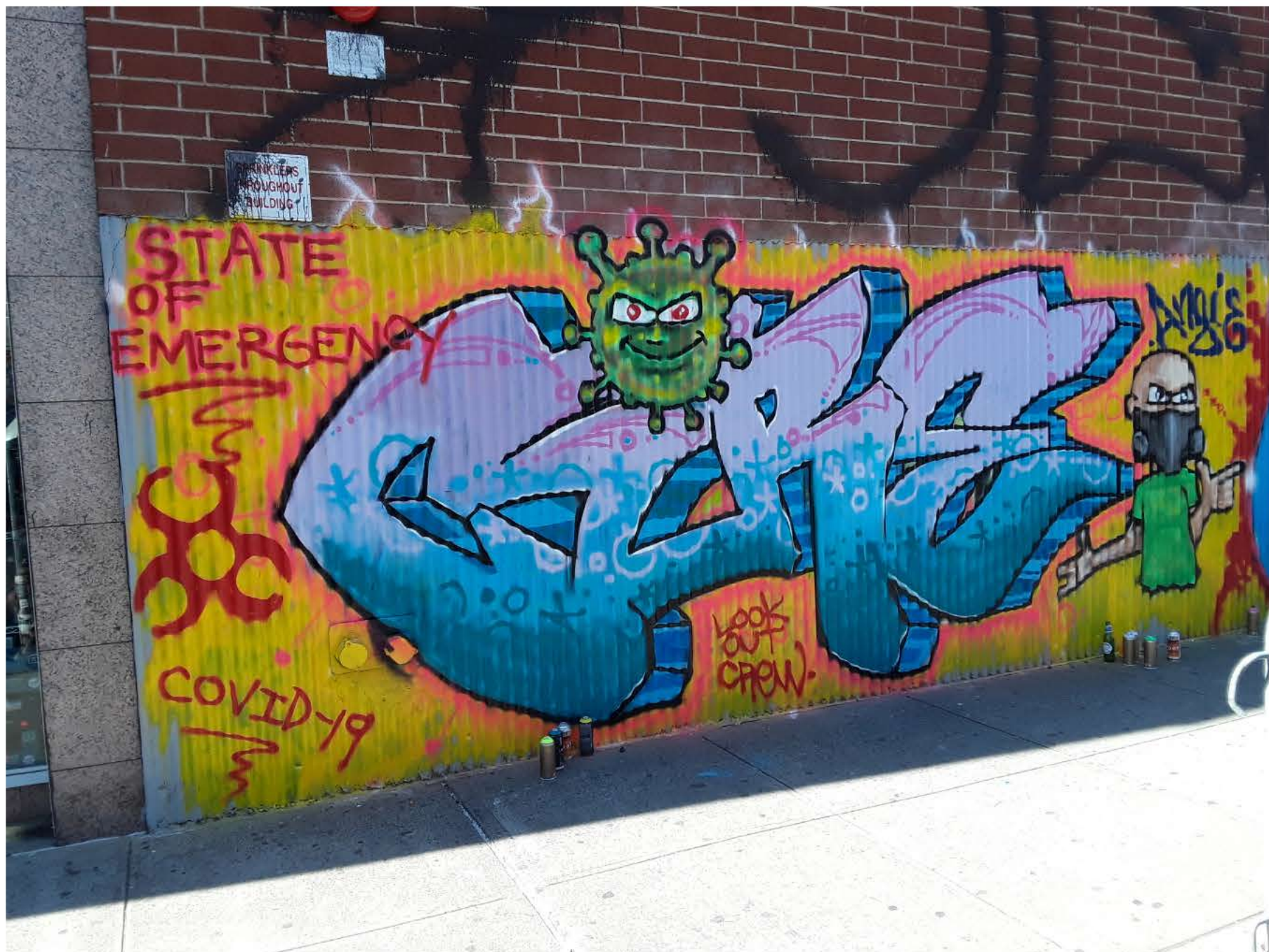
"I happened to be in China at the time of the outbreak, and I was disappointed by the government's response to the outbreak, as well as its crackdown on freedom of speech. When disaster strikes, the best and the worst of humanity come to the fore and I prefer to depict those ugly forgotten worlds. In the last two months, I saw some people brutally kill their pets or other people's pets because of rumors. Some people promoted extreme nationalism while others called for [letting older patients die]. There was racial discrimination, regional discrimination and hoarding of toilet paper. This work is the third piece of the 'Wandering Ghost' series, which is an interpretation of my present feelings—a metaphysically displaced wanderer."





CIRE One, New York City

Eric Joza is an old-school graffitist and Brooklyn native who was active in the late 1980s. He now paints on legally approved walls and created this street art shortly after New York declared a state of emergency. The mural depicts the virus as a comic book villain. The character on the right is wearing a respirator since Joza uses them to protect himself from paint fumes, but it also works for those who've contracted COVID-19 as well. "This crazy environment we are all in is like a low budget horror flick, where they had no money for special effects so the bad guy is fear itself. I gave this 'faceless' fear a face, but hopefully there is no sequel to this bad film."



SUBSET, Dublin

Artist collective SUBSET is known for tackling a range of social issues and reviving public spaces with their large-scale and evocative street art. This public artwork is titled The Virus Era and was created in response to the coronavirus. The artists wanted to question the government's "restrictive and reactionary approach to the crisis" through this work.





Hijack Art, Los Angeles

This LA-based graffitist was exposed to the street art world from a young age by his father who collaborated with Banksy. “In times like these, creativity can help us deal with and overcome a crisis. The piece itself is more of an observation of our current mental state. We seem to be waging a war against an unseen enemy, sending some of us into a panic and I wanted to convey this in typical Hijack fashion.”



Tara Anand, Mumbai/New York City

Anand is a Mumbai-based illustrator who is currently pursuing a BFA in illustration at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. “This artwork is part of an ongoing project where I’m drawing my friends and family every time they Facetime me and intend to keep this up until I can see them in person. This is an attempt to record what will be my only point of contact with people outside of my house for a while, and to see how our interactions evolve and adapt to the situation.”



Klari Reis, California

Reis has been making art for close to two decades and her biological- and cellular- based artworks can be categorised into three types: petri dish installations; cellular-based artworks inspired by how cells form and move; and topographical paintings of city life vs biological life. Her installations are made of the same material used to create flooring. She dyes, pigments and stains it, and then uses spoons, pipettes, blow torches and hairdryers for effects. “In my early twenties, I just got really sick and didn’t understand what it was about and was eventually diagnosed with an auto-immune disease called Crohn’s Disease. Over time, I got better but while I was being treated I started to look at my own cells under the microscope to see how they reacted to different pharmaceuticals. My art has always been about the power of positive thinking on our bodies and our cells. I am currently making what I am calling ‘Healthy Cell Paintings’ to give to family and friends during the pandemic. I am doing what I know to hopefully bring a little joy to those around me.”





Asfa Sabrin, Mumbai

Sabrin is a full-time research student and part-time artist who grew up in a small town in Assam and is currently living in Mumbai. She's had no formal art education, but has been learning techniques from Pinterest since 2014. Four years ago, she switched to digital art—a move that changed the game for her. “I almost stopped drawing and posting my artwork when I started working full-time in a biology research lab because I typically have 10- or 12-hour workdays. This piece explores some of those struggles—how much of your identity is defined by deadlines. Now that I have a lot of time on hand due to the lockdown, it's been a struggle to overcome the inertia of not making art every day and sort of return to my artist identity.”



