

Bearing Witness

Ellen Shattuck Pierce

INTRODUCTION

Linoleum is a sketchbook for me, a meditative place. Making a linocut allows me to slowly carve lines that are very certain in this uncertain time. Since March 16th 2020, I have created imagery related to the Covid pandemic, resulting in the *Covid Chronicles*, a series of sixteen relief carvings. The carvings each measure 46 x 61 cm and chronicle my experience of the Covid19 pandemic in Boston, Massachusetts and its wider impact in the United States.

As a mother and a public school art teacher I have had a window through which to view the pandemic's effect on families' lives. With the pivot to online teaching, I zoomed into two hundred and thirty homes to teach art to kindergarteners through fifth graders. Making the linocuts gave me some sense of agency. By recording the pain, anxiety and grief I witnessed, I aimed to escape despair and make sense of the chaos.

Nearing what we are starting to hope will be the end of the pandemic, the series serves as a remembrance and a validation of our shared experience. Additionally, it can be read as a cautionary tale of what we hope not to repeat when the United States faces its next pandemic.

NARRATIVE TRADITION

Recounting a narrative during periods of intense social upheaval has long been a tradition in printmaking. Francisco Goya's "The Disasters of War" and Kathe Kollwitz's "War" are both harsh indictments of war as told through a cycle of gutting images. Unlike her male peers, Kollwitz chose not to include scenes of combat or material ruination. Rather, she took the perspective of home and the war's devastating effect on mothers and children. Her unique vision sustains me in my own efforts to recount the effects of the pandemic on the home front and in our schools. In this brief

essay, I will explain the concepts that guided me in the making of *Covid Chronicles* and explore how images might be a useful way to bear witness.

HORRIFIC NEWS

Composing images for *Covid Chronicles*, especially in the first year, was in part responding to the challenge of processing so much horrific news in so little time. It was overwhelming. Each of these prints holds a lot of information, packed close. The compositions are visual expressions of what I woke



Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure 1. Let It Wash Over You (2020) by Ellen Shattuck Pierce. Linocut, 460 x 610 mm. Photo by Will Howcroft.
Figure 2. 4/13/20 - 5/1/20 (2020) by Ellen Shattuck Pierce. Linocut, 460 x 610 mm. Photo by Will Howcroft.

up to every day. In disbelief I would look at the news and say to myself, "All this is happening, all at the same time and all of it true."

My first print refers to a time that seems hard to remember now. We were all set for a "two week" disruptive adventure, sent home from work and school. The second print in the series, *4/13/20 – 5/1/20*, is filled with sadness. A rope forms a heart that lassos universal symbols depicting populations and activities most threatened by Covid, all pulled down by an anchor. And there is more: the cruise ship with Covid passengers stranded off shore and refused rescue; the New England Patriots plane flying in desperately needed PPE; a chart tracking the "first wave" of infections; and the terror on understanding that all parts of our bodies were subject to attack by the novel coronavirus.



Figure 3

The third in the series, *C'mon America! Mask Up!*, appears surreal, suggesting our dystopian existence. Spilled milk reflects the widespread waste of fresh food, as restaurants, hotels, and schools closed. Hogs were euthanized, or as I depict, put on diets of lettuce. The United States was in a precarious position, placed on life support, tubes connecting to a beating heart. An Icarus with lungs for wings and a heart for a body flies dangerously close to the sun, as eyes weep endless tears. And the only way to see a loved one in a nursing home was to visit with restricted access, face covered and bodies separated through glass.



Figure 4

ALLEGORY

The use of allegory pervades in, *Wash, Rinse, Repeat*, the fourth print in the series. A cute advertising icon blithely pours salt into our wounds. We line up for food, though food is being plowed under. We line up to be tested, though there are few testing supplies or sites. The broken eggs refer to food waste but also serve as an allegory: once consciousness is awakened, one cannot unsee the inequities and racism laid bare by Covid. We line up desperately to protest the murder of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, all the while that our president was absent, golfing and playing with countless lives.

Even as the plague took over society there was still sexual inequity. I carved print number five, *Scylla Retold*, after watching Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez respond to Representative Ted Yoho calling her a "f**king b**ch" on the steps of our Capitol. In this print, Scylla's tentacles feature Kamala Harris, Elizabeth Warren, Hillary Clinton, and members of "The Squad" of progressive women, all of whom have been called sexist and racist slurs because they hold and held positions of power. The revenge mythology of the existence of man-hating women is an old and tired theme. I found it exhilarating to recast Scylla, not as a monster, but a bad-ass sea creature. Watching so many women assume power in the US government was positive news that carried me through the darkest parts of the pandemic.

Figure 3. Figure 3. *C'mon America! Mask Up!* (2020) by Ellen Shattuck Pierce. Linocut, 460 x 610 mm. Photo by Will Howcroft.

Figure 4. *Wash, Rinse, Repeat* (2020) by Ellen Shattuck Pierce. Linocut, 460 x 610 mm. Photo by Will Howcroft.

CHALLENGES

One aspect of traditional relief carving that I both adore but find challenging is the limitation to only using black and white and having no gray scale. The sixth print in the series, *Reopening*, posed a challenge, as I wanted to douse the print in dappled light, which meant carving out a lot of white space. I think I used every tool and line I could think of to make lightness appear everywhere. I wanted to capture the mood that was so promising the first Covid Summer, when restrictions had relaxed. We experienced a racial reckoning as colonial monuments were destroyed or replaced. We dined safely outside together in blocked-off parking spaces and envisioned a more equitable society.

For print number seven, *Winter Peril*, it seemed apt to illustrate a game of hands when describing Winter 2021. The desire for human contact is part of our nature but it had lethal consequences. Cases skyrocketed and synagogues and churches were sites of transmission. "Here is the church, here is the steeple, open the doors and see all the people" symbolizes the heart-breaking and contentious times as we spent holidays alone and mourned alone. New York could not keep up with Covid victims and resorted to burying unclaimed bodies on Hart Island which saw the most burials in 2020 since the AIDS pandemic.

Since many of the same themes are present in print eight as print nine, I will move forward to describe the latter, *Pandemic Month 11*. Images of remote learning abound. Our brains are hooked up to devices all day. Moms are exhausted from working full-time while also being an IT specialist, cheerleader, therapist, cook, teacher, and activities coach. Women leave the workforce in droves. The stark and urgent palette of black and white keeps focus on the images and captures the mood.

MOTION AND MARK MAKING

A feature of printmaking I admire but rarely employ is creating motion through mark-making. In print number ten, *Circling Around*, I use the repeated motif of a circle to create the vortex of emotion our nation felt on January 6, 2021, the day of the insurrection. Our capital remained encircled in barbed wire for weeks after. The circle further symbolizes the endless repetition we experienced in our daily lives: we awaited the vaccine, we took long walks, we watched the hands of the clock (depicted as a shadow of the American flag, resembling a scythe), death loomed. A circle of nails crosses the path of people queuing for testing and loops up into a coffin maker's hands.

In print eleven, *Half a Million Today*, I pay homage to MC Escher. 500,000 candles were lit on the steps of the White House to honour the lives lost to Covid19; these morph into vaccines being made and then turn into capitol officers attending the memorial service for their fallen brother.

Coming Out of the Woods honours tech-savvy women who helped the



Figure 5



Figure 6

Figure 5. *Scylla Retold* (2020) by Ellen Shattuck Pierce. Linocut, 460 x 610 mm. Photo by Will Howcroft.

Figure 6. *Reopening* (2020) by Ellen Shattuck Pierce. Linocut, 460 x 610 mm. Photo by Will Howcroft.

most vulnerable secure appointments for vaccine shots, at a time when negotiating government websites seemed impossible. We finally are vaccinated. There is light ahead. Yet, we wait for children to receive theirs. We send them off to school in masks (in some states) amidst Delta. Other variants are disguised in the garden as alliums. An evergreen tree is made up of guns and poses a hidden danger to students on their way to school.

CONCLUSION

We know this is not the end of the story; the pandemic continues and there are more prints in the series. As I write this account, the January 6th Committee hearing is taking place, investigating the fateful day when the Capitol was stormed by citizens. Evidence shown to the jury was presented as a visual story of pictures; showing the notes, tweets, interviews and video footage that led up to the attack. History is messy, unpredictable, and uncertain when experienced firsthand. Creating a visual narrative helps us reflect, summarize what happened and gain insight into how we might prevent it from happening again.

As we search for the exact beginnings of Covid19 and ponder its ending, Covid Chronicles remain standing as a sign of those times. We can view them as a whole, or look at each individually and make our own connections. Within the cloud-like nature of the imagery, there is no beginning nor end, but a chronology that exists without slides, pages, headlines or audio clips. And this, I think, is the real benefit of printed matter. It's immediate and all in our hands. The cycle of prints captures what I thought to myself in the beginning of these times, "All this is happening, all at the same time and all of it true." It's simultaneous, experiential, a multiverse. Through making the series, the pandemic is stored in my personal time capsule. The prints have the capability to demonstrate to generations to come that these events did happen and that we bore witness to them.

SHARING THE WORK

I had begun to envision Covid Chronicles like the Bayeux Tapestry. While my cycle of prints is no real match to the tapestry and only spans 10 meters rather than 70, the idea of a continuous narrative appealed to me and I imagined installing the prints as a record of events. However, Covid posed problems for having in-person exhibits.

Nonetheless I was sharing the work on social media, and the response from viewers connecting with the prints was gratifying. I love the democracy of print as it is replicable and relatively low cost to produce. I wanted people to be able to hold my prints should they desire, so I printed mini-prints and sent them to anyone who asked for them, with the request they answer a question related to the print on the postcard.

The graphic nature of print and its ability to capture exacting detail made the *Covid Chronicles* read like tarot cards. Viewers responded to my written prompt and had visual reminders of the pandemic with



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

Figure 7. Winter Peril (2021) by Ellen Shattuck Pierce. Linocut, 460 x 610 mm. Photo by Will Howcroft.

Figure 8. "F" This (2021) by Ellen Shattuck Pierce. Linocut, 460 x 610 mm. Photo by Will Howcroft.

Figure 9. Pandemic Month 11 (2021) by Ellen Shattuck Pierce. Linocut, 460 x 610 mm. Photo by Will Howcroft.

which to make meaning. I received responses capturing moments of resilience, mutual aid, beauty, humour, and pain. My next project is to print a *Covid Chronicle Workbook* of the prints, writing prompts and space to respond so people can tell their own Covid story.

Mary Van Hook said, "Stories don't mirror life, they shape it." The *Covid Chronicle Workbook* is not recording what happened but building a narrative around a traumatic experience that we might be able to digest.

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Ellen Shattuck Pierce is an artist and educator living in Boston, MA. She loves printmaking and its historical role in disseminating knowledge, its use as a decorative art, and its use as a medium for protest. She embraces all three of these aspects by using relief cuts to create allegorical scenes of American life in her prints, books, and wallpaper installations. Her work has been shown in France, the UAE, Cuba and Portugal. She graduated from UMass Boston, and received her Ed.M from Harvard. Being Canadian, she longed to return to Canada and moved to Toronto to complete her MFA at York University.

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Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12

Figure 10. Circling Around (2021) by Ellen Shattuck Pierce. Linocut, 460 x 610 mm. Photo by Will Howcroft.

Figure 11. Half a Million Today (2021) by Ellen Shattuck Pierce. Linocut, 460 x 610 mm. Photo by Will Howcroft.

Figure 12. Coming Out of the Woods (2021) by Ellen Shattuck Pierce. Linocut, 460 x 610 mm. Photo by Will Howcroft.

IMAGE GALLERY



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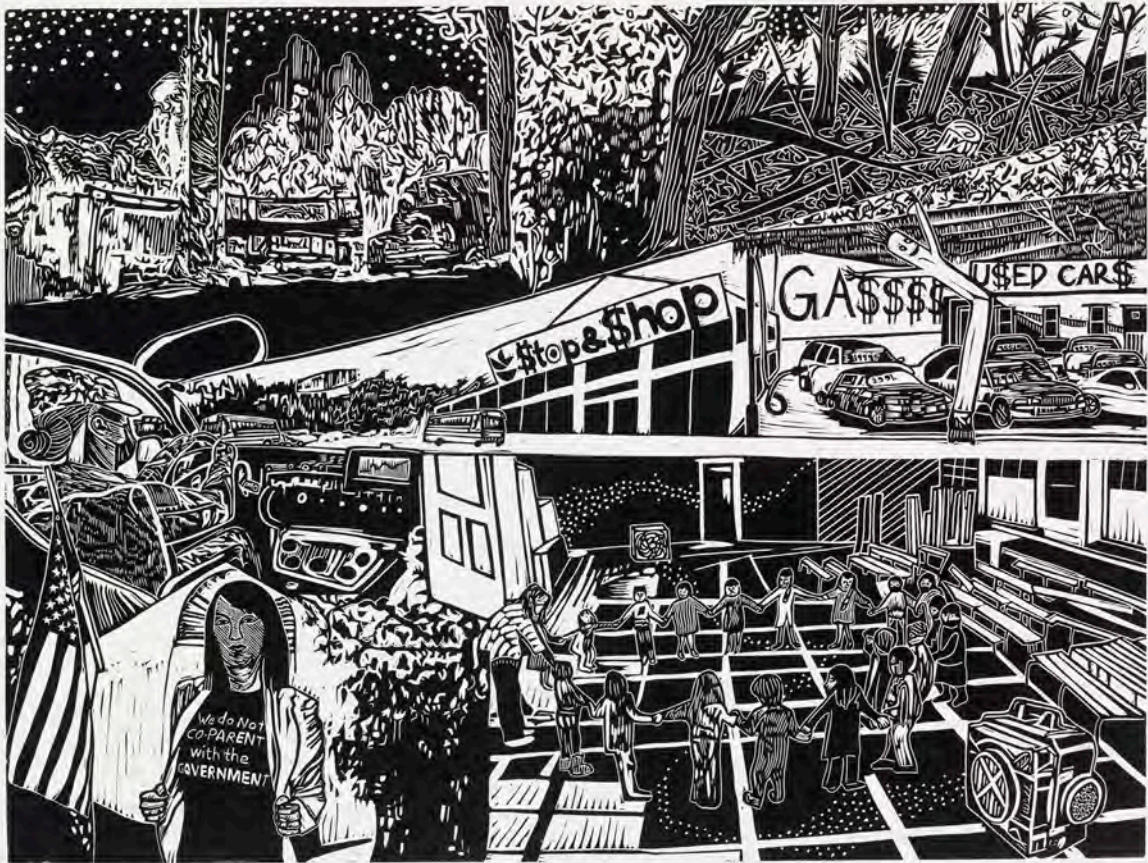


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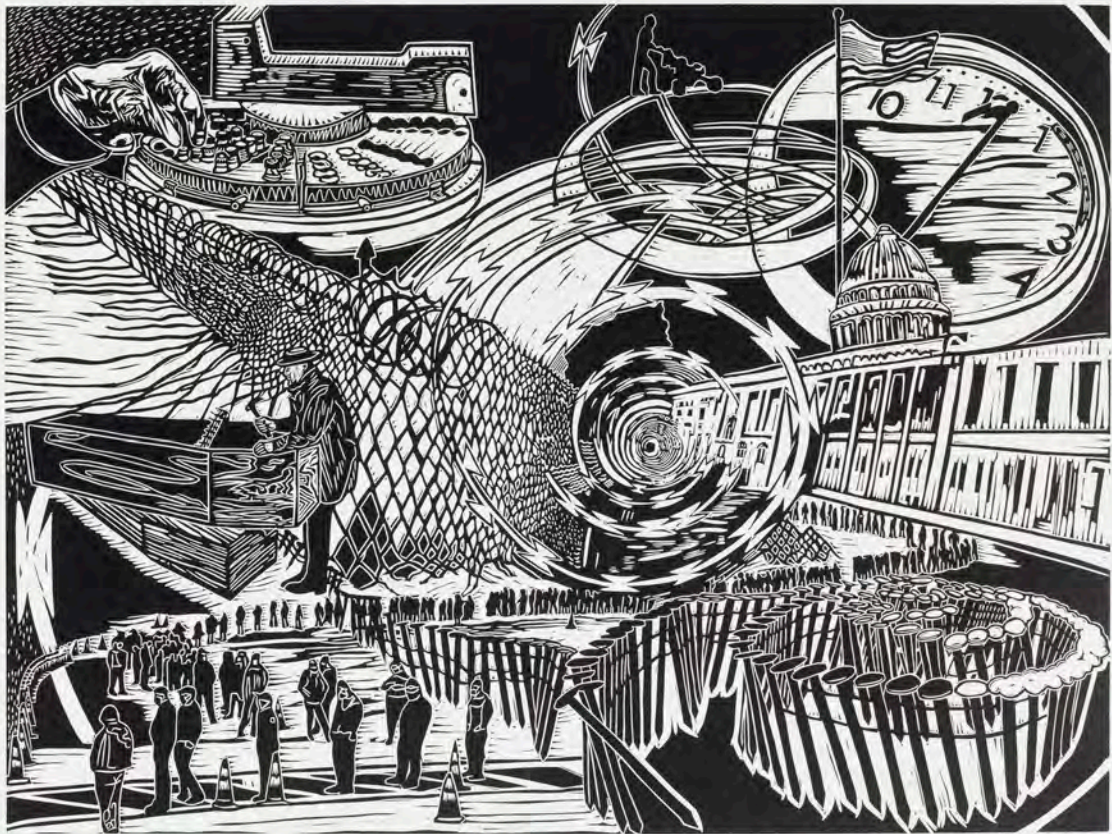


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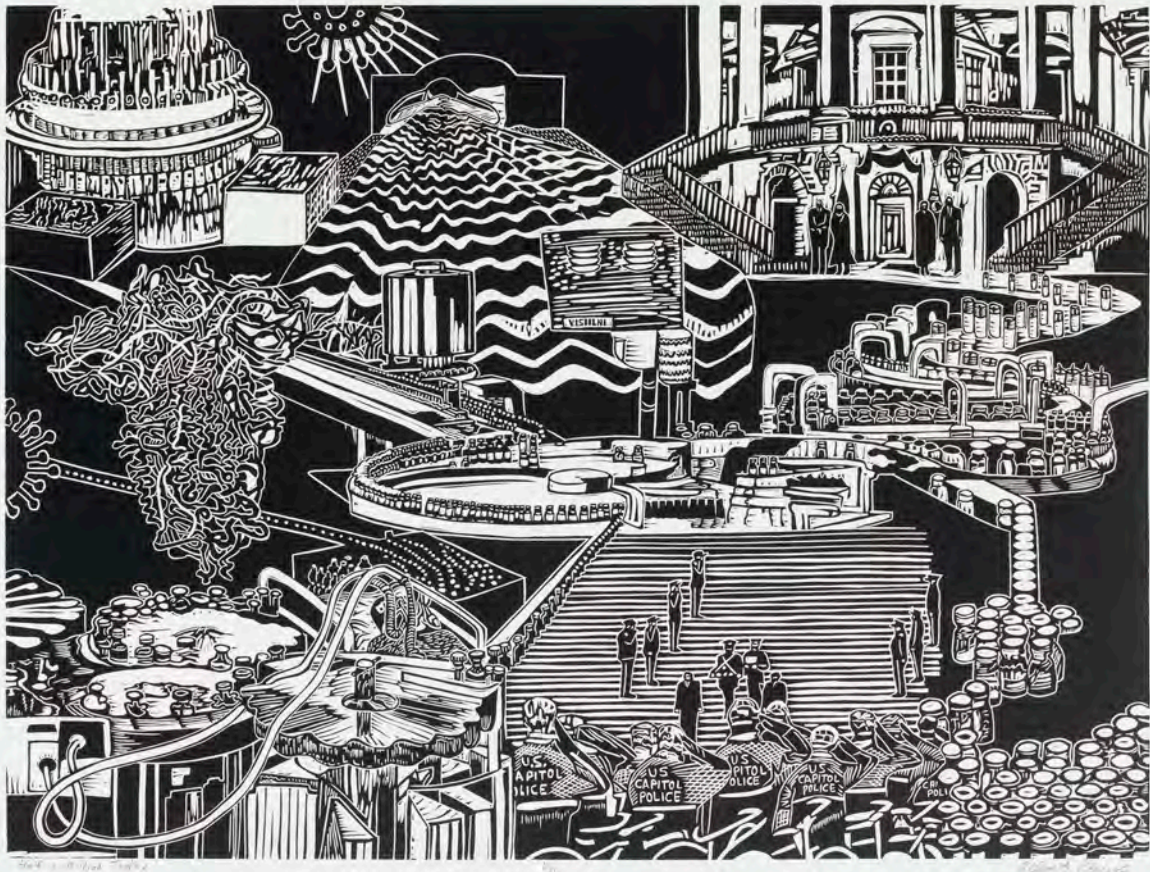


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