Arts & Humanities

Art Under Quarantine

Nancy Cohen’s new drawings capture the desolation and hope of the current moment.

By
Sally Lee
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Nancy Cohen with "13A" (left) and "Espiritu Santo," two drawings influenced by the pandemic. (Courtesy of Nancy Cohen)

Nancy Cohen ’84SOA is used to spending her days alone. As she works on the huge handmade-paper drawings and sculptural installations that have brought her critical acclaim, the hours pass quickly. Solitude is a gift that sustains her. But Cohen’s work , like that of many artists, has been, she says, marked by “the sadness of the virus

and greatly influenced by it.”

Two recent drawings, part of an ongoing series, were started before the pandemic but evolved as COVID-19 tightened its grip on the East Coast. One, titled *13A*, captures the orange flames and eerie light emanating from petroleum refineries near Exit 13A on the New Jersey Turnpike. Cohen, who works from a studio in Jersey City, says that over time this work has become more desolate, which feels “very parallel to this moment.”

The second drawing, *Espiritu Santo*, captures the memory of a trip to a remote island off the coast of Mexico. Cohen was hiking in the desert, and as she approached the sea she was struck by the intertwining spiral patterns of sand and water created by the tides. “It was one of the most beautiful things I have ever seen,” she says.

She worked on *Espiritu Santo* for more than three months, adding thick layers of paper pulp to create texture, color, and dimension, and as she worked, the memory of that moment on the beach comforted her. She says that during the lockdown, she began almost subconsciously to introduce the color gold. “There’s a knowing and a not knowing in the making of art, but I think the gold gives the drawing a spiritual and ephemeral quality,” she says, noting that in art, the use of gold is traditionally associated with heaven and angels.

“It helped me to convey the idea of a place that was beautiful but fragile and to capture the transient nature of life at this time.”

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