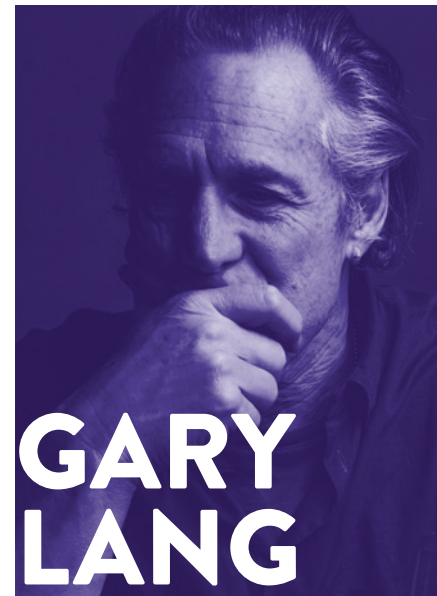
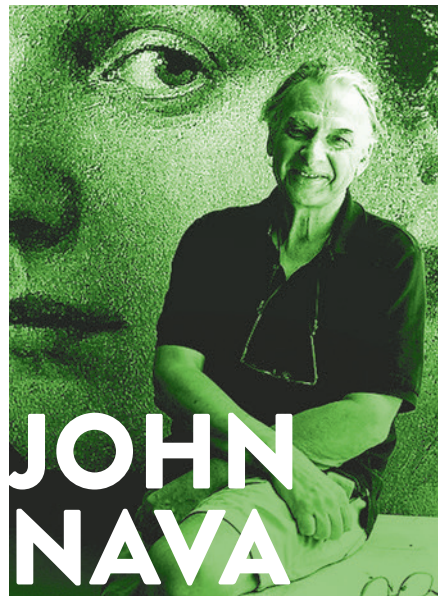


AT HOME WITH THE MUSE

“INSPIRATION EXISTS, BUT IT HAS TO FIND YOU WORKING.” *Pablo Picasso*



Every spring, the intoxicating aroma of citrus blossoms fills the Ojai Valley. This year, along with the Pixie tangerines, came the news that a dangerous pandemic — COVID-19 — was sweeping across the globe. A concern for our loved ones and community was shared by all. Soon, the United States would lead the world in infections, bringing the whole country to a standstill. Our uneasiness grew to a collective grief for all who have suffered losses as we donned masks and learned how to convey a warm smile with our eyes.

For a visual artist, isolation is often a way of life. From the solitude of the studio, masterpieces are born. Those who rouse the muse during challenging times can channel that energy and thrive creatively. But there is more to the creative process than simply having the time to produce. It takes mind, body and soul. For some, the empathic nature of an artist — especially when others are suffering — can generate a form of grief that can be debilitating. However, inspiration strikes from the broad depths of emotion, from despair to great joy. Throughout history, the arts have had the power to ask difficult questions, to suggest answers and to unify our society. They provide ways to interpret our world. Indeed, artists

are often authentic recorders of our collective history and humanity.

I had the opportunity to discuss what it is like to create during this epic time with six accomplished Ojai artists.

Realist painter and renowned tapestry maker **JOHN NAVA** shared, “I didn’t realize how much my normal life pattern matched ‘lockdown.’ I work in a studio on my property and rarely need to leave home at all. As it happens, I have a couple of commissions to complete and, if anything, the current pandemic-related restrictions have increased uninterrupted work time for me. Several artist and writer friends have noticed the same thing.”

When asked if outside factors, such as the state of unrest in our nation and its future, have had an influence in his motivation, John responded, “I usually work with the radio on — mostly NPR or KUSC. I have had to cut out news to a great extent since the current state of American politics is so indescribably foul. Both enraging and soul destroying.” John continues, “Today what constitutes a work of art is extremely widely defined. Similarly, the ways in which art is made are numberless. My own work, however, follows a traditional model of essentially solo practice. Working in highly social ways is very common now but

I, for the most part, spend my time alone in my studio. I sometimes work with a model or in a weaving mill in Belgium but, for the most part, I work on my own.”

Contemporary art is always a reflection of the times in which we live. John feels that there is a dramatic shift in the arts underway. “The traditional forms of fine art and houses of culture as domains of elite privilege are dead. The highly social forms I mentioned earlier, especially those that attack social injustice on every level, constitute both a damning critique and an invention of new forms to make art a more relevant and vital part of society.”

Creative partners **GARY LANG AND RUTH PASTINE** are modernist painters who approach their work in a meditative way, incorporating optical effects to masterfully engage the viewer. Their responses to the current events were unified regarding their family but could not be more different in the studio. When the March stay-at-home order was announced, their priority was to bring their two college-age children home. Once that goal was accomplished, both headed to the studio. Gary changed from his normally vibrant, energized color palette to a dark and somber



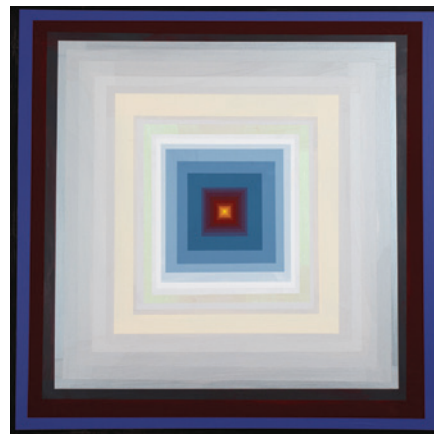
By Donna Granata, founder of Focus on the Masters Arts Archive & Library



Ruth Pastine, Depths. 2020.



Kent Butler in his studio. Photo: Sharon Butler.



Gary Lang, CQS#4, 2020.



Karen Lewis, The Birthday Bouquet. Oil on canvas, 2020.



John Nava, Single Orange, Oil on Canvas, 1990.



Katie van Horn, Untitled, monotype.

tonality. Gary shared, “I struggle with the world’s fears, like so many of us. We carry our brothers in our hearts and we’re mourning and fighting to survive.” Known for his signature massive, pulsating circles, Gary has, during the pandemic, turned to painting concentric squares — confined, controlled and structured — as a way to make sense of a world out of control. In contrast, Gary continues to pursue computer-generated images on aluminum that are, in his words, “uncorked positivity,” remaining perpetually optimistic — one of Gary’s most enduring traits.

During isolation Ruth revisited works on paper and began a new series of hand painted oils titled “Depths.” The color fields of the paintings are uplifting and life-affirming. The luminous color quality and dramatic palette was a surprise for the artist. She explains, “My painting practice is very rigorous physically, emotionally and spiritually. There is a methodological intensity to how I work, and it requires being completely present. I didn’t have the resources to engage in the rigor that working on large paintings requires. I thought I would engage my primary practice of painting with oils and try

working on paper. I wasn’t expecting so much luminosity from this work because of the dire and challenging times we’re all experiencing. I was imagining a much more somber palette, but the color and luminosity is really a gift right now because it’s filled with hope. It’s really helping to ignite and illuminate a much more positive emotional state.”

Working on paper allows the artist to finish a piece within one, two, or three sessions of working for several hours at a time as opposed to seven-to eight-hour sessions while working on larger canvases. “There’s something about working on paper. It has inherent liberties that are freeing to explore and experiment without the demands of even creating finished work. This was helping me to get through the moment and then I just found myself in this deep well, just transcending the distraction from my mind’s concerns.”

Often, an artist’s creative process is shaped by early experiences that remain deeply seated in their psyche and can become a catalyst for new work — especially during challenging times.

Painter and printmaker **KAREN LEWIS**

is a member of the esteemed Ojai Studio Artists. As a young girl, Karen and her family were living in the Philippines when Pearl Harbor was bombed. By the time news of the war reached Manila, Japanese troops were descending on the city. The family was captured and, along with 4,000 other people, placed in the Santo Tomas Internment Camp until their liberation by General Douglas MacArthur on February 3, 1945. Karen spent three and a half formative years — from age 9 to 13 — confined to one location. The traumatizing experience instilled in her a resiliency and fortitude that has served her well throughout her life and in her studio practice. Karen credits her optimism as a gift from her mother for always being positive even during the most trying of times.

“My husband Craig received the most beautiful bouquet of flowers for his 90th birthday. It was so stunning that I took them into the studio and painted them with such joy.” Shortly after, Karen had gone out of town and returned to Ojai just before the lockdown. She saw in her absence that the beautiful flowers had not been watered. “They were beginning

to die. They were fading, but they were still beautiful. So, I painted them a second time. I was painting this fading beauty over the month of March.” As time pressed on, the pandemic became more dire and the flowers continued to fade. “I turned them around and painted it again from the other side and I loved it! I just saw the beauty of something that was once gorgeous and was now fading as a metaphor for the state of our country. It’s no longer what it once was.”

KATIE VAN HORN is also a member of the Ojai Studio Artists. Locally her works grace the walls of the Azu restaurant on Ojai Avenue. When asked how she was holding up during the stay-at-home order, Katie lamented, “For me the COVID virus has been an amazing teacher in grief and compassion for everyone suffering, separated, dying, serving and reaching out. It’s just so overwhelmingly sad.” Katie needed the first two months to process the immensity of what was being experienced. “I have not experienced anything like it — a deep inner reflection.” At one point she realized, “You gotta take that stake out of your heart in order to

move forward. Now that I’m past it, I’m feeling really encouraged to get back to work.” As shelter-in-place orders befell communities all over the U.S., any artist with a concurrent or forthcoming exhibition saw the doors of their venue(s) close to the public. Many gallerists and artists had to pivot and post the work online for virtual exhibitions. As Katie considers the future of her work, she is realizing a shift. “For me, it will take deep listening to what is important to others right now that will be meaningful and uplift the person contemplating an art piece. Not imposed. It is going to be different. We are all in this together.”

In many cases, artists prepare for years for a major exhibition. When an artist loses an exhibit, they lose more than prospective sales and the considerable expenses involved. They lose momentum and the precious time preparing for the exhibit. They miss the joy of sharing their work with the public.

Ironically, for some artists, online sales are reportedly up as is the case with **KENT BUTLER**. “These challenging times can bring out the best in

us. I find I’m painting more and more in the moment. For many years we have used Facebook, the internet and Instagram to reach out to the public and the art world. Since the pandemic we have done amazingly well with our art sales, which hasn’t always been the case. I think for the near future the internet and virtual displaying of one’s art seems to be the way things are heading.” Kent and his wife Sharon are both members of Ojai Studio Artists.

Kent is known for his lively color palette and varying style including a signature pointillistic technique. “I also feel more energized and motivated. My colors seem more vibrant. I don’t mind isolation. I’m my happiest being in my studio by myself painting.” Kent’s optimism helps him stay focused. “We, as a nation, always should try to have hope. Being divided does not help. I try to keep my mind, body, and soul clear so that I can paint. I’m in remission from cancer so I really count every day as a blessing. My hope is that our younger generation can have a clear, healthy future. I’ve lived a wonderful life and I can only hope they will be able to do the same. I’m now in my mid-70s so I feel I had better get with it!” ■



Gary Lang with various works: Photo by Donna Granata.