

The Story of my Collection "Breathe"
By Shelly Cannon and Christy Ross

A once-in-a-lifetime pandemic upended our way of life, causing us to rethink everything. It is about a revitalized sense of gratitude; for health, for gathering with loved ones, for the privilege of meeting people in person, for the joy of being alive. This departure from "life before the pandemic" has given flight to a profound reinvention. Being required to stay home was the catalyst for a deep exploration. In a culture so consumed with doing and getting somewhere, being still -- and going within to start painting -- was a gift.

As an art teacher, in the past I saw myself as an instructor for others rather than an artist myself. Yet, I had to give up teaching as a K-8 art teacher to stay home and do distance learning with my son. At first, I admittedly felt blindsided. But while he was on the computer for class, I painted in our playroom. Gradually, I started to see it as the gift it was. I could take off my art teacher hat and trade it in for the artist's hat I yearned to wear. No longer feeling the need to rush around to school, work and appointments, a portal opened. I had the time and space to create. In the spirit of metamorphosis, change was on the horizon.

The other part of the equation, as stated, is what provided the bridge of connection: social media. Despite the fact I had to stay at home, my virtual world could be expansive and without borders. This enabled tremendous positive change. I could connect with people from around the world through my art. And so, social media became the lifeline to bond with others and build community.

I began seeing beautiful images – photos that others had created – urging me to paint in a way I hadn't previously. As though the world went overnight from black and white to color. Deep, saturated, rich colors, the hues that define my painting. I sought to capture through my art the beauty of distant shores I experienced on social media; to capture a fleeting moment in time and provide to others, even if virtually, an escape they likely needed as well. My work depicting faraway locales seeks to transport the viewer to experience other places without being able to travel there. The juxtaposition of feeling trapped, yet wanting to travel, was the catalyst for depicting these experiences in my art. While art did not imitate life, my art was inspired by the contrast between reality and my aspirations. I would leave the house to run outside or get coffee at the drive-through, seeking an ephemeral sense of emancipation. I continued to share online what I was painting.

The result: an incredible sense of connection with people. I'd see something such as a photo or a card, and ask for permission to paint it. In one instance, the photographer whose picture I painted bought the painting and gave it to the woman whose house he photographed.

Further, while well-intentioned with the people's right to know, I came to feel that the

incessant drumbeat of bad news in the media, from catastrophe to crisis, demanded another necessary departure: a much-needed break. Once again, I felt my art was providing a means of escape, both for myself and anyone who viewed it.

Magical things started happening. I took this as a message that I was aligned with my purpose, and to keep going. From Iceland to Brazil, the pandemic led me to befriend people the world over. I would see images I found uplifting and, once again, obtain permission to paint them. I also reconnected with high school and college friends. Friends both old and new enthusiastically responded. One of my friends, Daniel Shiplacoff from UCLA, planted lilies in his backyard. He let me paint them from his photos. And so it began.

My friend Mackenzie Wieser who lives in Elk Grove, California, is an avid cyclist and sunrise enthusiast. She let me combine her photos into a dramatic cyclist painting, "Ride at Dawn", "The Colors of Wisdom" and "Sweet Escape": (two silhouette tree paintings with colorful skies). We had known each other at San Dieguito High School and shared a few classes but through social media have had several conversations and I would now consider her a friend. Her dedication to fitness and wellbeing is awe inspiring as are her photos of the sky which she documents religiously as she goes for her bike rides. I hope that she one day has her own show of the skies that she creates with her photography.

Willy Johannes from Iceland, a friend I met on Facebook's "A View from my Window," creates photography of sunsets from Iceland. His work has inspired two of my sailboat sunset paintings: "Sunset Harbor" and "The Dream Awaits". His vivid sunset photography of Iceland has mesmerized me completely. I plan on meeting him in person someday and hope to experience the sunsets of Iceland myself.

My high school friend Angela Christensen Riddle lives in St. Croix and takes the most beautiful beach photography. We also reconnected during the pandemic. Her photography has inspired two of my paintings, "The Cloud" and "Waiting to Sail." One of the paintings sold right after I posted it on social media. She has a clear ability to capture nature at its calmest. I also plan to visit her in St. Croix someday. When I do, I will give her a big hug thanking her for all the beauty she has shared with me.

Greg Bolian, a friend I met back in 2008, had numerous stunning photographs of beaches from Hawaii as well as elephants from the San Diego Zoo. His photograph of Kailua moved me to paint. It became one of my best-selling works of art. Recently, it was selected to be in the Surfrider Foundation's Art Auction and Gala. Greg's elephant photography inspired "Liberation Elephant," which symbolized my determination to survive Covid with my spirit intact.

Being able to connect with people via social media has opened up a world of creativity. My most recent painting is of Gilbert Castellanos, an accomplished San Diego jazz musician. When my husband and I went to a concert for the first time, I

took my own photos of the sunset and Gilbert Castellanos performing at the Rady Shell. Three days later I finished painting his portrait and posted it on social media. I tagged him; he responded that he was “inspired by my work! It’s beautiful.” I will be donating it to his Young Lions jazz band so he can teach more teens how to play jazz.

This has been a great opportunity to build community and support the arts in my beautiful home of San Diego. In truth, I have always believed art is a connector. With the concept of progression from the pandemic as a framework, now I create as both an instructor and an artist. As we navigate the transition from stay-at-home to get-back-out-there, from lockdown to freedom, I feel a renewed sense of belonging. All of us reinventing are able to experience a kind of creative rebirth. In doing so, we can translate those personal experiences into art and provide much-needed perspective to move forward. Having grown up in a very Catholic family, the idea of a symbolic rebirth has great meaning. Whether online or in person, I have a restored faith in relationships. And I understand how vital it is that all of us, including our children have the social enrichment of being with other students. In the spirit of building community, I’ve expanded my relationships to other artists as well. By participating in the Shelter Island Art Association, the Clairmont Art Guild and the online group San Diego Artists, I can play a role in furthering a sense of community and human connection. As we all reach out beyond our comfort zones, we can touch people’s lives and forge meaningful relationships. All of which will have lasting impacts.

If necessity is the mother of invention, then the pandemic has been the catalyst for an overarching reinvention. With life as we know it redefined, from homes to classrooms, and hospitals to workplaces, all of us share a renewed understanding of how connected and interdependent we are. That we need each other and the gift of our relationships. And that, more than anything, our sense of aloneness and separation is an illusion. We must all breathe.