Visual Arts

How contemporary art is changing in the Covid-19 era

Online platforms are delivering artists' responses with unprecedented speed

'Roma 21' by Stanley Whitney (2020) © Robert McKeever/Gagosian

Jackie Wullschläger YESTERDAY

"I didn't paint the war," Picasso said after the liberation of France. "But there's no doubt the war was in my pictures." Like the impact of coronavirus itself, touching some people mildly, others devastatingly, the effect of a world of illness and lockdown on individual artists and galleries is diverse, but already memorable works are emerging which are inescapably of this moment without describing it.

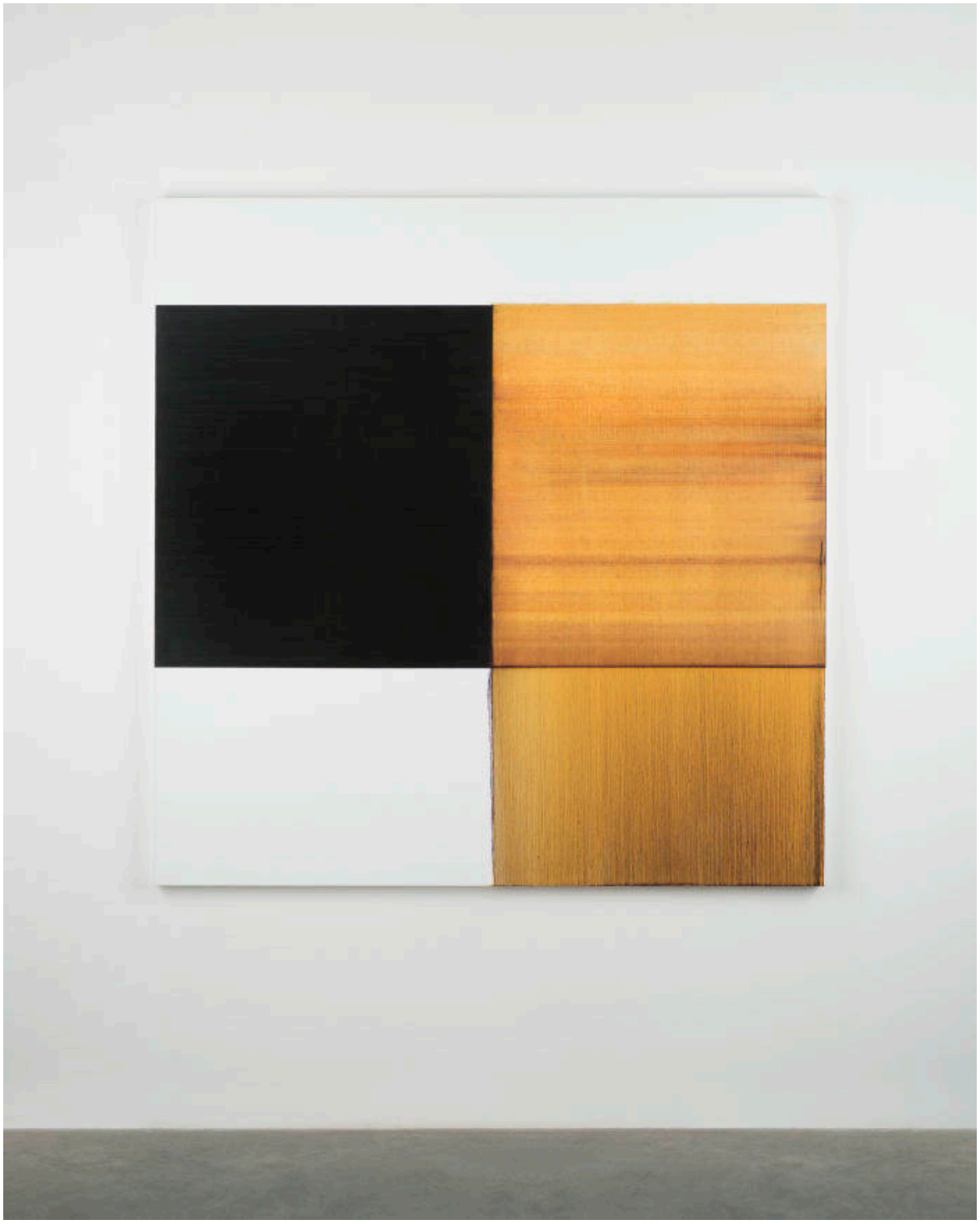
Callum Innes has just made “Lamp Black/Quinacridone Gold” in lockdown in his Oslo studio: quivering layers of paint partly dissolved in turpentine, exposing strata of colour and tone, suggesting a dark, closed room by lamplight, a mysterious blackness with glimmers of hope, also the fragility of skin.

The Scottish abstract master has never painted a more controlled yet expressive, richly veined work than this double monochrome. I came across it by chance, browsing Kerlin Gallery at the online Dallas Art Fair (to April 23) — a fair I never considered visiting in person.

Picasso did not show his occupation paintings until after the war, but today online platforms, quickly embraced — Art Basel’s viewing room, replacing its March Hong Kong fair, was so popular that the site crashed — are bringing new work to audiences in isolation with unprecedented rapidity. It is a triumph of contemporary art’s resilience and innovation.

“Roma 21” (2020), a vibrant, wobbly multi-hued grid/stack painting, playing off different densities, transparencies, free-form, jazzy, also suggesting shelves of funerary urns, is 74-year-old African American Stanley Whitney’s homage to what he calls Rome’s “order and ancient rhythm”.

Working between Italy and New York, Whitney, focus of the current Artist Spotlight (to April 21), Gagosian’s carefully chosen weekly online series, says the city “clarifies and inspires” him. This joyful disruptive painting reads like an eloquent memory of a shuttered civilisation.



'Exposed Painting Quinacridone Gold' by Callum Innes © Hyjdla Kosaniuk/Callum Innes/CIHK Ltd

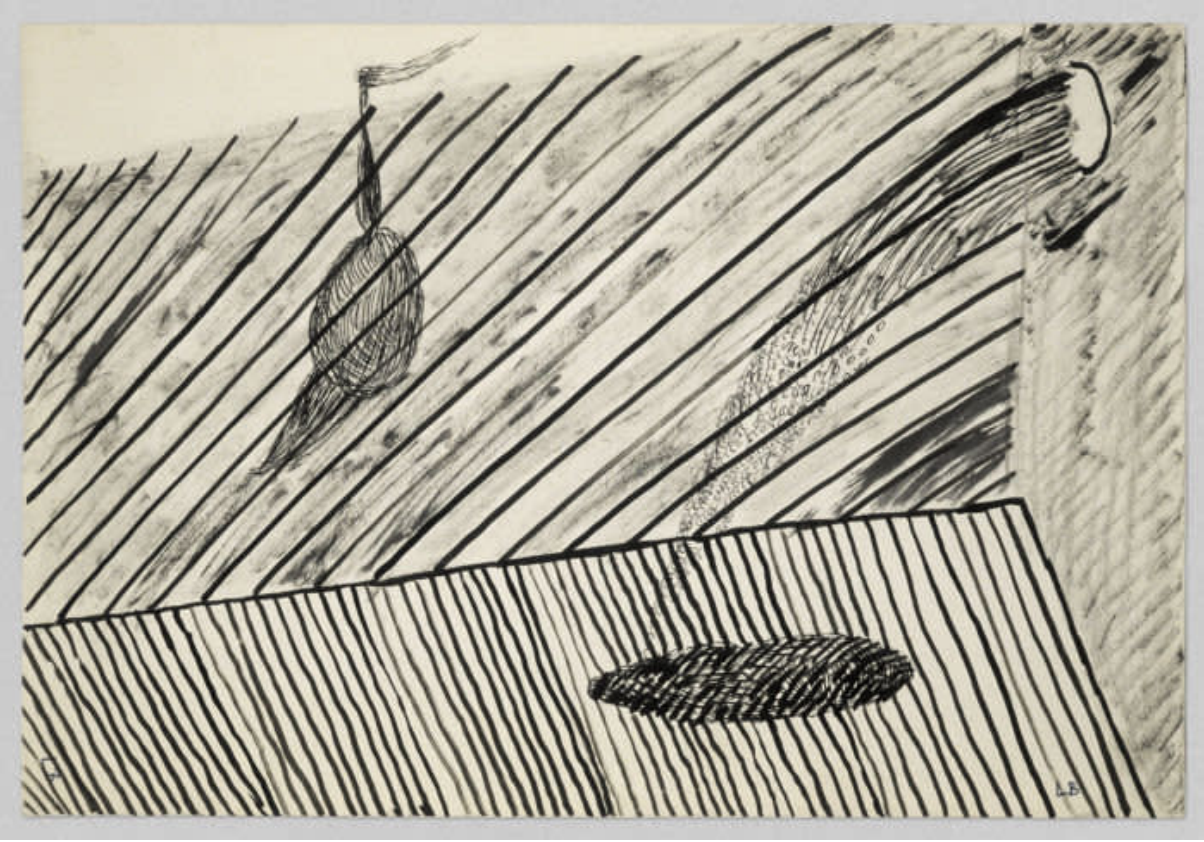
Then there is Tu Hongtao's "Light Night" (2019-20), a lush calligraphic abstract landscape, passages of crimson and pale blue against dark blocked-in surfaces, full of dread but threaded with shining painterly skeins, produced outside Chengdu when China first confronted Covid-19. Was Tu then even thinking about the disease? The point is great painting's sense for the pulse of the times. Lévy Gorvy's digital exhibition (to May 30), beginning with the nightmarish crammed cityscape "Maybe Tokyo or Chengdu" (2006-07), introduces this superb lyrical/epic painter to global audiences.

“The need for connection and communication is amplified now, art has a vital role in meeting that,” suggests Darragh Hogan, Kerlin’s director. Nevertheless, as another gallerist admitted to me tentatively, “It really is not a time to be seen to be pushing anything. Decisions are being made slowly. It’s a useful time to stop and think.”

Online viewing does not give the physical hit of encountering a powerful work, but it offers time, space away from the crowd, opportunities for slow looking, and the absence of aggressive salesmanship. Encouraged by path-breaking technology — Oliver Miro’s Vortic, Hauser & Wirth’s ArtLab — digital commercial exhibitions will endure as the new normal.

“The pandemic has accelerated changes that were already taking shape,” says dealer Kamel Mennour. “Audiences have proliferated globally . . . many already couldn’t visit our physical locations. Today, we have found ourselves in a world where we can either retreat in fear or connect and move forward digitally. This period will redesign the way the art world works. Probably fewer fairs, at least physical ones, and the rise of online initiatives as audiences get comfortable with consuming culture online. We see room for both the physical and the virtual.”

The move to digital brings three major advantages to contemporary art. First, as in other cultural sectors such as higher education, ethical gains: a drop in carbon footfall, wider accessibility, less elitism — many people interested in new art remain nervous of the frosty atmosphere in high-end galleries.



'Untitled' by Louise Bourgeois (1951) © Courtesy The Easton Foundation and Hauser & Wirth

Second: a flight to quality, with, hopefully, greater emphasis on painting — powerful images star online, conceptual games less so — and also on the subtle pleasures of drawings, which repay close attention: for example Hauser's inaugural online exhibition of Louise Bourgeois's drawings, "thought feathers . . . ideas that I seize in mid-flight", as the artist described them.

The art market will come through stronger, smarter, more relevant

Third is a drive to contemporary art education, paralleling historic offerings from museums. Gallerist David Zwirner has spoken of how the "globetrotting set" is becoming less knowledgeable: "Connoisseurship is really not valued, sometimes it is even looked down on." But people in solitude learn to dig deeper — a chance for the scholarly over the social. We will all be processing trauma at some level: New York and London, the twin art capitals long thriving on liberalism, global connectivity and extremes of wealth, are suffering the worst mortality rates.

"It's been a sobering experience," uberdealer Larry Gagosian told me from his East Hampton home last week, "a terrifying experience. When people go back, things will look different, the test of time will be more meaningful — going deeper, taking more time to digest and contextualise, rather than 'Here it is, do you want it?' Everybody is on a crash course, working out strategies — you can't just tell someone to come over and look at a painting. Business has slowed dramatically, but there is a desire to buy art, art makes people feel good. The art market will come through stronger, smarter, more relevant. There will be a premium on gravitas."

This is already apparent in imaginative presentations attuned to how viewers "read" art differently online, closer to literature's introspective pleasure rather than a physical gallery's collective experience. Kamel Mennour's recent *From Home* exhibition threaded excerpts from Zola, Maupassant, Camus and Perec through a gathering of bright, eclectic pieces themed around interiors: Bertrand Lavier's pink/blue sculpture/painting piano "Erard", Anish Kapoor's "Mirror (Magenta)". Luxembourg & Dayan is publishing weekly art letters: Sophie-Taeuber Arp to her husband on anger, Sol LeWitt's invocation to Eva Hesse to "stop thinking, worrying, looking over your shoulder . . . ass-gouging, eyeball-poking, finger-pointing, alleyway-sneaking . . . Stop it and just DO."

Michael Craig-Martin's 'Thank You NHS' poster (2020)

There is optimism in bleak times from artists just doing; Michael Craig-Martin's "Thank You NHS" flower poster, free to download, colour in and display in your window; Neapolitan street artist Jorit's "Paolo Antonio Ascierto", a hyper-real portrait of the Naples immunologist with mask, at Blindarte's auction (ongoing) to support Italian medical staff; New Yorker Rashid Johnson's "Untitled Anxious Red Drawings", lockdown variations of his "Anxious Men" series, released this weekend by Hauser & Wirth, with 20 per cent of its proceeds to the Covid-19 Solidarity Response Fund.

Hogan describes Innes's black/gold painting as "a perfect example of beauty born out of difficult conditions". "Every day is not a fiesta," says Gagosian, "but art has come through the ages, a source of inspiration" — as is new work, now.