

INTERVIEWS

ALICJA KWADE

June 12, 2020 • Alicja Kwade on adapting her practice to quarantine time



Alicja Kwade, *CC In-Between*, 2020, brass gold-plated pocket watch hands, mixed materials on paper, 12 1/2 x 18 1/2 x 1".

Guided by scientific principles, Alicja Kwade breaks complex structures into comprehensible

segments while shrouding her art in a mystery both cosmic and human. Last spring, she installed two large-scale sculptures modeling the solar system on top of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art for its Roof Garden Commission series. Comprised of heavy, delicately suspended stones from around the world, the abstract orrery encouraged viewers to reflect on their own position within a massive yet fragile universe. Working under partial lockdown in Berlin, the artist discusses the nature of time under quarantine and how her practice has shifted.

WHEN ALL THIS BEGAN, I returned to a series of clock hand drawings I started a few years ago. Back then, I was running around like crazy with shows and meetings and I realized that I couldn't remember what had gone on most days. So, I started these drawings to help me visualize my day and understand how time unfolds. I'd start at the hour I awoke, then change the position of the clock hands depending on how I felt time was moving as the day progressed. I'm not doing them each day anymore, but I have found that the drawings help me relieve some of my anxiety about the current situation.

When you open up a system like time, for example, and begin to see how it works graphically, it can become a kind of formal or mathematical structure that creates these waves, almost like light waves. Time can feel natural when you're in it, but of course it's very much a product of extrinsic social agreement. Events like these allow us to pause and reconsider such contracts, which are always changing and evolving.

[video]

A virtual studio visit with Alicja Kwade.

I've also returned to this series that I began in 2015, bronze casts of real candles that I burned from both sides. These works emerged from a previous series of sculptures for which I created portraits of people by burning candles and extinguishing them with the butt of a new one, until the structures reached the height of the person, using exactly as many candles as their age at the moment the work was created. I was reading Edna St. Vincent Millay's 1920 poem "First Fig," in which she famously writes, "My candle burns at both ends." At this moment, Millay's candle feels worth revisiting as a metaphor for an eternal moment, one without a beginning or end.

I think humor is the only thing keeping us going right now. I often deal with grand concepts in

my work—perception, light, the nature of reality—that are so impossible to comprehend that all you can do is laugh. I'm trying to preserve that sense of humor in the quantum fruits and vegetables series I've just returned to. I was recently peeling a lemon for this asparagus dish and created a double helix structure from the rind. I started thinking about a forthcoming exhibition that had been canceled, and how things are also affected at the smallest levels. That got me thinking about how to produce a portrait of matter through the string, its most elementary particle. So, I brought the lemon to the forgery and they burned away the original peel and made a bronze cast of the shape. I've also created similar quantum works with bananas, potatoes, oranges, and apples, each of which I've titled by its Latin name.

I'm not sure how my work will change moving forward. I definitely want to continue creating public art that appeals to a large audience. I still think public art can be an edification for people. With social distancing, of course, visiting museums can be difficult, and viewing art risks becoming an even more privileged activity than before. That's why public art feels important to me right now and will continue to hold its importance after the pandemic—it preserves democratic access to culture. But right now, in quarantine, I've mostly been trying to refocus on my core interests—time, systems of knowledge, and phenomenology—and concentrate on smaller pieces that I can do by myself. You don't need more than a pencil to express yourself in most cases.

— *As told to Jonah Goldman Kay*

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