

The pandemic as a palette

West Orange artist Lisa Suss creates 'Covid Diary' with provocative themes

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November — The More Things Change

Lisa Suss of West Orange carries her official title — she’s the visual arts director at the Jewish Federation of Greater MetroWest — with the combination of lightness and gravitas that seem to attach more easily to those in the creative realms.

She is officially the visual arts director for the public spaces at the JCC of Greater MetroWest in West Orange and the Alex Aidekman Family Jewish Community Campus in Whippany but likes to call herself a gallery director, “since what I do is clearer to understand that way.” While the pandemic has undercut her curatorial duties at both federation locations, it has provided the luxury of more time to visualize and produce an ongoing series of pandemic-themed creations and maintain a connection to contemporary events so necessary to an artist’s sense of place and purpose.

Ms. Suss is on open-ended furlough from her federation post, and her status is likely to continue as the pandemic reenters its full fury at the same time new vaccines go into mass (if hardly seamless) distribution. Instead of regarding the past 11 months as downtime, she is rigorously practicing a lemons-to-lemonade mantra by immersing herself in her craft and feeling relevant, not perhaps in the same way as a first-responder might, but as a chronicler of truly historic events.



Lisa Suss at work

“Generally, I’ve been happy to be on furlough since it has afforded me time for my personal art,” she said. “I like to work with and on paper using collage, pencil and colored pencil, and occasionally watercolor. I am a lover of paper and all things made of and on paper. I dislike painting on canvas and rarely do it. Most of the work in my ‘Covid Diary’ is fairly small, 8 by 10 inches up to 16 by 20 inches. I started in March by cutting up and reusing some old pieces that I was saving. In paying attention to the news, but wanting to steer clear of politics, I was creating work with a pandemic theme. I was also really proud of myself for devising a way to make paper masks that look like the masks we all must now wear.

“After a while, I understood that the work divided itself into the months that the pandemic endured,” Ms. Suss continued. “This made me very happy, since after making art which felt kind of random for several months it was no longer so but had an overall theme and reflected the way my concerns changed. It was gratifying to realize that the work had a topical focus and could all be designated by the umbrella title ‘Covid Diary.’ Due to the global nature of the pandemic, I was also able to use maps as a frequent collage element to comment on concerns regarding aspects of the pandemic in the world, the United States, and New Jersey,

Indeed, the creations, taken individually and as a continuum, reflect the uneven, unnerving course of covid. March’s “Social Distancing,” a combination map collage and etching of shambling figures placed near those ubiquitous blue squares, launched a series that has evolved across eight months relying on provocative titles, biting social commentary, and touches of humor and irony, although not as much of the latter as Ms. Suss ordinarily gives her work.

“Since the news was predominantly about the pandemic when the JCC closed in mid-March, I realized that the lonely-looking figures in ‘Social Distancing’ could convey separateness, particularly if they stood on the blue squares that were used to designate the appropriate distance each person should keep between him or herself and the next person,” Ms. Suss explained. “Pandemic,” one of two collages produced in April, was “the first time I made paper masks. These pieces reflect the worldwide nature of the virus as well as how anyone can catch it and no one is spared.” One of five collages for May, “Before Beauty,” is embellished with colored pencil and is “another instance of reusing older work to create something new. Most of the maps in the piece are of the whole world and each also includes a map mask.”



May — Before Beauty

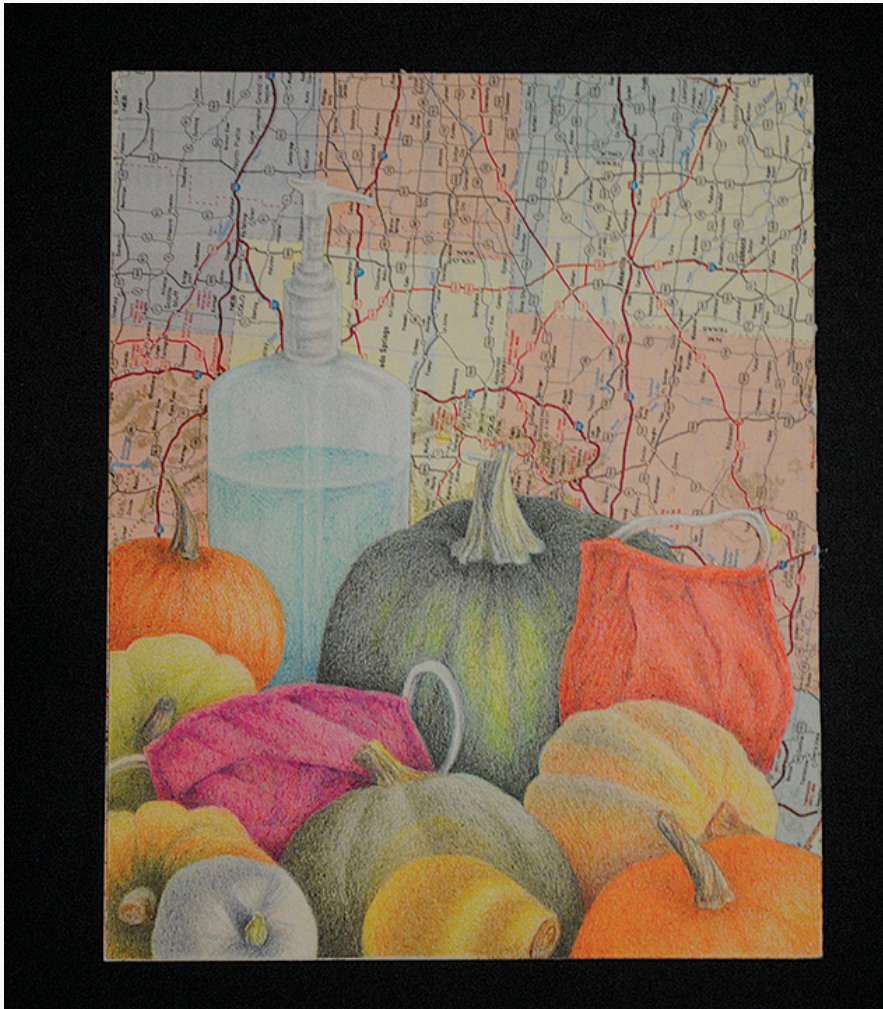
June's "Geography Lesson" commemorates George Floyd's suffocation death in Minneapolis under the crushing knee of a police officer. "After Floyd was killed, I needed to express my sense that the world would forever be changed," Ms. Suss said. The collage depicts a jumble of continents rearranged and randomly placed, a global reverberation of an event inducing worldwide shock. In July's "Lost in Space," featuring four squares with earth-like spheres, she continues to explore the theme of drift, "that the world is in upheaval and we didn't know where to go or how to get there."

The lack of cooperation with safety guidelines is addressed in August's "Compliance," a collage using maps and photos to simulate untied masks and the facelessness of crowds. September's "First Responder" presents a doctor attaching her mask in both a photo and a drawing. The viewer is immediately captivated by her intensity. "I had been holding on to this photo for many months and finally felt up to the challenge of drawing it," Ms. Suss said. "I particularly wanted to emphasize the doctor's eyes."

October's "The More Things Change..." brings autumn into brilliant, burning clarity with photos of fall foliage shaped as masks and superimposed on a map background. While the pandemic made us less attuned to seasonal shifts this year, when it raged into November, Ms. Suss captured its perversity in a collage and colored pencil creation called "Centerpiece," replete with colorful harvest gourds in a field of masks and a whimsical bottle of hand sanitizer. "This was the exceptional year when Thanksgiving was hardly celebrated and the national obsession was (aside from the election) the pandemic," Ms. Suss noted. For December, she continued the project with three collages under the rubric of "Endurance," using images of mountains, solitary trees, and masks made of wristwatches, representing the passage of time, all mounted on map backgrounds.

"I have been repurposing some of my old art works by cutting them up, collaging them, and embellishing them to create something new," she said. When one of the members of the Bookarts Roundtable — they make handmade

books; it's wonderfully creative stuff and the last exhibit I was able to host at the JCC before it shut down — told me that she was reusing some old work from college in her books, I looked at some of the work I had saved. I found some etchings that triggered new ideas. I also often use maps in my work and was happy to realize how apt they were to imply the scope of the pandemic, and therefore have incorporated maps in every piece I have created since I began this group of work.



November — Centerpiece

Pre-covid, JCC patrons were accustomed to seeing Ms. Suss seated at her desk near the entrance to the glass-enclosed Gaelen Gallery East, sometimes on the phone mining her extensive network of artists and artisans for future shows, at other times surveying a current exhibit for its proper sense of place and expression, or sitting at the computer doing the preparation for a future reception. The richness and scope of Gaelen exhibits have been evident to visitors at the JCC since philanthropist Norbert Gaelen first hired Ms. Suss in 2007, when the gallery was downstairs. “Norbert Gaelen died in 2016,” Ms. Suss said. “He was a wonderful, intelligent man who made his fortune in packaging for the cosmetics industry. As far as I know, his two favorite entities to which to donate were his alma mater, Penn State, and the JCC of Greater MetroWest.

“He was an art lover and collector. He and his wife, Audrey, accumulated a significant art collection, including paintings, Native American ceramics and, especially recently, contemporary glass. Audrey continues to be a friend, mentor, and supporter, especially in relation to the annual Gaelen Juried Art Show.

“The new, upstairs gallery opened in 2013,” Ms. Suss continued. “My official title is visual arts director and my original responsibilities included mounting shows in Whippany as well as in showcases that used to be in both the arts/theater lobby and the Steiner Court, which no longer exist. So the actual definition of my job has shrunk over the years. My position is part-time but there are instances when I need to put in extended and weekend hours to mount shows and host opening receptions.

“I try to run the gallery very professionally,” she said. “JCC members and visitors are almost uniformly enthusiastic. I was working on a few projects when everything shut down. I’m not sure what future exhibits and projects will look like, but the gallery was booked, and usually is, for the next two years. However, I am certain that will now change. I work closely with Audrey Gaelen regarding the annual Gaelen show and sale, and there is also a very helpful Gaelen committee. Due to the pandemic, both the 2020 and 2021 Gaelens are canceled. I feel bad for my artists since so many of them look forward to the event each year. “



June — Geography Lesson

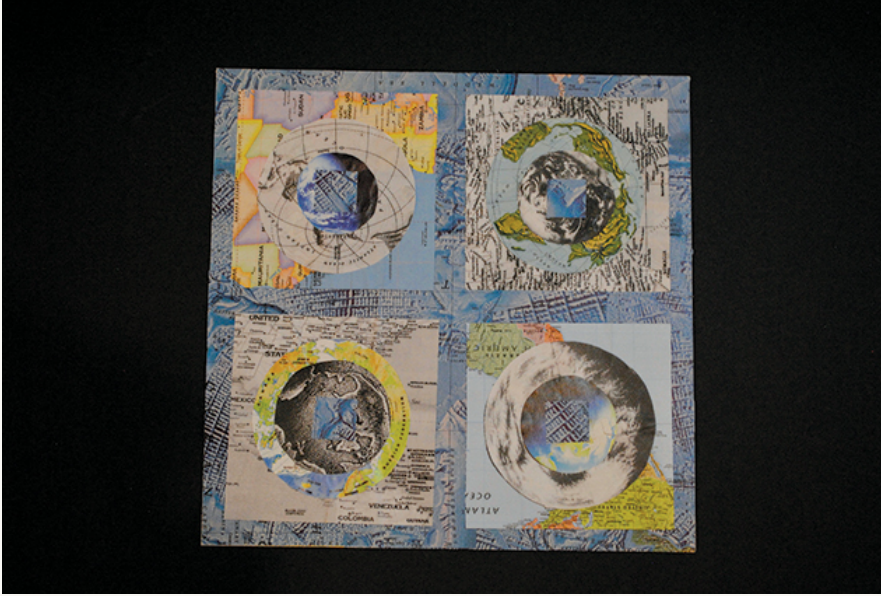
Mrs. Suss was born in Newark and moved to West Orange when she was 3. Except for a few years soon after she got married, she has lived in the township all her life; she and her husband, Ronald, brought up their three children, Robert, David and Gillian, there. She went to Mountain High School, where the art teacher, Carol Rosen, proved a decisive career influence, even though, she said, her parents encouraged her talents from an early age. After graduating with a B.F.A. from Beaver College (now Arcadia University) in Glenside, Pa., she went on for a master’s in printmaking at NYU. Starting as a fiber artist and printmaker, she expanded her media vocabulary to include drawing, book arts, and watercolor. Her particular focus on looking at the ordinary parts of life in different ways frequently incorporates toys and games in presentations. By integrating odds and ends from garage sales and flea markets, her work seeks to question societal values and reflect the skewed views of the contemporary world, she said.

Ms. Suss has exhibited widely throughout the United States and is a juried member of Exhibitors’ Co-op, an artists’ group based in northern New Jersey. She also is a founding member of the West Orange Arts Council and served eight years as its leader. Now she contributes as chair of the exhibitions committee. She also is a founder of the Essex County Arts Advisory Board, is on the arts committee at Temple Sharey Tefilo-Israel, where she is a congregant, and often is called on as an independent art show juror. She has three children and four grandchildren.

“Over the years, I have worked with several federation agencies to mount shows,” she said. “I regularly work with Linda Forgosh of the New Jersey Jewish Historical Society and Marilyn Schneider and Monica Schneider-Brewer of the Wellness, Arts, and Endowment Center of Jewish Service for the Developmentally Disabled. WAE provides creative arts and crafts opportunities and computer skills for people with significant developmental disabilities. The WAE Center members visit the Gaelen Gallery regularly and the gallery hosts a show of their work every two years. I have also consulted for Jespy House in South Orange, which brings adaptive arts to a residential program for the disabled, and for several of the other federation agencies.”

Looking beyond the horizon, as is the wont of many of her creative brethren, Ms. Suss admits “not knowing when things will start up again,” but “so many people involved in all aspects of the arts are having difficulty. Performing artists and presenters have it particularly bad. But as far as I can tell, there is still quite a bit of creativity going on.

“You can’t keep artists down — many are compelled to continue to create in their individual media. We visual artists are taking advantage of the time in our studios to create new work, which often reflects new concerns and new artistic growth.”



July — Lost in Space