



Making Art in the time of COVID-19

Amy Howden-Chapman and Emma  
McIntyre in the United States

by Chloe Lane

Published on 28.05.2020



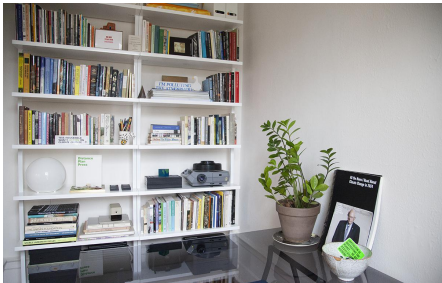
Repairs being made to Amy Howden-Chapman's *Insults against a 1960s Environmentalist* — a flag that calls attention to the personal attacks made against writer Rachel Carson after her seminal exposé of the chemical industry, *Silent Spring*. Image courtesy the artist.



Installation view from Emma McIntyre's first 'show' in one of the ArtCenter galleries last semester. Image courtesy the artist.



Work in progress in Emma McIntyre's home studio (ft. Kahu the dog). Image courtesy the artist.



Amy Howden-Chapman's office/The Distance Plan's moveable archive. Image courtesy the artist.



The outlook from Emma McIntyre's studio. Image courtesy the artist.

In the beginning, we prepared for COVID-19 as if we were waiting for the landfall of a hurricane. We stocked up on beans, bottled water, diapers. We checked the batteries in our torches, filled up the car's gas tank, withdrew a small amount of cash, and charged all our devices. Then we opened a bag of emergency chips, and we waited. After nearly six years of living in Florida, this was what my husband Peter Gouge and I had learned.

The walls of our apartment were a collection of paint-mixing failures. Rotten eggshell, cold oatmeal, the yellow-green of wilted broccoli—they were the colours of a refrigerator's forgotten items.

When we moved in, we had exactly three years left in Florida, so Peter's suggestion to repaint didn't seem worth it, even for some psychic relief. This mindset could be applied to our whole time in the US—we arrived with three bags between us, and we only bought what we needed to live.

The two hurricane-preparedness tasks I hadn't completed this time were the ceremonial moving of the outdoor furniture inside, and placing our plants in the bathtub. Sitting on our balcony while our son played, I could see that only 1.5 of our plants were thriving—the snake plant with its tall, waxy leaves, and the lucky bamboo, thinned to a rake of its former self—and I acknowledged I had no idea how to prepare for a global pandemic. I'd failed to even stock up on paracetamol. What if we got sick? What if we were still here when our health insurance expired? Why didn't we decide to leave sooner? Despite the fact that we always had one eye on the clock, life changes, and we had put down roots.

The fraught time between the balcony and finally boarding our Air New Zealand plane is another story.<sup>[01]</sup> Though when we eventually got there, we had four checked bags, three carry-on bags, numerous “personal items,” two “baby items,” as well as more than thirty cubic feet of freight waiting to leave a shipping port in Miami. Some of this was books, records, kitchen and baby things. But there was also a lot from Peter's studio. Paintings, paints, and tools—all the things that as an artist he couldn't live without.

---





When New York-based New Zealand artist, writer, and editor Amy Howden-Chapman moved to Los Angeles ten years ago to begin her MFA at CalArts, she packed very few art materials. Besides some lengths of fabric, she filled her luggage with art made by other people.

“Images that were anchors for me,” she said. “Including an old Richard Killeen print that belonged to my grandparents. All the places I’ve moved to in the last ten years, it has moved with me and kept me company. It reminds me of home.”

Since New York went into lockdown, she has been spending her days in the Brooklyn apartment she shares with her partner. She is still writing, making art, and teaching at a college that specialises in degrees for trade unionists. One of her classes is an art course designed for apprentice electricians whose union pays for their degree while they’re working. Because they’re essential workers, many are still on-call during lockdown, and some have had workmates die, or family members who are sick, or, if they’re not working, they have spent the day trying to reach their local unemployment office.

“On top of that, they have to present their artwork to me through a screen! But they keep ‘showing up’ which amazes me. At least I can take their mind off the more serious stuff of life for a couple of hours each week. Mostly the art class is about climate and art, but we still laughed a lot about Duchamp’s *Fountain* last week.”

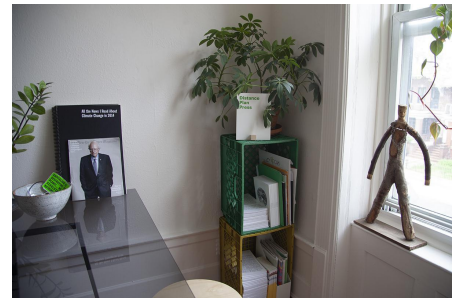
When Howden-Chapman was at CalArts she sewed a lot, mainly fabric banners she incorporated into performances. “The work tended to creep upstairs out of my studio and across the living room floor. I have always liked working from home. And have never really needed a studio in the traditional sense.” Though these days her computer and her camera are her primary tools, she occasionally returns to this way of making, as with the 2015 piece *Insults against a 1960s Environmentalist*. This enormous black and white flag, with phrases like “hysterical,” “spinster,” and “communist sympathizer” stitched into it—all personal attacks made against writer Rachel Carson after her exposé of the chemical industry in her 1962 book *Silent Spring*—takes on the force of a skull and crossbones. It is a staking out of territory, a mark of defiance.



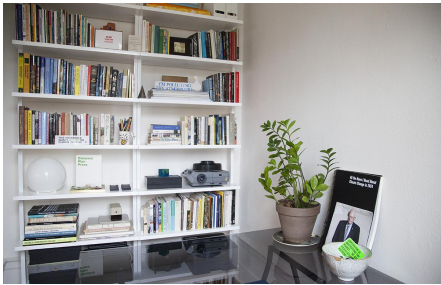
Amy Howden-Chapman, *Insults against a 1960s Environmentalist* (2015) on display at Metro PCS Gallery, Los Angeles. Image courtesy the artist.



Repairs being made to Amy Howden-Chapman's *Insults against a 1960s Environmentalist* -- a flag that calls attention to the personal attacks made against writer Rachel Carson after her seminal exposé of the chemical industry, *Silent Spring*. Image courtesy the artist.



Amy Howden-Chapman's office/The Distance Plan's moveable archive. Image courtesy the artist.



Amy Howden-Chapman's office/The Distance Plan's moveable archive. Image courtesy the artist.



*The Distance Plan Issue #5, Charismatic Facts: Climate Change poetry & Prose*. A free digital version of the issue can be found at [TheDistancePlan.org](http://TheDistancePlan.org). Image courtesy the artist.

"I find myself looping back to the same material and ideas. I'm working on a photographic series about climate infrastructure"—her shorthand for the man-made structures that either minimise the results of climate change, or exacerbate them—"in New York City. And I recently reprinted a series of photographs I took of earthworks in Wellington. Instead of preparing for sea-level rise, those images documented the building of a road bypass—the creation of transportation infrastructure that has been contributing to climate change in the intervening decade."

In the series *The Walling World: New York City* (2019), she documents the city's attempts to protect Manhattan from the kind of storm surge it experienced during 2012's devastating Hurricane Sandy. The photographs are grim black and white studies that capture both the *new architecture* and the people who live with these ubiquitous monuments of concrete, sand, metal, and plastic. In one, a woman and young boy hold hands while the boy pokes the

industrial sandbags; in another, a sign that states “This program is designed to reduce storm surge flooding in this community...” has been vandalised.

“As the years go on, I care less and less about stuff. Including making objects. I’m very aware that we have a very short window in which to solve the climate crisis, and so that is one of my key priorities as an artist, as a person. On the other hand abstraction is also a relief. I make experimental music with a friend of mine, [Steve Kado], and one of the reasons I enjoy doing it is that it is a break from thinking about climate change.”

Howden-Chapman is an archivist at heart, something else she has inherited from the grandparents who owned the Killeen print. Starting in the early 1960s, when Robert and Noeline Chapman sat down to watch the news, they also recorded it. Their decades of recordings have since become The Chapman Archive, the University of Auckland’s largest audiovisual collection.

“I take after them and obsessively collect information, which I believe can go some way to helping us reflect on how the cultural understanding of the climate crisis has evolved.”

With her Auckland-based friend and colleague Abby Cunnane, she runs The Distance Plan, a platform that brings together artists, writers, scientists, and activists to confront the climate crisis. They publish a journal annually, and every time Howden-Chapman moves, she packs up The Distance Plan archive too. “It’s boxes and boxes—It’s heavy!”

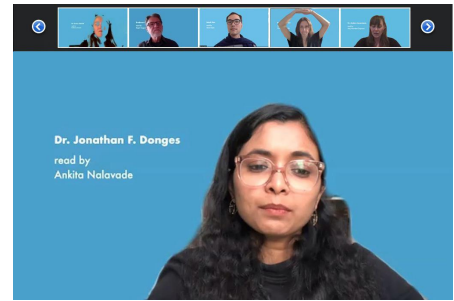




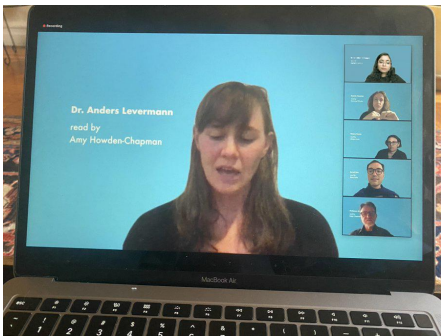
Amy Howden-Chapman, *The Walling World* (2019). A newly concrete wall erected around NYCHA's Baruch Houses in Manhattan's Two Bridges neighborhood. Construction crews have installed a dirt ramp in order to access both sides of wall designed to stop flooding and storm surges from the nearby East River. Image courtesy the artist.



Amy Howden-Chapman, *The Walling World* (2019). A sandbag barrier wall in lower Manhattan installed to protect NYCHA's Smith houses cuts off passersby from the playground behind. Image courtesy the artist.



Performance still from Amy Howden-Chapman's *Have You Ever Felt Overwhelmed? The Words of Climate Scientists, Activists and Journalists*, April 2019. Image courtesy the artist.



Performance still from Amy Howden-Chapman's *Have You Ever Felt Overwhelmed? The Words of Climate Scientists, Activists and Journalists*, April 2019. Image courtesy the artist.

In celebration of the 50th Earth Day on 25th April 2020, she had planned a performance in conjunction with the New York-based group Climate Collective NYC. Titled *Have you ever felt overwhelmed?* and originally performed for Wellington's Enjoy Public Art Gallery, it uses transcripts of interviews Howden-Chapman made with a range of climate change experts. The scripts were to be read out loud by a group of people sitting in the same room, as the core idea is taking time to be in a place together and considering the magnitude of the climate crisis. When COVID-19 made this aspect of the performance impossible, she considered not proceeding—if the readers and audience couldn't be in the same space, wouldn't the piece lose its resonance? She realised an advantage of using Zoom was that people from all over the world could read, including her friend Steve Kado, currently self-isolating in Texas.



I joined the Zoom meeting from where I was self-isolating in rural New Zealand. Abby Cunnane was there, drinking coffee in her kitchen, along with people I did not know, all watching from their couches, desks, or beds, in every corner of the world. The performers, including Howden-Chapman, must have been sitting in their homes, but their faces hovered in front of blue screens that stated their name and the name of the climate expert whose words they were reading. At times some of the performers lost definition, their faces retreating into swirling puddles. The tone of the transcripts was often conversational, and the effect of this was powerful.

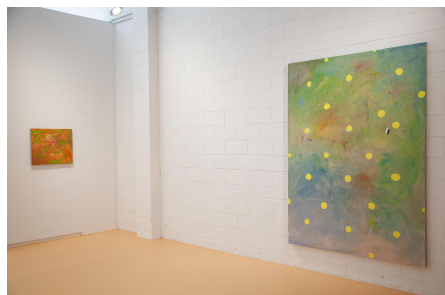
“In some sense, it’s like the grim future I know is coming has already arrived,” Howden-Chapman said, when discussing the current situation and her lockdown life in New York. Watching her performance, I felt I was already living in our future too. A future where we don’t leave our homes, where we live in our screens, and where the performance I was seeing was actually just a time capsule of recordings devoted to mulling over this whole climate change business. Howden-Chapman was concerned about how the performance would resonate if everyone couldn’t be in the same physical space, and, indeed, I didn’t feel especially connected to anyone else who was reading or watching. Zoom is a lonely medium. However, this feeling of isolation gave me a sense of urgency towards the subject matter that I’m not sure I would have experienced if I had been sitting shoulder to shoulder with these people.

Howden-Chapman wonders if this new grim present could also lead to a better future—one that includes fewer carbon emissions. “Hopefully some of these changes stick post-COVID... I’m just hoping there isn’t a heatwave here in New York City this summer while we’re still at home. Social infrastructure is already under so much pressure. That would crack it.”

For the moment, she breaks up the long days in front of her computer with walks, or sometimes a semi-illegal bike ride to Manhattan to take photos and see the rivers: “It’s the closest thing to the sea around here.” She has figured out how to carry two weeks worth of groceries on her bicycle, too—the courier bags on either side packed to overflowing, the contents held in place with bungee

ords. And is that another strip of black fabric tying down a bag of spinach on the back?

---



Installation view from Emma McIntyre's first 'show' in one of the ArtCenter galleries last semester. Image courtesy the artist.



Finished painting in Emma McIntyre's home studio – *Untitled*, 2020, oil, flashe and mesh on linen and denim, 1475 x 1625 mm. Image courtesy the artist.



Emma McIntyre, *B.*, 2019, oil, spray paint, flashe and mesh on linen, 1320 x 1750 mm. Photo: David Daigle.



Installation view from Emma McIntyre's first 'show' in one of the ArtCenter galleries last semester. Image courtesy the artist.



Emma McIntyre, *G.*, 2019, oil and flashe on linen, 500 x 600 mm. Image courtesy the artist.



Emma McIntyre, *A.*, 2020, oil, flashe and cotton on canvas, 1320 x 1750 mm. Photo: David Daigle.



Emma McIntyre, *Y.*, 2020, acrylic and oil on linen 350 x 450 mm. Photo: David Daigle.

“There was no way I was going to start again without them.”

When New Zealand painter Emma McIntyre moved to Los Angeles eight months ago, she packed many of her prized paints and brushes into her luggage. Now, she is finishing the first of a two-

year MFA programme at ArtCenter College of Design while in lockdown. Although she knew she would be able to buy supplies cheaply in the US, she still brought the oil paints she had amassed over the years, which, in her words, “make my palette.”

“I lean in to acidic, bright colours, and often use their complementaries on top to create passages of intense colour, and parts where the layers combine to become earthy and muddy. I have a love/hate relationship with fluorescent colours—alone I find them so garish, but they are often so crucial to achieving my desire for the work to glow from within.”

McIntyre loves a grid: The chessboard, the harlequin pattern, the grid that is suggested only by the arrangement and repetition of solid dots or body prints made with her knees or breasts. These grids are imperfect, the work of a deliberate but human hand. The watery layers of paint have a translucence, an untouchable, almost celestial quality. But McIntyre isn’t mapping constellations for us to marvel at from afar—instead, the gift of these works is something more grounded, muckier.

“I look at a lot of Impressionism, and I think about how to create those atmospheres with colours that are related to what might be an L.A. palette—the bright and shiny façade, delusions of glitz and glam, the pollution, the dirty dustbowl that it is, but also the beauty of the nature and the light.”

I want to zoom in again. Now I’m looking at the work of an archeologist mid-dig. Move closer to the paintings—to that carefully plotted rectangle of earth. That’s where the good stuff is, the real treasures. The variations in McIntyre’s marks are one of the pleasures of her works, the dirty, dusty layers giving way to solid jewels of colour. The curious scratches on the surface of the paint—tracks left behind by small animals, or some long gone humans spinning their own tales?

“I have some special brushes I brought over ... I also make a lot of my marks with whatever I can get my hands on—my fingernails, cloth, sandpaper, bubble wrap, etc. so my needs for tools are versatile in that way. Although I do have some rubber shapers and a couple of stamps I can’t do without ... I’ve also been doing a bit of

body printing lately, so the private studio [at ArtCenter] has been good for that, ha ha.”

McIntyre sends me snapshots of her favourite colours of the moment. Each of these well-travelled, scrunched-up tubes of paint—Old Holland Yellow-Green, Violet-Grey, Brilliant Rose, Provence Violet Blueish, Brown Pink—is presented in its best light, yet still they do little for me, even less than every Instagram post of poorly risen sourdough I’ve seen in the last long month. But bread is bread, and only an artist knows what her tools are worth.

Until the arrival of COVID-19, McIntyre often spent 60 hours a week in the ArtCenter Grad Art Building. Her schedule included classes taught by the author Chris Kraus, the critic Bruce Hainley, and the painter Richard Hawkins, a class on the history of contemporary art in L.A., critiques, approximately five studio visits with faculty and guests every week, and then after all of this, making work. Like a cat following the sun, she spent her days moving between the studio, classroom, kitchen, and courtyard, and back again.

Apart from the obvious—losing her studio—California’s lockdown has also meant losing the pressure-cooker effect of being at school. However, since her classes and critiques have moved to Zoom, she has found a new appreciation for the language of art. Knee-deep in the fear that can come with the territory of being an abstract painter, she worries she often doesn’t have “the right words” to talk about what she does. Zoom has shifted this.

“No one can engage with the materiality of the work to its full extent, so there is a greater focus on its conceptual aspects. I’ve started finding a new language for my paintings that I didn’t have before.”

McIntyre lives close to Elysian Park in the heart of L.A., and shares her apartment with her husband and their dog. Her “studio” is currently set up in the yard, and with a single wall and no ceiling to play with, she has only been able to work on one painting at a time. Her workspace is also weather dependent, and L.A. has been surprisingly wet since lockdown.



In drought-stricken California, nobody wishes for less rain. But a rainy day also means a no-work day for the unexpected plein air painter. She has also struggled with what it means to be an abstract painter during these times, worrying that she is just ‘rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic.’ She has found some solace in the writings of American painter Amy Sillman, particularly the piece *Unpresidential Times*, which Sillman wrote the day after Trump was elected. It’s a freaked out, angry, but also exuberant letter that asks, “what do we do right now? Our desires are conflicting and ill-fitting... do we re-tool our art practices, or just keep going, putting the anger into the work? What would be the point of abstraction now?”



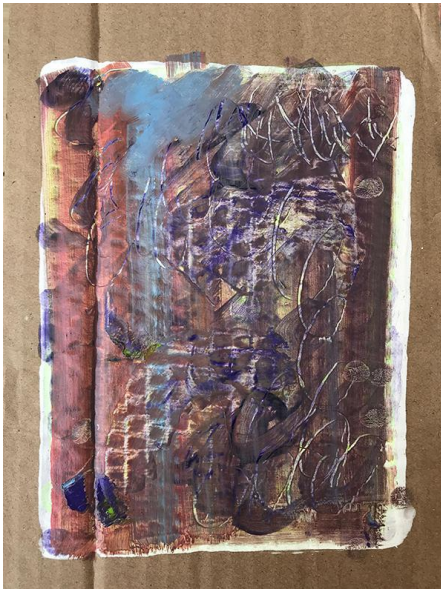
The outlook from Emma McIntyre's studio. Image courtesy the artist.



Work in progress in Emma McIntyre's home studio (ft. Kahu the dog). Image courtesy the artist.



Emma McIntyre, *Untitled*, 2020, oil and flashe on cardboard. Image courtesy the artist.



Emma McIntyre, *Untitled*, 2020, oil and flashe on cardboard. Image courtesy the artist.

On rainy days, McIntyre’s large work in progress remains propped up beside her bed. When she isn’t writing and reading at her kitchen table, she spends her time looking at this painting and thinking about it, looking at it, and thinking about it. “Art has always sought out and celebrated new forms and new ways of being in the world,” she said, “and in the constantly shifting landscape of the COVID-19 crisis it’s encouraging to remember that.”

I think of the evolution of my husband Peter's practice over the last six years as a portrait of the ways our life has changed during that time. Before we left New Zealand, he was making 6 ft x 4 ft paintings on carpet. They couldn't be rolled, and were heavy—no good for shipping from Florida to New Zealand—so he started making small paintings on plywood. If it couldn't be carried on his bicycle, it couldn't be carried. When a few years later he started his MFA at the University of Florida and had access to the wood and metal workshops (and we finally owned a car) he began making furniture. Then our son arrived, so he turned to small paintings on paper that he could work on at the kitchen table any time of the day or night. His output has altered again now that we are in self-isolation in New Zealand and most of his tools still haven't left Miami. His watercolours, pencils, and a small selection of woodcarving tools were all he packed with him. Since we have returned he has started whittling—odd-looking spoons made from branches found on our daily walks.

Though it doesn't always feel like it in the moment, could there be a freedom to this accordion of external constraints, and its constant expanding and contracting? Maybe it can clear a path for making different kinds of work, or at least encourage us to rethink our work and what we can contribute in a more active way. I'm reminded of a Josef Albers interview I read long ago, which took place after Albers moved to the US. The interviewer asked Albers if the increase in the scale of his paintings was a reaction to the American landscape. He replied with something along the lines of: "No, we bought a larger station wagon."

It feels like our station wagons have been miniaturised. But could this brave new Zoom world we live in have actually done the opposite? And given us all the station wagons? The roomier, faster, louder, smarter, funnier, and even more powerful ones? I guess we'll have to wait and see.

### *Footnotes*

01. I wrote about our departure here: [www.newsroom.co.nz/readingroom/2020/04/13/1123658/houston-we-have-a-solution-a-kiwis-desperate-flight-home](http://www.newsroom.co.nz/readingroom/2020/04/13/1123658/houston-we-have-a-solution-a-kiwis-desperate-flight-home)

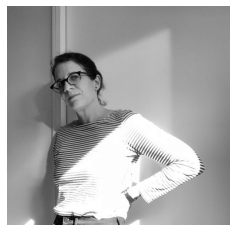
## Biographies



Amy Howden-Chapman is an artist, writer and co-founder of *The Distance Plan.org*, a platform that works for climate action through collaboration across the arts, sciences, policy, and activism. Her work has been exhibited internationally and her writing has appeared in venues including *Urban Omnibus*, *Anthroposphere: The Oxford Climate Review* and *Counterfutures*. She teaches at the Harry Van Arsdale Jr. Center for Labor Studies, SUNY, Empire State, New York City.



Emma McIntyre is a New Zealander painter born in Tāmaki Makaurau in 1990. She now lives and works in Los Angeles. Since 2012, she has been a part of multiple group shows in New Zealand. Her first solo show *Loop the Loop* at 30upstairs in Wellington opened in 2016, the same year she graduated from Elam School of Fine Arts at the University of Auckland. Her work was presented in various shows around New Zealand since then. In 2021, the year of her second graduation, this time from the ArtCenter College of Design in California, the Chris Sharp Gallery in Los Angeles, California organised her first solo show outside of New Zealand. *Up bubbles her amorous breath*, her first solo show in Europe, was presented at Air de Paris, France, from 9th January to 12th February 2022.



Chloe Lane is the 2022 recipient of the Todd New Writer's Bursary and a 2021 Grimshaw Sargeson Fellow. Her second novel, *Arms & Legs*, is out now in Aotearoa (Te Herenga Waka University Press), and will be released in North America (House of Anansi Press) and the UK and Europe (Gallic Books) in 2023. She lives in Gainesville, Florida.

