

We Were, and Then We Weren't.

**Developing an Art Exhibition
During a Global Pandemic**

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I'm sure many of you have read these dreaded, cliché opening remarks at the start of each article, email and newsletter you've read recently: "During these uncertain times," "Due to the current global issues," and so on. The effects of COVID-19 have truly shaken every last business, organization, event, and person, and it's undoubtedly a time in our current world history that will not be forgotten. I mean, how can we? Schools closed, businesses shut their doors, and meetings transferred from our stuffy board rooms to our cozy living room couches. It felt as though the world came to a complete stop in March, but we persevered, and continued to try our best to develop a new 'normal'. Unfortunately this pandemic is not over, and from the looks out it, it won't be over for a while yet.

Personally, as a BFA student here at Western University(UWO), I found that developing a group art exhibition over the summer brought me some comfort; it was one of the few activities which did not end so abruptly due to the pandemic. I was lucky enough to have the opportunity with my fellow group members Tia Bates, Ashley Staines, Sam Erdelyi,

and Helia Trinh to work closely with the Artlab Gallery to develop our exhibition "We Were, and Then We Weren't.", amidst the global crisis. This experience was an interesting one, and as one of the first student groups to experience coordinating a show during the pandemic, there were many times where I found myself wishing we could just ignore the restrictions and just go on as we normally would before. I hope that our experiences with this exhibition can provide some insight to those who are going through a similar challenge, whether you are a student, an artist, gallery staff, or museum coordinator. We're not in this alone, and there's always a way to make things work.

We received the approval to begin our work for the show in late March/early April, at the same time as things began shutting down and quarantine began implementing itself into our new normal routines. Since a few of the members of our group lived outside of London, we had already planned on remote meetings with each other, regardless of the pandemic. What we hadn't planned for were the societal restrictions which were implemented due to COVID;



Installation view of "We Were, And Then We Weren't." Artlab Gallery, September 2020. From left: floor sculpture by Sam Erdelyi; hanging installation by Sam Wagter; photographs by Sam Wagter; paintings by Sam Wagter; sculpture by Tia Bates; prints by Tia Bates; paintings by Helia Trinh.

“ I had two months at the beginning of the summer where I wasn’t working due to COVID, which I found did actually help. I spent those months entirely on one piece of art, and I think it was my most developed piece of art in the show.

” Tia Bates

Like many others globally, a few of our members were out of work because of the shutdown. Being stuck at home really took a toll on our mental health. Anxiety built and motivation was difficult to come by. “It took a lot of emotional strength...” Helia told me, and I think she speaks for all of us. As university students, we are used to creating work together in one communal studio space. Without the inputs and assurances that our fellow peers provide in the moment of creation, it was difficult to keep motivation in ourselves/out work high. On the other hand, others such

as Sam E prefer to work alone, but use the studio space as a way of breaking out of their introverted tendencies and forcing themselves to try new things. It’s spaces like these that are so critical for the creative process, and not only are they important for emotional support, but physical freedom as well.

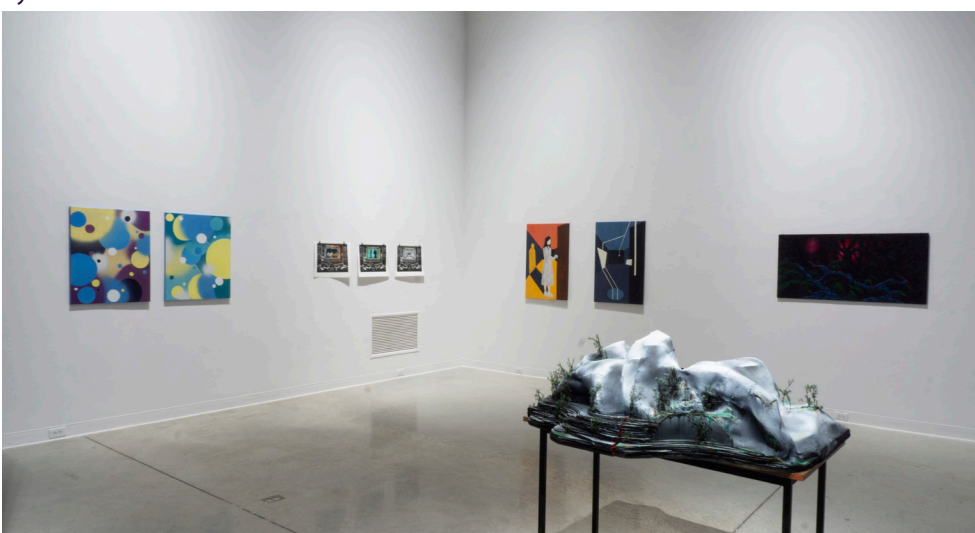
We have been privileged enough for the past three years to have large studio and workspaces with plenty of room to work and create. However, working from our bedrooms proved to become a hurdle.

“ I would have done an installation piece if that [space] hadn’t been a factor, but I wanted to do something super easy and simple to install because I knew that there would be restrictions around it. So COVID, for me, did change the work itself that way.

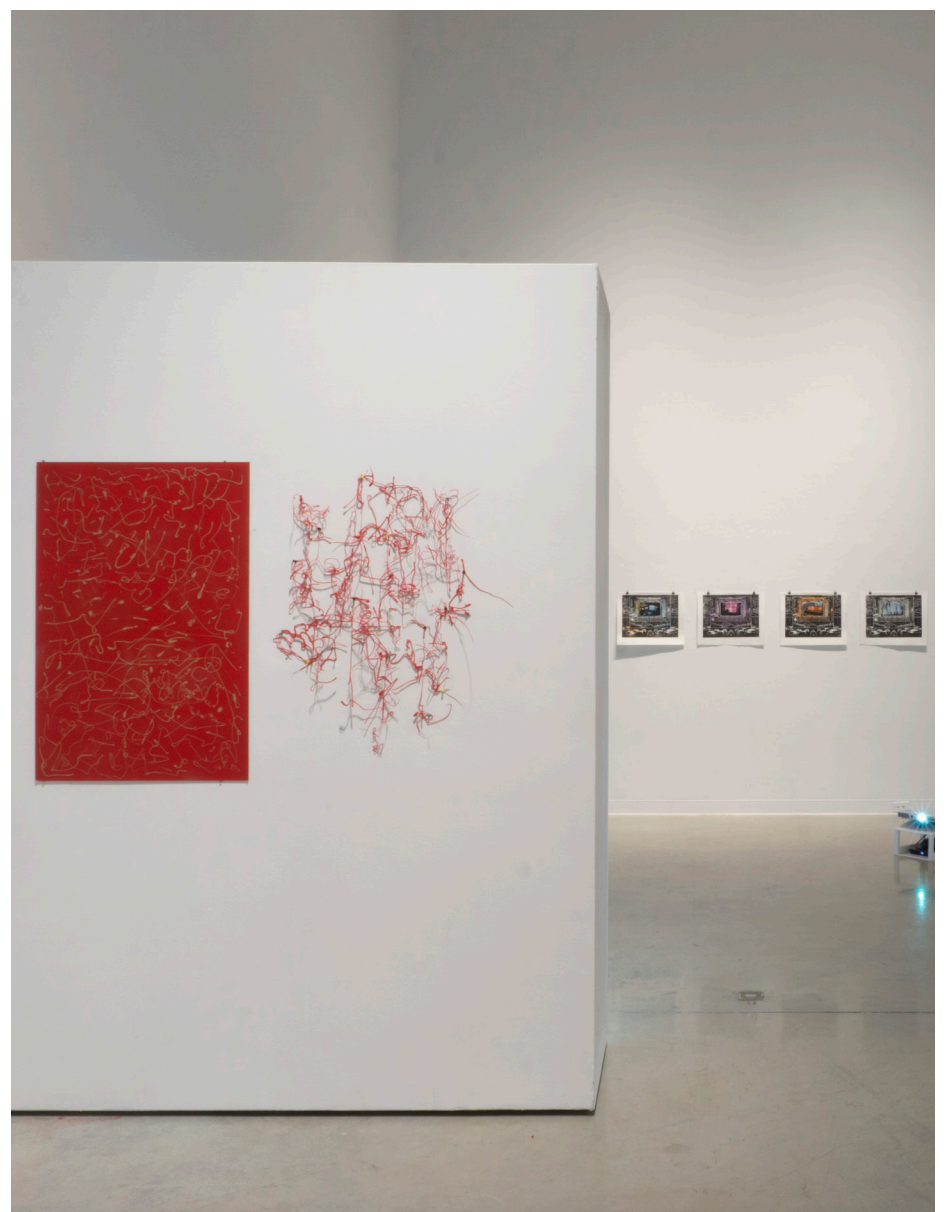
” Sam Erdelyi



From left: prints by Tia Bates; projected GIF by Ashley Staines; hanging installation by Sam Wagter; paintings by Ashley Staines, floor sculpture by Sam Erdelyi; projected video by Tia Bates.



From left: paintings by Sam Wagter; prints by Tia Bates; paintings by Helia Trinh, sculpture by Tia Bates, painting by Sam Erdelyi.



From left: hanging sculpture by Helia Trinh, prints by Tia Bates.



From left: photographs by Sam Wagter; paintings by Helia Trinh; sculpture by Tia Bates; painting by Sam Erdelyi; prints by Tia Bates; hanging installation by Sam Wagter; projected GIF by Ashley Staines.

“ Everyone went crazy with hobbies at the start, so I was trying to get sculpture materials and the hardware store was sold out of everything.

” Tia Bates

“ I personally felt more anxious. At the start of the summer, I was scared to go out and get supplies.... I kept pushing back going out to the store. I could have started a lot sooner if I hadn't been nervous.

” Helia Trinh

“ I had all my materials and the equipment needed to make my GIF. The hard part was visualising how it was going to look all together, The sketchup was great, [but] it's still not as great as seeing the art in the space.

” Ashley Staines



From left: framed painting by Tia Bates; floor sculptures by Sam Erdelyi; glass hanging installation by Sam Wagter.

As we prepared for our group exhibition, and unable to go to our local art supply stores, we had to improvise with what we had at home. Many of us reused old materials we had lying around our homes, purchased items online and had them shipped to our door. This wasn't necessarily a bad experience, and in fact, I would consider recycling and repurposing to be a positive thing! However, repurposing and online purchasing were hurdles which we hadn't planned for, nor were they ideal in our specific, time-crunch circumstances: having to wait for shipping, on top of not necessarily knowing the product quality before purchasing. Even if we braved the pandemic and went to the store, we often found that nothing was in stock.

These uncertainties caused a lot of stress, and we all had to change up ideas last minute at many points over the course of the summer. These uncertainties were also solely because of COVID-related issues and outside of the more familiar creative process. Change is normally expected during the process of artistic creation, and I'm not necessarily sure the changes we had to make were all that bad. However, I think that it's important to recognize all the additional variables that entered into the creative process during the pandemic, which we normally wouldn't have worried about. We quickly recognized that we needed to prepare to be flexible, and be ready to engineer new solutions.

In the vein of flexibility, and despite many people's effort to contain the pandemic, the second wave erupted on campus. For the safety of everyone, events and buildings closed back down, meaning our exhibition came to a very quick halt. After only 3 days, our exhibition was forced to close and was no longer accessible for the public to come and visit. The irony of the title "We Were, and Then We Weren't." was not lost on us. Who knew how appropriate this idea of memory, light, and permanence would end up becoming for a show which we named before the pandemic began. For me, the irony unintentionally adds to the complexity of our exhibition. Reflecting back on the show now, I'm finding myself happy that this intrusion in our plans ended up being such an interesting one.

All that being said, we all were quite disappointed that the show ended prematurely. We had put so much blood, sweat and tears into getting the show finished, and it's difficult to view this as a positive outcome. During my interview with the group before the show was uninstalled, we reflected on our thoughts and experiences:

“ Tia

The worst was not being there for the installation. The show was only open for 3 days after all of this work.... I think most of the impact of COVID came after I spent all the time and energy making the art, and then not having it open to see like I expected. My expectations were thrown up in the air when it came time to have the show on display.

Sam E

I had a very similar experience as Tia. I haven't actually been to the gallery yet, at all. So I don't know if I'm even going to be there to see it which is weird to think about. I was a little upset but at the same time, there have been so many other things happening [during the second wave] that I was just like, yup okay it's just another thing on the list.

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“ Ashley

I mean, for me, I just feel like I was really unmotivated during the whole thing because of work and stress. I ended up having to work a lot during COVID, and there was a lot of stress from how things just changed drastically overnight earlier this year. There was a lot to take in, plus not seeing anyone all summer. It was really weird overall.

Helia

I sometimes wondered if it was going to even be worth it because I had inklings that there would be a second wave at some point. So I was worried that the exhibition wouldn't work out the way we want.

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As for me, I feel similar to everyone else: disappointed it ended so soon, sad that no one really got to experience the show, frustrated with the people who are not following the proper safety protocols, as well as the general pandemic stress and anxiety we all as a society are feeling. I had my hopes that the show would go on, however I did prepare myself emotionally for the risk of things being shut down.

“ Helia

Ya I did during the 2 weeks leading up to the show's opening. When I found out the gallery had to close, I wasn't surprised.

Ashley

Personally what I was most disappointed in was not being able to have the opening, rather than it closing. The opening where everyone comes and sees your art all at once and there's that social aspect to it, it's nice seeing everyone's reactions to your work.

Sam E

Ya I think I was more prepared for it, however obviously not prepared enough because I wasn't able to go see it, which I regret immensely because mainly I wanted photos, like Ashley mentioned. Having the experience of the opening is the culminating exciting thing about an exhibition. Knowing that right from the get-go we wouldn't be having one, it took a lot of the big dramatic climax out so it was less of a let down when it did get cancelled.

Tia

In contrast to you guys, I wasn't prepared at all. I was really upset, it was rough for me. I figured they were still running in person classes so I thought it would be fine. I wish they counted the gallery as an academic activity rather than an extra curricular so that it would stay open.

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From left: framed painting by Tia Bates; floor sculptures by Sam Erdelyi.



From left: glass hanging installation by Sam Wagter; photographs by Sam Wagter; prints by Tia Bates; paintings by Helia Trinh; sculpture by Tia Bates; painting by Sam Erdelyi; hanging installation by Sam Wagter.

All in all, despite the unfortunate outcome, this exhibition experience was a very valuable one, where we developed new skills, created interesting art and got to experience what it's like to organize our first group exhibition outside of the classroom. And for anyone else going through a similar experience as us, or even working on something different entirely, I offer you some words of advice:

Make sure to stay organised and motivated. When working from home and isolated from others, creativity and motivation can diminish and other negative mindsets can set in. Set up phone calls as you work, and keep in touch with fellow artists to gain feedback and critique. Organize a group and schedule weekly meetings to keep each other grounded and hold yourselves accountable. Don't isolate yourself.

Be ready to improvise, adapt and overcome hurdles. From the unexpected hurdle of running out of tube of paint, to your pet ruining your art, to the gallery being forced to close its doors-expect the unexpected, and prepare yourself for worst-case scenarios. Stay positive and hopeful that things will work out fine, but recognize that the pandemic is out of your control.

Make the best of what you have, engineer new solutions and remain extra flexible. For most people, the process of creating art is never linear and there's a built-in necessity (and expectation) for change. However, during these "uncertain times", a little more flexibility is never a bad thing to have. A healthy dose of caution, ingenuity, and optimism will go a long way.

It's okay to feel frustrated or upset that things didn't work out the way you hoped, and it's alright to not be pleased with the outcome. Life is full of curveballs, and it's not always possible to be satisfied with every event and moment in your life. However, I also think it's important to really dig into the silver lining, such as an extremely ironic title. Find humor in these moments so that you can look back at this time and be reminded of the positives rather than the negatives. Don't let a hurdle like COVID prevent you from creating!



Leaping from the walls and breaching our space
Filling the room
Every nook, cranny, and cavity
Becoming
Twisting and pulling itself into allegories
A dual entity.

It became us, and we became it
We were, and then we weren't.



We Were, and Then We Weren't.
September 2020, Artlab Gallery
London Ontario.

© the individual artists: Tia Bates, Sam Erdelyi,
Ashley Staines, Helia Trinh, Sam Wagter, 2020



Special thanks to Ruth Skinner for not only providing us with the opportunity to display at the Artlab, but for helping us with all the administrative behind the scenes work leading up to the show. I also want to give my personal thanks to Ruth for providing me with the chance to write and publish this publication, as well as revising and editing along the way. In addition, we would like to give huge thanks to Dickson Bou for installing and managing our artwork and the tech that came with it into the gallery, as well as providing us with plenty of photos of the space. Without you both, this project could have never happened.

Lastly, I would like to thank my groupmates. Without your continued hard work and dedication in the months leading up to the opening day, our exhibition would not have been the success that it was.

To see more of our work, visit us at:

Tia Bates

Instagram: @tiabates_art

Sam Erdelyi

Instagram: @_yledre

Ashley Staines

Instagram: @ashley.s1999

Helia Trinh

[N/A]

Sam Wagter

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