

ARTFORUM

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Domenick Ammirati talks to artist Whitney Claflin about surviving an economic shock



A view of “the hovel.” Photo: Whitney Claflin.

My first impulse when this all began was to buy groceries. My second was to see how people were doing. The art world, for all its flaws and fissures, is a community, and it’s the one I’ve got. When its trappings recede in a time like this—as if there were any time like this, exactly—you’re left with the people. I’ll be talking to some of them over the next couple of weeks, seeing how they’re doing materially, emotionally, physically, financially, and so on.

—Domenick Ammirati

FOR THE PAST FEW YEARS, I’ve been living illegally in the leaky garage of a former funeral parlor, which had been converted to an office at a time when wood paneling was a generic interior option—“the hovel,” as I affectionately call it. Surviving hand to mouth, check to check, without savings, and my credit mauled by student loans, I have no chance of getting my name on a lease of any kind anywhere in New York City. But when I found the place on Craigslist, a collector came through with phenomenal help—the hovel is, after all, a stunningly affordable, one-of-a-kind, nothing-like-this-exists-in-NYC-anymore workspace—and he helped me get the paperwork signed. Eventually, for various reasons, I moved in completely. There’s a shower and two sinks; carving out a way to hide a twin bed and a hotplate was a no-brainer. I have to keep my clothing in a filing cabinet, but I no longer had to worry about making two rents.

Of course, the landlord refused to ever draft a lease longer than one year, and since the space is zoned commercial, each year he’s gouged me, increasing the rent by \$100 a month. I’ve never been able to keep up, but I’ve always kept at it. As the rent climbed, I had no choice but to pay in installments, with 50 to 80 percent of each week’s meager income being left in an envelope for the landlord. One week a month, my phone and internet are due simultaneously, which leaves me with between zero and twenty dollars to get by on for seven days, after purchasing a weekly MetroCard to commute to work.

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Domenick Ammirati, Artforum, March 27, 2020

On February 28, I opened an envelope that I assumed would be a lease renewal with a further price gouge that I would have to find a way to magically deal with. Instead, I received my final bill. The landlord wanted me out by April 1. Nature poured me a strong neurochemical cocktail of panic and dread, garnished with a sliver of relief. I put the envelope down and went to a friend's opening in Chelsea. Coronavirus was still a conversational topic you could elect to skip at this time. Mainly we wondered together if it was really okay for us to communally graze from the after-event's plate-it-yourself charcuterie tower.

I work doing floating freelance bookkeeping at a nightclub. When I started, I was paid fifteen dollars an hour, now up to twenty-two, and capped at a max of twenty-one hours a week. The amount of money I'm earning, including any freelance work I land on top of that, is woefully below what I need to make ends meet. I can never find enough high-paying gigs to slot into my leftover patches of time. Making art is super time-consuming, and even though I make a lot of work out of found objects, it still carries a fair amount of overhead. I love my job, but it's really hard to have my hours pruned even lower on a week when the bar doesn't bring in enough cash. In turn, I'm grateful for the flexibility they offer when I need to travel for a show or spend more concentrated time in the studio. I can anticipate the loss of income, self-isolate to reduce costs, and focus on painting. I eat two meals a day—oatmeal and lentils from the rice cooker—follow a free yoga channel on YouTube to out-zen the precarity, and ration the weed. In some ways, not a lot has changed for me now that we're under quarantine.

March arrived and COVID-19 cranked up the volume. I talked to the club's owners about my unstable living situation; starting April 1, I wanted to work more hours in any capacity. One week later, like every other bar and restaurant in New York, they were shut down. I broke my shelter in place on St. Patrick's Day to go in and help the owners place accounts on hold, clean, put away any food that could be saved in the walk-in fridge, and other sad, necessary tasks. I was able to rescue a lot of fresh mint that lost its job of becoming a mojito; its fragrance wafting out of my tote was an emotional anesthetic as we trekked to my hovel together, both wilted, uprooted, and out of work indefinitely.

With the halt in evictions, my crisis over what to do about the hovel was put on pause. Then I heard from a friend who has a bedroom available for April. I followed up and decided to take it. I don't know how I'm going to pay for it after May, but I feel much less alone knowing almost everyone has landed on the same thin ice I've been skating on for years.

Whitney Clafin is an artist living in New York.