Art Saved Us
We’re back!

It’s hard to imagine being happier to type those words. We reopened our doors on February 16th to a small group of writers and artists who had self-selected to be at Yaddo with pandemic policies in place. What policies? Well, we implemented many of the steps we’ve all become used to in this frightening period and some that are specific to a residency: Covid test before traveling to Yaddo, another test on arrival, weekly testing for all staff, no leaving the grounds (though we do have 400 acres to explore!), no rolling admissions, extra cleaning. The first group was almost giddy to be Pod 1, and Pod 2 sailed along with equal verve, productivity and companionship.

Before the world folded inwards, you might have surmised that a period of social distancing would be a no-brainer for Yaddo. After all, we’re a retreat—a place consciously designed to allow for hush, for deep-thinking, reflection and solitude. One of our core traditions is quiet hours, held each day from 9 a.m. until 4 p.m. and again after 10 p.m.–what could be more interior leaning than that? But as we shuttered our program with the heaviest of hearts, not knowing when we would be re-enlivened with the bustle of guests, we focused a lot on the other side of the retreat coin: community. As we all know from our own lives—whether from meditation or prayer, solitary walks or an unplugged phone—the point of retreat is to gather strength and then advance. For Yaddo’s artists, the form that re-entry takes is a lucky one for each of us—it’s the thousands of books, films, symphonies and artworks that delighted, challenged and comforted us through this anxiety-laden year.

And so, even as we welcomed artists back into “the bubble” we worked imaginatively, and with some urgency, to help in the recovery of the creative economy as a whole and to open access to the great work Yaddo artists are doing. Since reopening, these tentacles from Yaddo out into the world have included a live concert, from Mike Doughty’s living room, no less, and the premiere of a terrific new one-hour show called Hora! (hosted by the mega-talented Catherine Maria “Cat” Rodriguez) which aims to surprise and delight. What else? We’ve continued our Artist Forums, launched a film and conversation series—The Fight for Rights—which to date has featured Lisa Cortes and Victor LaValle discussing All In: the Fight for Democracy and Bennett Singer and Jacki Lyden previewing Cured. And of course, there’s our podcast Shadow/Yaddo, which continues to grow by leaps and bounds. Every other Thursday, an episode drops and the lineup of talent (voices of hope, resistance, humor and wisdom) explore a myriad of topics.

We’re not out of the woods yet, but the silver linings are piling up. For one thing, we’ve all realized how important the arts and artists are to us. That’s what we turned to in those shut-in days—to books, films, storytellers, music and art. As the year goes on, we’ll welcome back more and more of the artists whose 2020 residency had to be postponed, and we’ll look outward to bringing fresh work, vital topics, and good company (virtual and “for real”) to our larger community. The arts saved us, and we at Yaddo are grateful for every step that aids in their revival and the forging of an innovative path back from the pandemic.
Chin Chih Yang was born in Taiwan and now lives in Queens. He studied at the Parsons School of Design in Manhattan and graduated from Pratt Institute in Brooklyn with a Master of Science. His work addresses society’s efforts to protect itself, both physically and psychologically, against long-term catastrophe resulting from pollution, surveillance, isolation and social intolerance. He’s interested in the scary side of human nature, signaling experimental and creative ways to view the planet and ourselves.

For one of his projects—“Kill Me or Change,” he donned a top hat and coat woven from trash while a crane dropped 30K aluminum cans overhead, burying him alive. For a project called “An Interactive Protest Against Corporate Waste,” he created a suit of recycled materials and performed a Shaman-like dance in Times Square. And as of late, he performed “Mobile Quarantine House,” wearing a plastic safety suit and engaging with strangers in the financial district of Manhattan.

We know that the pandemic has been particularly hard on those in the performance disciplines. An audience is key to their creative work. We asked Chin Chih to tell us a bit about how he’s managing and where he finds motivation to keep on making his brilliant performances.

Q. How has the pandemic impacted your performance work?
A. The pandemic caused the loss of many opportunities. Residencies with just the right facilities were cancelled, so I went back to the streets. In 2020, I performed live in Times Square and on Wall Street. I had conversations with people in Harlem and other places in New York City. I studied people, I focused on race, class, gender, education. Mostly I watched how we react to each other in times of stress, because creating unity among people is at the heart of my upcoming performance, “Watch Us: Together We Can Do It.”

Q. How do you stay motivated to continue to make performance work despite social distancing?
A. Change motivates me. I react to humans, to our environment, our society, our disasters. So my motivation is endless. I spent lots of time reading the news on different media. As a sculptor, I am keenly aware of safety in my work. The element of interactivity, of hearing people speak their mind, is critical to my work so I have to keep thinking and adjusting. I use large-scale performance as a starting point to invoke deeper understandings of love.

Q. Your performances such as “Mobile Quarantine House” have a great sense of humor. How do you take on hard issues, yet manage to do it with a sense of humor?
A. [“Mobile Quarantine House”] is about protecting individual freedom. I made a mobile house, an ironic, ridiculous action. Most of my art uses satire and humor as a way to address hard issues. A little joking makes it easier for the audience to absorb what you want to express.

Q. From conception to actual performance, what is your process like for creating new performance work?
A. My concepts are always based in social situations, in sharp changes and environmental issues. I take issues, consider my life experiences, and use time-based art to make the most impact. The concept is the most important part of my process. I spend most of my time on concept. After that research, I collect the material to produce the work. I use recycled materials. Then I choose and arrange the location and set a date and time. When I perform, I’m not concerned with how many people are there. One or a thousand is the same audience to me. I will perform my best – what’s most important is that it happened. I set big goals.

Q. During the pandemic, many artists have developed innovative solutions to getting their artwork out into the world. What do you think the post-pandemic future looks like for performance art?
A. I am very happy to see all the innovative methods artists are trying during the pandemic. This is what I think artists should do and I have always thought art should experiment and adjust to current affairs. These performances that developed due to the epidemic situation, I think they are very good, and I like them very much. I think performance will continue to develop and become more essential. The epidemic is having a major impact on human life, but I hope people can use these opportunities to learn about relationships and cooperation and develop more harmonious and friendly ways of living together.
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fine form as he introduces us to Happy Doll,

And with A Man Named Doll he’s back in
fine form as he introduces us to Happy Doll, a
sometimes feckless Hollywood detective,
whose sidekick is George, a half-Chihuahua
half-Terrier mutt. Ames knows how to add
style to the seamy underbelly of the city he
now calls home, but he’s also smart and
serious about the forces that are unleashed
when sex and crime come to the fore.

It’s hard to talk about LA noir without
Walter Mosley coming to mind, and
that’s just fine because he’s published his
15th book starring the magnetic private
investigator Ezekiel “Easy” Rawlings. Blood
Grove gives us an Easy who is slowing
down a bit, nearing 50 and content to
putter in his rose garden and enjoy the
strappings of his success. But of course,
there’s one more case that has to be
unpackaged, and it turns out to be a maze of
murder, pornography, racism, corruption, and
a Vietnam veteran who tugs at Easy’s soft
heart. All the ingredients, in short, that make
for a perfect Mosley outing.

THERE’S COUNTRY NOIR
Let’s just admit that Chris Offutt doesn’t
flinch. In his short stories, novels and three
memoirs, he stares down whatever there is
in his line of vision. But he can have a dry,
campy wit, too—vis the fantastic episodes of
True Blood, and Weeds he wrote.

AND THEN THERE’S NATURE NOIR
We might call it “Climate Crime.” The
evidence is all around us, in the very air
we breathe. We feel the eerie afterglow,

CATHERINE CHUNG: The Tenth Muse
Chung’s protagonist, Katherine, rises
from gifted child
to exceptional
mathematician on the
brink of greatness as
she solves the Riemann
hypothesis. In this
meticulous and ambitious
novel, Katherine digs into
a mysterious theorem’s
winding historical path through World War II-era
Germany to excavate the legacy and kinship
of mythical and mathematical female pioneers
who came before her. Chung depicts with great
delicacy that one’s mind is the source of ultimate
freedom.
Whether you’re reading on a plane, in a hammock, at the beach, we’ve got you covered.

the sense of cumulative dread as the pendulum swings from the many ecological disasters we’ve witnessed in our lifetimes, to ominous anticipation of what comes next. Nathaniel Rich is the ultimate guide to all of this, and in his latest book, Second Nature: Scenes from a World Remade he makes it clear that, for him, the eerier and more morally complex the evidence, the more suited he is to the task. He gives us glow-in-the-dark bunnies, suicidal starfish, an epic rupture of methane gas, species returned from extinction (Saber-toothed tiger, anyone?) and a ubiquitous chemical leaked by Dupont. Biotech, fossil fuels, ethics and economics collide, but Rich is too smart to only see dystopia: there’s an appreciation for the possible beating strongly in these pages, too.

HOW THE LIGHT GETS IN

Forget everything you think you know about collections—we’re talking about the brilliant Jo Ann Beard here, and she takes all expectations and spins them around in a kaleidoscope that reveals every hidden facet of a character and an issue. Festival Days brings together 20 years of short stories and creative non-fiction. Beard is a careful writer, curious about what lies beneath the surface: how it feels to get a cancer diagnosis, what it takes for a person to jump out a window to escape a fire, the magic empathy of animals. But she’s also tough and full-on funny and these pieces will stay with you for years to come.

ANNA MARIA HONG: Fablesque
This dynamic and acerbic second poetry collection perverts narrative structures to mimic the disjointed violence of North Korean military aggression. Often concerned with lineage and care between generations who experiences differ wildly, this exacting lyric powerhouse packs a tender punch.

RAJ KAMAL JHA: The City and the Sea
A treatise on the enduring brutality of masculinity, journalist and author Raj Kamal Jha’s fifth novel weaves together two seemingly disparate narratives: a boy in poverty-stricken New Delhi awaits his mother’s return while a woman with a faded memory arrives at a deserted hotel in a snowy German town. Structured with the illogical foundations of a dream, this work of surreal stream of consciousness coheres all of its bizarre dimensions.

DAVID HOON KIM: Paris is a Party, Paris is a Ghost
Set in a strangely disoriented Paris, Kim’s debut centers on Henrik, a Japanese adoptee haunted by his vanished girlfriend. His pursuit of her leads him to meet an assortment of characters that compose the city. Jaded Korean ex-pats and eccentric French widows swirl with memories of Henrik’s own Danish parents and his mirrorless childhood home in announcement of a darkly comic and transgressive new voice.

EUGENIA KIM: The Kinship of Secrets
Eugenia Kim’s impecable crafted second novel finds two sisters separated by immigration and war in 1948. Inspired by true events in her infant brother Linh in the final days of the Vietnam War, Lai’s most recent work depicts Hằng, whose desperate attempt to flee to America is notified by three central characters: two deeply felt lovers, Phoebe and Will, and John, the Christian cult leader who may divide them. Kwon portrays the losses and gains of innocence in gilded halls slick with burgeoning trauma.

R.O. KWON: The Incendiaries
This scintillating debut novel introduces religious zeal to a carefully pruned American campus life, ultimately staging a showdown of faith against grief via three central characters: two deeply felt lovers, Phoebe and Will, and John, the Christian cult leader who may divide them. Kwon portrays the losses and gains of innocence in gilded halls slick with burgeoning trauma.

Anna Maria Hong (author of several New York Times bestselling novels such as The Paris Wife) is another one who chooses to color outside the lines in her latest, When the Stars Go Dark. Set in San Francisco in the 1990s, the novel mixes actual missing person case histories with its central focus on an epidemic of missing girls. The heroine of the novel, Detective Anna Hart, knows something about such predators first-hand, as does McLain, and with her we look at the disappearances through the lens of the taken girl’s psyche, their “damage” if you will, and leap from that into the realm of the metaphysical. Your heart will pound, but so will your neurons!

AKIL KUMARASAMY: Half Gods
This collection of interconnected stories from debut author Akil Kumarasamy deftly layers multiple points of view and their corresponding dramatic ironies. Kumarasamy takes readers across the landscapes of New Jersey, Kentucky, Sri Lanka, and colonial Ceylon, tracing raptures and ripples through thin layers of social grace as reappearing characters mingle and fall out, evoking the classic dinner party mise-en-scène in works from Fitzgerald to Adiche.

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THANHHA LAI: Butterfly Yellow
Lai’s most recent work depicts H’ng, whose desperate attempt to flee to America with her infant brother Linh in the final days of the Vietnam War goes horribly awry when he is taken from her and she is left behind. After completing the ruthless journey herself six years later, she must cross the greater distance of his missing memories of home and family.
Everyone in the Yaddo circle was profoundly saddened to hear that the beloved poet and fiction writer, Richard McCann, had died at age 70 in Washington, DC, where he lived. Richard was a long-time member of the Yaddo community: his first residency was in 1977 and he went on to join our board, did yeoman’s work as Chair of our Literature Panel, and served as Chair of our Admissions Committee. Richard was the author of Mother of Sorrows, a collection of linked stories that Michael Cunningham described as “almost unbearably beautiful,” and a collection of poems, Ghost Letters. His fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry appeared in such magazines as The Atlantic, Ms., Esquire, Ploughshares, Tin House, and the Washington Post Magazine, and in numerous anthologies, including The O. Henry Prize Stories 2007 and Best American Essays 2000.

For his work, Richard received grants and awards from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Christopher Isherwood Foundation, the Fulbright Foundation, and the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown. He was an admired teacher of literature and creative writing at American University, where he was named Professor Emeritus on his retirement.

The tributes that flowed in on social media and in memoriam were, of course, deeply personal and particular to that relationship, but some common strands did emerge—including his astonishing blue eyes and the mischievous twinkle that often shone there, his support for other artists’ work, his capacity for deep friendship, the dazzling brilliance and depth of his mind, and, perhaps most of all, the certainty he could give as he listened to you that you were understood. He was loved by so many of us and is sorely missed. It seems right to let Richard have the last word: here is a poem from Ghost Letters that he wrote as farewell to another.

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HAUNTED JUKEBOX
At night it’s clear I love you.
The glass you drank from on its side crusting in the sink.
You, not here, and I drawing the perfect flower
which approximates a bomb or an ear flattened from the silence on the phone.
There are two kinds of nights, really. One
where I forget you and hear
dogs in the woods digging through dumped garbage.
I return to my work,
sewing slivers of mirror on your pillow,
not to hurt. The other is like tonight,
imagining you’re collapsed in your chair
after a long journey back to me—“Let’s Make Love”—
and I rinse out your glass again
and fill it with water too cold to drink.

CONGRATULATIONS TO YADDO ARTISTS AND GOLDEN GLOBE WINNERS:

YADDO IS A RETREAT FOR ARTISTS located on a 400-acre estate in Saratoga Springs, New York. Its mission is to nurture the creative process by providing an opportunity for artists to work without interruption in a supportive environment. Yaddo offers residencies to artists from all nations and backgrounds working in the following disciplines: choreography, film, literature, musical composition, the visual arts, performance, and video. They are selected by panels of other professional artists without regard to financial means. Residencies last from two weeks to two months and include room, board, and a studio. Yaddo’s extensive grounds and buildings were designated a National Historic Landmark in 2013.