

VISUAL ARTS

All the wild, creative, and just plain funny works Massachusetts art students are making from home

By **Cate McQuaid** Globe Correspondent, Updated April 16, 2020, 12:00 p.m.



A still from Megan DiTullio's assignment for Hayley Morris's stop-motion animation class at MassArt. COURTESY MEGAN DITULLIO

Even before Massachusetts College of Art and Design students returned to class remotely on March 23, sculpture professor Charles Stigliano sent out an assignment. It involved chickens.

“I realized students felt uneasy and separated from each other,” Stigliano said. “I thought I should do something to get everybody together.”

The prompt: Craft a chicken out of whatever material you have at hand. The project blew up within the MassArt community. Students, faculty members, faculty members' children, and more got involved. Photos of chicken art in glass, clay, and needlework circulated via e-mail.

"Even people not participating were looking forward to chickens turning up," Stigliano said. "After 50, I stopped counting."



Molly Harrington, a student in Charles Stigliano's MassArt class, made this chicken "out of oil clay that will hopefully be cast in iron next semester," she said in an e-mail. COURTESY MOLLY HARRINGTON

Studio art classes pose a special challenge to distance learners. Tools and materials available at art schools are often not in the basement at home or under the kitchen sink. Art professors are crafting new lessons that stress resourcefulness and take into account the huge shifts society is undergoing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of their ideas are also just plain fun.

“Every teacher I talk to, every minute we spend,” Stigliano said, “is trying to come up with ways to do things relevant to the reality that these students are in now.”





Sara Micciche's "Cowboy Chicken" is made of clay and acrylic paint with an aluminum foil and wire base. COURTESY SARA MICCICHE



Mad Beaubien's "Embroidered Chicken" COURTESY MAD BEAUBIEN

Elliot Papp, a junior auditing Stigliano's class who lives with roommates in Mission Hill, made several chickens out of food. He carved a tiny one from a carrot. He shaped another from raw chicken and cauliflower, and then cooked it.

“I’ve been cooking a lot since we’ve been home,” he said. “I worked with what I was already using. It was great to keep creating things and have something fun to do in this scary situation. To have something to share and to laugh about.”

Floor van de Velde, who teaches digital fabrication at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts, knew her students probably wouldn’t have laser cutters and 3-D printers on hand.

“I was hesitant at first,” she said. “I thought, how on earth will we do this?”

She has engaged her students in speculative design. “You think about how to solve large social problems. What role can design play in what may happen, and what is happening in the present?” she said.

Now, her students are contemplating designing restaurants that eliminate human interaction, or protective garments such as invisibility cloaks. They’re diving deep virtually, plunking their products around the world using Google Earth, and they’ll make a catalog of their work.

Teaching a 3-D fundamentals course at Montserrat College of Art, Chelsea Sams would ordinarily be in the wood shop now. Instead, like van de Velde, she has asked students to devise COVID-19 design solutions.

“Their assignment is to create a device that can be used for social distancing or other COVID-19 management,” she said. “They’re thinking of things ranging from hand extensions to push people away to a pop-up scary thing to keep people from getting close, to face umbrellas that keep sneezes away.”

Sometimes making art helps the artist (and her viewers) grapple with life’s challenges. MassArt senior Megan DiTullio spent the early part of the semester crafting a frog puppet in Hayley Morris’s stop-motion animation class. The puppet, Scooter, is about 10 inches

tall.



A still from Megan DiTullio's assignment for Hayley Morris's stop-motion animation class at MassArt. COURTESY MEGAN DITULLIO

“It’s all a handmade process,” Morris said of stop-motion. “We had to quickly rethink things. I thought, how can they do this at home, without making a set or having fancy lights and cameras?”

“A lot of students took the project as a chance to comment on the situation,” she added. “Using their projects as a therapy, almost.”

DiTullio plopped Scooter in front of the television and handed him a remote — giant in his little green hands — to watch the news. He scrubs a countertop with Lysol, makes a half-hearted attempt at yoga, and gazes dolefully out the window. The sweetly comic 44-second video DiTullio shot will resonate with people stuck at home.

“I was thinking of him feeling small and insignificant,” DiTullio said.

Other projects travel back in time to old technologies. Toni Pepe at Boston University and William Van Beckum at Wellesley College have suggested their photography students

make camera obscuras by sealing off all the light sources in a room with trash bags and duct tape. Then, cut a small hole out of the covering on one window. The image of whatever is outside will project upside down on the opposite wall.



William Van Beckum, who teaches photography at Wellesley College, made a camera obscura in his home as a demo for his students. COURTESY WILLIAM VAN BECKUM



William Van Beckum demonstrated how a camera obscura projects an image upside down on the opposite wall. COURTESY WILLIAM VAN BECKUM

“You can add a prism to flip the image right side up, or cut multiple apertures for multiple projections,” said Pepe. “Or skew the aperture for a projection on the ceiling. I’ve done it with my kids.”

Pepe is also asking her students to create a document similar to the record of humankind that went into space with the Voyager 2 space probe, launched in 1977.

“The purpose is to get students to learn how to create an archive, and how storytelling is part of that,” Pepe said. “The making of an archive tells us about the making of knowledge and the culture of a community.”

Her students are gathering their own archive of sounds, images, and handmade items to communicate their domestic culture to the outside world.

“It’s a time capsule for this moment,” Pepe said.

Creativity, meaning-making, and resourcefulness are all on any art school syllabus. COVID-19 has highlighted another role teachers play: leading the small communities in their classrooms. Stigliano’s chicken assignment was optional, but Papp took it up for the opportunity to connect.

“Chuck is good about building community. To have a group you know, to have a prompt and doing silly things together,” he said, “it was good.”

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