



Hang In There, Baby

THE COME DOWN; OR, HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING

SAM MCKINNISS ON THE ART OF CATHARINE CZUDEJ,
JEAN-BAPTISTE-SIMÉON CHARDIN, AND LUKE O'HALLORAN

THE TWENTY-FOUR-HOUR NEWS CYCLE, or whatever we're calling it, served us roundups of reheated takes from the year being put down to rest. It had us believing our instincts that 2020 was bad, while suggesting that 2021 would be something else, which is a very fine claim as far as the selling of products goes. But no matter what comes next, the experiences of the past year will never go away, and they will never not be noteworthy. The *annus horribilis* of 2020 will never end, similar to the way trauma and post-traumatic stress might as well weigh the same upon a life. In media, however, during the mirthful final week of December, a different type of reminiscence transpired, selling clicks as it belied a sense of hope we could celebrate. Indeed, as I began writing this, on New Year's Day, 2021, it seemed likely, though not guaranteed, that Donald Trump would exit the presidency, an end that, when it finally befell we the people, prompted some of us to attempt celebration. As I sit down now to revise this piece with four days remaining in February, it has been only three days since Trump's successor held a candlelight vigil and a moment of silence for the half a million Americans killed by the coronavirus. It's been a hard winter.

But it should not be so bad for mature people to admit the truth of things, which is that 2020 will be with us for as long as we shall live. Covid-19 is not over yet, which is also true of AIDS, by the way, to say nothing of the economic repercussions from either disease and the official mishandling of both. The sickness, death, and trauma continue unabated, though the vaccines will do what they will. With the coronavirus, there may very well be a transition from pandemic to endemic, as there has been with AIDS. Naturally, this transition will not occur quickly and thus will be less newsworthy, more difficult to affix to a calendar date, more subtle but no less enraging as it evolves and gloms onto the human condition, as we will eventually come to know it. The living will become inured to mass death, if we have not already. We will have trouble distinguishing Covid-19 as an

event belonging to a brief lapse of time past. The virus will most likely continue to roar on before settling in for the long haul against the once and future backdrop of oligarchical misrule, only to be interrupted periodically by special effects brought to you by climate disaster.

Still, I was able to divert a few moments away from the inanity, fear, and depression of the past year's quarantine by reading Don DeLillo's 9/11 novel, *Falling Man*, published in 2007. I read a secondhand paperback edition released in 2008, the year of the housing crisis. With all due respect to the Never Forget crowd, I never forgot about the World Trade Center, despite everything since, even if I waited until last year to read DeLillo's novelization of its downfall. For those who haven't read it but might easily have guessed, the climactic scene at the end of *Falling Man* arrives as a flashback to the collision pitting man versus man, or jihadist versus infidel, or else airplane versus skyscraper. What plot that precedes this finale, as we've come to experience afresh, is the ensuing loss, confusion, and trauma, the ongoing aftermath of late capitalism, as well as pointers on how to strike up an office affair when there's no office to go to, and how to gamble.

Not to insult your intelligence, but 2007 came six whole years after 2001. And $2020 - 2007 = 13$ years. Which is to say that it takes a while for someone to make sense of a bad time, even Don DeLillo. It takes even longer for a person like me to find the hours to read his account of it. Anyone able to will need quite a lot of time to make heads or tails of a hand-to-God rip to the global stasis like 9/11 was. And so it will be with the global airborne toxic event of Covid-19, without even getting into the beforetime and meantime, characterized as it has been by breathtaking economic and racial disparities as well as relentless violence tearing apart the social fabric woven over our ever-warming planet. Any effort to process the damages endured in the past year is not over yet; we're just getting started, again.



Left: View of “Catharine Czudej: HOMEOWNER,” 2020, Von Ammon Co., Washington, DC. Background, from left: *White Board*, 2020; *White Board*, 2020. Foreground: *Don’t let the computer get on you*, 2020. Photo: Vivian Doering.

Above: Catharine Czudej, *Not Yet Titled*, 2020, phone books, polyurethane resin, lamp. Installation view, Von Ammon Co., Washington, DC. Photo: Vivian Doering.

Opposite page: View of “Catharine Czudej: HOMEOWNER,” 2020, Von Ammon Co., Washington, DC. From left: *TV*, 2019; *Homeowner*, 2020. Photo: Vivian Doering.

ART GIVES US PAUSE, HOWEVER. One of the most benevolent functions of art is to grant viewers this luxury. Making pictures and sculptures allows an artist to stop time and fashion some view of it into an image, a look out the window or into the mirror, to smooth the edges of contemplative stones. Even art forms that utilize time, such as music, drama, film, or video, come with term limits—finite durations within which opportunities may arise for improving the scene.

On February 8, 2020, I took the Amtrak from New York to our nation’s capital to look at art. This was pre-lockdown, obviously, so everything ran along smoothly, as planned. My first order of business was to see an exhibition at Von Ammon Co. in Georgetown of works by the sculptor Catharine Czudej, a close friend who used to keep a studio across the hall from mine in Brooklyn. Owing to the fact that it was one of the last shows I saw before life went to hell, this is an exhibition I have thought back on with fondness as one of the year’s very few highlights.

The show was also memorable for the correctness in general of its various attitudes—the dark wit, the faux grandeur—as well as its eerily prescient anticipation of where we find ourselves now.

Czudej named her show “HOMEOWNER,” a self-explanatory honorific that would soon prove itself extraordinarily relevant, as far as titles go. A little more than a month after her exhibition opened, home became a vitally important stronghold for fending off the sickness outside. Especially in densely populated metropolitan areas, where most people rent. But if home was, and is, a means for staying alive, it was just as often transformed into something like a site of house arrest: a locus of boredom and idleness, loneliness, fear and anxiety, resource scarcity, domestic abuse and threats of eviction—an arena for a battle against loathsome despair.

Placed inside Czudej’s installation were a number of household objects including some nice lamps and a heaping pile of phone books, which I remember thinking was fun at the time, since there’s nothing quite like a list of names and numbers. Now, however, that sort of thing could read just as easily as a book of the dead. Thinking of all the defunct strangers I will never get to call is dispiriting, to say the least, and the enormity of the loss I feel for an outmoded utility such as citywide telephone directories is perverse.

The gallery perimeter was scattered with a series of severe black rectangles, which on closer inspection revealed themselves as resin molds of flat-screen televisions, the likes of which are commonly installed in private dwellings. Yet Czudej’s screen casts have remained with my imagination ever since I laid eyes on them. One was hung on its mount, while the rest were leaned against walls, mute and unmoving, like dead entertainment systems. As objects, or even paintings, they are conversant in the language of any other black monochrome à la Ad Reinhardt, except that Czudej’s screens seem to haunt the shelter in place, as if to show what the corpse looks like when you Kill Your TV. And why on earth would I do that if all I seem to do anymore is watch Netflix at home by myself? It was a chilling proposal.

The exhibition centerpiece was less macabre and yet still somewhat gothic, in its way. A homemade jumbo-size bouncy castle filled a large portion of the floor beneath the gallery’s vaulted cathedral skylight. An electric air pump sat next to it, keeping the balloon building semi-inflated, as leaks in the seams made it less than airtight. It was glorious. Czudej had constructed this garden folly from reclaimed vinyl billboard signage; each sewn panel came pre-emblazoned with found logos and snippets of ad copy for various services, products, or lifestyles. Its surface was colorfully graphic



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in a manner recalling the work of postwar artists like Mimmo Rotella or Tom Wesselmann, both of whom also used commercial detritus as materials for collage. Claes Oldenburg's *Giant Fagends*, 1967, seems appropriate to mention here as well for historical precedence, if not also for ambience. But Czudej brought newly added bonuses, such as medieval-fantasy backyard-birthday-party architecture as well as the amateur shoddiness of bounce engineering by hand, so that if your child were to be invited inside the castle and start jumping around, the entire construction would depress and crash down like a house of cards, or what I would call a literal housing crisis.

Czudej's installation succeeded in giving form to some of our most hollowed-out precepts for attaining personal wealth and stability in this country, the American dream remade as farce for the weary and worn. It was spectacular without being sensational, sobering without being teetotaling.

Per the gallery press release, "The exhibition . . . represents one of the cruellest and least trustworthy pieces of American metaphysics: the mortgage. 'HOMEOWNER' examines the punishing discourse of young adulthood, and the nation's unwavering faith in good debt." It was 2008 all over again, with very little illusion and a big emphasis on lampoon. There we were, looking at it in the young year 2020; we were just getting going without knowing toward what.

THE FOLLOWING DAY, I visited the National Gallery of Art to look at paintings. There on view was Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin's famous 1737 picture *Le château de cartes* (The House of Cards), an oil-on-canvas depiction of an adolescent arranging his house of cards on a game table. The muted blues and browns of the boy's domestic-servant attire harmonize with the warm, dark-gray background, while the rosy flesh of his face and hands adds to the overall quality of amusement, serenity, and self-satisfaction. The young man erects his make-believe fortress, not unlike Czudej and her castle nearly three centuries later, but on an intimate scale. It can be assumed that Chardin's subject has arrived to the table after the conclusion of some other card game intended for more mature gamblers, as betting chips or gold coins are scattered there on the blue baize beside his construction. Chardin's genius for fooling the eye is fully apparent, especially at lower



left, where the artist has rendered the table drawer slightly ajar, the knave of hearts peeking out behind the stark-white back of some other playing card—perhaps a king or a queen, but who knows.

It was impossible to visit Washington, DC, and look at this masterpiece without being at least somewhat aware of the Netflix show of the same title, the once-popular prestige-TV series dramatizing backroom power grabs among congressional legislators. In February of last year—by which time the show’s male star, Kevin Spacey, had been brought low after facing sexual-misconduct accusations—I remember thinking, of the Netflix show, *How boring compared to Chardin*. And for that matter, how quaint when compared with the unscripted reality of life under Trump.

Suffice it to say that the house of cards endures as a metaphor for the precarious structures that govern our lives. “But that’s why you built the towers, isn’t it?” DeLillo writes. “Weren’t the towers built as fantasies of wealth and power that would one day become fantasies of destruction? You build a thing like that so you can see it come down.” Building walls out of trump cards by way of *trompe l’oeil*, Chardin’s perfectly delicate composition has redoubtable staying power. We observe the boy at play in a moment of pre-knockdown cogitation. Unlike in fixed images, however, time barrels on; and so, it was with remarkable swiftness that the niceties of organized life on this planet began falling apart mere weeks after my trip to the capital.



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MONTHS LATER, and into the dark days and nights of late October—with the endless slog of citywide lockdowns, a mounting death toll, California on fire, the interminable presidential campaign, the ebullient yet uncertain excitements of activism swirling all around us, the ennui—my other close friend Luke O’Halloran quietly opened an exhibition of dazzling new paintings that elegantly captured the atomized free-for-all.

O’Halloran, who presented his show at Kapp Kapp in TriBeCa, called it “Dealing.” The title came in as a triple entendre. First, as a nod to the recently

embattled field of art dealing, of course, but also to mean coping. Thirdly, it's a reference to blackjack (as in *hit me*). Five of the seven paintings on view featured playing cards fluttering like red, white, and gray confetti suspended across deep-blue airy space, as if the unseen ground beneath so many houses of cards had just been rocked or quaked or otherwise blown to bits. If finding your footing last year felt like stumbling over ceaselessly shifting patches of uneven earth, with the annihilation of society as we know it sure to come raining down at any moment, these paintings spoke to that vertiginous sensation adroitly yet casually, somehow never losing their cool.

I can also conceive of these paintings as being about a game of fifty-two pickup, which would be nothing more than a practical joke, really, if we were feeling especially nihilistic about the state of things. But O'Halloran's paintings gave me hope, as the odds give a gambler a way of getting by. "The cards fell randomly, no assignable cause, but he remained the agent of free choice," writes DeLillo. "Luck, chance, no one knew what these things were."

The most magnificent example from O'Halloran's show was *Cards in the air 07* (all works 2020), a large oil on canvas picturing about forty cards drifting through a phthalocyanine expanse of nothingness. The rest of the composition arrives brightly and suddenly all over this isolated virtual daytime space, like a ticker-tape parade, but more like a magic show. In that way, it recalls the late, great Sarah Charlesworth, specifically her photograph *Control and Abandon*, 1992–93, from a collection called "Natural Magic" (O'Halloran's *Lady sawed in half*, one of two non-card paintings included in this show, bears a remarkable resemblance to Charlesworth's *Levitating Woman*, 1992–93, also from "Natural Magic"). O'Halloran seems to have inherited Charlesworth's curiosity about metaphysics and optics, exploring their methods and veracity. The main difference is the generational chasm separating each artist's cause for concern, but also that O'Halloran chooses to render and develop these interests using paint rather than by purely photographic means.

In so doing, he deploys careful strokes of impasto oil color in vibrant, pigment-rich tones across his surfaces. Attention is paid to the art of *trompe l'oeil* within the areas reserved for each card, as he details every club, spade, diamond, and heart. Brief instances of the *chiaroscuro* technique dapple the canvas as light and shadow become perceptible over the cards, which in turn accumulate as so many miniature gradients scattered over the grandly enveloping gradation that ultimately plays host to them all.

Another, smaller picture from the series, *Cards in the air 06 (dead man's hand)* introduces mythology into the mix by invoking the unfortunate demise of Wild Bill Hickok of Deadwood, South Dakota. The black aces and eights floating across this canvas were, according to frontier legend, the very cards found in that famous gambler's hand at the time of his murder in 1876 (he had been playing poker when a villain shot him point-blank in



Opposite page, left: Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, *Le château de cartes (The House of Cards)*, 1737, oil on canvas, 32¾ × 26".

Opposite page, right: Luke O'Halloran, *Cards in the air 07*, 2020, oil on canvas, 73 × 55".

Above: Sarah Charlesworth, *Levitating Woman*, 1992–93, Cibachrome, lacquered wood frame, 44 × 54½". From the series "Natural Magic," 1992–93.

Below: Luke O'Halloran, *Lady sawed in half*, 2020, oil on canvas, 27½ × 103½".





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the back of the head). The color scheme of red, white, black, and blue evokes the rugged individualism of the myth of Wild Bill, all while reminding viewers that violent, unnecessary death is as crucial to the American idea of itself as apple pie is delicious.

O'Halloran's *Non-lethal terminal velocity 03*, also included in "Dealing," depicts a kitten spread-eagled as it plunges into a tenebrific gray abyss, but fear not. Feline anatomy combined with its innate righting reflex have granted the animal the ability to increase its surface area into shapes more likely to produce drag and slow down, guiding itself through to a safe descent. Not so, sadly, for the subjects of Charlesworth's "Stills," 1980, that artist's series of enlarged black-and-white news photos of men and women jumping from very tall buildings, caught on camera in midair.

DeLillo again, inspired by the titular subject of a news photo from September 11, 2001: "She thought it could be the name of a trump card in a tarot deck, Falling Man, name in gothic type, the figure twisting down in a stormy night sky. . . . Headlong, free fall, she thought, and this picture burned a hole in her mind and heart, dear God, he was a falling angel and his beauty was horrific."

Hito Steyerl, musing in *e-flux journal* in April 2011: "Whole societies around you may be falling just as you are. And it may actually feel like perfect stasis—as if history and time have ended and you can't even remember that time ever moved forward. . . . Falling means ruin and demise as well as love and abandon, passion and surrender, decline and catastrophe. Falling is corruption as well as liberation, a condition that turns people into things and vice versa. It takes place in an opening we could endure or enjoy, embrace or suffer, or simply accept as reality."

Mouth agape, the cat's icy-blue and black eyes dilated in states of alarm, its tail, claws, and digital pads fully expressed as if desperate for a limb to catch onto—though in reality its life is a drag, and drag means survival. O'Halloran's vulnerable creature is tenderly, even lovingly rendered. He or she or they are going to make it to the bottom of this. Like the poster says, "Hang In There, Baby." □

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Above: Luke O'Halloran, *Cards in the air 06 (dead man's hand)*, 2020, oil on canvas, 17 × 64".

Right: Sarah Charlesworth, *Patricia Cawlings, Los Angeles, 1980*, gelatin silver print, 78 × 42". From the series "Stills," 1980.

Opposite page: Luke O'Halloran, *Non-lethal terminal velocity 03*, 2020, oil on canvas, 12 × 9".

