

Selfie of a Selfie

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ABSTRACT

Upon landing in Australia, our bus from the airport was greeted at the hotel entrance by 10 staff in blue protective clothing, plastic gloves, masks, and face shields. There was an orderly collection of our luggage and we each had a personal escort to our respective rooms. We were given verbal instructions and written literature on hotel operations and quarantine rules, including info about being swab-tested for COVID on the first, fifth and twelfth day (and if healthy, being released on the fifteenth day).

Keywords: Painting, Quarantine, Hotel room, Covid-19, Isolation

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At the end of last year, my husband and I were given permission to travel from Australia to Germany to support a family member who was ill, on the proviso that we would stay for at least three months. Living in a rural setting meant that we were able to isolate from others during the COVID pandemic. In January my visa expired, and I learned that I would be quarantined in a hotel 2,000 kilometres from my hometown.

While preparing my suitcase to leave Germany, I packed 3 paint brushes, 5 tubes of paint and a stretched canvas (about A3 paper size). I knew that painting while in quarantine would keep me occupied, help pass the time and become a meditative experience. I did not have a preconceived idea of what I might paint; I just took the supplies to give me inspiration.

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My room had a large picture window, a king-sized bed, a desk, two comfortable barrel chairs with a side table and a large bathroom with a walk-in shower. Each day I received a phone call from either the police, hotel reception, a nurse, or a psychologist to check if I was doing okay. I received good quality breakfast-lunch-dinner at regular times throughout the day, delivered in paper bags and left outside my door. I could only open the door while wearing a mask and there were cameras in the hallway to be sure that no one left their room.

I soon got into the routine which included e-mailing, zooming, phone chatting, watching TV, reading novels and washing dishes and clothes. But on the fifth day, I started feeling anxious. I was not even halfway through quarantine and was having difficulties imagining another ten days of isolation. I became particularly concerned about whether the air conditioner in my room was isolated from the other rooms, and the news on TV was reporting hotel outbreaks elsewhere. Earlier in the day, while opening my door to pick up my lunch, a man across the hall opened his door at the same time and the panic in his eyes sent a chill down my spine.

It was at this point that I found the subject for my painting: I would paint myself experiencing the process of quarantine. I took a photo of myself with my phone held low and at a diagonal angle to the bright curtains (sunshine) behind me. I wanted to represent my sense of entrapment, lack of fresh air, and social isolation. I immersed myself in the aesthetic task itself, underpainting the face, hair and shirt, using red, yellow and green. Intermittently, over about five days, the painting process gave me a creative outlet that helped me cope with captivity and to gain an aesthetic perspective of my situation.



undercoat



line and contrast



blend and highlight



white accents

Perhaps because of the slowed-down pace and cell-like context in which I was living, I gradually went into a meditative sort of state. I steadily darkened key features within the painting, until the final stage, where lighter tones were employed and white was used as highlights. Time seemed to stand still – the painting process allowed me to experience what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi called ‘flow’ within the psychology of invention. I was reminded of my early reading of Viktor Frankl and how the need to make meaning is one of the fundamental driving forces of artistic creativity.

Eventually, I only had 5 more days to go, and I could see the prospect of heading home soon. Still, I longed to be outside and to take in the fresh air. So, on the morning of my release, I had hoped I would have a moment to sit by the hotel’s swimming pool and feel the sunshine on my skin. But the efficiency of the hotel quarantine system found me being ushered from my room to reception, then dealing with paperwork with the police and then being put into a cab which was waiting with the number of my hotel room as the identifier of which driver would take me to the airport.

It was a strange sensation, being ‘out’, a kind of culture shock. The closest feelings I had to this was when I returned to ‘civilisation’ after hiking/tenting for ten days in the Canadian Rockies, led by a botanist who orienteered his wife, daughter and me through virgin territory using a compass and topographic map. After nearly a fortnight of the peace and solitude surrounded by majestic mountains and wildlife, encountering things like cars, roads, fast food joints and noise seemed alien and plain old wrong. Similarly, being released from isolation and hotel quarantine was disorienting. As the cab driver and I sat in silence on the way to the airport, with masks over our noses and mouths, I watched the COVID-free city folk shopping, jogging, dining, chatting – mask free.

When I got home and dumped my luggage in the courtyard, I walked directly to my front veranda and sat in silence, looking at the garden and how it had grown over several months. Fresh air, sun, sounds of nature – the beauty overwhelmed me. Later, as I was unpacking, I looked at my selfie looking back at me. The woman in the painting was expressing a side of me that had not existed before my experience of being quarantined. Although friends say the painting does not look like me, it looks like me at that time. Importantly, I healed by painting her.