

Tuesday March 08 2022

To: % CARFAC Alberta

Re: Eldon and Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Arts Prize 2022
Letter of Nomination for Edmonton Artist Blair Brennan

To: The selection jury for the 2022 Eldon and Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Art Prize,

It is my distinct pleasure to submit this nomination of Edmonton Artist Blair Brennan, and the artwork "*The Covid Series*" featured as part of an online exhibition developed through the Department of Art & Design, University of Alberta and the Royal Society of Canada Titled *Art in the Pandemic* <covidcreative.ca> which was launched in February of 2021.

Blair Brennan is a crucially important Artist whose practice continues to be deeply meaningful in the fabric of Edmonton's visual art community. Brennan has been humbly going about his impressive commitment to a daily art practice for over 40 years. In addition to his studio practice, he has served as Gallery and Exhibitions Manager at The University of Alberta from 1987 until 2018 when he took leave due to a spinal cord surgery and associated complications requiring rehabilitation and long-term care. Throughout his career at The University and in the arts community Brennan has formally and informally acted as mentor, conspirator, collaborator, supporter, and inspirer to generations of practicing artists from emerging to established and across disciplines. Brennan models a thoughtful, complex, and generous dedication to materiality in his artwork ranging across media and mediums as varied as drawing, sculpture, printmaking, and performance with a commitment to seriality through mixed media works on paper as well as welding and branding with torches and steel. His Artistic practice is complex and varied; mixing research and resources of historical and contemporary value in equal measure to get down on paper an ineffable sense of the artist as a constant receiver and transmitter of sensory information.

The 28 drawings that make up the work *The Covid Series* are an exemplary and incredibly timely artwork that connects to Brennan's long term daily drawing practice and a noted history of presenting a series of works on paper at the 11.5 x 8.5" scale. Beyond material concerns, this work makes present the challenge and trauma the COVID 19 Pandemic has waged on the individual and our collective well being. With regard to this work and the *Art In The Pandemic* exhibition, the Exhibition Coordinator Sean Caulfield offers: "This series of drawings come out of a daily drawing practice in which Brennan responded to the ongoing news from the pandemic. As an individual who is considered high-risk in relation to COVID -19, this creative

work focused on the anxiety and uncertainty this crisis has fostered for all Canadians, but particularly for those in vulnerable populations.”¹

The drawings pull from a range of media sources and combine collaged elements with the artist's own marks, edits, erasures and additions. The use of text, repetition, dark humour, cut-ups, and collage are regular motifs in the artists work. In this series these elements find new meaning as they begin to reveal and reflect a sense of anxiety, isolation, an inference of slow and stretched time, and a haunting reminder of the power and vulnerability of the human body.

In a 2020 Artist statement Brennan offers: “As a series, these works can be “read” much like the panels of a comic book. Although not an explicit narrative, *The COVID Series* presents an evolving journey or odyssey that may seem familiar to many hospital patients, staff and visitors. The grouping will give viewers the opportunity to see the artworks as a progression of ideas or an unfolding narrative.” In reference to the recurring outline of a figure, Brennan describes this as his *everyman*, taken from his highschool biology textbook, he offers: “Much of the history of art has been connected to representation of the human figure. *The COVID Series* utilizes a human form; however it is an anonymous figure. In this way, the figure may function as a symbolic stand-in for any one of us. Anyone viewing this work may insert themselves into this narrative.” This sense of speaking to the individual viewer is particularly compelling in *Isolation Station*, *Describing Things Observed*, *Shelter At Home*, *Outbreak*, and *Closed*. In these works we really begin to feel and understand the anxiety of isolation and being alone in one's own mind. In *SLY MAN COIL HEAD* and *A Mask I Wore*, the Artist confronts us with a more menacing figure, maybe a talking head, these images provoke a sense of dread often spurred by a constant and very dark news and media cycle. *We Are All Brian Wilson* inserts a much needed moment of humour and some hope into the series. Of this piece Brennan offers (this is) “my hope - that like Brian, we could emerge from our quarantine with a masterpiece like the Beach Boys *Pet Sounds*. Brian notoriously spent 3 years in his room.”

Themes of Magic, Conjuring, and Ritual have been long present in Brennan's work. These themes can present as dark and mysterious as well as hopeful. In a recent interview published in *The Edmonton Journal* the Artist offers: “When you think about magic, it's often about healing, there's a natural connection. In an artist statement a long time ago I wrote about magic being around to allay our fears about illness and death.”²

The Online Exhibition developed in partnership between The University of Alberta's Department of Art & Design and The Royal Society of Canada Task Force called for and featured a wide range of creative work with an aim to act:

¹ Caulfield, Sean, *Art In The Pandemic* <<https://www.covidcreative.ca/en/contributors/blair-brennan>>

² Griwkowsky, Fish, *Blair Brennan: the artist who broke his back and knows he must keep moving*. The Edmonton Journal. April 8, 2021

<<https://edmontonjournal.com/entertainment/local-arts/blair-brennan-the-artist-who-broke-his-back-and-knows-he-must-keep-moving>>

“as a place to experience creative research related to COVID-19, creating an archive to document this cultural moment, and offering an opportunity to explore new creative practices. The lived experience of illness and of coping with a pandemic can be difficult to articulate as well as difficult to process. It is vital for artists and other creative researchers to work alongside other disciplines to help explore the full impact this crisis is having on our society. The anxiety, fear, and uncertainty that this crisis has produced is having very real impacts on how Canada responds to COVID-19 – influencing public policy decisions and attitudes towards science and healthcare. But it has also reminded us of the importance of social interactions, including through the arts and other cultural activities, and of our enormous capacity to make positive change when we work together. Creative research enables all of us to more fully articulate and understand this crisis, and in turn places us in a better position to respond to this pandemic effectively, as individuals and as a society.”³

Brennan continues to be active in his drawing and writing practice even with the constraints of his recovery and healing. His powerful compulsion to draw or write, to make work daily, is evident in *The Covid Series*. The drawings resonate with our contemporary moment and offer unvarnished glimpses into the psyche of surviving a global pandemic in isolation. This work encapsulates Brennan’s ability to convey layered and complex themes through direct material means and it has been inspiring to see this Artist continue to offer their insights and provoke and challenge traditional thought even while enduring a difficult and stressful recovery and rehabilitation.

I’m grateful for the opportunity to express my support for Blair Brennan’s work and recognise his long and impactful career fostering interdisciplinary connections and collaboration within the Edmonton arts community through this nomination. I hope the award jury will recognise the importance of this new body of work, its contemporary relevance, and value as a marker of this extraordinary and tumultuous time from Brennan’s critical and evolving artistic perspective.

With much thanks for your time and attention in reviewing these materials.

Sincerely,

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³ Quoted From: Exhibition About Page <<https://www.covidcreative.ca/en/about>>