

William  
Stoehr

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STIGMA AND SURVIVAL

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Front Cover: Laine 22a, digital image

# William Stoehr

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## STIGMA AND SURVIVAL

Concurrent exhibitions presented by The Foothills Art Center - Golden, Colorado and the  
University of Colorado - Fulginiti Art Gallery - Aurora, Colorado

Foothills Art Center opening Thursday August 26, 2021 and continuing through October 31, 2021

University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus Fulginiti Art Gallery opening Thursday  
September 16, 2021 and continuing through November 18, 2021





*Destiny 15, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 60 in.*

## Using art to erase the stigma surrounding addiction

Sometimes a portrait can cross boundaries that are impassable in real life. Through art, we can feel things in a new way, gaining perspectives that are different from our own. Art, by connecting us with one another, makes us aware that we are not alone and allows us to experience the suffering and the joy of being alive. In this way it opens the door for empathy and for overcoming the fear and shame that are so commonly encountered when dealing with people suffering from addiction.

The stigma faced by people with substance use disorders in the medical system, society, from their loved ones, and even within themselves poses significant barriers to prevention, diagnosis, treatment, and recovery. Stigma isolates them, exacerbating their condition. Eliminating this stigma is essential as we confront the addiction and overdose crisis in the United States.

The first step toward alleviating stigma is helping people understand that substance use disorders are a medical condition, and not a moral failing. We must encourage



people to talk about the disease. We must learn to see people with substance use disorders as human beings just like us and understand that addiction is a disease like hypertension or cancer – something that needs treatment, and compassion.

Science and art are unlikely bedfellows, but the intersection of neuroscience to understand how the brain changes due to substance use and addiction and art to remind us of our shared humanity provides a powerful way to help alleviate deep-rooted stigma and inaccurate perceptions. I am also an artist, and I've always had a passion for the power art has to communicate and change attitudes. While scientific evidence can build a case, the emotional connection experienced through art can be an even stronger argument for changed perspectives.

Nora D. Volkow, M.D.

Director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, National Institutes of Health.



*Laine 5*, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 60 in.



## William Stoehr's *Stigma and Survival*

*Emma, I promise to paint your portrait  
if you promise to go to rehab*

The anguished plea above is a desperate cry from the artist to his sister Emma – an opioid addict who, although she was “clean” for five years, relapsed and subsequently died of an overdose. It condenses, within the economy of a single sentence, both the hope and despair that accompany the witnessing of a loved one’s descent into the private hell of addiction as well as it alludes to the enormity of the sufferer’s predicament – the profound, compulsively intractable allure of substances which - while they provide a brief respite from inner torment will, ultimately destroy the person seeking that relief. Stoehr’s promise to Emma reverberates not only in his five portraits of her, but to my mind, throughout all of the remarkable images that comprise this exhibition and the larger body of work of which they are a part.

I was introduced to William Stoehr by Sandra Firmin, Director and Chief Curator of University of Colorado Boulder Art Museum. From what I was able to discern from the images that he sent me, and in spite of the limitations inherent in looking at works of art from within the limited capacities of a computer screen, I was intrigued enough by what I saw to arrange for a studio visit.



*Emma 2*, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 60 in.

I wasn't prepared to be gut-punched by every painting that William showed me – simultaneously riveted and relieved to turn away. The oversized portraits – most of them 7' x 5' – are painfully intimate, simultaneously seductive and confrontational. They are difficult to look at and difficult to turn away from. As Susan Sontag remarked in "Regarding the Pain of Others": "...The iconography of suffering has a long pedigree...Can you look at this? There is the satisfaction of being able to look at the image without flinching. There is the pleasure of flinching."

The visible markers of addiction – are often not visible on the person's body. Unlike the scarf covering the bald pate of a person undergoing chemotherapy or the obvious tremors that betray one afflicted with Parkinsons, substance abuse disorder may not be so obviously seen. The sufferer's "otherness" can be easily concealed, inviting neither the scorn and moral outrage nor - at best - the empathy that might arise in a direct encounter. What Stoehr's paintings do for us as well as for his subjects is thrust us into the relational model proposed by philosopher Martin Buber. They steer us, however unwillingly, away from the "I – It" model in which the "other" is simply another thing that doesn't require or compel a response into the "I – You", which is relational, dynamic, and unmediated - a relationship in which the "You" is seen, known and responded to. In or out of rehab, successfully free of addiction or relapsed back into it, simply recognizing this

form of suffering without censorial complaint or shaming is a profound form of care. Human connection may be one of the most powerful antidotes to the agonies of opioid addiction.

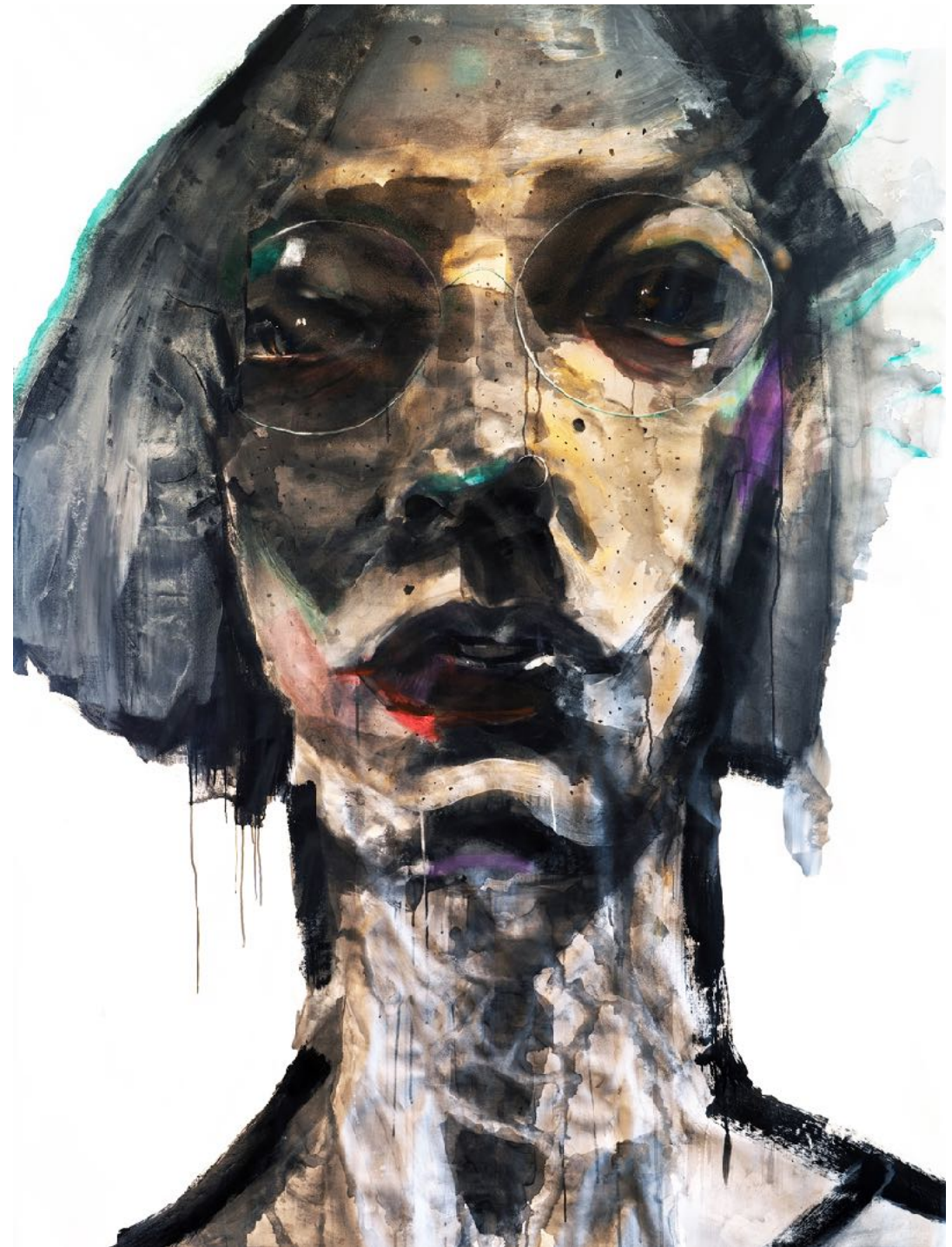
Narratives may make us understand but pictures do something else: they haunt us. All pictures that record to any degree the inner or outer torments of the human being run the risk of being seen in a spirit of prurient allure. Alternately, and particularly within the portrait genre, there are fresher, more piercingly introspective examples of image-makers whose work, by its nature, circumvents that possibility. Stoehr's portraits are among the most "haunting" that I've encountered. The subjects' identities, whether disclosed in symbolic gesture, facial expression, pose, or narrative are closely connected and any one painting could easily "speak" for the entire group. The ambiguous blackness of their backgrounds or foregrounds or faces is also a unifying element providing a visual hinge-point and a discursive space that exists between the subject's world of experience and ours. Their eyes as well, rendered by Stoehr with great clarity and precision - distinct from the manic fluency that he demonstrates in other areas of the image – are another avenue through which we are invited to step across the vast gulf which likely separates our own identity and experience from that of the painting's anguished subject.



A number of the portraits' subjects are "caught" reflexively placing an exaggerated skeletal hand to their mouth as if to express shock or alternately, as a gesture of attempted concealment. What you are looking at in Stoehr's portraits are both symbolic rites of exorcism and actual representations of internal states tied to the world of opioid addiction. In turn they shape our own understanding of the person's "difference" – a "difference" in which we too have our place.

I'm immensely grateful to William Stoehr for so open-handedly allowing me access to this poignant and powerful body of work and to Sandra Firmin for introducing us – rightfully intuiting that something good might arise from our meeting. Many thanks to Eriq Hochuli, Curator of the Foothills Art Center in Golden, Colorado for enthusiastically embracing the idea of producing concurrent exhibitions of Stoehr's portraits – each exhibition amplifies and informs the other. As always I'm indebted to Dr. Tess Jones who continues to guide my efforts with great insight, intelligence and energy.

Simon Zalkind, Curator of Exhibitions  
Fulginiti Art Gallery



*Emma 4*, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 60 in.



## Curatorial Thoughts

I often characterize visual arts as being among our most potent forms of communication. I strive to leverage the artist's talent to raise topics and fuel conversations in our community. William Stoehr is a powerful partner to bring a crucial conversation to the visitors of Foothills Art Center.

The widespread prescription of and use of powerful pain management drugs called opioids are at the center of a public health crisis. William's sister was among the millions of Americans victimized in the wave of misuse and abuse that began in the late '90s. The crisis has flared amidst COVID-19 lockdowns and economic recession. Deaths from overdoses spiked to 93,000 in 2020. The exhibition *Stigma and Survival* brings this conversation to the forefront of the viewers' minds. By making the issue easier to discuss, we want to dispel the myths and moralization surrounding those who suffer from substance abuse disorder. Opioid addiction is far from rare; about 1 in 10 people who utilize opioids for chronic pain develop a use disorder.

Through honest and largely intuitive painting, William creates icons. Each work takes on a life of its own as William's process leads the way.

Strategically placed metallic paint, adornments and sharply rendered negative space give each work the power to consume your attention.

Whether you perceive resolve or grief in the portraits William paints, their scale and supernatural humanity engulf you. William masterfully creates ambiguity which elicits an emotional connection with the viewer

This publication accompanies the *Stigma and Survival* exhibitions hosted by the Foothills Art Center in Golden Colorado and Fulginiti Gallery at the CU Anschutz Medical Campus in Aurora, CO. The exhibits are composed of William's trademark large-scale portraits as well as his new digital work.

Special thanks to William Stoehr, Nora D. Volkow, M.D., Director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, National Institutes of Health and Simon Zalkind, Curator of the University of Colorado Fulginiti Art Gallery.

Eriq Hochuli, Curator at Foothills Art Center, Golden, CO

## From William Stoehr

There is this voice in the back of my head always whispering. "What good is your art? What does it accomplish? Does it matter?"

I started to broadly explore victims of violence, bigotry and addiction. Viewers interpreted my work within their own subjective context related to their own experiences - which is what I wanted. But again the voice returned and asked, "How can you honestly relate to these issues?" Well, I can relate to addiction. Not as a victim but as a witness, and I know about stigma.

Stigma suffocates discussion, blocks action, causes pain. I want to use my art to normalize the discussion and to help erase the stigma. My sister OD'd but, maybe to the millions affected, I can be part of a solution. Stigma is the place to start.

With alcohol and drug abuse, it's never just one person that is impacted. And so the faces I now paint are the faces of all those affected - the victims, witnesses and survivors.



Emma 1, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 60 in.





Willie 16, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 60 in.

Emma died from an opiate overdose.

She was 57 years old and struggled with drugs and alcohol for most of her life.

After Emma graduated from high school she left home for Oklahoma and wasn't heard from for six months or more. No one knew where she was living. No one knew what she was doing. This wasn't something that we talked about.

One day Emma simply called and asked for airfare to come home. Would things have been different without the stigma?

Emma used booze, pot and meth in high school but, when she had the first of her failed back surgeries, prescription opiates took over. And when the pain continued the doctors were all too willing to prescribe more to this known alcoholic and addict.

The trusted small town family doctor said her back injuries were the result of her falling down when drunk - which she did but, he was wrong about the cause. I don't think he could see the beautiful woman behind the drunk and addict. He couldn't see beyond the stigma.



Emma said that she was evil.

Oh my - where did that come from? No you are not evil.  
No you are not alone. Yes we can discuss this. Yes we  
can get help. Yes there is hope.

On the third day of a marathon heart-to-heart, as I  
talked and pleaded and cajoled, exhausting all of my  
ideas.....from out of the blue, I promised Emma that I  
would paint her portrait if she went back to rehab.

The door opened just a crack. She agreed..... and for five  
years she seemed to be in recovery.

It was wonderful to see her laugh and smile. But then  
her beautiful husband died. Then more back surgeries,  
more pills. She relapsed. She died.



*Britain 6, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 60 in.*





Willie 12, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 60 in.

I know my work has emotional impact.

It is ironic that this is something that I can influence but not control. I no longer own the painting the moment it is experienced completed and interpreted by you. It fascinates me to see how you react in ways I never intended or foresaw.

This is your reality born of non-linear emotional experiences, traces of the past and mental images triggered by the cues I present. It is a reality which goes beyond simply observing an image. In other words, can I entice you to not simply interpret my paintings as illusions of reality but instead cause you to perceive and experience a reality of your own making?

I want you to feel with certainty before you think. I want you to have new and different experiences, over time, each time you re-create my portraits with your own mental image, narrative and state-of-mind.





Misuzu 3, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 60 in.

My large portraits start with an ambiguous expression, shared gaze and uncertain context calculated to provoke you into creating the narrative. I suggest certain features and realistically detail others. I use a limited pallet of acrylic paint along with metallic and iridescent colors that produce changing patterns with changes in lighting and view angle.

Working freely, I drip, brush, pour, scrub and scape paint while applying a variety of lines, dots and other adjustments. I often paint multi-views or facial features slightly out of alignment. I frequently paint vaguely different expressions for each side of the face.

These variations might make my images appear more real as time, half remembered memories, and prior experiences.

William Stoehr





*Emma 3*, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 60 in.



*Emma 5*, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 60 in.





Willie 7, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 60 in.

*Our biggest fear happened. We got the knock on the door. When your family is working through this, you fear death. You can't sleep at night. Every time the phone rings, you jump. To this day, between 3 and 3:30 a.m. I come down these steps. I walk to the front door and look out because his car used to park right in front of our house.*

*Carol*

*We were the poster children for stigma. We didn't even tell family members. We were embarrassed. We thought we did something wrong as parents.*

*Joyce*

*We didn't know that prescription medicines were in the game. We had no clue until we got that call that he was dead.*

*Anne*

*We felt hopeless. And hopeless in the sense of not knowing what else to do. But never hopeless to the point that we would stop fighting or that we would stop believing in him.*

*Linda*



*I can remember when I wanted to quit using and felt more alone then I have ever in my life. I washed an entire bottle of Xanax down with a 5th of Jack Daniels. I tried calling every place I could think of for help and couldn't afford it because I didn't have insurance. I cried and passed out from the drugs and alcohol. The next day I woke up down the street laying against an apartment building. That loneliness I felt almost cost me my life. It took me another decade to finally get clean. If your message reaches one person that feels alone like I did; to let them know they are not alone, it could save a life.*

*James*

*I had Naloxone at home and we were able to revive her. She has overdosed three times that I'm aware of. I still carry it with me even though she is grown. I'm still quiet about it when I see people. But usually when I open up, I find out that there's somebody in their family that is also afflicted with the disease.*

*Mark*

*When kids are sick, normally people help the family. When people have an addiction, nobody is bringing a casserole.*

*Julie*



*Rheanna 2, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 60 in.*





*Alexus 10*, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 60 in.



*Laine 13*, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 60 in.



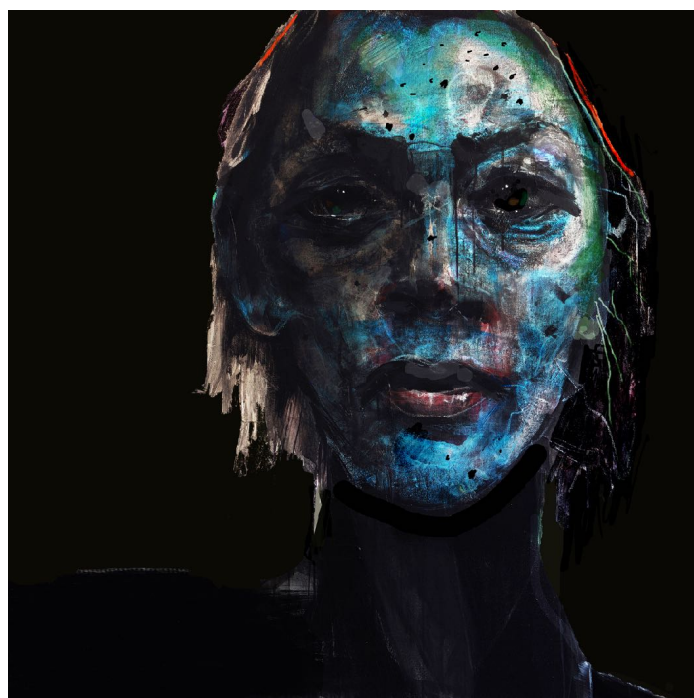


*Shelby 10, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 60 in.*

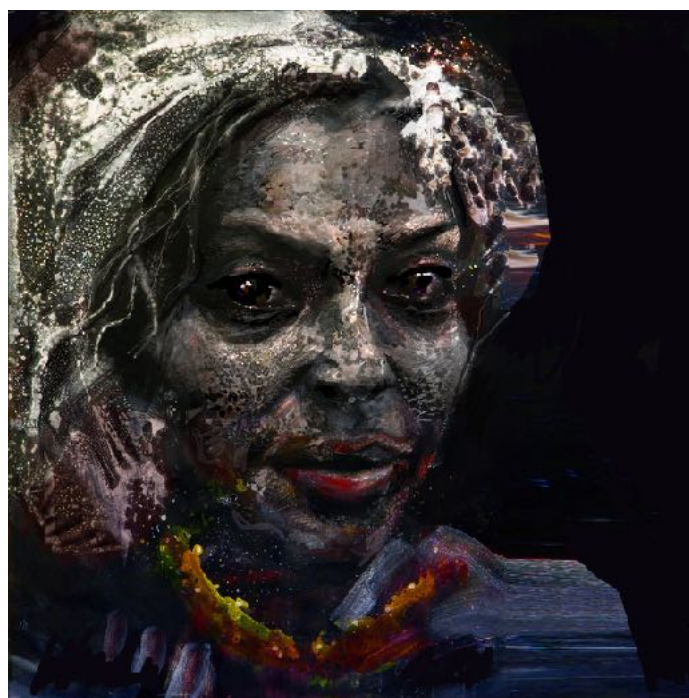


*Rheanna 7, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 60 in.*

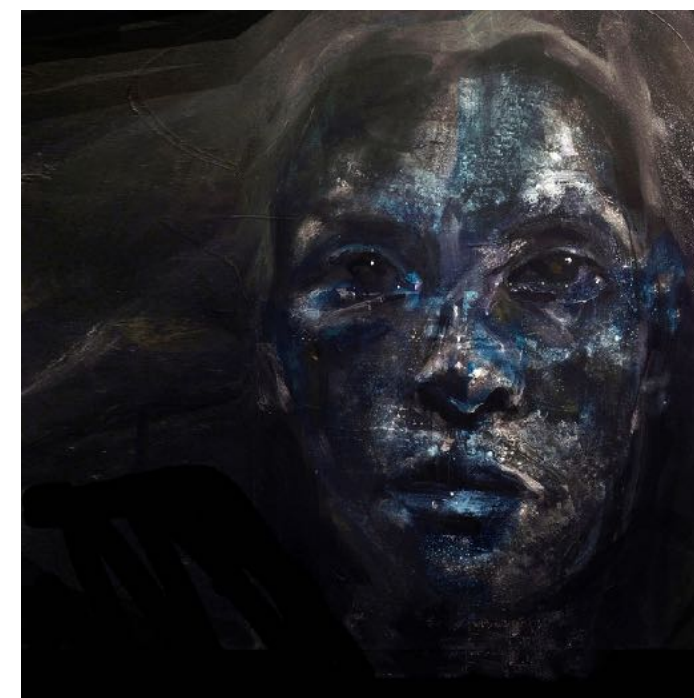




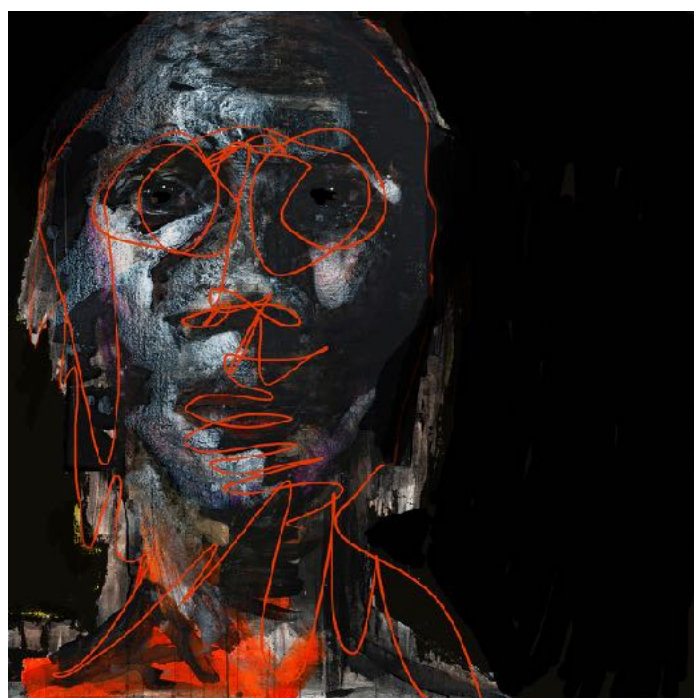
Laine 22a, digital image



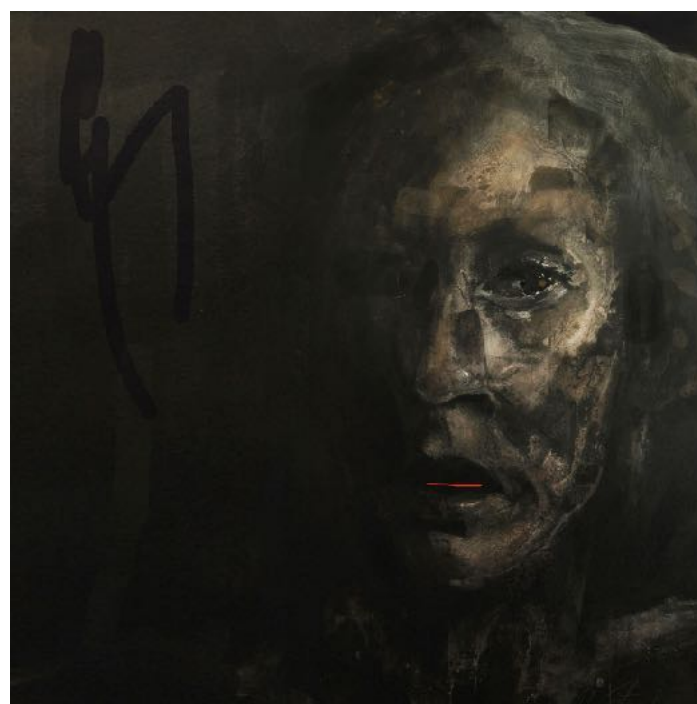
Priscila 6a, digital image



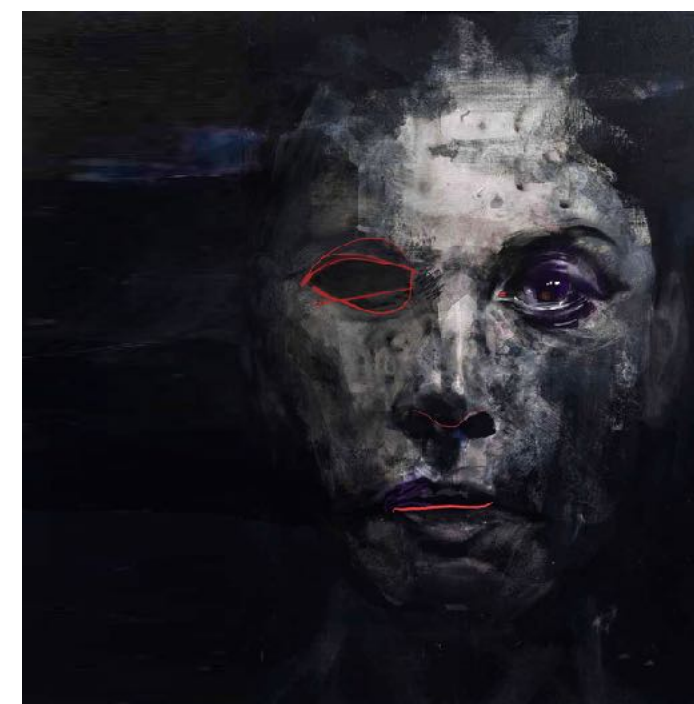
Laine 7a, digital image



Carley 1a, digital image



Jacqueline 1a, digital image



Destiny 10a, digital image



## Art In the Time of COVID: Reinventing Myself

Our son and his wife had their hands full with two jobs, two kids and online school. We decided that we would rather be with our family and help where we could. My wife and I packed up and moved to Washington DC. We now split our time between there and Boulder. I decided not to set up a studio in DC. I will get back to painting but this was not the time.

Because of COVID-19, I had four shows postponed and, given my mission, this was the worst possible time. It was time to reinvent myself. I went digital.

I can't experiment with paint drips but I can still experiment with layers of color. I miss making large sweeping strokes with large brushes but I also recognize that much of my painting is done with small brushes as I place tiny dots, lines and other marks on my canvas.



Rheanna 9a, digital image



Alexus 8a, digital image

I love the scale of my seven-foot canvases but now I can project them billboard-sized.

I love the way my paintings hang together on a gallery wall but now I can animate them and create an always changing virtual exhibition online. I love experimenting and learning new ways to handle paint but now I am learning and experimenting with iMovie, Photoshop and GarageBand.

But most of all I believe that reinventing myself is a way to take my art to a new level and to more effectively get my message out to those that matter most - victims, witnesses and survivors.

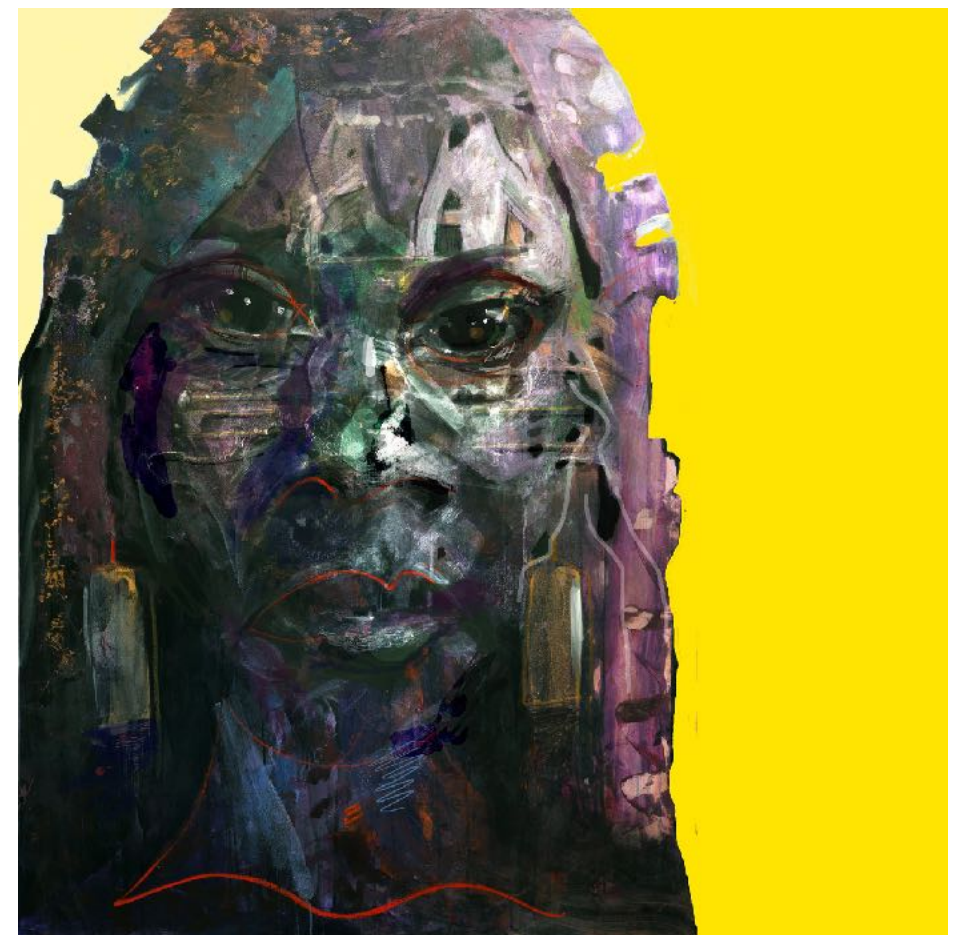


Thea 3a, digital video stills

In 2012, I went to the *David Hockney: A Bigger Picture* exhibition at the Royal Academy in London. It was a visual celebration that showed me the potential for creating large-scale art on my iPad.

I now start with repurposed high-resolution images of my own large-scale paintings, in-process work and original digital drawings. I continue to work on them on my iPad where I add various marks, masks, enhancements and graphic overlays to the base image which I then reproduce as an individual image, GIF or video. They are prepared for HD display on monitors, as projections on gallery walls or as on-line presentations. I also produce high-quality images which I print on metallic paper and then bond to aluminum composite panels in a wide range of sizes.

William Stoehr



Britain 15a, digital image





*Anastasia 1*, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 60 in.

For a complete online catalog with a list of paintings, digital art and videos from these concurrent exhibitions including installation images and video links see:

[WilliamStoehrArt.com](http://WilliamStoehrArt.com)

In Colorado, for help with any mental health, substance use or emotional concern, call Colorado Crisis Services at 844-493-TALK (8255), or text TALK to 38255. Trained professionals are available to provide free, immediate, and confidential help, 24/7/365. Learn more at [coloradocrisiservices.org](http://coloradocrisiservices.org)

The national helpline is 1-800-662-HELP (4357). This is a free, confidential, 24/7, 365-day-a-year treatment referral and information service (in English and Spanish) for individuals and families facing mental and/or substance use disorders. Learn more at [samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline](http://samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline)

## **Concurrent exhibitions presented by The Foothills Art Center and the University of Colorado - Fulginiti Art Gallery**



Center for Bioethics and Humanities  
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO **ANSCHUTZ MEDICAL CAMPUS**

The Foothills Art Center is located at 809 15th St, Golden, CO

The Art Gallery at the Fulginiti Pavilion is located at 13080 E. 19th Ave. Aurora, CO 80045