

Chicago Tribune

Local artists create work for a collection focused on documenting the emotion of the COVID-19 pandemic

Just a few weeks before the COVID-19 lockdown, artist Mike Barret Kolasinski was cross-country skiing in a Michigan county park where he stumbled upon a small, picturesque stream. Back at his home in Irving Park, he turned the scene into a pastel landscape. Considering the days that followed, he said of the stream that he was “glad to be there” when he was.

“For me in particular, to be told to stay at home is tough because I love being outdoors,” Kolasinski said. “I can’t wait to get back out there and gather images to work from.”

Kolasinski contributed his piece [“Glide to be Here”](#) to the [Great American Paint In](#), a juried collection of works by artists from across the country who are sharing their stories of the pandemic.



The aim of the project is to collect work from all 50 states to document how Americans are experiencing this time, said Bill Weinaug, founder of the Great American Paint In.

“We’re in the middle of this incredible history that is happening around us and it’s really painful,” he said. “We need to capture the emotion of this pandemic through the eyes of the artists.”

Weinaug is a mechanical engineer by trade, who said art has always been part of his story. He owns Gallery CERO at Wekiva Island in Longwood, Florida, which is a recreation venue, but also an environmental center. About 12 years ago, Weinaug said he and his wife took over the [Wekiva PaintOut](#), an “en plein air” painting event to raise money to protect the surrounding river and land.

When COVID-19 hit, Weinaug said he quickly learned how hard artists had been affected and felt the need to support his local community. The Great American Paint In was adapted from the PaintOut and started as a way to help the artists at a time when Weinaug said he saw a “huge tension” in the community.

“We also wanted to create a marketplace where artists could have opportunity to sell a piece of art,” Weinaug said. He said many artists are struggling to sell pieces during the pandemic, so he is hoping the collection catches the eye of collectors.



“Being an artist is a very difficult endeavor,” said artist Kirk Kerndl of Lombard.

Much of his work prior to and during the pandemic deals with a sense of isolation, he said, calling his pieces “Hopper-esque.”

“Artists — well, I don’t want to speak for all artists — in general have an isolated existence to begin with,” Kerndl said.

His oil painting, [“Red Pipe Wrench”](#) is part of the Great American Paint In collection. He said the rusting wrench swinging on a nail depicts a feeling of seclusion or loneliness many are experiencing these days.

Weinaug said he hopes to capture these emotions as part of art history. The collection now has almost 200 pieces, and while they are working to collect submissions from the last few states to round it out, Weinaug said the eventual goal is to make the collection into an art history book.

“This might be a whole new movement of art,” he said. “Who knows what’s going to grow out of this pandemic. We’re just in the middle of it.”

To see the article, click [here](#).