

HYPERALLERGIC AUGUST 1, 2020

ARTISTS QUARANTINE WITH THEIR ART COLLECTIONS

by Stephen Maine



Ann Craven, title and date unknown, watercolor on paper, 12 x 9 inches
(image courtesy Avery Z. Nelson)

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The protocols and other pressures of living in this perilous time continue to reshape the significance of once-familiar artworks. For this series of articles, I've asked artists who collect other artists' work to tell me about recent encounters with the images and objects they've been looking at for a while, and the unaccustomed meanings that have emerged. My questions are: In the context of rampant disease, do you look at your personal collection differently now, and which works in particular? Is there one that especially resonates with you at this weird, frightening moment? And does it take on new meaning?

Avery Z. Nelson (Brooklyn, New York): During the winter of 2006, I was freshly out of undergrad and working the register of Utrecht in the East Village for \$9.50 an hour. My friends and I had an unspoken game of trying to pack shipments as creatively (slowly) as possible because fuck exploitation, and we were really bored. One day Ann Craven walked into the store with a stack of 100 or so watercolors that she needed to get framed. Ann was one of my mentors in school, and I was thrilled to see her. Much to my surprise, she showed me the stack and told me to choose one.

Over the past four months I have returned to Craven's painting frequently. As I listened to the incessant sirens shriek death up First Avenue in April, I found serenity, beauty, and decay in Craven's flower. As I marched in the streets of Manhattan and Brooklyn during the mayor's bullshit curfew and police bulldozed into us, arrested us, beat us, and continued to do their daily job of terrorizing and murdering Black lives, I began to see the three flowers as a single flower in motion, either bleeding down into the earth or floating up into the sky — maybe both at once.

I've thought about getting Ann's watercolor properly framed, but as I've watched the rich get richer and most of my friends on unemployment redistribute as much as they can each month to those ineligible and more vulnerable, keeping the painting in the crappy Utrecht frame that I took it home in seems absolutely right.