



Emily Cox sits in front of Claude Monet's *Water Lilies*. © TRAVIS YOUNG

THE ELDRITCH SCALE OF THE REAL

EXPLORING THE NELSON-ATKINS AFTER SIX MONTHS IN SMALL SPACES BY EMILY COX

I paused in the high-ceilinged atrium of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. Along with the rest of Kansas City, I hadn't been here for at least six months. It was the last Saturday in August, and the museum wasn't yet open to the public—just to its volunteers, its most elite members, and me.

I wanted to see something big, so I headed towards Monet's *Water Lilies*. Passing through the familiar baroque galleries on the way, Caravaggio's *Saint John the Baptist in the Wilderness* stopped me in my tracks. I took slow steps closer, looking up at John, moody and imposing, larger than life. The high drama of the painting had my mouth gaping under my mask. I haven't been in the presence of anything like that, not for months and months.

At once, the museum felt like a playground; I had the urge to giggle, to run around from piece to piece, too many riches to take in.

I toured the museum, returning to paintings I've loved for years, like visiting old

friends. Or I would stand in the middle of a gallery, swiveling my head at the feast around me, seeing what I hadn't before. Josef Albers' *Homage to the Square* was a pool of rich colors I wanted to soak in. I could feel my muscles relax, the more time I spent in the museum. I wanted to speak to the statues. I looked at *Guanyin of the Southern Sea*, I asked if he'd been lonely there, too, if he looked forward to having visitors once again.

Without other museum guests hanging around, I lingered. There was no polite jockeying for position, no rushed viewings when you know someone else is waiting nearby. Fascination bubbled through me, clearing away pandemic-era detritus of worry, alarm, fatigue.

I found myself appreciating works that I usually pass by without a glance, like the stained glass peonies by John La Farge. I usually find Kandinsky annoying (sorry Kandinsky fans), but on this day, even Kandinsky could do no wrong.

Deep gratitude welled up as I saw new

things after months mostly spent in my apartment looking at screens. Doris Seidler's *Cathedral II* was a marvel of textures, but looking at an image online now, it looks forgettable. The textures that jumped out at me in person fall flat on the screen. While I'm typically quick to critique museums for the norms they enforce, here, on this day, I was reminded how the museum offers a sacred space in which to be transformed by art. And all the virtual gallery tours in the world can't make up for the in-person experience.

Like with Anselm Kiefer's *Lichtfalle*: At over 18 feet wide and 12 feet tall, it swallowed me whole. The depth of the mixed media, including glass and wire, creates a world unto itself. I am moved by its scale and intricacy, by the attention it demands.

There are also artworks that just make more sense in person. Their occupancy of the space in the museum gives them weight. Look for the dual light bulbs of Felix Gonzalez-Torres' *Untitled (March 5th) #2* next time you're in the Bloch Building. Reading the placard about this AIDS crisis-era work, then stepping back and looking at the piece, I felt a kick in the chest.

There are changes at the museum, of course. While entrance remains free, they are asking you to register for tickets in advance of your visit so they can monitor occupancy levels. Travelling exhibitions and programming are all on hold at least their

GET OUT

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Reserve your free tickets at nelson-atkins.org

Hours: Mon 11-5; Tues & Wed closed; Thurs 11-9; Fri 11-5; Sat & Sun 10-5.

Members can visit an hour early on open weekdays, starting at 10 a.m.

next fiscal year, beginning next May. But the Nelson's collection runs deep, and new exhibitions will be curated from within. Gordon Parks x Muhammad Ali, which opened less than a month before the museum closed, will also bless museumgoers for an extended run through April 4, 2021.

Parks' portraits of Ali notice tender details of the young boxer. I was surprised to find photographs so mesmerizing, when I spend so much time, everyday, with photographs scrolling on my phone screen. But the grain of the prints made from film neg-

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Cox views Guanyin of the Southern Sea, Chinese, 11th/12th century, Liao (907-1125) or Jin Dynasty (1115-1234).
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atives gave me goosebumps. The subjects were there in the room with us. With nothing else but white walls, I was immersed in the composition, the story, the aliveness of Ali.

While standing before Water Lilies, I'd looked at those flinging brush strokes, and I could see Monet's hand in them. Later, I stood in front of the Eagle Feath-

ways to soothe those alarm bells of loneliness. (I had resisted the Zoom-hangout trend but then discovered that my biweekly virtual book club brings me so much joy from that togetherness.) But I do wonder for how long we will feel an aversion to being near others physically, for how long we will register the physical presence of others as a potential threat?

DEEP GRATITUDE WELLED UP AS I SAW NEW THINGS AFTER MONTHS MOSTLY SPENT IN MY APARTMENT LOOKING AT SCREENS.

er Headdress by an unnamed artisan(s) of the Northern Cheyenne. I could see the sweat stains on the fabric lining its interior; I could see the imprint of the man who wore it. Georg Pencz's miniature engravings, just three inches wide, had me leaning forward, face near the glass, to make out all the tiny lines, all the incredible detail. I could imagine Pencz, too, leaning close, muscles cramping.

Looking at each piece of art felt like forging a connection through space and time with the people who created them. The communion I felt with the artists through their handiwork was healing for the months of pandemic loneliness. I could feel the people present, and time collapsed around me. The museum didn't feel empty; it felt vibrantly alive.

Loneliness often perpetuates itself. We are wired to need others and raise the internal alarm when we are too alone. That clanging alarm often interferes with actually getting our social needs met; we enter hypervigilance where it's easy to see rejection or abandonment everywhere we look.

Being physically isolated from one another at a time when most of us could desperately use the comfort and care that being around other people provides is the worst irony of this pandemic. We are finding new

Maybe being near the physical creations of others can offer a surrogate social experience. Early in the pandemic, I exchanged snail mail letters with several friends. Handwritten envelopes with folded papers inside capturing whatever they were feeling and experiencing in the moment they wrote it. Receiving those, I felt as giddy as I did in the museum. This imprint of another human's effort and creativity—of their existence—felt like a treasure. I felt less alone.

Being at The Nelson, seeing the art in person, the full mind-body experience, the visceral reactions, it was something I hadn't known I needed. Go. Let yourself be pulled down the hall by William Keith's Sunset Glow. Whisper to the statues, ask what they've been up to without us. I smiled as I walked around, my turbulent brain calmed and focused on just what was in front of me. The cacophony of my pandemic anxiety quieted in the face of works of art that brought me fully present. All I needed was the companionship of the artists through their work, and the curiosity they evoked.

At the end of my visit, I felt fed. As if, after months of eating dinner alone in front of the television, I shared a meal with dear friends, laughing and telling stories. Satisfied like that. I didn't know a museum could do that. **P**

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