# Covid Metamorphoses

**136 Eldridge Street**
**June 4-27**
**Co organized by Paul Whiting (George Gallery) and Jared Linge (High Noon Gallery)**

Pythia, colored pencil on paper

**Paul Whiting:** I was amazed when your first posts of new drawings started to appear on social media last April when I knew you were sick with Covid. I'm sure that I would have been trying to sleep and maybe binge watching something on Netflix, at best. What was it like to work in bed while recovering from Covid?

**Jennifer Coates:**
At first I was so scared. I was monitoring my temperature constantly. As I got more and more exhausted and had trouble moving around without feeling breathless and sweaty, I retreated to the bed. After a few days it became clear I was going to need to stay there for a while. I didn't have the attention span or focus to read or watch anything, but for whatever reason, it didn't take too much energy to make digital collages in Photoshop and then drawings from the collages. It's something I had done before during a hospital stay: I already had a sickbed studio practice. I just went slow and pretty much dissociated. I didn't want to think about where I was or how long I'd be there or what I would do if it got worse. I had my computer, some paper and pencils and just surrendered. It was a place to escape to and stopped me from thinking about being sick. I was in bed 24/7 but my body was acting as if I was exercising - it was so bizarre and unpleasant. I had to go somewhere else.

**PW:** The drawings were intense and committed and they felt like they were the product of fever dreams. Photoshop often has dry connotations but you turned it into a dream machine of sorts. Can you describe your process?

**JC:** I sometimes have these visual hallucinations when I am really tired but can't sleep. I close my eyes and scenes that are part geometry, part cartoon, part spatial appear and morph from one scene into another, it is a weird roller coaster ride. They are actually technically called Closed Eye Hallucinations. I try to approximate this experience with Photoshop. That process starts with a big google image search. I feel like I'm on a hunt through art history: landscape painting, the nude in the landscape, specific animals and how they are represented in different cultures and time periods. I look at how animals, humans, flowers and trees are depicted, how figures interact within a landscape, how figures are situated in relation to each other. Early modernism, medieval bestiaries, ancient Egyptian relief sculpture - there is so much to look at. Once I've amassed a good index, I drop them in Photoshop on top of each other, a few at a time, in various combinations, creating layers and erasing away to reveal what's underneath. I adjust the color balance to achieve these extreme chromatic relationships that the computer offers. I realize I have brought this color balance idea into my painting - I'm always thinking how to increase saturation/brightness/contrast. Some of those digital editing tools in Photoshop are now present in my analog hand.

Finishing the collages means that they've achieved some kind of just comprehensible whole - where different eras and different approaches to representation flicker and mutually illuminate each other. As I start drawing from them, I make decisions along the way about what to include or exclude. I never paint directly from the collages, I have to put the images through their paces: an initial drawing, drawings based on other drawings, small paintings based on drawings, then large paintings based on small. This way the original sources become mine, part of the electricity of my body. I feel like the past is being mutated and warped into my own particular, awkward, manic present.

Three Blue Bathers, colored pencil on paper

**PW:** Can you talk a little more about making these particular drawings?

**JC:** In the digital version of "Spring Dancers," Matisse and Denis combine together in the landscape and the figures are Paleolithic from the Addaura caves in Sicily. They are dancing, with birdlike heads, and one figure is prostrate before the others: it's thought to be a sacrificial ritual. In my pencil drawing, the figures are easier to discern and the jumble of landscape bits are more solid, decisive.

Spring trees are interspersed with portals to the starry night sky. Pulses of acidic yellow punctuate across the abstracted foliage. “Forest Gathering” is a mashup of a Poussin drawing, a Burchfield landscape and a Cezanne watercolor. This one was particularly ornate but I felt like I had all the time in the world to dig in on translating the details into pencil. The bark on the birch trees felt like handwriting, the branches started to poke out and echo each other and the Poussin heads have their odd cameo roles in little clearings in between.

Spring Dancers, digital collage

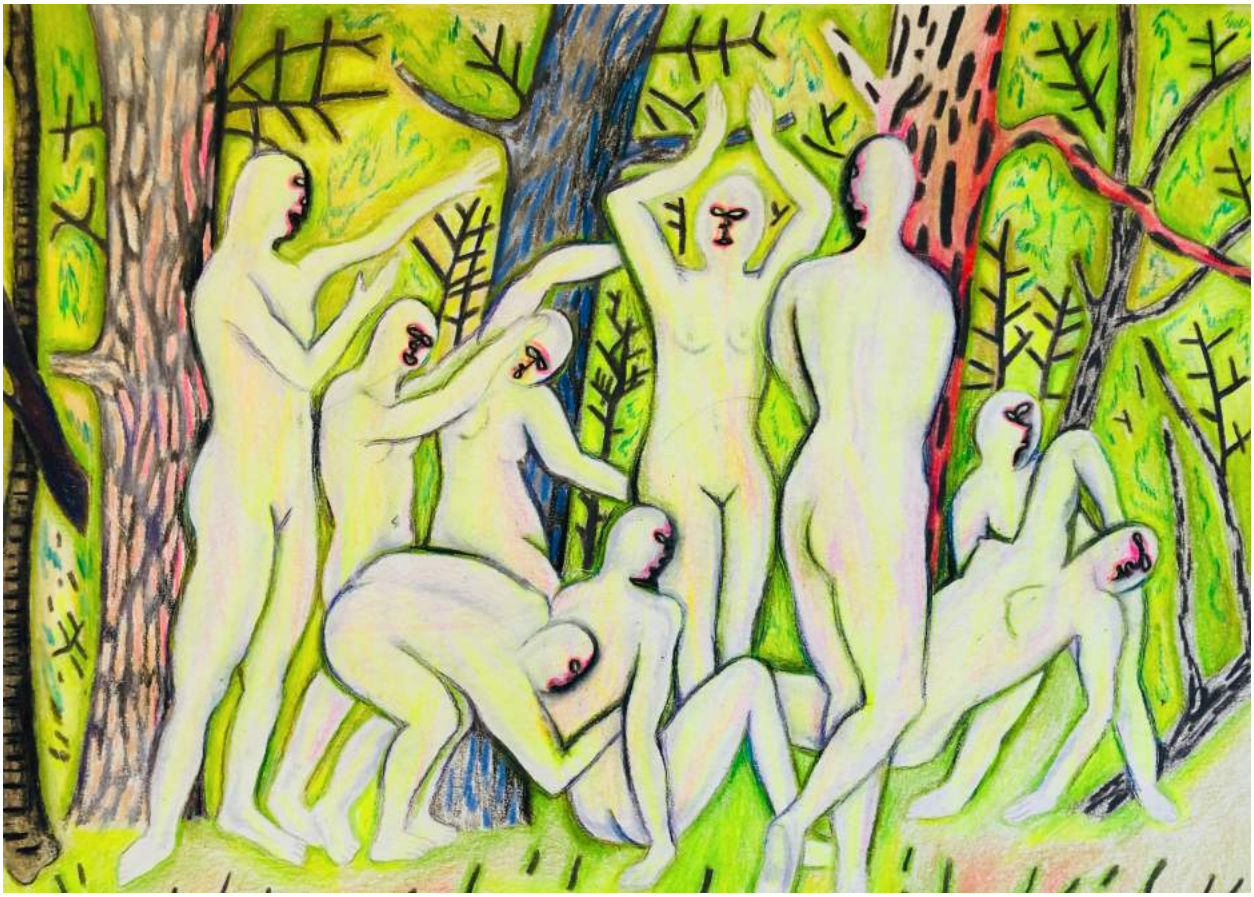
Spring Dancers, colored pencil on paper

Forest Gathering, digital collage

Forest Gathering, colored pencil on paper

**PW:** Many of these figures appear to be in pain or even agony. You talk about the work being a refuge or escape from the illness, but maybe some of the angst of the time was creeping in via the distressed figures. Those are beautiful and strange "tigers" but they don't look very happy; the plant people have the intense flush of spring but the red also reads as blood or maybe an over-sensitivity that’s shifted into pain. Many of the Bacchanal figures have faces that look alien or mask-like. Some are frolicking but there

is clearly something threatening going on as well. I'm interested in who these characters are and what they're going through.



Bacchanal 1, colored pencil on paper

Plant People, colored pencil on paper

**JC:** No one is really surrendering to joy. There is Paganism here, but it has a utopian side and a homicidal side. The bacchanals are drunken celebrations in the woods but what if the revelers are undead zombies, do undead zombies actually know how to have fun? What if they are just going through the motions in a dissociated, puppet state. It's like the medieval Danse Macabre, the plague death dance. Plants are reclaiming people but maybe that's painful: in some places it looks like they are sawing humans in half. Maybe the "natural" elements of the landscape are toxic

**PW:** Can you talk about the figures in “Standing Stones?” They seem less collaged than some of the figurations in other drawings but are similarly odd and ominous.

**JC:** Those are drawn from Proto Indo-European stelae, or stone ancestors. They are supposed to honor the dead. I put them in a stand of trees that look like hair follicles or nerve endings. There was so much death happening at the time, and my own body felt like a sick forest. I just kept drawing and drawing as if that was the way out of the illness.

Standing Stones, colored pencil on paper

**PW:** The relationship between mythology and dreams is a fascinating and open topic. How do you see this in terms of your work?

**JC:** Myths are stories told about common feelings and urges through recognizable types or characters. For me, if personal dreams are to manifest themselves in art at all, they are easier to connect with if they reference familiar situations or figures. Art history is replete with images of myth that offer opportunities for continued relevance. My experience has been one of intense anxiety about the world I live in. I have a lot of apocalyptic but vivid, dense dreams. I can put all my nervous energy into the mythical figures from another time and it feels like ordering the chaos of my brain somehow.

**PW:** How else do you think the feeling of Spring 2020 (both personally and politically) influenced these works?

**JC:** From our beds we can access all periods of human history at all points on the globe. Our understanding of the present and the past is compressed into these trance-like states in front of the screen. You can find everything and nothing in these states. I can waste my time in a vortex of news and social media consumption or I can be an image sleuth trying to make sense of the history of depiction and what it meant to feel alive at all the other times, not just my own. I feel like art is the key to all of this.

Spring 2020 for me was a time of being confined to bed and glued to a screen. The screen was the way to self soothe and stay connected. From my sickbed I found it

comforting to weave different times together in Photoshop, then replace the screen with a piece of paper. I had to make drawings to redeem my misery and I wanted to turn back to the past to find something resonant in the present.

I look at a lot of prehistoric images. Lately I have been thinking about this word “prehistory” and what that actually means. What was it like in the time before written communication - an almost impossible thing to consider. Prehistory seems like a fact - the time before written history - a word that represents the truth of how things were in the tens of thousands of years before written language. I’ve been reading about prehistory though and it’s a concept that was developed in the 19th century by Swedish archeologists. It’s another white, Euro-centric construct that is used to “other”- in this case, the distant past. The whole idea of the distant past didn’t even exist for a long time because of fantastical Biblical dating. In the 19th century people started to understand just how far back things went. Prehistoric tools, objects, artworks were being categorized, catalogued and valued for the first time. Stratigraphy - the order of remains and ruins according to geological layers - became a way to understand the past. I know this is long-winded but I feel like it’s important to how I’ve been thinking visually. There are no layers in cyberspace, but when I am working in Photoshop there are. When I find images online, I put them in layers to understand them as fragments from the past. The drawings have a layered-ness to them also, they register different strata of marks and ideas.

**PW:** I was thinking of Werner Herzog’s movie “Cave of Forgotten Dreams” in relation to all of this. Do you feel an affinity with it?

**JC:** For sure, I was so excited to see it when it came out in 2010. The whole 3D glasses experience made it extra special and bizarre. Using this clunky modern technology to help us see back in time to those glorious caves was hilarious but thrilling too. So classic Herzog. He brought us the pure magic of the drawings themselves, but also the collective wonder of trying to picture what it might have been like to see them or make them back then. What was it like to have a need to go that far into the earth, through dark tunnels, in order to conjure animals you can easily see back out in the open landscape. The flickering drawings are like moving herds in the low light you have to bring with you into the cave. Like the earliest version of a movie, you’re there to have your normal sensory surround replaced with something fully man-made. Paleolithic French people did their best to leave traces behind, and Herzog celebrates these traces in a medium that has its own eccentricities and limits. There is poetry to all of it. When he showed the albino crocodiles swimming in nuclear

Ghost Tigers, colored pencil on paper

runoff at the end, I wondered if this is what our age will leave for future millennia: toxic waste and mutant animals

**Jennifer Coates** is an artist working in Brooklyn, NY and Lakewood, PA. She is the 2021 recipient of the John Koch Art Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and a 2019 fellow at the Civitella Ranieri Foundation in Umbria, Italy. Recent solo shows include “Pagan Forest” at West Chester University, PA and Toxic Halo at High Noon Gallery, NYC. Her work can currently be seen at the National Arts Club through the end of June in the group show “Painting the Narrative.” She teaches at the New York Academy of Art and the NYC Crit Club. She is also the co-host of “Pep Talks for Artists,” a weekly conversation on the Clubhouse app with fellow painter, Amy Talluto.

**Paul Whiting** lives and works in New York. His work has been exhibited in Galleries throughout the US and Germany. He was granted a Core Program Fellowship at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston and a residency at Yaddo. In 2015, he was a fellow of the Edward A. Albee Foundation. He also runs George Gallery