

“Suzette Martin’s Viral Load” [An Essay Fragment, Draft], April 2021  
Jacob Henry Leveton

Foremost among the many contradictions that the coronavirus pandemic poses for American life is that despite the sheer ubiquity of COVID-19 in the United States, the toll of the virus has been largely invisible, at least in terms of the many scenes of suffering taking place in hospitals and homes. For instance, in April 2020, early in the pandemic when New York was experiencing 800 deaths per day, MSNBC aired British journalist Stuart Ramsey’s Sky News special report on COVID-19 in hospitals in Bergamo.<sup>1</sup> The “red zone” represented was in Italy, not New York City, even when the epicenter of disease was in the US, not Europe. The anxiety of representation *qua* proximity to misery has consistently vexed the visual field in the American context of the pandemic.

Even so, certain artists have critically intervened to engage with the COVID-19 crisis in the US, perhaps none as stridently as Suzette Marie Martin. Across the course of the pandemic, Martin has been at work on her continuing project *Viral Load*, a series of ten, large-scale, mixed media drawings on canvas, “bearing witness to the emotional consequences of cumulative, collective, loss during the COVID-19 pandemic,” as the artist herself describes them.<sup>2</sup> Martin’s move into the medium of drawing, as opposed to painting or any other media, to grapple with the interrelated medical, emotive, social, and economic forms of deprivation brought on by COVID-19 is fitting. As the preeminent scholar of drawing Deanna Petherbridge has observed, arguing for the autonomous importance and capacities of the medium as significant apart from its traditional preparatory or occasional functions, drawing itself comprises a vital “matrix” for thought, by its very nature “a responsible and *labile* poetics.”<sup>3</sup> That is to say, the intimacy and

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<sup>1</sup> “Special Report: Coronavirus—Into the Red Zone,” *MSNBC*, aired April 5, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Suzette Marie Martin, “Viral Load,” <http://www.suzettemartin.com/viral> (accessed December 13, 2020)

<sup>3</sup> Deanna Petherbridge, *The Primacy of Drawing: Histories and Theories of Practice* (Yale, 2010), 9.

immediacy of the draughtsperson's inscription on the support carries with it a means of commitment of expression and emotion relative to the process of making.

Martin's drawings are, I think, immense contributions to thinking during the pandemic, in large part because they bring science into art and suffering into view. Each comprises a single body ensconced in a claustrophobic space, and every body emerges in relation to medical text describing the SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes COVID-19. Illustrations of the SARS-CoV-2 virion also appear. Martin translates medical text and image into the visual field.

In the second work of the series, "V.2," a single androgynous figure sits uncomfortably in Martin's construction of pictorial space, head cut off at the top of the canvas, left foot cut off at the bottom (Fig. 1). Affective disjuncture marks the image. Within the form of Martin's subject—really the artist herself, in the



Fig. 1. Suzette Marie Martin, *Viral Load*, "V. 2," 2020. Charcoal, acrylic paint, water soluble graphite, and colored pencil on canvas, 40.00 x 30.00 in. (101.60 x 76.20 cm.), collection of the artist

absence of the availability of models under Center for Disease Control social distancing protocols—the descriptor “SPIKE Glycoprotein S” is inscribed in graphite. Visual intensity of the capitalized word is warranted by the significance of the viral element illustrated. The spike glycoprotein constitutes the means by which SARS-Cov-2 facilitates infection, connecting with and entering the host cell, before subsequent replication and explosion of infection.

Relative to a similar practice in a different time, Roland Barthes commented on Cy Twombly’s intermedial projects suspended between text and image. Calling the artist’s work “a kind of writing,” given its relation to calligraphy, Barthes upheld what he called the “allusive” qualities of Twombly’s writerly work, its constant “going off somewhere else.”<sup>4</sup> Martin’s use of scientific text and image operates similarly, albeit with some difference. The effect of the medical description is to move the viewer away from the affective intensity of the visual scene, the detached site of science as opposed to the emotionally-charged space of loss. However, the location of the medical signifier within the body can only be so centripetal insofar as the novel coronavirus constitutes the dominant horizon of embodiment in the present. The figure is estranged from their environment by gloves that protectively preclude the facility of touch. More significantly, the subject of Martin’s work is alienated from recognizability by others by the necessity of a mask that inhibits viral transmission at the same time that it disrupts what Emmanuel Levinas called attention to as the basis of ethical life predicated on “proximity of the other” as “the face’s meaning.”<sup>5</sup> Martin’s representation of the human subject appears to collapse in on itself, divided and distanced, paradoxically suspended in an effort towards safety and (in)security.

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<sup>4</sup> Roland Barthes, “Twombly ou Non multa sed multum” in *L’Obvie et L’Obtus* (Seuil, 1982), 145-162.

<sup>5</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Ethics as First Philosophy” in *The Levinas Readers*, ed. Seán Hand, trans. Seán Hand and Michael Temple (Blackwell, 1989), 82.