

Peter Halley in conversation with executive director Peter
Doroshenko
Dallas Contemporary

Is it possible for you to get work done during the Coronavirus pandemic?

Yes, I seldom stop working. But there is always this tension — how can one justify making works of art when so many people are unemployed, sick, and dying? Should I do something to help instead of making paintings?

Within my limited capacities, I try to do what I can. So I have been donating to food banks, contributing to Covid-related art benefits, and making sure that I manage to keep my studio assistants employed. I also did virtual studio visits with some MFA students, many of whom have felt particularly isolated when their schools had to shut down.

At the same time, I do believe that it is of real importance for artists and other creative people to continue their work during times of crisis. I often think about the artists who lived in the first half of the twentieth century. They had to go on working through two World Wars and the Great Depression. I think it's essential to assert that creativity and self-expression will persist in bad times as well as good.

Does critical writing or science influence your thinking?

Yes, of course. I have always been especially interested in Michel Foucault, who wrote extensively about how outbreaks of plague in seventeenth-century Europe were an important factor in determining how the space of modern cities would be structured. He felt that the regimes of quarantine and social isolation that were established in that era set the stage for techniques of social control in the modern era.

How has your work evolved over the years?

Believe it or not, my work is a kind of diary. As you know, I employ a very small vocabulary of symbols in my work — diagrammatic cells and prisons that are connected by conduits, all set on a flat colored field. Each painting evolves from those that came before, but as I draw, I never know what will happen next as I compose and rearrange these elements.

When I look back at my old paintings, I can clearly remember what was going on at the time they were painted-- both in my personal life and in our culture as a whole.

But there is always a mystery to the whole thing. For example, I have sometimes gone a year or more painting only cells and not prisons — or prisons and not cells. Recently, the vast majority of my paintings have included three prisons. These shifts are completely intuitive. I have no conscious control over them.

What has been the catalyst to incorporate and take over spaces for your installations and exhibitions?

Oh, I don't think I take over the spaces — they take over me! All of my installations are site-specific. They are determined by the proportions of the space, the character and history of the architecture, and the cultural identity of the city in which they are located. When I did an installation in a five-hundred-year-old warehouse in Venice last year, it required a completely different approach from the installation I did in 2018 at Lever House, the 1950s modernist office tower in New York.

My installations are based on my interest in the relationship between two-dimensional images on the wall and the three-dimensional space that they inhabit — how two-dimensional elements such as paintings can dramatically change the reading of the architecture and how the architecture affects the reading of the paintings.