

Chester Arnold

KQED

## 'Curbside Exhibition' at Catharine Clark Eases Back into Art Viewing

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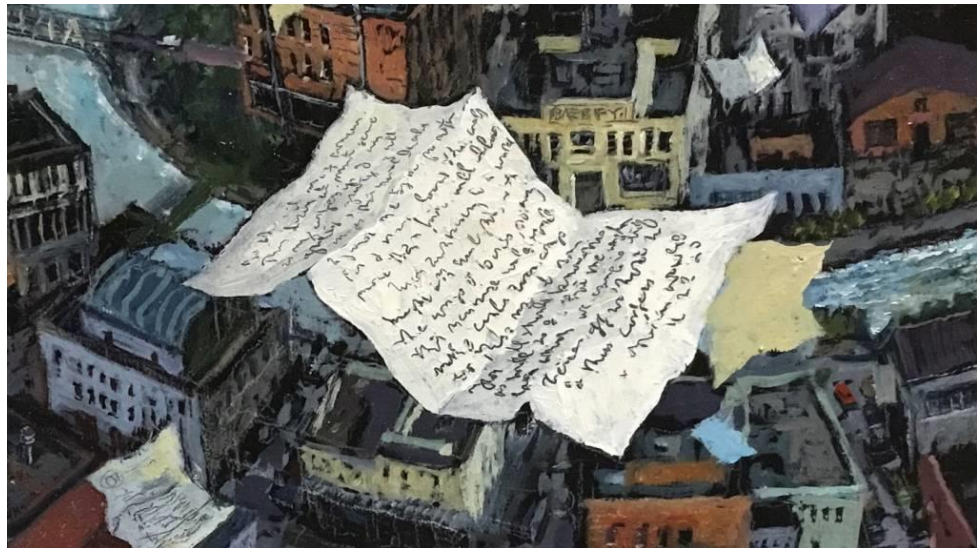
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Chester Arnold, 'A Signed Confession,' 2020. *(Courtesy the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery)*

Visiting art shows used to be a regular part of my job. I'd see at least one show a week, sometimes more if I was feeling ambitious or visiting an area dense with galleries. But 70-some days into shelter in place, I've gotten so out of practice I can't remember what I saw last. Was it [Charlie Leese's show](#) for Bass & Reiner? Or the [reopening](#) of 500 Capp Street?

Nowadays, I don't venture out much. Leaving the neighborhood has become the equivalent of a major expedition, not undertaken lightly and with about as much protective gear in tow.



Chester Arnold, 'Gone to Seed,' 2017. (Courtesy the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery)

Until this past Saturday, I'd almost forgotten how nice it is to have a reason to go somewhere—anywhere. The event in question was the opening of *Curbside Exhibition* at [Catharine Clark Gallery](http://www.cclarkgallery.com), recent work by Sonoma artist Chester Arnold. The gallery's first attempt at a socially distanced exhibition presents Arnold's miniature oil-on-panel paintings behind a window facing the building's lobby, a space shared with Brian Gross Fine Art.

It was a mixture of old-school opening and new-world rules. Buckets of sparkling water sat near dispensers of hand sanitizer; Clark greeted visitors in person, pointing to arrows marking out increments of six feet on the lobby floor. The gallery's precautions to minimize risk to both staff and visitors were reassuring. (Everyone must wear masks and only three visitors are allowed in the lobby at a time, with staff remaining at a distance, behind a blocked doorway into the gallery proper.)

Arnold's paintings are well suited to this approximation of a show. His small-scale works and fine brushwork necessitate up-close viewing, but seeing them through glass doesn't diminish their effect. At the opening, an additional folding table was covered in works on paper, Arnold's ongoing series of trompe-l'oeil folded letters. The whole experience felt a bit like an impromptu backroom show, mostly thanks to the personal attention of gallery staff and Clark herself.



Chester Arnold, 'Retirement,' 2019. (Courtesy the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery)

I have to admit that seeing people—even just the top halves of their faces—was slightly overwhelming. I've become inept at small talk after months of conversing with only close friends and family. (When a casual acquaintance recently tried to chat with me at the farmers market, I blurted out “Have a great Sunday!” while pretty much running away.)

Arnold's work reflects back a certain amount of the claustrophobia and isolation that define life now. (When I visited, loose plastic bags and bits of paper blew up and down Utah Street; the city looked desolate.) And inside the lobby, three of Arnold's paintings show handwritten letters flying over cities. The paintings' internal sense of scale is hard to pin down. The letters could be physically close, high above the cities, or (as I choose to see them) the folded pieces of paper are enormous, large enough to crush the sturdy buildings below.

In the 6-by-8-inch painting *Retirement*, a bucolic landscape appears through an oval hole in a red brick wall. Bending to look through a window at the oil-on-panel painting, I enacted a strange hall of mirrors, peering through a thing to see a painting that mimics peering through another thing. Even when not rendering actual peepholes, many of Arnold's paintings force a narrow gaze, like on the lower half of an oak tree's thickly textured trunk. Or on a dandelion bursting out of a cracked ground.



Chester Arnold, 'Straw Harvest,' 2020. (Courtesy the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery)

But his work also zooms out, almost impossibly far. *Final Destination* shows man-made structures atop a rocky, isolated island. *High Seas* depicts a boat dwarfed by a cresting—and gigantic—wave. Vertiginous views above an M.C. Escher-like mine are painted on panels that measure smaller than postcards. Humans are tiny in these paintings; the surrounding world, so much more powerful. It's not currently reassuring to contemplate humanity's fragility. But Arnold's paintings also show individuals engaged in the mundane tasks of stacking baled hay and walking through nature. Their activity is implied in the scrawled handwriting of his windy letter paintings. Not everything worthwhile is grand.

Which is why the act of leaving home; of awkwardly attempting greetings and chitchat; of seeing artwork in person, however briefly, felt hopeful.

And that's something.

<https://www.kqed.org/arts/13881106/curbside-exhibition-at-catharine-clark-eases-back-into-art-viewing>