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SURFACE

Jessica Lichtenstein Turns COVID-Induced Anxieties into Works of Art

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GABRIELLE GOLENDIA



After COVID-19 altered the world as we knew it, the New York artist Jessica Lichtenstein began collecting a disparate assortment of musings from romantic poetry, pornography, Instagram, newspapers, comic books, diaries, and other sources until she amassed 4,000 of them in an Excel spreadsheet. She then took the independent thoughts and expressed them collectively by etching the words onto thousands of lockets she ordered on Alibaba.

Winston Wächter Fine Art, Inc.

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They now star in her solo exhibition, which features the series of concrete hearts with engraved lockets embedded inside bursting cracks. It's not only Lichtenstein's first sculptural body of work, but a drastic departure from her figurative art. Here, she uses objects typically associated with sentimental meaning and reappropriates them with honest feelings—a metaphorical act of making something beautiful from “a perfect storm.” That analogy is also the apt title of her show at New York's Winston Wächter Fine Art, which features an immersive exhibition of digital, sculptural, and installation work that responds directly to the disruption caused by the pandemic. “You can extrapolate a collective consciousness out of 2020, and to me, that's the random amalgamation of thoughts of the mind and of the heart,” she says.

Surface spoke with Lichtenstein about *A Perfect Storm* and the works in the installation, from crumbling hearts with lockets to a bed of paper cutouts of the female figures to a mother of pearl mural adorned with tree nymphs clinging to branches in the final moments of the passing storm.



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How did you come up with the concept for *A Perfect Storm*?

It all came together in a year. While I was first quarantined, in March, I started collecting quotes—whether they came to mind or I read or heard something I liked in romantic poetry, literature, newspapers, blogs, my diary, pornography, and so on. In the end, I had a spreadsheet of at least 4,000 quotes. Eventually, I decided to engrave all these thoughts on lockets. As objects, lockets are romanticized treasures and delicate sentimental jewels that we either give to ourselves or to someone we care about.

What do the expressions represent?

Instead of typical messages you might find on a locket, I wanted to engrave real thoughts: fears, anxieties, and worries combined with beautiful thoughts, poetry, and existential philosophy. In both a macro and micro sense, the real workings of the mind—all the random thoughts you could collectively extrapolate from 2020.

Where did you source the lockets from?

The lockets were out of the box. I've never used them before, and, oddly enough, I had this weird thought that maybe there'd be a backlash against China after COVID-19 was officially declared a pandemic. I wanted to actually buy something mass manufactured and the fact that the lockets were made in China was symbolic of how the virus also originated from China and then spread around the world, just as fast and prolific as mass-produced goods. I went on Alibaba and started talking to companies in China while factories were shutting down. I found these lockets from the source of the storm, so to speak.

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