Devendra Banhart
Painting at the Edges of Mythology
By Shana Nys Dambrot
The Rebuild SoCal Partnership (RSCP) consists of 2,750 contractors throughout Southern California that represent more than 90,000 union workers. RSCP is dedicated to working with elected officials and educating the public on the continued need for essential infrastructure funding, including airports, bridges, ports, rail, roads, and water projects.

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GETTING PERSONAL — HOW THE PANDEMIC KEEPS CHANGING THE WAY WE SHOP

Starved for the personal touch? There’s an app for that.

BY MICHELE STUEVEN

Many of us haven’t seen the inside of a grocery store for about a year, and those of us who have must admit it’s like an Amazon warehouse version of The Hunger Games. For those of us who actually like to shop, the idea of leisurely cruising the aisles, pinching produce and running into neighbors is a lost art.

While the pandemic has changed us as consumers to rely on faceless delivery platforms, something that was once only available to the wealthy has been reborn for the masses: The personal shopper. The Dumpling grocery delivery app has grown exponentially, providing personal assistant-type services that include everything from picking up ladders at Home Depot to shopping for shoes.

Unlike other delivery platforms that work with independent contractors, Dumpling helps individuals start their own grocery shopping and delivery business. Personal shoppers set their own schedules and pricing, and keep 100% of their tips. Dumpling provides the technology and app needed for them to get their orders.

The consumer downloads the app, puts in their ZIP code, and chooses the shopper they want based on reviews, personal profiles and locations. Shoppers are free to go to any store and farmers markets – which are not options on other platforms – and also provide customers with receipts, purchasing items at in-store prices.

Christopher Murillo is a full-time social worker who locates permanent housing for the chronically homeless who have an HIV or AIDS diagnosis. When COVID-19 started, he wanted to continue servicing his community by signing onto Dumpling and becoming a personal grocery shopper for those who couldn’t go to the market. He found it therapeutic.

Funded by the Department of Health Services and the Ryan White Foundation, Murillo handles 20 clients on a day-to-day basis, maintaining their housing, medication compliance, making sure their health is up to par and that they make their appointments, meeting with them via Zoom on a weekly basis to keep up on any kind of assistance they might need.

“I don’t do well on downtime,” says Murillo, who has amassed 84 regular weekly and monthly personal shopping clients. “I’ve always been a go-getter and a hustler. I’m a busybody who likes to make things happen, so when things slowed down during the pandemic, it was something to keep me busy and help my own mental health during isolation. It’s more than just grocery shopping. I’ve developed some lasting personal relationships.”

Just ask Dodi Fromson, the tech-savvy and physically fit 85-year-old widow of foreign correspondent and USC Journalism professor Murray Fromson.

“I don’t dare get COVID and when the variants popped up, I shut down and stopped shopping at the market,” says Fromson. “Friends introduced me to the app and it turned out better than great because I met Chris. He’ll go anywhere for me, where Instacart won’t go to my favorite store, Trader Joe’s. I’m not going to hook up with people who don’t go where I go. He’s meticulous about my orders and leaves them safely on my back porch. My family doesn’t live here, so they can’t do a thing for me. I’d be lost without Chris. I have a normal selection of food and don’t have to carry heavy bundles into the house. He’ll call me from the store with the list and check if I need anything else. He’s so thoughtful and outgoing and makes it easy. Once this is all over I’m having him...
“YOU’RE GONNA GET BEAT DOWN. YOU’VE GOTTA GET BACK UP.”

BRADLEY RIOT, RIOT CYCLES — LOS ANGELES, CA

At the intersection of punk rock and café racers, Bradley Riot is pushing the limits of what a stripped-down race bike can do. But the road to becoming one of LA’s premier bike builders wasn’t always smooth for a bartender who’d never picked up a wrench.

See why he’s our first Luckies American Original.

Check out Bradley’s story at LuckyStrike.com/LAO

CIGARETTES

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over for dinner.”

“I go to the Nosh or Brooklyn Water Bagel every Sunday to pick up her pumpernickel bagel and take it to her house. She likes to start the week with bagels and cream cheese,” says Murillo, who also has working moms and professionals as clients. “We talk a lot over the phone outside of Dumpling and she relies on me. We’ve gotten to know each other.”

Dumpling customers are drawn to the app for the personal touch that the community has come to miss during the pandemic, much like that welcoming face in front of the house of your favorite restaurant.

Cindy Pao grew up on a farm in Taiwan in a house full of home chefs always experimenting with food. Before the pandemic, she co-owned a dumpling business called Bling Bling Dumplings. You’d find her at farmers markets, Coachella and other music festivals. All that came to an end last March. In April she needed a job and started working at another delivery service, but missed that human interaction. She jumped over to Dumpling and has racked up about 300 customers – 50 weekly and monthly regulars.

“I love shopping,” Pao tells L.A. Weekly while carefully picking out produce on one of her runs to Gelson’s. “We get to know our customers, their families, what they can and can’t eat. I go to different stores for them, because not all of them have what they need. If one place is out of green onions, I’ll go to another store. It’s like this mission I have to complete. It’s like a scavenger hunt. It has to be good quality, and I don’t like seeing them pay more than they have to. I always pull from the back row so they have the freshest option. I’d rather go to another store to get them the freshest meat possible and the cuts they want.”

Nikki Schulman is a full-time mom working from home with a six-year-old and senior parents, who opted out of grocery shopping early on in the pandemic and tried various services to help juggle life. She was attracted to Pao’s personal profile on the app and has been a loyal customer ever since.

“I rely heavily on Trader Joe’s and other specialty markets and am very picky about my produce,” Schulman says. “The other platform wasn’t covering them. Cindy is the most careful and thoughtful shopper I’ve ever met. She’ll text me from every aisle in the store. Do I want a ripe avocado or a hard one? She...
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The clinic of the Fuller School of Psychology
Theaters remain closed, but the good news is, there’s no shortage of diverse and engaging films to see at home or at local drive-ins. Here, our critics review some of the biggest movies of the month, including a few you might have missed.

**I Care a Lot / Netflix**

There’s something of a charade going on in the title of *I Care a Lot*. It’s not that the protagonist of this smart, bleakly comedic film doesn’t care, it’s that she doesn’t care about other people, their problems or their loved ones. She just cares about their money.

Rosamund Pike stars as Marla Grayson, a caregiver and con-artist who steals money from her patients. In pink lipstick and too-tall-heels, with a convincing smile, she seems nice and innocent, going along with her good-girl routine until she drops the act and bleeds her victims dry. It’s made her a lot of money over the years, until she drops the act and bleeds her victims. It’s made her a lot of enemies, too.

Directed by Azazel Jacobs and adapted by Patrick DeWitt from his novel, the film is unapologetic in its detached tone and portrait of absurd socialites. In Paris, Frances and Malcolm encounter a cast of equally oddball characters as they drift in and out of an existentialist haze. With its soft focus and bleak narrative, *Exit* feels like a Camus novel filtered through a satirical lens. Some will take umbrage with Frances as she slowly gives her money away in an almost suicidal malaise. It’s almost as if she’s creating an abyss for herself; she’ll never crawl out of it.

When she first meets her son’s fiancé (Imogen Poots), Frances groans, “Ah, to be young-ish and in love-ish” with a very languor that’s almost flawlessness in its detachment. Frances only seems to care about her son and her cat, who she claims inhabits the soul of her late husband. Unfortunately, the film loses steam by favoring the main character over the supporting cast, which everybody seems to care about beyond their money. *Exit* is a sumptuous black and white, with a sexy and sensual soundtrack periodically punctuating the dialogue, but more often simply making the whole thing palatable.

**Our Friend / VOD**

Don’t let the presence of everyone’s favorite awkward funny guy Jason Segel fool ya. *Our Friend* is not a comedy. Based on journalist Matthew Teague’s 2015 essay for *Esquire* magazine, the film is about a man (Casey Affleck), his wife Nicole (Dakota Johnson) and their best friend Dane (Segel), and how each deals with her battle with terminal cancer. Teague’s loving tribute to the friend who moved in with them and helped them through it all – from taking care of their two daughters to the couple’s relationship conflicts to the mundane household stuff – is heart-warming to watch in film form and each actor brings a lowkey realism to the story that’s extremely likeable. Well, Affleck isn’t really likeable, but his shortcomings seem to be part of the point here. All three of the main characters are in fact imperfect.

Via flashbacks (there are lots of flashbacks in this movie), we learn that Nicole had an infidelity, while Matthew traveled all the time and maybe wasn’t that attentive before the diagnosis. Dane is somewhat of a loser professionally working in a sporting goods store with dreams of maybe doing stand-up. When he drops his entire life to be there for the Teagues, it’s clear he’s not giving up much – except a budding relationship that he doesn’t seem all that into. His offer to stay with and help his besties gives him a sense of purpose. Mostly he just really wants to make things a little less hard for all involved.

Despite the deterioration and sense of doom and death that darkens and hangs over the family’s situation and *Our Friend’s* entire narrative, there’s plenty of light here thanks to Johnson and Segel’s effortless chemistry, which they also display with the great young actresses who play Teague’s daughters. Yes, this is a film genre I coined “mourn porn,” but unlike other movies of its ilk, it never feels manipulative, it feels matter of fact and real, even when it’s extremely emotional.

**Palmer / Apple TV+**

Director Fisher Stevens’ feature debut *Palmer*, written by Stevens and Cheryl Guerriero, is a lot like its taciturn protagonist. Palmer (Justin Timberlake) is more concerned with fitting in than being individual. The storytelling is formulaic, deliberately familiar and prosaic, sometimes frustratingly so. The main character is a sad, quiet man who has spent the last decade in prison and returns home to live with his grandma, Vivian (June Squibb). He’s got the ex-con beard and hoodie and thousand-yard-stare, but his life changes when he finds himself babysitting Sam (Ryder Allen), the child of a heroin addict next door. Sam isn’t like the other boys – he plays with barbies – which means Palmer is going to have to teach him a thing or two about being a man.

*This cute kid/tough guy dynamic is one we’ve seen a million times before*, but the sentimental tropes aren’t given enough life or breath here. It’s nice to see Palmer embrace Sam for who he is, warts and quirks and all, but it takes nearly two hours to get there, and everything that comes before is as cruel and conventional as Palmer himself.

**French Exit / VOD**

In *French Exit*, Michelle Pfeiffer plays Frances Price, a wealthy widow who’s squandered the last of her inheritance and impulsively sells her belongings to live in Paris with her cat, Small Frank, and glum, impulsive son, Malcolm (Lucas Hedges). Pfeiffer breathes life into some character and kinks, but you can feel the story escape Mortensen; just as the father’s dementia in the movie eludes his son’s control.

There are some powerful moments in *Falling*, but the narrative is an exercise in patience. Mortensen plays John, a gay man living in California with his husband Eric (Terry Chen) and their daughter. When the movie opens, John is flying home with his father, Willis (Lance Henriksen), in an attempt to buy him a house closer to his family and away from the seclusion of his farm in New York. Good luck! Henriksen’s Willis is a virulent, insufferable grump (bordering on psychotic). Suffering from a smoldering dementia, Willis can’t go one minute without spouting hateful homophobic, racist rants in public areas – planes, restaurants, even museums. A sane person would ask why he doesn’t simply place his father in a home with the care of professionals. Instead, he’s buying this maniac a house? Reality notwithstanding, John sits through his father’s outbursts with the patience of a Tibetan monk (so do we).

**Malcolm & Marie / Netflix**

Had high hopes for this one based on the premise and feel of the previews, but mostly the cast, which everybody knows by now, consists of just two people: Zendaya and John David Washington. Shot in sumptuous black and white, with a sexy and sensual soundtrack periodically punctuating the dialog, but more often simply making the whole thing palatable, *Malcolm & Marie* has received as much praise as it has backlash. It deserves both.

Written and directed by Sam Levinson, who works with Zendaya on HBO’s *Euphoria*, the COVID-era production details a nightlong argument between a young couple after Malcolm (who is a filmmaker) has a new movie premiere. There’s some real truth and biting commentary wielded in the wordy back and forth banter – about filmmaking, about film critiquing, about relationship dynamics, about baggage, about appreciation, and about the racial divide. And it’s enjoyable to watch these two fine actors dig into it. Until it’s not.

About half-way through, it’s not. This is a toxic relationship and you start to wonder what either gets out of it. Are they both that screwed up? Marie is a former drug addict (and aspiring actress) who inspired Malcolm’s movie, and Malcolm is a narcissist who is probably with this young woman precisely because of her dysfunction. Did he use her story for his movie’s narrative? Maybe. Do we even care midway through? Not. *Malcolm & Marie* has received as much praise as it has backlash. It deserves both.

**Our Friend / VOD**

Don’t let the presence of everyone’s favorite awkward funny guy Jason Segel fool ya. *Our Friend* is not a comedy. Based on journalist Matthew Teague’s 2015 essay for *Esquire* magazine, the film is about a man (Casey Affleck), his wife Nicole (Dakota Johnson) and their best friend Dane (Segel), and how each deals with her battle with terminal cancer. Teague’s loving tribute to the friend who moved in with them and helped them through it all – from taking care of their two daughters to the couple’s relationship conflicts to the mundane household stuff – is heart-warming to watch in film form and each actor brings a lowkey realism to the story that’s extremely likeable. Well, Affleck isn’t really likeable, but his shortcomings seem to be part of the point here. All three of the main characters are in fact imperfect.

Via flashbacks (there are lots of flashbacks in this movie), we learn that Nicole had an infidelity, while Matthew traveled all the time and maybe wasn’t that attentive before the diagnosis. Dane is somewhat of a loser professionally working in a sporting goods store with dreams of maybe doing stand-up. When he drops his entire life to be there for the Teagues, it’s clear he’s not giving up much – except a budding relationship that he doesn’t seem all that into. His offer to stay with and help his besties gives him a sense of purpose. Mostly he just really wants to make things a little less hard for all involved.

Despite the deterioration and sense of doom and death that darkens and hangs over the family’s situation and *Our Friend’s* entire narrative, there’s plenty of light here thanks to Johnson and Segel’s effortless chemistry, which they also display with the great young actresses who play Teague’s daughters. Yes, this is a film genre I coined “mourn porn,” but unlike other movies of its ilk, it never feels manipulative, it feels matter of fact and real, even when it’s extremely emotional.

**French Exit / VOD**

In *French Exit*, Michelle Pfeiffer plays Frances Price, a wealthy widow who’s squandered the last of her inheritance and impulsively sells her belongings to live in Paris with her cat, Small Frank, and glum, impulsive son, Malcolm (Lucas Hedges). Pfeiffer breathes life into some one that could’ve been a glorified caricature, embodying Frances with a cold bemusement as if the world were a tiresome exhibit she must endure with a cigarette and martini.

Directed by Azazel Jacobs and adapted by Patrick DeWitt from his novel, the film is unapologetic in its detached tone and portrait of absurd socialites. In Paris, Frances and Malcolm encounter a cast of equally oddball characters as they drift in and out of an existentialist haze. With its soft focus and bleak narrative, *Exit* feels like a Camus novel filtered through a satirical lens. Some will take umbrage with Frances as she slowly gives her money away in an almost suicidal malaise. It’s almost as if she’s creating an abyss for herself; she’ll never crawl out of it.

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L.A. SCHOOLS BEGIN PLANNING FOR IN-PERSON CLASSES

The Los Angeles Unified School District gets approval to reopen in-person classes, but seeks vaccinations for its teachers and staff, while the United Teachers feels that it is still unsafe to return to normal instruction.

BY ISAI ROCHA

Los Angeles County has met the state’s threshold to begin the process of reopening schools for in-person classes. Schools began the process of submitting waivers for classes in grades TK-6 to resume, so long as they meet Los Angeles Public Health’s guidelines for a safe reopening.

LAUSD submitted a plan for on-site learning that was approved by L.A. Public Health, but it may not begin reopening classes until teachers are vaccinated.

While L.A. County recorded a five-day COVID-19 case rate under 25 per 100,000 residents, allowing it to reopen schools by state standards, LAUSD Superintendent Austin Beutner has continually said the district will not open its schools until teachers, staff and administrators are all vaccinated.

“We know a critical part of reopening school classrooms will be creating the safest possible school environment, and that includes providing vaccinations to all who work in schools,” Beutner said. “This will not only protect the health and safety of the essential employees in schools, but will provide enormous benefit to children and their families, leading to a faster reopening of schools and of the economy more broadly by enabling working families to go back to work.”

L.A. County Director of Public Health Barbara Ferrer said the hope is that teachers can begin being vaccinated on March 1, but it “really depends on how much vaccine we get.”

“We can go super fast if we get a lot of vaccine, or we can go slower if we don’t get a lot of vaccine,” Ferrer said. “We can do 600,000...
appointments right now and we only have 200,000 doses.”

As teachers await their turn, LAUSD nurses began receiving vaccinations at Roybal Learning Center, which is officially LAUSD’s first school-based vaccination site.

SAFETY MEASURES THAT SCHOOLS MUST MEET

L.A. Public Health detailed the measures schools must take in order to be certified for in-person instruction. Schools will have to meet the standards before being allowed to reopen their TK-6 grade classes.

On-site learning will not be mandatory for any school and the decision to reopen will be left to individual schools and districts. Distance learning will also continue for those who do not want their children attending in-person classes.

“It is understandable that there are many parents who do not currently feel comfortable sending their children back to school for on-site learning,” Ferrer said. “Schools offering on-campus opportunity learning should continue to offer 100% distance learning opportunities.”

Aside from the typical face mask, cleaning and distancing measures that all open sectors must comply with in Los Angeles, schools must show that they are enforcing a system where class members cannot mix and are with the same group of students at all times.

School buildings will be required to have certified ventilation systems in place, a measure that LAUSD has already implemented in 80,000 square feet of its buildings through MERV 13 filtration, which is known for filtering between 35% to 50% of bacteria, smoke, sneeze nuclei, insecticide dust, copier toner and face powder, according to W.W. Grainger Supply Co.

Schools will also be required to have a testing and contact tracing program in place.

These requirements are similar to what 297 Los Angeles schools have already complied with when receiving waivers to reopen their TK-2 grade classes. Those schools will still be asked to resubmit their COVID-19 compliance plans in order to expand classes to grades three through six.

L.A. RAMS OFFER A COVID-19 VACCINATION SITE FOR COUNTY SCHOOL TEACHERS AND STAFF

In an effort to vaccinate L.A. County teachers, administrators and staff, a large-scale COVID-19 vaccination site has been offered at the new SoFi Stadium in Inglewood.

The site would be a partnership between the Los Angeles Rams, Hollywood Park and the city of Inglewood, and would work in close association with LAUSD, serving both public and public school personnel in L.A. County.

SoFi Stadium would have the capability to vaccinate up to 10,000 people per day and would have up to 600 LAUSD nurses administering the vaccines.

“Returning students, teachers and staff to campus in the safest way possible is essential to the well-being of our entire community,” said Beutner. “A bus driver takes students to school, a principal unlocks the front door, a teacher leads in the classroom, a cafeteria worker prepares lunch and a custodian keeps the school clean – they’re all connected at school. A dedicated vaccination site and comprehensive effort for the education community would allow schools to re-open sooner and in a more coordinated manner.”

While Los Angeles Unified had its plan approved by the Los Angeles Department of Health, at the current pace, teachers would not begin vaccinations until March 1, when eligible to the next tier.

At the moment, the county is still prioritizing vaccinations for healthcare workers and adults aged 65 or older.

The site is still seeking approval from L.A. Public Health and according to a media release, wants to “begin operating as soon as possible.”

“We have seen a need within our community, and we are working alongside Los Angeles Unified and its partners to provide a solution,” Jason Gannon, managing director for SoFi Stadium and Hollywood Park, said. “We are proud to offer the space and infrastructure needed for a mass vaccination site for school staff. This is another critical step to keep Angelinos safe and healthy in our fight against COVID-19.”

UNITED TEACHERS FEEL IT IS STILL UNSAFE TO REOPEN SCHOOLS

As district schools have moved forward with plans to reopen for in-person instruction, United Teachers Los Angeles have said they do not feel safe sending back its teachers to work under the current conditions of the pandemic.

UTLA points to past public health regulations where the minimum threshold to reopen was seven positive cases of COVID-19 per 100,000, a number that was adjusted to 25 positive cases per 100,000 in the most recent health recommendations.

“Last year, the state said it was unsafe to reopen until infections fell below 7 cases per 100,000,” UTLA President Cecil Myart-Cruz said in a statement. “Suddenly, as more infectious and fatal variants are spreading, the state claims it’s safe to reopen when infections are at 25 cases per 100,000.”

While the union agrees that those working in schools must be vaccinated, it also believes that L.A. County should get out of the “Purple Tier” as well, which is the most restrictive tier in accordance to the positive COVID-19 case rates recorded in California counties.

UTLA held a caravan protest over the weekend that was themed, “Not my child; Schools Aren’t Safe,” as parents and educators drove through the streets of Los Angeles, urging for a “safe” return, “especially Black and Brown communities that have been hit hardest by COVID-19.”

“We are exhausted by the challenges of distance learning and by watching elected officials prioritize the opening of malls, outdoor dining, and card rooms over controlling the virus so as to make it safe to return to school campuses,” Myart-Cruz said.
Devendra Banhart: Painting at the Edges of Mythology

The accomplished musician visualizes his daemons

BY SHANA NYS DAMBROT

Devendra Banhart’s strange and wonderful exhibition of recent paintings and drawings at Nicodim Gallery in downtown Los Angeles is a rogue’s gallery of surrealist avatars, a pageant of intimately scaled works awash in playful, mischievous mystery. From deceptively simple line drawings with an eccentric, Exquisite Corpse style to richly textured, penumbric paintings in which spirits emerge from the colorful ether, Banhart’s visual practice is both analogous to the freak folk energy of his music and at the same time comes from another universe entirely. As Banhart tells the Weekly, “the root of it all is poetry.”

The Grief I Have Caused You is Banhart’s first solo show in Los Angeles – but not necessarily for lack of trying. He attended San Francisco Art Institute, he’s done the cover art for all his albums; SFMOMA produced an exhibition pairing him with Bauhaus visionary Paul Klee, and he participated in the Getty Pacific Standard Time initiative. Prestel did a book of his work. But when it came to the fine art gallery world, he found it rather less welcoming.

“About ten years ago I really tried,” Banhart says. “In both L.A. and New York, I had literal doors shut in my face. It was a series of ego blows – is the work that bad? Is there a stigma about being just another musician with an art hobby?” No one cared that he’d long taken it seriously as a parallel discipline. The truth is, from painter and one-man-band Lynn Foulkes, to land artist Walter De Maria as the first drummer of the Velvet Underground, Mark Mothersbaugh, Graham Nash, Stewart Copeland, Kim Gordon, and all or most of the Talking Heads, there’s plenty of deeply interesting art made by people better known for their records.

Primal in a way that both does and does not make sense, like dreams, Banhart’s visual style has developed over decades of exposure and an affinity to artists who have pushed against the boundaries of consciousness, spirit, and transcendence. He counts Leonora Carrington, John Cage, Meredith Monk, Laurie Anderson, Rufino Tamayo, and Louise Bourgeois among his influences. “Eva Hesse feels like a mother to me,” he says, “and Agnes Martin, I wanted to be her, to be celibate and wear a quilted coat!” Isabelle Albuquerque (a dancer who became a sculptor and also shows at Nicodim) was his first friend in America, and her mother (the legendary artist Lita Albuquerque) became like a second mother, his “art mother.”

But more than that, the work also grows directly out of his spiritual explorations. From the Paris conjuring salons of Madame Blavatsky, to automatic writing and other surrealist parlor games and Carl Jung’s Red Book, Banhart is following a lineage of artists who deliberately operated at the active edge of imagination and the collective subconscious. The work also explicitly references Tantric art, specifically Vajrayana Buddhism and a mediation in which you visualize yourself -- your head, your body, flesh and skull. You see your skull as a cup, disambiguate your body, and fill your open skull with the body parts before offering it to the deities.

In the paintings and drawings, it’s just this sort of reconfigured anatomies, fantastical sprites, ancient animal gods and even older life forces -- and in some cases, the very primordial cloud from which such beings are formed -- which greet, frighten and beckon to the viewer. As he channels single forms, or endlessly works thick pigment until the grotesquerie resolves itself, Banhart is not so much creating as discovering each piece. This is part of what gives his cohort of impossible beings their individuality. The artist and the works are co-creators of one another in the studio and the electricity of that invention radiates from each canvas and page.

With a liminal palette and hypnagogic companions, The Grief I Have Caused You is an eerie and enchanting open-ended meditation on forgiveness and acceptance -- of and by yourself, and of and by others. Like everyone, Banhart admits he “can get wrapped up in the suffering others have caused me (presidents, police, partners). But I have caused grief too, and in this time of lockdown the distractions are so few, I could only hide for so long, I had to look at that. I don’t have control over who forgives me,” he continues. “But I do have control over whom I forgive. It’s so dramatic and serious that it’s funny, the agony and the ecstasy.” And that’s the energy of the paintings -- the magnified uncertainty of this time of global physical separation and intense karmic connection, given form, and giving permission to be whatever version of ourselves we need to be in order to exist in it.

The Grief I Have Caused You is on view by appointment at Nicodim Gallery, 1700 S. Santa Fe, downtown L.A., through March 20; nicodimgallery.com.
Sunny War Finds Peace in Lucidity

BY BRETT CALLWOOD

Singer, songwriter, folkie, punk, activist – Sunny War is all of that and so much more. It’s been a journey – having relocated from Nashville to Los Angeles with her mom and stepdad when she was 12, she formed the folk-punk band Anus Kings in 9th grade with friend Brian Rodriguez.

“We would just play shows with other teenagers and stuff,” War says. “I dropped out of school like two years later, and then I started busking on the boardwalk. But I would say my first time playing shows was in the Anus Kings band. Then from busking, I was homeless and I was living off of that, and I just got better at playing, just from playing so much. Then I got invited to play shows sometimes, from the boardwalk. Different people would be like, ‘I’m having a barbecue – I’ll give you $30 to come out and play your set.’”

As she entered her 20s, War was still busking to pay her rent – achievable because she had five roommates. But still, the stress pushed her to take a regular job at a mall. Unfortunately, the job left her with no time to play music, and she found herself in a not uncommon but impossible situation.

“I was just going back and forth – either I have to work somewhere else and I can’t play at all, or I have to figure out how I can play and be able to pay my rent,” War says. “So I started being more serious, having CDs to sell, and having business cards when I was busking so I could be invited to play gigs, and I slowly started playing more gigs. When I met my manager, who was also a booker, he would invite me to play sometimes. I guess it got more professional, just by playing more at venues.”

Now solidified as a solo artist, War describes her sound as “bluesy, folk, singer-songwriter stuff.” She also dabbles with banjo and enjoys blending genres. In addition, she occasionally picks up an electric guitar and plays a show with old project the Anus Kings.

“We played last year or the year before,” she says. “We’re actually about to re-release all of our records officially. We only had it on Bandcamp, so we just talked about it yesterday, ‘Let’s just put this out.’ So it’s gonna be online soon.”

March will see the release of her album Simple Syrup. We ask if she’s pleased with the way it turned out and she’s refreshingly, surprisingly honest.

“I mean, there’s one song on it that I think, ‘Deployed and Destroyed,’ I like it but I think it’s a little bit corny,” she says, with a laugh. “But I like it I guess. The rest of them I like.”

The single “Lucid Lucy” dropped earlier in February, and War says that it’s probably the prettiest song, and the most thought out, on the album.

“It’s just about lucid dreaming because I just believe that our only chance at happiness is to be asleep,” she says. “So it’s just about, no matter what is happening, you can maybe train yourself to enjoy sleeping.”

The Simple Syrup album was largely written before COVID hit, but there’s one song, “It’s Name is Fear,” that was written during the pandemic and added on at the end.

“I wanted to have a record at the beginning of 2020, because I had a lot of touring planned,” she says. “But then I just had to sit on it. At first, it was going to be a double album, and the EP that was released called Can I Sit With You was also going to be a part of Simple Syrup. But it was like, ‘now that there’s no touring, let’s put the EP out,’ so we took four songs out of the album. It’s weird. I didn’t know what to do. I was just like, ‘might as well put it out.’ But I feel like it’s over a year old. There’s some stuff that was added recently, it’s just all over the place. I don’t know.”

Having been homeless herself for a period during her teens, War knows firsthand the hardships faced by L.A.’s homeless community. So while living downtown, near Skid Row, she was inspired to start a branch of Food Not Bombs – a loose collective of vegan and vegetarian groups that provide food to those in need.

“There was a time I was drinking myself to death, and there was a Food Not Bombs in People’s Park, Berkeley, that would come once a week,” she says. “That was the only time I ate for months. I was blacked out for months. I probably would have died, because I really didn’t eat besides that once a week that they would come to the park. So I thought we should have that. I didn’t know there was already a Food Not Bombs group in L.A., but we just have our own chapter, the Skid Row chapter. It’s an anarchistic organization because other groups are from a church or something like that. It’s not about trying to push something on you or whatever. It’s just like coming together and having a meal once a week.”

It’s an admirable, selfless endeavor, and points to the authenticity, the honesty, that courses through War’s work. She’s currently driving towards that March album release and then, obviously due to the lockdown, everything is up in the air.

“I have some shows in April – I don’t know what’s going to happen, but as of now they’re booked,” she says. “There’s some other stuff in the summer, I’m supposed to go to the UK. I’m like, ‘really’? I have no idea what’s going on. I thought they weren’t allowing Americans. A lot of the gigs that were cancelled last year were rescheduled for this year. I guess depending on what happens with COVID, we’ll see.”

In the meantime, she’ll play the occasional livestream show even if she hates that they sound shitty.

“If people are so desperate that they’re watching people play on Zoom, then we might as well do it,” she says. “I know some people are actually really, really isolated. Sitting in their room watching concerts on Zoom. OK, fine. Fuck it.”

Sunny War’s “Lucid Lucy” single is out now, and the Simple Syrup album is out March 26.
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