

## Voices from the Pandemic: Julia Stahlman

November 20, 2020

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### *Using setbacks to fuel creativity*



Portrait of Julia Stahlman outside. Photograph is courtesy of Julia Stahlman.

When I was little, I would chew gum and spit it out and make it into little people, which my sister thought was disgusting. The wax off of Babybel cheeses I used to mold into little hands, and then they would hold the wrappers and the little people.

My relationship with art has changed and evolved as I've grown, and it's been a significant influence in my life. It's allowed me to have a more creative perspective on the world and express myself in ways I wouldn't have been able to without it.

There was a period of time of feeling unmotivated. Still, I also think what the pandemic has done and what I've seen, not just in myself, but so many other artists, is increased creativity in ways that you could never have imagined—in ways you would never have tried.

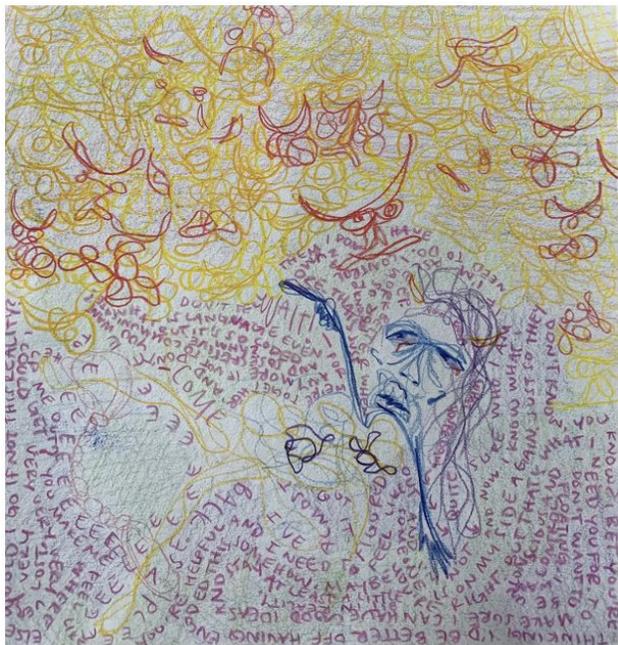
I remember I was printing on wax paper and aluminum foil for my printmaking class, which I would not have done had we still been in person and had access to materials at my school. Another girl in my class used a ton of boots and materials from her house. She made her own paper, and she pressed the papers under the tires of her car. She used chicken, tea, chocolate, literally Oreos to make art and to do these things. I don't think that would have happened if we had been in person and had access to the more typical materials we would have used for our projects.

For me personally, when I went home, I wasn't expecting the time period to be so long. My brain was still moving and jumping, and I got a little bit creative with materials. I was painting on cardboard. I was printing with the back of erasers. I was doing a ton of different stuff. I was taping things to tarps on my floor. I was painting, and just painting on a ton of different things. But as time went on, I hit kind of a block. I didn't want to be as creative anymore because I didn't see an end in sight, and that uncertainty of not knowing crept in and took over.

I think not knowing was a huge part of it because that kind of spread into every aspect of my life. I was uncertain about what I was going to do in the next day, week, or month. I was unsure of how I was going to get home before I got home, and even after I was home, I was uncertain of what was going to happen with everything going on around me when I couldn't leave my house.

What a global pandemic would mean for me and my life, let alone everyone in the entire world. I didn't know what it meant for me to keep my parents safe.

So even when I figured out what I wanted to do—protect myself and my family—I didn't know exactly how I could do that aside from staying put.



Artwork titled "come back: an open letter to the voices in my head" by Julia Stahlman. Photo is courtesy of Julia Stahlman.

I remember a drawing I did maybe a couple of weeks ago. It was just kind of standard - paper and colored pencil. I was doing it solely based on a stream of consciousness. It was an open letter to my feelings of being set back. Almost the voice in my head. That kind of running dialogue you think of in your head—like a small little person that's an alternative "you."

As I did that, I illustrated a picture. I had this anthropomorphic thing floating and pointing at a colorful and identifiable mass. The negative space was filled with my open letter.

Even though I have had setbacks, I try to live my life without regret. I consider everything a learning experience. I would never have gotten from point A to point B, whether it's the present or future, without setbacks.