



# ART THRIVES

## SONOMA'S CREATIVE CLASS LETS IN THE LIGHT

**WHERE WERE YOU LAST SPRING WHEN YOU REALIZED THAT THE WORLD WAS ABOUT TO TURN UPSIDE-DOWN?** What were you doing? Ask an artist, and they'll tell you what they were working on — and what they lost. The shows that got canceled. The CD release that got delayed. The photo shoots and gallery visits that suddenly couldn't be scheduled.

But, in the next breath, they'll tell you how they took a moment, analyzed the new circumstances, and survived — even thrived — despite, or perhaps even *because of*, those constraints. Artists and creatives are adaptive, after all, and they know how badly in this darkness, we need their light.

BY MEGAN McCREA

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ERIK CASTRO



**THERE ARE ARTISTS' STUDIOS**, and then there is T Barny's studio. Everything about it is extraordinary. The soaring glass roof. The din of the fans, blowing full blast. The swirling marble dust. And, of course, the tools: forklift, chisels, and saws, a 5-ton diamond core drill. And, in the midst of it all, the artist himself, clad in boots, goggles, ear protection, and weight belt. Catch him when he isn't mid-carve, and Barny, 64, will wax rhapsodic about chainsaws — "you gotta have three" — and his preferred

medium: stone. "Geology has made this, over millions and millions of years, combining all these different ingredients and all these different minerals, and then I carve it into something that's more than just a rock you see in the field. It comes from the earth, and I give it life."

In 2020, Barny, who lives in Alexander Valley with this wife and dogs, had big plans to celebrate his 40th year of sculpture: "We had a show planned every month for the whole year, and they all went away." With shows canceled, the sculptor pivoted to virtual events, participating in open studios and working with his staff to create an online retrospective. He also remains something of a jokester; last March, when demand for toilet paper crescendoed, he took cylindrical cores he had drilled while working stones and made marble "toilet rolls." "It became pretty popular," he recalls. "The first roll I made sold in about seven minutes."

In a chaotic year, Barny has felt a renewed commitment to his art. "I really wanted to keep making things that were beautiful, because of all of the trauma and tragedy that's been going on. That's my whole point, to make something that gives you a good feeling." [tbarny.com](http://tbarny.com)

"I ask a stone to work with me and perform, and what comes out of there sometimes surprises me, because it's so cool, so beautiful," says Barny.

# T BARNY SCULPTOR

## **PANDEMIC COMFORT FOOD:**

Spaghetti with meatballs from Catelli's restaurant in Geyserville

## **BINGE-WATCHING:** "Game of Thrones"

**MAD LIB:** During the pandemic, I have felt like:

M.C. Escher

stuck

in

one of my artworks.





# MJ LINDO-LAWYER MURALIST



Lindo-Lawyer relishes the sense of possibility in a blank wall. "Imagine what you can do with it. Imagine the impact. It's so powerful!"

**"I THINK THAT THE SCARIEST THING AS AN ARTIST IS THE IDEA THAT ART ISN'T 'ESSENTIAL,' YOU KNOW?"** MJ Lindo-Lawyer pauses. "But a world without art? It's almost, in my opinion, this unlivable space." For her part, Lindo-Lawyer, 32, has been working to make the world more livable for some 15 years. In fact, the Roseland-based painter, who was born in Miami to Nicaraguan parents who fled the civil war, can't ever remember not painting. "My parents bought me an easel when I was, like, two."



**PANDEMIC COMFORT FOOD:**  
Homemade  
sourdough bread

**INSPIRATION:** Fuco Ueda

**MAD LIB:** During the pandemic, I have felt like  
**No-Face from the movie "Spirited Away"**  
in **my shelter- in-place home.**

Lindo-Lawyer progressed into a style that mingles fantasy with reality in vivid-hued images. About a decade ago, in the ultimate art world meet-cute, Lindo-Lawyer met her future husband at a San Francisco gallery, where she couldn't take her eyes off his work. With more time now for art (both MJ and her husband were laid off from their day jobs during the pandemic), the couple has taken the year to "hyper-focus": painting a half-dozen murals; adding merchandise in their shops; and sketching and planning new work. Still, the year hasn't been without challenges. The artists create their pieces based on reference photos with models, but with the pandemic, it's been impossible to arrange their usual shoots in Los Angeles. Instead, they've adapted. "We did a shoot outside, in our backyard. And we kinda told our neighbor, 'Hey, heads up, we're gonna have a naked lady in our backyard!'"

Last November, Lindo-Lawyer had her first solo show, at Stone Sparrow NYC. For that show, she created five pieces in different colors, exploring the theme of how we cope. She named the show "Seasons" in a nod to this surreal year. "I feel like so many of us have felt stuck during Covid," explains Lindo-Lawyer, "like, it still feels like March 2020, because that's when everything kind of stopped. But regardless of what's happening, time is moving forward, and seasons are changing. The world is still moving forward." [mjlindoart.com](http://mjlindoart.com)





PAUL BENSON  
FURNITURE  
DESIGNER



Benson uses tools that have been in his family for generations. "It's a reminder of that connection to people who have created in the past."



**PAUL BENSON CAME INTO 2020 WITH MOMENTUM.** Coming off fresh collaborations with interior-design world heavyweights, he exhibited his work at contemporary design fairs in Miami and San Francisco and was accepted at a gallery in New York. But now, with things “more localized and slowed-down,” Benson says, “I feel like we’re having that intimate experience of exploring, ‘Well, what’s our place in the world?’” The pandemic has brought Benson, 51, back to his roots,

both geographically — he’s Sonoma County born and raised — and creatively. His exquisite walnut tables and enameled metal cabinets are created with antique chisels and custom metal lathes and other machinery handed down from his father and grandfather. It’s an artistic tradition Benson now carries forward with his wife and two sons, who often help in his Sonoma studio.

For the walnut tables he’s working on — all thoughtful rhythms, organic lines, and finely lacquered surfaces — Benson has been seeking new inspiration and thinking through new approaches to create the energy and texture he’s looking for. “I make small samples that I carry with me, chunks of laminated wood or pieces of textured bronze or whatever — and I take them when I go to the beach and think about it. It’s a process.”

And, in this quieter moment, Benson has been doing a lot of processing. “What is the real purpose of my creativity? For me, the end result is, it’s about community. I think we’re at a time in history where we have to create some new beginnings and reckon with the past. We have to start understanding each other and seeing each other as valuable and important. And I think creative people can help with that.” [paulbenson.us](http://paulbenson.us)



**PANDEMIC PLAYLIST:** Dave Brubeck; jazz; hip-hop

**INSPIRATION:** Artists Wendell Castle, Ruth Asawa

**MAD LIB:** During the pandemic, I have felt like

Dustin Hoffman gardening in the later scenes of “Papillon.”





**PANDEMIC COMFORT FOOD:** Popcorn sprinkled with nutritional yeast; homemade almond milk matcha lattes

**BINGE-WATCHING:** All eleven “Star Wars” movies in chronological order; “The Mandalorian”

**MAD LIB:** During the pandemic, I have felt like

the crew of the starship Enterprise

standing on the bridge

observing planet Earth, and going, “What is wrong with these aliens?”

“I THINK OF MY STUDIO AS — LITERALLY — A PHYSICAL EXTENSION OF MY BRAIN,” says C.K. Itamura. “When I walk in, I feel like, ‘I’m in my brain! I’m gonna do some thinking!’” When the pandemic struck, the artist was working on a long-term project focused on building community by getting people off their screens and into a space together, to chat, drink tea, and paint paper teacups that she had made by hand. With that work on hold — and other large-scale exhibitions impossible — Itamura took a moment to pause, and as she puts it, “be still and distill.” Into that stillness came a note from the Imaginists, a Santa Rosa experimental theater group, asking to collaborate. Itamura arrived at a unique solution for the Imaginists commission, an at-home theater experience to be performed by the recipient — a play in a box, with handpainted props.

Lately, the artist has also been teaching virtual classes on book-making and distilling some bigger ideas down “into snack-sized tidbits of art.” She made two zines: a graphic celebration of Ruth Bader Ginsburg and an outer space-themed meditation on fear.

Working across different media

feels natural for Itamura, thanks to wide-ranging explorations as a child growing up in San Francisco and Sacramento. “My mom had this worldview that you should learn as much as you can about as much as you can,” remembers Itamura, 57, who lives in Santa Rosa with her partner, musician Conrad Praetzel. And, while this year has had challenges, Itamura takes comfort in the instances of light. “When there’s that little interval between disasters, it’s almost like, just hold onto that moment, and remember, ‘This is what it feels like for everything to be okay.’” [peachfarmstudio.net](http://peachfarmstudio.net)

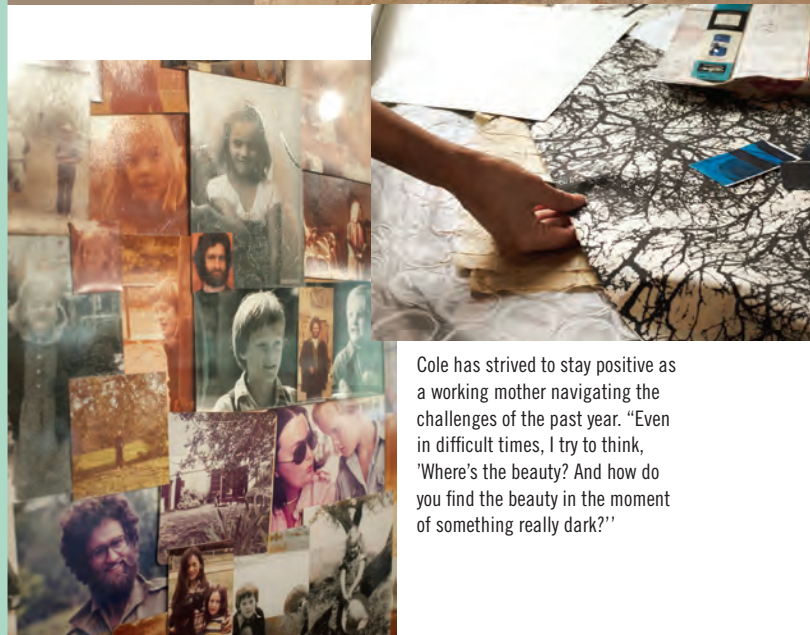


Itamura says she spends a lot of time thinking about the things in our world that don’t always make sense. “So it’s been really easy to stay creative this year.”





# ALEX COLE PAINTER



Cole has strived to stay positive as a working mother navigating the challenges of the past year. "Even in difficult times, I try to think, 'Where's the beauty? And how do you find the beauty in the moment of something really dark?'"

**"WHEN I PAINT, THE WORLD JUST KIND OF FALLS AWAY,"** Alex Cole explains. "I forget that I have worries. I forget that I have kids. I forget that I have dishes. I feel like I'm at a dance party. It's just like, 'Ahhh!' It's so good!" The 47-year-old artist, who lives in Sonoma with her husband, daughter, son, and dog, discovered the joy of creativity early, growing up with a jazz piano-playing father and a mother with an eye for interiors. Now, Cole creates vibrant



**BINGE-WATCHING:**  
"Bridgerton" "The Crown"  
"The Queen's Gambit"

**INSPIRATION:** Rufus  
Wainwright; Tracee Ellis Ross

**MAD LIB:** During the  
pandemic, I have felt like

**Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde**  
riding on a rollercoaster.

abstract landscape paintings, posts insights on Instagram, and teaches. "I teach my students how to just play and let go, get back to their 5-year-old selves!"

When Covid hit, Cole wasn't sure how she felt about going about business as usual, selling her art. "So, I said, 'What's the other thing I do for people? I bring joy.'" To that end, she decided to create one 5 x 7 piece each day and post it on Instagram. The first person to choose that painting would get to name their price. She continued the project for a month, shipping her art as far as the Netherlands. Cole also spread joy in the form of free virtual painting classes and through the mural she painted in downtown Santa Rosa.

Looking ahead, the artist hopes to create additional collections and to offer skill-share classes online. She loves teaching painting, of course, but more than that, she loves sharing her philosophy of life. "I think all of us, in our lives, get wrapped up in, 'What's it going to look like?' before we even start. And it just stops us in our tracks," Cole says. "Why are we doing that to ourselves? Like, just take one step and see how it feels. You don't have to take a hundred steps all at the same time. You're just taking one. The word is, 'Yes!'" [alexcolestudio.com](http://alexcolestudio.com)





# EKI SHOLA MUSICIAN

## EKI SHOLA WILL NEVER FORGET THE MOMENT THAT LED HER BACK INTO MUSIC.

It was 2012; she had just lost her mother; and she and her dad and siblings had gathered to plan the memorial. The mood was tense; someone suggested a break. “And so,” recalls the London-born physician, “we went up into my old bedroom, and I found my old keyboard.” Her father, sister, and brother picked up their old instruments, “and we just jammed for several hours. And it was *incredible!* And I remember saying, ‘I need to do music.’”

The past four years have been intense. She and her family lost their home in the Tubbs fire, a tragedy which prompted Shola, 44, into making even more music — as she puts it, “creating my own medicine.” Her latest album was slated for release in February 2020. “Then Covid hits, Black Lives Matter begins, and I had more things to say. I had to stop because I actually ran out of physical space on the CD!” Naturally, recording in her Santa Rosa home studio during the pandemic — with husband, kids, and a dog at home — has presented its own set of challenges. “I remember doing a song, and I had to hide in the laundry room to record the vocals,” Shola recalls.




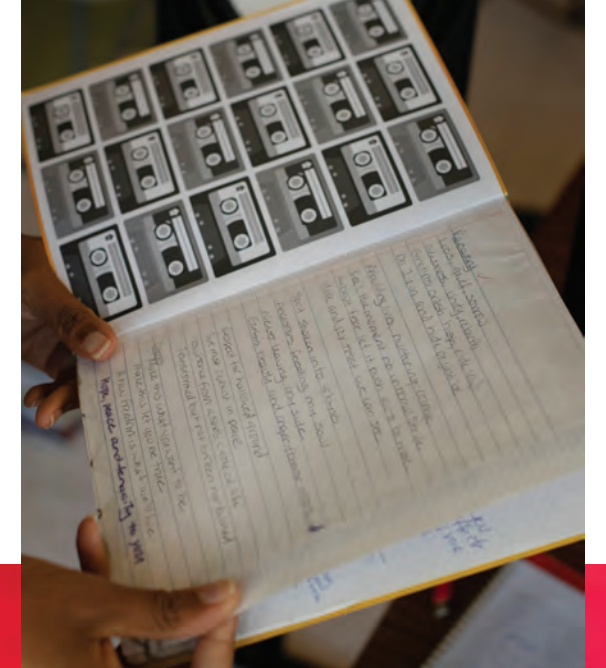
**PANDEMIC COMFORT FOOD:** Peanut butter–chocolate chip cookies; sweet potatoes chopped up with black rice, avocado, cilantro and lime

**PLAYLIST:** “Grounding” (off her third album, “Drift”); “Can I Believe You?” by Fleet Foxes

**MAD LIB:** During the pandemic, I have felt like

a bear    hunkering down  
in  
a cozy den.

It’s a lot to balance, but when she’s able to see the way her music touches people, it makes everything worth it. “I just see that, despite whatever differences we have — culture, gender, ethnicity, political beliefs, geography — music, because it’s frequency, it’s energy, it supersedes all those perceived differences, and just connects us on a feelings level. And that is so powerful.” [ekishola.com](http://ekishola.com) 



Shola says she often feels the strongest urge to create in the wake of loss. “I mean, really, creating my own medicine, right?”