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## Checking In: Marc Dennis Repels Doom by Feeding Hope and Insects to His Kids

We often check in on New York-based artist, professor, and curator Marc Dennis as art fairs are approaching. When we first met Dennis in Aspen years ago, he invited us to an even mix of high- and low-brow hangouts while in town, so we knew he was a perfect Insider from the start. Throughout the year, he typically can be seen floating from opening to reception to award ceremony—and he's a wealth of knowledge on what's what and who's who. Between art events, he's creating wonders from his DUMBO studio.

Dennis' art supporters—ranging from his students at The Art Students League of New York to mega-collectors and curators; museum-goers to social media followers—know his brushstrokes well. Bright pops of color wash over canvases in freakishly real depictions of animals, humans, and other artists' works. His finger on the hyper-realistic pulse is spot-on.



Marc Dennis, *The Tree Of The Knowledge Of Good And Evil*; Courtesy Of Marc Dennis.

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In some pieces, we see insects and flowers fuse together (*A Great Piece of Turf*); a cheerleader taking flight in front of Jean-Michel Basquiat's work (*Allegory of Hoo-Rah!*); and a museum security guard standing next to large framed paintings of a kitten (*The Measure of All Things*). Regardless of subject, Dennis masters realistic and imaginative qualities to produce pieces that trick and please the mind.

*Whitewall* caught up with Dennis to see how he's doing in isolation during the COVID-19 outbreak—from what he's watching and sketching to how he's parenting and cooking with insects.

**WHITEWALL:** How are you doing?

**MARC DENNIS:** I'm staying positive! I need to preface my responses by admitting that as an artist, I've basically practiced distancing for many years, simply because I've spent countless hours alone in my studio and am rather comfortable with this experience. Me and my kids—ages 8 and 11—are making the best of our quarantine experience. We have plenty of food, toilet paper, paper towels, and other essentials.

We are maintaining safe practices—staying inside, avoiding contact with others, washing our hands regularly, sanitizing our phones and Ipads, and getting plenty of exercise and laughter in the process. We watch what my kids call “boring” exercise videos on YouTube—but rather than follow along, squatting and bending, we create our own movements along with our own silly narration and sound effects (lots of farting sounds, actually). It's a lot of fun.

And then there's the homeschooling! My kids start their “school” day at 8:30 a.m. by listening to their principal's morning message online. Then they engage in their virtual classrooms. Teachers post assignments each morning and kids complete them according to a timeline. The teachers are only a Zoom or email away. Naturally there are road bumps, but everything we are all experiencing is a work in progress and the more focused we are on our objectives the better.

**WW:** What are you listening to, reading, or watching?

**MD:** I listen a lot to the same stuff I've always listened to—NPR, CNN, ESPN, FOX Sports Radio, and podcasts such as “Radio Lab,” “Criminal” and “Freakonomics.” We have a lot of books and I sometimes grab a book—it could be on art history, nature, or the *Plains Tribes*—and read a chapter or two. I watch TV with the kids—mostly Cartoon Network

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(*Gumball* is a fascinating cartoon by the way)—and tons of movies. We’ve watched *Jumanji: Welcome to The Jungle* and *The Next Level* maybe a dozen times each in the past two weeks. They are funny as hell. I watch a lot of late-night TV, after the kids go to bed—mostly Netflix, but also *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Better Call Saul*, and of course the news... How can we not watch the news?

**WW: What are you cooking?**

**MD:** I’m cooking way more than usual! I guess we all are! I miss take out. LOL. I’ve been experimenting with recipes—mostly cooking whole chickens using a wide range of ingredients from rosemary to turmeric and mangos to maple syrup. A whole chicken lasts two to three days. It’s been a lot of fun to be honest. I take notes on what I’m doing so I can repeat the steps.

I’m also getting back into baking with insects. In 2009 I created an organization called “Insects Art Food,” in order to educate and enlighten others to other sustainable and viable food sources. In other words, to enable people to question the definition of food. Anyway, I created the Chocolate Chirp Cookie (chocolate chip cookies with crickets) in 2009 and have been baking it regularly ever since. I came across some frozen crickets in my freezer about two weeks ago and baked a batch recently.

**WW: How are you staying connected?**

**MD:** I text a lot! Who doesn’t?! I also speak on the phone and Facetime with family and friends often. I call my parents every day. My kids do the same with their friends, with the additional component of playing Roblox or Minecraft online with their buddies. And naturally, there is the social media universe! It is what connects us all. I’m on Instagram (@darcmennis) a lot—posting pretty much every day, and although Facebook had dropped off my radar, I still look at it to see what others are up to.

To be quite honest, I’m enjoying my space—no hard feelings to my friends and family. After all, they certainly know I love and miss them, but in some way I am accepting this time to re-center and embrace the unknown. Somewhere in all of this are a range of lessons about ourselves and the world that I’m sure that some of us, maybe most of us, will discover in time.

**WW: How are you staying creative? Are you able to make work at this time?**

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**MD:** I sketch a lot. I draw often. I can do it while watching tv, movies, etc. My kids sometimes do it with me, alongside me. They have tons of supplies—pencils, pens, paper, watercolor paints, etc. And because I've not been in my studio for almost a month, I got back into using watercolors. With respect to exhibitions I have coming up, thank God the work is already completed.

I also got lucky because just before the pandemic hit the fan, I completed two important portrait commissions I was working on! The clients will need to wait at least another month to get their portraits until I feel comfortable going back to my studio.

And like I said, I cook a lot—and there is no doubt cooking, if done right with experimentation and exploration, is indeed a creative experience. The only difference is that I eat the chicken rather than hang it on the wall.

**WW:** Where are you finding hope or inspiration?

**MD:** Hope is all we have. I maintain a very positive attitude and do everything to drive negativity, anger, and sadness away. I've experienced enough of it in my life and have come to realize it is not just draining, but to feed hope is life-affirming. As far as inspiration—well that's easy. Hell, all my life I've been interested in just about anything and inspired by just about everything. My creative mind never sleeps. Speaking of, at bedtime, I often imagine my creative mind on the pillow next to me so it can keep working while my brain gets rest. *Oy vey!* Did I just really say that? LOL. Well, what can I say? Without our imaginations and a sense of humor, we are doomed.

--ELIZA JORDAN