

Transcript of oral history with the Chris M. Monaghan by Monica Ruth

Interviewee: Chris M. Monaghan
Interviewer: Monica Ruth
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Location of Interviewee: Sacramento, California
Location of Interviewer: Dexter, Michigan
Transcriber: Transcribed by <https://otter.ai> with a second pass by Monica Ruth

Abstract: This is an oral history of Chris M. Monaghan, an artist based in Dexter Michigan, conducted by Monica Ruth, a graduate student intern with the COVID-19 archive, A Journal of the Plague Year. Chris talks about his street art/chalk artwork, participating in chalk art festivals, how the pandemic has influenced the festival and artist scenes, and how chalk art is a source of entertainment, hope, and outlet for mental and physical health.

MR: 0:11

My name is Monica Ruth, and I'm a graduate student intern with the COVID-19 archive at Arizona State University. Today's date is March 31 2021 The time is 10:04am pacific standard time where I'm sitting in my home in Sacramento, California, and today I'm speaking with Chris Monahan in Dexter Michigan to record some of his stories about pandemic experiences for the COVID-19 archive. Chris may have your consent to record your responses and add them to the archive with your name.

CM: 0:39

Yes, you do.

MR: 0:41

Thank you so much. I really appreciate it. So to begin, can you please tell us your name, again, where you live, maybe a little bit about your family and the areas or places that you work with your art, a little bit about your life as an artist.

CM: 0:58

Sure. So my name is Chris M Monaghan, I'm an artist I live in Dexter, which is just outside of Ann Arbor, it's in the southeast corner of the state. I don't know, but near Detroit, and I am an artist. It's kind of the side thing that I do, I do paint. I work with a lot of digital medium, and, and I'm probably best known, though for my street chalk art. Like most kids I started drawing chalk art. When I was younger, we didn't have internet or anything back then and so being outside was what we did, and drawing was a big part of that experience. What really captured my imagination in terms of street chalk art was the original Mary Poppins movie. And in there, there's a scene where Bert is a street screever, which is a term that's used to describe a street artist in in England, and he creates this scene, and they jumped into the scene and go on this really cool adventure within his artwork. And that concept of creating something that people could jump into an experience stuff is always stuck with. I thought that was just an amazing concept. And I wanted to kind of do that and not necessarily in terms of, in an art format but sharing that kind of experience with my kids, you know, as when I got older and had kids, I

wanted to give that that sort of same experience where we could create a little world with chalk and they could to, you know, have some fun with that. So we would do things like chalk in the driveway chalk on the sidewalk chalk around the sides of the pool and things like that and it was a great summer activity. And I thought that was it was a lot of fun. How I got into the more formal chalk environment or venue was I was coaching one of my daughter's soccer teams and the other coach happened to be the the festival administrator for a local chalk fest when they asked if I would participate in that. And I said sure, I think that would be really cool. So I created my little design and I went to Walmart and I bought my box of pastel chalks, and I showed up and I was just I was in aw, there were all these artists that were doing these really beautiful, brilliant masterpieces on the street using this really vibrant chalk and things and I kind of looked down at my box of chalk that I had bought at Walmart and I'm like, I'm not ready for this, but I you know part of me was like I want more I want to be part of that I want to do what they're doing. And so they'd given me some of their chalk and and I went out and I created this design and it was one of the best experiences of my life in terms of art. And with talking with them, I found out that there were festivals all over the country.

And I was really thrilled to have discovered this community of artists that you know were not only talented and could create these incredible pieces of artwork, but they were also very supportive and encouraging, which inspired me and other artists to do more. And so I started traveling around the country on weekends, going to these festivals that attract, you know 50, 100, 300,000 people as spectators. And it was a really, really cool experience. And I've been doing that now for just over 10 years. So it's a lot of fun. The neat thing about chalk art too is that it's, It's a performance art it's you know in other forms of art you create your art and you post it somewhere you put it up in a gallery and people come and see it and then that's the end of the experience with street chalk art it's a process in you're performing from the beginning to the end. And the people that come there in the morning to see you get started, are often the same people that you see throughout the day, that are coming in to see the progress you've done. And so it's that, start to finish process that makes it kind of unique. You're putting on a show in a lot of respects. And it's just so much fun when the piece is done to see people interacting with the designs, taking pictures posing and kind of accomplishing what my original goal was when I saw that Mary Poppins movie of creating a scene that people can interact with and have a lot of fun with. So that's how I got involved with all of this.

MR: 6:28

So you talked a little bit about pre pandemic chalk art festivals and interacting with the crowd. Can you talk a little bit about how the pandemic has impacted those aspects of of your work?

CM: 6:43

Yeah. So, in 2020 most all of the festivals around the country or around the world for that matter, Because there's a lot of street festivals like this in Europe and things as well. Were either canceled postponed or had gone virtual. And so the difference between all the other years I've been doing this and last year in 2020, was that I was kind of forced to do a lot of the work at my own home in the driveway on the sidewalks and things like that. I really missed that interaction with the crowds and being around that artists community and things but what kind of started to happen, as I would do these drawings outside of my house and people would stumble upon them when they're going out for walks or whatnot, interact with them, take pictures post it on social

media, which prompted more people to show up in pretty soon I know every week I would have people coming by to see this artwork. I started to get messages from people thanking me for doing this and sharing that experience because it gave them something, gave them some sort of form of entertainment, that they otherwise couldn't access because of a lockdown or, you know, just the safety and health of family members and things like that so this was an activity that was outside, social distancing was easy to accomplish, and adhere to, and it just, it gave people. I don't know a little form of entertainment, I guess. I guess that. I don't know, my little contribution to some truly unique times.

MR: 8:42

Yeah. So, when you're transitioning the work from a festival atmosphere with other artists and you're doing it at home. There's obviously less interaction with the artists community, are there ways that you've been able to keep in touch with the other artists that you've met along the way?

CM: 9:02

Yeah, most of the artists are on Facebook, or they have Instagram profiles where everybody is constantly, you know, uploading work that they've done, whether it's for a festival or just on their own. There's a lot of groups that I participate in and in those social media environments that you know people share information about maybe all of their upcoming events, how they're doing things and just sharing their experiences. Kind of like I'm doing with you in terms of how the pandemic has changed the landscape.

MR: 9:42

Have you seen that change towards any of the artwork from your art or your, your rest of your art community?

CM: 9:51

in terms of talents changed

MR: 9:54

content, yeah,

CM: 9:55

Yeah. So yeah, one of you know at the beginning of the pandemic, there was a lot of effort on the artist in the artist community to thank, you know those frontline workers and things and so a lot of the artwork content was based around people like first responders and nurses and doctors and stuff. You know a lot of portraits. I know a lot of people are doing, there's a picture where it's got like these superheroes that are lined up Spider Man, Superman, Batman, and embedded in there as a nurse, with a mask. And, you know, things like that we're, were kind of cool and again, you know artists aren't on the front lines, but in some respects they are because they're providing that outlet in that, you know, ability to express their "Thank yous", through things like chalk art or whatever other mediums.

MR: 10:55

Can you tell me about your best experience doing chalk street art, during the pandemic?

CM: 11:03

Yeah, so there was a cancer patient in my community that had stumbled upon one of the pieces that I had done, and she had asked me to do a specific themed piece for her she was really big into pirates, and she had lost her leg as a result of her cancer treatments and things and. And so, the pirate theme went along with like pirate pegleg kind of a thing and she really like played that up. So I designed the whole piece around that theme specifically for her. And it had, you know like the big mast of a pirate ship that, you know, she could be perched up on, as if she was up on the top of the mast in the crow's nest, and it had like a skeleton climbing out of the hole in the sidewalk with all these coins and seaweeds and stuff hanging off of it and things and her and her family came by to see it when it was done, and take pictures and stuff and you know it's just that it was that connection, that sense of community, being able to share what I could do to make somebody's day better. And I like to think that, you know, getting that completed and having her come by to see it, You know, helped in some small way.

MR: 12:38

I'd like to hear about some of the more challenging aspects of working with street art during the pandemic, can you share a little bit about that?

CM: 12:48

Yeah, I mean, the biggest part about doing the street art, the challenges that go with that is, you know, again, it's it's a performance art. It's a community type art, and, you know, it's really meant to be seen by large groups of people, and losing that venue like that, it was tough at first. Yeah, you get used to sharing it like that, and you feel, you almost feel isolated in a way, because, you know, instead of being surrounded by all these other artists and and all that positive energy and things, now you're out there by yourself. You know in your driveway doing something that you know normally would could be appreciated by a lot of people. But I think it's it's the isolation maybe is the toughest challenge, especially in this type of work.

MR: 13:58

How would you describe your hopes for chalk art as we move through the pandemic and hopefully come out the other side?

CM: 14:07

Well, as festivals and stuff start to open up again, it's an outdoor activity so I think there's a lot of opportunity with the right precautions in place for people to enjoy this type of thing. I think that that, that people can go outside and do these things, you know vaccinated or not yet being outside and it seeing these, you know small festivals and stuff that are popping up in these little communities and things. You know, I think it gives people a source of entertainment, that they otherwise could not participate in otherwise.

MR: 14:52

You've mentioned that you used to travel pretty frequently. Do you see travel still being part of your future chalk artwork?

CM: 15:02

I do. I think that, you know, as long as myself and my family, because my family travels with me, I think that if the event organizers, put all the necessary precautions in place, if the airlines have proper precautions in place, and as more and more people get vaccinated and the numbers start coming down. You know, my hope is that we can return to some sense of normalcy sometime you know towards the fall of this year. And there are some pretty big festivals that happen, especially down south, you know, in the fall and early winter, when you can still do those things in those states. So

MR: 15:50

I read an article that you linked on your website about an event that took place last October, in Columbus, Ohio. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

CM: 16:02

Yep, so that was the Columbus, Ohio Chalk the Block Festival, which is held in Easton Town Center, which is a large shopping complex there. It is an outdoor venue because it's kind of like an outlet mall area. And the organizers there, really did take a lot of the they spent a lot of attention to detail to ensure that the safety of the artists, the safety of the people coming through, that it was all a safe environment for people to experience. They were, you know, the artists' areas were kind of cordoned off so that the artists had a lot of freedom and space to work without, you know like, because one of my biggest concerns was as a street artist, you're either down on the ground, and you've got people standing over you. And my concern was if people are coughing or sneezing or breathe, whatever the case may be, that tends to go down and you know it's just, you're right there. Let the event organizers were very cautious. Giving ample distance, you know, not only for this, for the people that were there to see the artwork but for the artists themselves. And so it ended up being a very good experience and I think it was a good example of how a festival can be run successfully, even during times where, you know, social distancing and responsibility are key to the health of people that are there.

MR: 17:45

So, chalk art is, is temporary. Right and that's just, it's just the way it is. Tell me what you think about that and how that might influence the way you work.

CM: 18:02

Yes, chalk art chalk art is temporary, and I think that that's one of the things that I find intriguing about this form of art, is that it's almost romantic in a way, because you know, you do this, if you don't see it while it's happening or Well, it's there, you know, at the first rain it washes away. And it's gone forever at that. You know so it's romantic in the sense that if you don't experience it while it happens, then you, you lose out. You don't get to experience that, again, in a lot of ways, that's, you know mirrors life. And I think it's a good example of why you need to not only go see chalk art when it's happening but, you know, live your life and do the things you want to do.

MR: 19:01

Yeah. And with that, I'd like to know more about what your hopes are for the future of your chalk artwork, And, and perhaps doing more festivals.

CM: 19:14

Yeah, so I did recently receive a grant, an education grant to, to, to help fund some projects that I've been working on. One of them is a educational style program that incorporates chalk art design and drawing with learning. It's kind of aimed at younger kids. Last year we did an episode that that will be on YouTube shortly, but it went to a pumpkin patch during Halloween so I incorporate drawing, like a Jack O' Lantern with actual things that you can do and activities you could do at the pumpkin patch itself. And I know just from testing it on my kids that they were pretty excited about it, and it kept their attention. And they also learned from it too so those kinds of things are happening. I've got, I'd like to continue to do some public teaching at the libraries, you know, in terms of chalk art because there's there's a lot of people who are interested in that. It's kind of a, it's one of those things too that whether you're a kid or an adult chalk art still has some of that unique enjoyment to it, you know, because like if you get if you get an art job it can be work. And with chalk art. It's, it still holds that same kind of enjoyment that same kind of excitement that you had when you were doing it when you were five. You know you're outside, you're in the, in the open air you're out on the, on the driveway or the sidewalk, creating something. And it's just, it's fun. no matter what age you are. And I think that's one of the neat things about it so my hope is, is that I can use that vehicle to not only educate and teach people how to do it, but you know also continue to participate myself and do some pretty neat things. You know a lot of my the themes around my designs are based on making something impossible possible. And I want to continue to share that with the community.

MR: 21:51

Yeah, thank you for sharing that. So is there anything else that you'd like to share with the archive that I haven't asked you about?

CM: 22:01

I just, if you haven't been to a chalk festival, then I think you would be totally amazed. I encourage everybody to go out and and at least go to one because it's really a neat unique experience and again it's one of those things where if you don't see it while it happens. And it's gone forever. And, you know, just continue to be creative, doesn't have to be chalk it could be anything but art is a pretty important aspect of humanity. And I think that everybody has a little bit of artist in them, and they need to let that out, sometimes, especially during times when there's pandemics when expressing yourself is key to health, mental health and physical health, I believe.

MR: 22:49

Yeah, definitely. Well thank you so much. I really appreciate your time and you sharing your stories, your pandemic experience as a chalk artist, and hopefully we talk again soon.

CM: 23:02

Definitely, thank you very much.

MR: 23:03

My pleasure.