

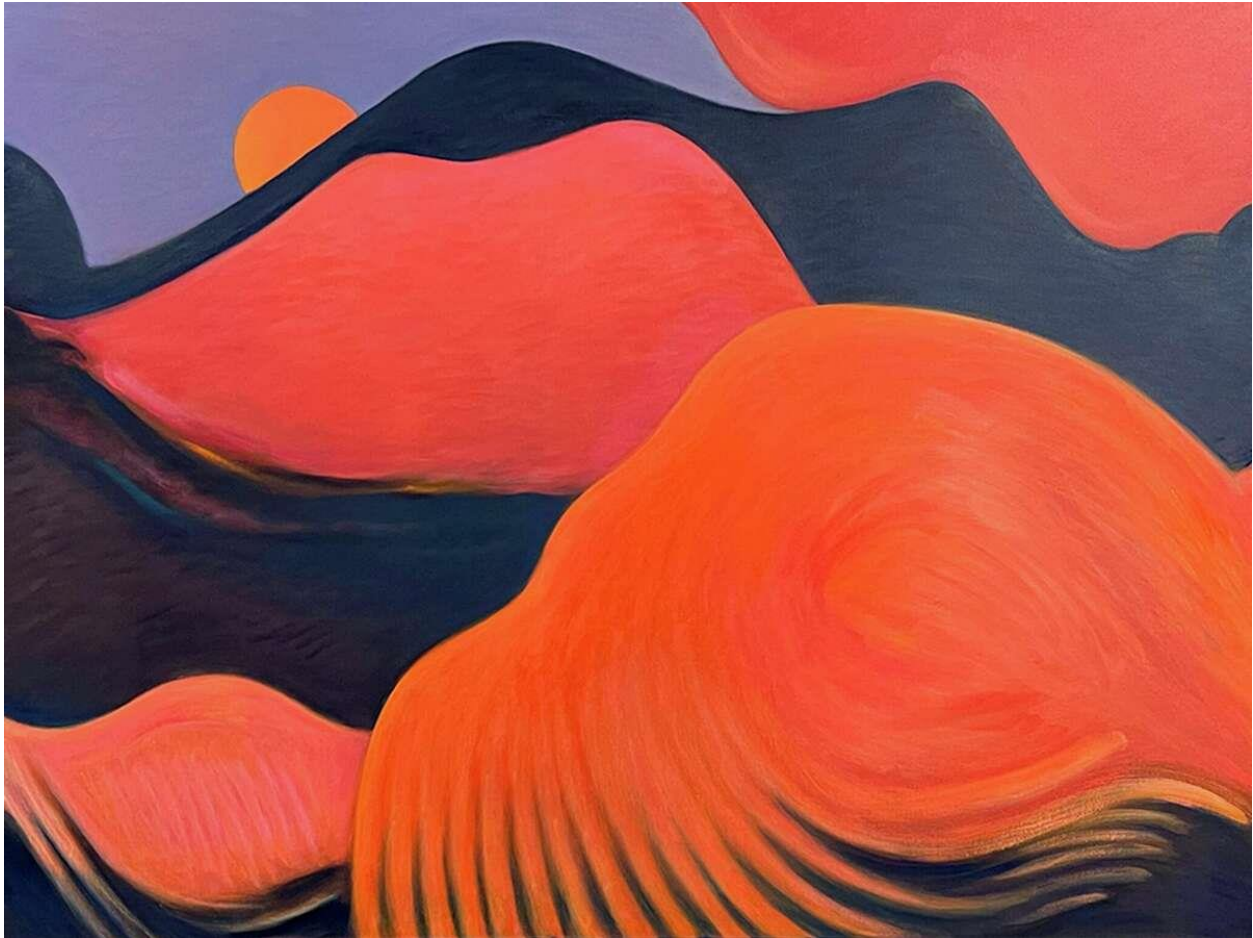
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# Dance and painting meet to confront the COVID blues in Houston

Donna E. Perkins and Jhon R. Stronks exorcise their pandemic anxieties at the Archway Gallery this March.

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"As I Drifted Off," a painting by Donna E. Perkins. Perkins' work will be on display at Archway Gallery through March 30.

Donna E. Perkins

Like many people during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, artist Donna E. Perkins found herself glued to the news. Living alone at the time, she'd spend hours in front of the television, watching what felt like a world on fire—millions of deaths, the George Floyd protests, the insurrection, the war in Ukraine. Perkins, who lived alone when Harris County first went into lockdown, says it was a period of "tremendous isolation" for her.

To distract herself, she began making small paintings while she watched TV—just little 4x6 and 8x8 inch works. She now has 166 of those tiny paintings, which will be the centerpiece of a new exhibit called *No Matter What, Keep The Hand Moving*, opening March 4 at Archway Gallery.

Coupled with those paintings will be a series of performances by dancer Jhon R. Stonks called *After All*, also informed by their experiences during lockdown. Stonks and Perkins are longtime collaborators who describe their works as a push and pull of friendship, respect, and inspiration. The two have been working together since 2009, when they were introduced by another artist, Margo Stutts Toombs, at a reading at Archway.

Before that, Perkins had already been looking to dancers for inspiration. "A lot of my earlier paintings were based on lines from dancers," she says. She'd go to a rehearsal, armed with a canvas, and make broad strokes based on the movements she saw performed. Then she'd go home and transform those simple sketches into abstract paintings. She liked the movement those early lines imparted. "It was the backbone of the structure of my paintings," she says. And even though the paintings are abstract, "There's a certain humanness that comes into [them.]"

Perkins's paintings run the gamut from amoeba-like shapes that resemble sunsets to chaotic watercolor scribbles that look like waves cresting on a shore. Stonks's performances, meanwhile, are informed by modern and classical jazz dance, especially the Black social dances that inspired the jazz form. Stonks says their collaboration is both "conversational and responsive" and "parallel and perpendicular."

"I think what's happening is I'm taking those lines back," they say. To create their performance, Stonks says they plan to go into the gallery after all the works are hung, and spend time with the paintings, looking for things the average person

might miss—the brush strokes, nail holes in the walls, the frames. "There are usually traces of the labor that went into the paintings." They'll also look for paintings that may have been inspired by other dancers. "I'll see who might be in the room with me."



Dancer Jhon R. Stonks.  
Lynn Lane

Stonks, who also works as the director of programming at the Houston Metropolitan Dance Center, incorporates both dance and singing in their performances. Those are forms, they say, that "are really seeking to display the effort" versus "actively masking the labor in other forms of dance" like classical ballet.

Stonks says their years-long collaboration with Perkins is about holding space for one another. "It's about learning to push and pull. There's a level of consent between us."

As with Perkins, the early months of the pandemic were difficult for Stronks. A close friend died in mid-2019, and Stonks had not yet had a chance to grieve when the pandemic hit. By the end of last year, they were in complete burnout. "I left 2022 pretty harshly," they say. "I hit a wall creatively, emotionally, professionally. I realized how much grief I had not processed."

Stonks and their husband now happen to be roommates with Margo Stuttts Toombs, the artist who first introduced them to Perkins. Stonks says being forced to slow down during the pandemic ended up being a blessing that brought the three of them closer together.

"We realized how much the three of us enjoyed taking care of each other, and how much we hadn't been taking care of each other before," they said. Still, watching the endless violence against Black, queer, and disabled people during the pandemic was exhausting.

"Because I am queer, I am not unaware of that violence," they say. "I can't imagine people who lived alone [like Perkins] having to process that."

For Perkins, that exhaustion culminated in a painting that developed when she was cleaning off her brushes one day. The oil paint on the cleaning rag began to resemble a woman in distress. She turned those strokes into a non-abstract painting called "My Scream," an homage to the Edvard Munch painting said to depict the existential panic of being a human. That work, along with her mini paintings and others, will be on display at Archway.

Perkins is in a better place now, though, having moved into a studio/apartment in the Museum District where she's neighbors with other artists. As for the title of her show, *No Matter What, Keep The Hand Moving*, she says that was her mantra during the troubling early months of the pandemic. "Just keep your hand moving and something will happen," she says. "There is a lot of intelligence in the body."

*Donna E. Perkins's show No Matter What, Keep The Hand Moving will run March 4 through 30 at Archway Gallery. Jhon R. Stonks's performances, After All, will take place March 10, 11, 17, and 18 at 7:30 pm in the same gallery. Admission is free.*