2021 Collaborative Project Proposal
Proposed by Bonnie Bernstein

WORKING TITLE: Saints Alive
(a variant on Ramona’s original Saints proposal)

CONCEPT/THEME: Borrowing from Central American folk art traditions to express gratitude for the selfless acts of unnamed individuals in a pandemic year.

CONTENT:
Vignettes (text and image) ascribing good deeds to generic individuals (the nurse who, the friend who, the food delivery guy who, the neighbors who….).

Narratives will be short and personal. Art may be stylized – bold colors, flattened perspective, simple figures – reminiscent of folk art, untrained and direct.

Artists may incorporate traditional iconography (e.g., halo or emanating light), new iconography (e.g., hand over heart), or other symbols to help convey meaning and emotion.

PROMPT: Who are some of the humble, unsung individuals who carried on in our behalf, and whose kindnesses helped us cope during a year of illness and isolation? How can we venerate them?

INSPIRATION: Two Central American folk art traditions – Mexican ex-votos and Peruvian retablos.

Mexican ex-votos are folk art paintings captioned with personal narratives that thank patron saints for their intercession in overcoming some personal misfortune. They have evolved from scenes depicting salvation from a life-threatening illness or event to more quotidian escapes, like surviving a snake bite or a bop on the head by a blindfolded person with a piñata stick.

Peruvian retablos are small box-altars that originally held 3-D tableaux of Christian events (e.g., the Nativity) but have evolved to depict scenes of the daily lives of the Andean people – shops, home industry, festivals, performances, etc.

FORM/STRUCTURE:
Unbound collection of prints in a gate-folded portfolio designed to look like a traditional Peruvian retablo (but empty, without 3-D art). We might also produce a limited “deluxe edition” with an altar-like enclosure that could also serve as an upright display for exhibition.

SKILL-BUILDING: digital color separation for plates and registration in letterpress printing – OR – reduction printmaking with linoleum on letterpress; portfolio binding.

Comment: Both ex-votos and retablos have their origins with Christian missionaries after the Spanish conquest who introduced them in their efforts to impose their beliefs on the indigenous peoples of Central America. However, over time, both forms were appropriated by indigenous artists to depict native as well as Christian beliefs and secular traditions important to them. We as artists can likewise use these folk art forms to make art that is meaningful to us in our time.
Sample ex voto:
[rough translation] I thank my dear Virgin de Guadalupe because I can support and feed all my cats since they have given me much love and company... after the death of my husband Pancho... I had a lot of depression but now all my days are different, my life has changed very much, in a word, I am a very happy Mrs. Azuma Martinez.

Sample retablo: