

FLUX: responding to head and neck cancer

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When Dr. Minn Yoon met with a patient in a café, she realized that surgical interventions had made it impossible for her companion to drink coffee, or speak loudly enough to be heard above the whirring grinder. Yoon, associate professor at the School of Dentistry at the University of Alberta, decided to raise awareness about the long-term physical and social effects of head and neck cancer by launching a research project involving patients, health care providers, scholars and artists (www.seemehearmehealme.com). Since 2015, this group has worked collaboratively in a series of workshops, meetings and studio

visits, ultimately producing — among other outcomes — *FLUX*, an exhibition of contemporary artworks that engage with and communicate the experiences of people affected by head and neck cancer. The artworks were installed at the International Museum of Surgical Science in Chicago from May to August of 2018.

Flux is an expansive term that alludes to unmanageable flow and bodily change, as well as a kind of metallurgic purifying agent, suggesting the physical and medical transformation of patients. Jude Griebel's life-sized sculpture, *Obstructed* (2016), features a grey mountain man hewn from rock and covered in trees. His

neck area is the site of a catastrophe where a sudden landslide has brought traffic to a halt (Figure 1). While Griebel's monstrous figure waits for treatment, Brad Neczyk's video installation, *Waiting room* (2016), invokes surgical practice and the alteration of identity (Figure 2). Multiple screens project fragmented human faces that move incessantly, separating and rejoining without ever forming a coherent portrait of the patients who posed for the artist. The lasting social impact of cancer treatment informs Heather Huston's sculptural installation, *I am wearing clothes, but I am naked* (2016), a title that quotes one of the



Figure 1: Jude Griebel, *Obstructed*, 2016 (84 × 163 × 84 cm; resin, wood, foam, oil paint; installation shot from inaugural exhibition at dc3 Art Projects, Edmonton, Jan. 5–21, 2017).



Figure 2: Brad Nczyk, *Waiting room*, 2016 (dimensions variable; installation shot from the International Museum of Surgical Science, Chicago).



Figure 3: Heather Huston, *I am wearing clothes but I am naked*, detail, 2016 (183 × 152 × 38 cm; digital print on paper, pencil on vellum, decals on ceramic plates, wooden tree branches; installation shot from the McMullen Gallery, Edmonton, June 22–Aug. 3, 2017).

patient-participants describing his public life. Layered images of two life-sized figures appear to sit at separate tables; in front of them are empty plates decorated with hands hesitantly reaching for connection (Figure 3).

Each work resulted from a collaborative interdisciplinary exploration that drew on the voices, experiences and visualizations of individuals with head and neck cancer. The patient-participants spoke at the workshops, wrote narratives, visited artists' studios and gave tours of the exhibition. In a forthcoming publication,¹ several patient-participants describe how such experiences contributed to their healing process. Leslie O'Connor-Parsons noted that the first workshop "left me feeling hopeful, and much less isolated." Kimberly Flowers argued that speaking in front of audiences and providing feedback on artworks "provoked me in a healthy way to deal with the trauma of my cancer experience. I also had a sense of awe that these complete strangers could hear my experience as a patient and present it in a tangible, accurate way."

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Reference

1. Brett-MacLean P, McTavish L, editors. *Art + Medicine collaborative practice: Transforming the experience of head and neck cancer*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press. In press.

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