

Exhibition

See me, hear me, heal me

FLUX: responding to head and neck cancer was exhibited at the dc3 Art Projects Space in Edmonton, AB, Canada in January 2017, and will be shown in Seoul, Korea, in April 2017

The *see me, hear me, heal me* project brought visual artists, researchers, and medical professionals together with patients recovering from head and neck cancer to explore the effect of the disease on the patients' lives through art. The first tangible product of the collaboration is *FLUX: Responding to Head and Neck Cancer*, an exhibition presented in January at the dc3 Art Projects space in Edmonton, AB, Canada.

"For me, the disfigurement and the visual nature of head and neck cancer was something that resonated—the tearing apart of identity, not only their visual identity but their voice and the way they were able to eat and socialise," says project organiser Minn Yoon (University of Alberta, Edmonton AB, Canada). "I thought that visual art would be well aligned to communicate their experiences." The six Canadian artists whose work appears in *FLUX* take strikingly different approaches to that goal, but together they create a powerful mosaic of experience.

The first work a visitor notices is likely to be Jude Griebel's *Obstructed*, a sculpture that is both man and mountain, resting on a hospital bed. Closer inspection reveals that a rockslide in the figure's neck region has blocked traffic on a highway that winds across his mountain or body—and recently, because stopped vehicles are

still present. The figure sits in the bed with a stunned expression on his face, as though he had just been knocked down—a clear parallel with the shock of a cancer diagnosis. But Griebel's figure also reflects determination and hope: the figure might be stunned, but he's shaking off the blow and preparing to get up again.

By contrast with Griebel's directness, Jill Ho-You's *Veils*, on two nearby walls, takes a much more subtle approach. The work comprises four sheets of white mylar with a lacework of tiny, meticulous pieces cut out, like a stencil, to cast barely perceptible shadows on the white walls. The geometric white-on-white gives a restful effect that seems completely non-medical. Eventually though, some viewers will realise that the cutouts are patterned after medical images: a mandible here, perhaps a thyroid there. A low table nearby displays 90 used scalpel blades, testament to the physical hard work involved in cutting mylar, and an allusion to the finely detailed, physically demanding work that surgeons do to treat head and neck cancers. "Of all the work, people have responded to this the most," says exhibit curator Lianne McTavish (University of Alberta, Edmonton AB, Canada). This positive response might be because, of all the works, Ho-You's is the least uncomfortable, the least challenging to the viewer's sense of wellbeing.

Although these first two works deal with the experience of diagnosis and treatment, the remaining four—displayed in a second room—focus on longer-term impacts. Sean Caulfield's *Familiar* overlays old domestic photos with tumour photos and histological sections in a montage of nine panels. The effect suggests the ugly intrusion of cancer into a life, and nostalgia for the way things were before.

Heather Huston's *I am wearing clothes, but I am naked* (a quote from a

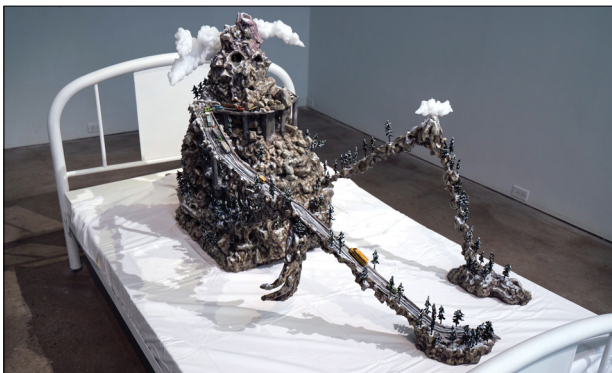
patient involved in the project) speaks to the isolation of many patients, unable to eat with friends and family. Huston's installation features indistinct photos of a man and a woman, obscured by a scrawl of perhaps medical annotations. The two photos hang on the wall before adjacent, but separate tables, each bearing an empty plate decorated with an image of a hand, upturned in supplication.

Ingrid Bachmann's sculptures and paintings, mostly untitled, explore cancer patients' disfigurement, with special emphasis on the stoma many patients bear on their throat. Bachman's images range from horror—staring eyes and open mouth that echo the gaping stoma—to a more hopeful drawing of a flower growing out from a stoma. Dominating the room, though, is Bachmann's unsettling sound sculpture, *I have something to tell you*, a repeating soundtrack that sounds a bit like laughter, a bit like crying, and a bit like a throaty, indistinct attempt at speech.

For me, the most powerful work in the exhibition is Brad Necyk's *Waiting Room*. Two television screens display fragments of human faces. The fragments ebb and flow, swirling around and never quite settling into complete portraits before dissolving again. The work forces viewers to confront the disorientation and loss (in many cases, literally a loss of face) that patients experience after treatment. It's deeply uncomfortable, yet profoundly sympathetic.

The exhibition's audience ranged from medical professionals to students to random passersby, and Yoon says that most visitors report deeper understanding from the experience. More shows are planned in other cities, the next being in Seoul, South Korea, in April.

Bob Holmes



Jude Griebel, *Obstructed*, 2016, 84 × 163 × 84 cm, resin, wood, foam, oil paint