

Living / Loss

The Experience of Illness in Art

Great achievements in modern medicine have enhanced our knowledge and treatment of many diseases, but understanding what it feels like to be sick requires more than technological advances and medical science. The facts of disease are objective and readily available, whereas illness is subjective, less accessible, difficult to teach, and sadly, often neglected.

Although the developed world has been relieved of many scourges, chronic illness is widespread and increasing in prevalence. Few are spared the experience of illness or can avoid being touched by it, either personally or because of the misfortune of a loved one. **Living/Loss** takes you on a journey through different responses to illness, revealing how artists have captured and explored the emotional as well as physical manifestations of ill health.

Curated by **Fiona Kearney**

The exhibition has been developed in partnership with the **Alimentary Pharmabiotic Centre**, University College Cork

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Large print version of exhibition texts available from the information desk.

Feeling Sick

The onset of illness can seem inconsequential at first, with individuals feeling tired, nursing a slight cough, or facing up to the niggling sensation that something isn't quite right. In most cases, these symptoms pass and life returns to normal. However, they might also be manifestations of a more serious ailment, or an indication of chronic illness.

In *Work no.78*, Martin Creed layers plaster bandages to construct a miniature sculptural cube. The scale of the work and his use of common household materials remind us that illness can also refer to seemingly insignificant afflictions like bumps and bruises, while Cecily Brennan's paintings of patients with eczema and psoriasis recall the ways in which illness can manifest itself through skin rashes and discolouration.

Doctor, Doctor

The experience of illness can be traumatic, as individuals find themselves subjected to a seemingly endless series of examinations, procedures, medical forms, and hospital wards. The patient is forced to rely on the advice and authority of the doctor, and this loss of control over one's situation can lead to feelings of anger and anxiety.

In a new site-specific work, *The Project Twins* explore the feelings of depression and the social stigma that often accompanies illness. Their playful installation reminds us that humour can also serve as a coping mechanism for patients.

Jo Spence's photographs convey questioning and rage at her illness and medical treatment. She defiantly reclaims ownership of her body image by unflinchingly depicting the physical impact of breast cancer, as well as her personal responses to the disease.

The Waiting Room

For those who have suffered illness, the doctor's waiting room is an all too familiar experience. The neutral decor, institutional seating and outdated magazines offer little distraction from feelings of worry. In Paul Seawright's photograph, a woman and her child are waiting in a run-down African clinic. The cluttered cardboard boxes and shuttered windows of the setting powerfully capture the waiting room's atmosphere of boredom and anxiety.

For this exhibition, a dedicated education space has been created that takes on the look and character of the waiting room. Including copies of research materials from both medical and art journals, the space also features a selection of images by Bobby Baker, whose art practice explores her own experience of mental and physical illness.

A series of informational films from the Wellcome Collection reveals the ways in which issues relating to public health have been communicated over the past sixty years.

Hospital Stays

The treatment of a long-term illness transforms the day-to-day life of any patient. It might involve lengthy stays in hospitals, blood tests, an endless routine of check-ups and procedures and prolonged periods of rest. In this situation, the resolve of the patient is tested, with each prognosis becoming a source of hope or, in some cases, despair.

Thomas Struth's photographs of flowers and landscapes, originally commissioned for hospital rooms in Winterthur, Switzerland, offer patients a window onto the surrounding countryside and, at the same time, affirm their dignity as individuals in an unfamiliar, alienating setting. The artist focused on unusual details of flora to suggest the ways in which the experience of illness can amplify our awareness of one part of the body.

Medical Treatment

Damien Hirst takes a more comic view of medical care. In his *Last Supper* series of screenprints, he replaces the brand names of drugs used to treat serious diseases with those of staple British foods. Hirst's artworks provocatively demonstrate the way in which an assortment of pills can often become the final meal for chronically ill patients.

The need for hope while undergoing treatment is captured in Laura Potter's aspirin rosary beads. Combining pharmaceutical materials and Catholic iconography to explore how patients must place their trust in medicine, the work also alludes to the prayers said for the suffering of others, as well as in an Irish context, the importance of religious orders in caring for those with serious illnesses.

Recovery, Rehabilitation and Loss

Where does illness end? It might result in a continual process of medication and therapy, of adaptation to sickness as a permanent part of everyday life. Traces may persist, as physical or mental scars. It could lead to death, or rehabilitation, or to a complete recovery.

Cecily Brennan portrays the after-effects of illness in her paintings and sculptures of skin grafts and surgical scars. In these works, patients retain the marks of the experience, in the stitches and staples that hold the body together and allow it to heal. For Mary Rose O'Neill, the work itself represents a healing process. Her set of prints evokes the experience of loss and how the imagining and remembrance of a loved one can help in overcoming grief.

Like Jo Spence, whose final works here reflect upon her impending death from cancer, the possibility of dealing with illness often means looking at it directly, of acknowledging its presence as an inescapable aspect of life. In one of her last photographs, Spence is in a hospice, clearly very ill, but holding in her grasp the shutter release button which allows her to take her own picture, still determined to represent her illness, and life, on her terms.