Something Is Wrong

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“Relief from pain through palliative artmaking can save us from the discomfort of living with this injustice and violence that we see every day, but it does not treat the basis for the pain. [ . . . ] Is the artist perhaps unconsciously at first trying to fight inevitable death by stacking up the artworks? Hiding the foregone erasure of the body?”

—Barbara Hammer, The Art of Dying or (Palliative Art Making in the Age of Anxiety) (2018)

“Dr. Bailey: What is the most important step in the treatment process? Anyone?
Dr. Avery: Physical Exam.
Dr. Bailey: No, no chocolate for you.
Dr. Yang: Lab and radiology evaluation.
Dr. Bailey: Uh, oh, come on people. Now you’re embarrassing me.
Dr. Grey: Patient history.
Dr. Bailey: Thank you.”

—Grey’s Anatomy, Season 6, Episode 15 (2010)

Fun fact: Something is wrong, and it has been for a long time.

The epigraphs are from Barbara Hammer’s final lecture on death, illness, and art as a prolific experimental filmmaker living with cancer, and Dr. Miranda Bailey, a fictional surgeon who values her patients’ voices more than any other character in the medical drama Grey’s Anatomy. In Hammer’s lecture she used the term palliative artmaking to describe her practice. Palliative care is a medical practice focused on comfort, support, and symptom relief as opposed to cure. Reframing art making (and life) with those goals in mind informs how I make work as a chronically ill artist and educator. The many hours I have spent watching Grey’s Anatomy—and other sexy, utopian (at least the early seasons) healthcare fantasies—informs this work as well.
Art and medicine are estranged siblings. Photographs are good at decontextualizing their subjects from the world that they exist in. A medical exam room is good at decontextualizing a person from the world they exist in. A person becomes a patient when their first-person experience is translated into third-person narrative. When looking at medical archives, the preservation of the historical context of the experiences of patients is a vital job of archivists and researchers.

I collect and make images of the visual codices of illness, and share my own archive of experiences as a sick artist to explore mythologies of recovery. I began visiting medical archives in 2018 while I was working a 9 to 5 job, teaching part time, and unsuccessfully trying to manage worsening chronic pain that I have had since I was a child. I started going to the Archives and Special Collections at SUNY Upstate Medical University Health Sciences Library in the morning before work to photograph objects from their collections and to look through unprocessed negatives, usually large-format portraits of patients. Through this I have found a deep well of documentation of intimate patient experience in a field whose narrative is often told from the perspective of the clinician.

I have been hearing the term “evidence-based” a lot lately, mostly from my health insurance company when denying authorization for treatment. I thought I was the evidence. In the fine art photography world many theory-based workers focus on interrogating the indexicality (presumed truth value) of the photographic image. While evidentiary value is vital, for it to function, trust must be built.

Before we used the verb “to photoshop” to describe the act of manipulating a photograph we used the verb “to doctor”: as in, “This image looks like it’s been doctored.” The words “doctor” and “document” are derived from the same Latin verb *docere*, meaning to teach. These linguistic overlaps inform my relationship to both the evidentiary value of photography and the power of context, and become acutely visible in educational practices in both hard and soft sciences. First-person narratives are central, after all, to both art and medicine, and evidentiary function is not reliant on a value-neutral concept of objectivity. When those narratives are used to educate—which happens in both the hard and soft sciences—the people they belonged to are no longer present. Every clinical photograph with a patient’s face is of someone presumed dead because of the date of the photograph.

While on a recent research visit to the New York Academy of Medicine historical collections, looking at and reading about documentation of patients, I wrote in my notes “Photography is always about death, always. More than any other phenomenon”—which is a strange
hierarchy to arbitrarily create and assign a victor to, especially when medical practice is a phenomenon popularly understood as a field that is all about prolonging “the foregone erasure of the body” (to borrow a phrase from the lecture referenced in the epigraph).

Looking back at that statement, *Photography is always about death*, I think I missed a word. What I meant is that photography is *not* always about death (a diagnosis of exclusion). Medicine is the same, it’s not all McDreamy saving lives on *Grey’s Anatomy*, or the desperate urge for artists to make work that will live on after they die. What Barbara Hammer, both patient and practitioner of indexicality, was talking about was palliative care, in artistic, medical, and ontological practice. An exploration of not only death, but quality of life. All of the things in healthcare that are not about death, like pain, pleasure, intimacy, recovery, cruelty, need, desire, bureaucracy, etc. These are some of the subject terms I cast into finding aids for this work.

My own personal experience runs through my art, which is a cross between autotheory and magical realism. It is a conglomeration of medical records, bills, treatments, pills, vaguely impersonal notes to self, and drawings made by my grandmother, whose complex illnesses may have been passed down to me.

I try to see myself through the eyes of clinicians who hold the keys (along with insurance companies, and policymakers) to tools that make life livable. Whether these tools work, whether the keys should be turned, whether the view of “myself” is right: I hope to visualize the things that haunt me and the things that haunt the medical field.

The archival photographs I share can only be accessed through secondhand documentation. I redact their identifying information and pair them with my own artifacts of medical treatments and education to acknowledge the veracity and complexity of patient experiences.

**LIST OF FIGURES**

* Edward G. Miner Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, University of Rochester Medical Center, Rochester, NY
** Visual Studies Workshop, Rochester, NY
*** Archives and Special Collections at SUNY Upstate Medical University Health Sciences Library, Syracuse, NY

Fig. 1. Clinical photograph labeled Trigeminal Neuralgia, 1947 *
Fig. 2. Documentation of the Buffalo Society of Natural Sciences. The sprinkle of gold is a type of mold often found eating away at the gelatin and cellulose on the film. Lantern Slide Collection **
Fig. 3. Inverted cyanotype of lantern slide labeled Dr Holmes Farewell Address, Harvard Medical School, November 28, 1882, printed on a page from OnTrak Chronic Pain Workbook sent to me by my Health Insurance Company in 2020.

Fig. 4. Gelatin Silver Contact print of lantern slide. Plate No. VI Severe Mustard Gas Burn of Buttocks with Blistering, *Atlas of Gas Poisoning* (1918).

Fig. 5. Diag ? Progressive Muscular Atrophy, 1947 *

Fig. 6. Sodium Amytal—Blue Heavens (street name), a barbiturate used as an early and unsuccessful truth serum, found in a medics kit from WWII.

Fig. 7. Drawing of a lab rat by Jackie Felix, my grandmother, from a set of drawings based on photographs by Catherine Chalmers that appeared in “Fuzzy Little Test Tubes,” *New York Times* (July 30, 2000).

Fig. 8. Thomas Moyh na, *Spinal Catastrophism: A Secret History* (Falmouth, UK: Urbanomic, 2020), 98.

Fig. 9. Drawing by Jackie Felix, my grandmother, overlayed on a photograph in my living room.

Fig. 10. Trigeminal Neuralgia, an inverted photograph of a water-damaged negative found in the Clinical Photographs collection *

Fig. 11. Gold dots are isolated from the lantern slide in the second plate of this series and pasted over the collage.

Fig. 12. Incision site two months post-operative breast reduction.

Fig. 13. Detail shot of an installation of my work Pleasure Point in Berlin, DE, November, 2016. I was practicing sutures on marshmallow mice at the time.

Fig. 14. A gelatin-silver print with a photogram drawing I made using dry erase marker on glass overlaid on a negative from my grandmother’s archive of family photos with the same type of mold I found on the lantern slides at Visual Studies Workshop.

Fig. 15. Photograph I made in December 2018 of a dead mouse in a glue trap alongside materials from a medics kit from c. 1970 in the research room ***

Fig. 16. Text on verso: Manic Depressive, pre-operative 1927. * See 1929 short surrealist film for a frighteningly similar image.

Fig. 17. Mounting medium for microscopy. The backdrop is a microscopic image of the eyeball of a dead fly I found on the floor of the closet at a residency in Ithaca, NY in 2016.

Fig. 18. Rabbit entrails.

Fig. 19. Drawing of a lab rat by Jackie Felix, my grandmother, from a set of drawings based on photographs by Catherine Chalmers that appeared in “Fuzzy Little Test Tubes,” *New York Times* (July 30, 2000).

Fig. 20. Object from Spencer Buffalo, Objects Collection ***.

Fig. 21. Photocopy used for drawings of a lab rats by Jackie Felix, my grandmother, from a set of drawings based on photographs by Catherine Chalmers that appeared in “Fuzzy Little Test Tubes,” *New York Times* (July 30, 2000).

Fig. 22. Diagnosis: Morphine Addiction, Operation: Prefrontal Lobotomy, Pre-Operative Films (February 26, 1941). Verso of a photographic print *

Fig. 23. Pre-operative image from a series of photographic negatives labeled “Anxiety Series,” a collection of photographs of people before and after being given lobotomies ***

Fig. 24. Photograph from *The Edinburgh Stereoscopic Atlas of Anatomy* photographed while on residency at Visual Studies Workshop, Rochester, NY, printed June 2018 on silk organza.

Fig. 25. Occipital lobe of a sheep’s brain.
Fig. 26. Illustration from a collection of medical slides bought on Ebay for GBP 34.99. The item listing was “230x35mm Photo Slides Medical History Shock Resuscitation Inhalers Ventilators.” Slide labeled “Methods of Resuscitation. Bimanual Massage of Heart via Abdomen,” illustrator unknown

Fig. 27. Drawing of a lab rat by Jackie Felix, my grandmother, from a set of drawings based on photographs by Catherine Chalmers that appeared in “Fuzzy Little Test Tubes,” New York Times (July 30, 2000)

Fig. 28. Tenosynovitis, undated *

Fig. 29. You’re Welcome letter from my first COVID-19 stimulus check, April 15, 2020 with a cyanotype made from a lantern slide labeled Plate No. VI Severe Mustard Gas Burn of Buttocks with Blistering, Atlas of Gas Poisoning (1918), printed on the letter

Fig. 30. Verso: Degenerative Arthritis, 1957 *

Fig. 31. Past due bill from Harris & Harris Ltd, a debt collection agency

Fig. 32. Illustration with handwritten “Right Fornix Cut” *

Fig. 33. Microscopic image of a dead fly I found on the floor of the closet at a residency in Ithaca, NY in 2016

Fig. 34. Verso: Diagnosis: Dermatitis herpetiformis of pregnancy (1936) *

Fig. 35. Netter, Frank H. MD, CIBA Collection of Medical Illustrations, Volume 1, Nervous System, p. 81, Plate 54, printed on silk organza

Fig. 36. Scan of negative, clinical photographs ***

Fig. 37. Earthworm in a jar of formalin attached to photograph with polypropylene suture thread to clinical photograph ***

Fig. 38. Scan of negative, clinical photographs ***

Fig. 39. Love in the Scoliosis Clinic, 1972 ***

Fig. 40. Anesthesia and Analgesia—March-April, 1938, diagram on unlabeled lantern slide

Fig. 41. April 14, 1950, Tendon Transplant *

Fig. 42. Piece of notebook paper with “Med School Interview Questions” found on the floor of a Wegmans in Buffalo, NY

Fig. 43. Drawing from Jackie Felix, my grandmother, overlayed on a photograph of a bottle of Gabapentin, an anticonvulsant used to treat chronic pain

Fig. 44. Clinical photograph, Scoliosis, 1931 ***
Figure 1.
ERRATA

p. 3, line 25: for plan, read pain
p. 3, line 39: for joy, read job

Figure 2.
Figures 3, 4, and 5.
Figures 6, 7, 8, and 9.
Figures 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14.
Figures 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, and 21.
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Figures 26, 27, and 28.
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