

A Juried Exhibition

of Works by Artists

Whose Lives Have Been

Touched by Cancer



CONFRONTING CANCER
Through Art



June 22 through

August 25, 1996

Arthur Ross Gallery

University of Pennsylvania

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Sponsored by

University of Pennsylvania

CANCER CENTER

University of Pennsylvania Medical Center

In the struggle against cancer, art is a tool of survival. For the artists in this exhibition, art-making is a response to a wide array of emotions. As they describe it, their art "shouts what I cannot say aloud," "releases what I was feeling," or "blocks out the pain and anger." It expresses feelings ranging from fear, pain and rage to hope, acceptance and peace. Almost invariably, confronting cancer through art is therapeutic, combatting a sense of helplessness in the face of frightening and overwhelming forces; affirmation as opposed to victimization. Creative expression and the will to live become intertwined.

In many of the images in the show, the body is the protagonist. Disfigurement and deterioration symbolize not only the physical, but also the psychic toll of the disease. At the same time, they contrast with the coping powers of an inner strength and spirit.

Certain images recur. One is the nude female body marked by mastectomy. Taking their rightful and perhaps subversive place in the history of the nude female in art, these depictions challenge the objectifying ideals of feminine beauty. These honest, sometimes harrowing, but ultimately heartening images of women who have lost a breast force the viewer to face the traditional roles that physical appearance and the concepts of motherhood, procreation and nurturing play in establishing a woman's identity. "Loss" is not hidden: the viewer, possibly made uncomfortable by such direct imagery, is compelled to share, at least on some level, not only the tribulations, but also the triumphs of the breast cancer survivor.

In many of the forthright images in the show, the "scars" left by cancer are transformed into badges of honor and courage. Recalling the decoration of the body in many cultures — often signaling rites of passage, imbuing warriors with special powers or recording bravery — the body here becomes an esthetic surface marked and altered by malady: scars, incisions, tattoos, dyes, hairless heads and frail bodies. In particular, hair loss is emblematic for both sexes, hair being a symbol of beauty, youth, potency, and sexuality.

Many of the artists confront their own cancer; others deal with the illness of loved ones, relatives, friends or patients. For some, cancer encouraged collaborative work, mirroring how the disease brought them closer together. Some pieces are loving memorials to those who have died; others are moving celebrations of survival. Many function as legacies designed to outlive those who made them and those who are the subjects of the work.

Like cave painters who believed that magical powers issued from image-making, several artists think of their work as talismanic. Suzanne Pitak Davis' angels are amulets for warding off disease. Kevin Kostelnik's shield provides protection from the enemy: cancer. Christiane Corbat, in casting the body of a woman with cancer, imagines it as a healing process through the laying on of hands.

"Cancer teaches you about life," remarks Lenore Malen, whose piece *Maze*, part of her *Games of Disquiet* series, shows how coping with cancer brings the unfathomable mysteries of existence into painfully sharp relief. In the end, all these esthetic confrontations with cancer open our eyes to the preciousness of life. From this realization comes work of great dignity, courage, poignancy, and inspiration.

Gerald Silk, PhD
Curator

Confronting Cancer Through Art



At the University of Pennsylvania Cancer Center, we understand the profound impact that a diagnosis of cancer has for patients, their family members and friends. Over the past 25 years, we have been privileged to know many people whose courage and strength have inspired us. And we have learned that it takes more than the best medical care to battle this disease. As the body needs healing, so, too, does the spirit.

That's why we're proud to sponsor *Confronting Cancer Through Art*. This extraordinary exhibition gives vision and voice to the experiences of all those who have confronted cancer.

We are grateful to the Arthur Ross Gallery for their collaboration in bringing these works to the public. And we thank the artists for their vision, talent, and willingness to share their stories with us all.

John H. Glick, MD
Director
University of Pennsylvania Cancer Center

The Arthur Ross Gallery seeks to involve disciplines from all over the university in art and exhibition. Our search for a project that might relate the art of medicine to artistic creativity, together with the vision of the University of Pennsylvania Cancer Center, is responsible for this exhibition by and for people whose lives have been touched by cancer.

An invited jury composed of art historian Gerald Silk, artist Becky Young, and curator Judith Tannenbaum, associate director of the Institute for Contemporary Art, reviewed more than 300 entries from 125 artists. The show expanded into a second exhibition space; the production of a multi-media component permitted the inclusion of other artists and works.

Until a few decades ago, the illness could barely be mentioned in the family let alone shared with outsiders. That is no longer the case. In expressing feelings that profoundly affect us as human beings, the works transcend particular suffering to speak to universal experience. They express a full range of emotions and responses: anger and rage, courage and endurance, sorrow and resignation, love and sympathy. Some cast an unflinching eye on the interior world of cancer and its effect on the human body. Others suggest a sharpened awareness of and appreciation for the outside world. All show the importance of the creative process in coming to some sort of terms with disease.

The artists have our admiration and thanks for agreeing to describe, as well as to show, the important role of their art in facing adversity. Through their works and their words they touch us directly, whether or not our own lives have been touched by cancer.

Dilys Pegler Winegrad, PhD
Director/Curator,
Arthur Ross Gallery

GAIL SKUDERA

Potsdam, New York

Golden Slippers

from the *Mother Rose* series, one of ten
photo transfer, paper, fabric, watercolor:
woven

15 1/2 x 11 inches

1995

Catalog No. 50A

Also included in the exhibition:

Sterling Silver

from the *Mother Rose* series, one of ten
photo transfer, paper, fabric, watercolor:
woven

15 1/2 x 11 inches

1995

Catalog No. 50B



In 1990, cancer became a catalyst for change in my family when my mother was diagnosed with an advanced endometrial tumor. Watching her struggle to maintain the consistency of her life against the inevitable force of her cancer was, for me, a difficult and unforgettable passage. In the aftermath of her death, I began to make paintings of my mother as a child, as a young woman, and as an older woman, when she was ill. These reconstructed paintings/phototransfers/weavings not only helped me to deal with my grief, but they are also a tribute to her memory and a reminder of what there is both to lose and to cherish.

