

Invited Editorial

Art in the time of disease

It is well-known in western art history that the Dutch mastered the style of vanitas portraiture - vanitas essentially standing for the symbolic still-life paintings that were meant to signify brevity of life, a certainty of death and decay associated with anything beautiful. Seventeenth century anatomist Dr. Frederick Ruysch, also known as the “artist of death”, was known for his paintings and etchings that blurred the lines between clinical scientific documentation and artistic portrayal of the body.^[1] His drawings [Figures 1 and 2] depict in detail the absurd theatricality and drama that the element of disease and death bring to human life; be it through dancing cadavers with fetal puppets or crying skeletons and infant skulls or preserved organs that come alive inside embalming jars.

Rembrandt's famous *Bathsheba at her bath* (1654) [Figure 3] has been regarded as a study in symptoms of breast cancer since the 1980s, after two Australian surgeons had interpreted the blue mark on her breast as a lump.^[1] Story goes that the model died soon after, but there is no concrete factual data on the cause of death being breast cancer. The painting can be then upheld by the scientific world as a forensic subject of investigation, or instead turn into a curious image with possibilities. Perhaps what really comes forth through this painting is the character of Bathsheba who is made to look vulnerable yet poised in this portrait, with an imperfection presented as is through the image. As the author Gertrude Stein says, “Really in everybody's heart there is a feeling of annoyance at the inevitable existence of an oil painting in relation to what it has painted people, objects and landscapes. An oil painting is an oil painting. One might say almost all oil painters spend their life in trying to get away from this inevitability.”^[2]

The intimation of imminent disease and death in art has been the subject of many Western Renaissance paintings where morality played a major role in the subjects of the masterpieces especially commissioned by the clergy. Man was the center of the universe, guided by the Cartesian way of thinking. Thus, the body came into question often as a subordinate, a receptacle, a sight of redemption, penitence and punishment. Disease would then become the symbol of this

redemptive philosophy. If a man has sinned, he shall repent through sickness and death. One could call equivalent to today's instances of cancer in the world, epidemic diseases such as plague, smallpox, and so on in the medieval centuries, concerned with a social breakdown of hygiene and health. For instance, in Indo-Buddhist mythology, Hariti, who was an ogress who devoured children (alluding to an epidemic of smallpox in the region), is known to have been reformed by Lord Buddha into a goddess and caretaker of children from disease and death.

Some paintings of Rubens (1577-1640), the Flemish Baroque painter whose paintings were known for their hyper-realistic details, movement and sensuality have been subject of researchers for diagnosing breast cancer. Photography had not been yet invented at the time and hence painting served also as a medium to document the time and people. Medical researchers were able to trace symptoms and development of breast cancer in one of the models through the series of three paintings - “*The three graces*”, “*Diana and her nymphs pursued by satires*” and “*Orpheus and Euridice*”. In “*The three graces*” [Figure 4], one can see that the model on the right has an open ulcer with reddening of the skin, nipple retraction, reduction of breast volume as well as axillar lymph nodes which is a visual aspect of a locally advanced breast cancer.^[3]

In art, the question of disease has been often connected to larger humanitarian crises, war and its ravages, famine, hunger, madness. The symbolic weight of a bodily ailment has been often used to express concern about historical aporias. There was a vast amount of literature and art produced after the world wars that has a focused preoccupation with this notion of ‘dis’ease that spread in the society; a humanitarian tumor had been diagnosed, which could be overcome only through creative zeal. Here again, the body was used and adopted to express the larger condition of a postwar society grappling with ravage, trauma, and memory. The German expressionists were one such group of artists and thinkers such as Otto Dix, Georg Grosz, Edvard Munch, Gustav Klimt whose works were saturated with exaggerated expressions, deformed faces, and grotesque colors, presenting almost

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caricatures of subjects around them, in a way emphasizing the warped nature of society in postwar Germany. These include Munch's famous series "The Scream" (1893), the war drawings^[4] of Otto Dix and the street scenes of Klimt among others. The drawings and woodcut prints of the artist and illustrator Chittoprasad (1915-1978) during the Bengal famine carried a marked influence of this expressionist style and to this day remain one of the most remarkable documents of the catastrophe.

Over time, there has been a reversal of the role of disease and death. Present instances of art have dealt with the subject of disease in strong political terms of identity, gender, and social consciousness. Contemporary artists like Mithu Sen who is known for her delicately presented yet explicitly visceral works have brought into the very center of creative expression the presence of the body in all its anatomical and sexual aspects as a force to reckon with. In a recent exhibition in Mumbai titled "Aesthetic Bind: The subject of Death" (2013), curator Geeta Kapur dedicated the show to the tenth anniversary of the death

of acclaimed artist of the 70's and 80's, Bhupen Khakhar, whose life was cut short by cancer. A self-taught artist, Khakhar was encouraged by peers such as Gulammohammed Sheikh and went on to tackle issues of gender, his own homosexuality as well as his later imminent death by disease through his paintings. As death came rapidly to Khakhar, he addressed it in every which way- with rage, with pleas for compassion, with unconcealed terror. What he also confirmed is that disease ignites desire.^[7]

Iranian actress and artist Mania Akbari, who was diagnosed with breast cancer, directed the film *10+2* that depicted her struggle with the disease, which caused her to lose her breasts. Her mutilated and marked body was the center of many following works among which were a photographic series titled *Devastation* (2008) and the video project "In my country men do have breasts" through which she tries to draw lines in between her personal catastrophe and the sociopolitical situation in Iran, Israel, and the war in the Middle East. The video captures the essence of prosthetic memory in a landscape of war and in the landscape of a damaged body. In mid-90's,



Figure 1: Van Fredrik Ruysch. *Alle de ontleed - geneses - en heelkindige werken. Vol. 3. Amsterdam, 1744.* Etching with engraving, Frederick Ruysch.^[5]

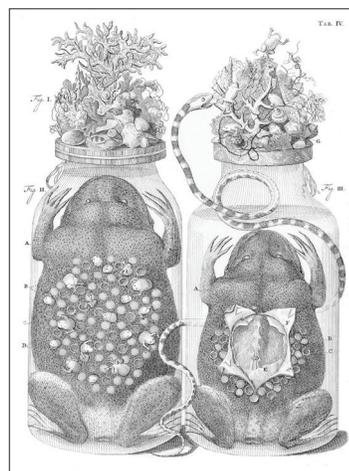


Figure 2: One of Ruysch's "embalming jars", from his *Thesaurus animalium primus* (1710), Frederick Ruysch^[8]



Figure 3: *Bathsheba at her bath* (1654), Rembrandt.^[6]



Figure 4: *The three graces* (c.1635), Rubens

artist/model Matuschka's photograph, *Beauty out of Damage*^[9] became one of the most widely published pictures in the world. The image of the model's self-portrait postmastectomy is a resilient presence of the scarred body's persistent beauty. This image may have done to the world of medical awareness what Manet's *Olympia* (1863) did as an avant-garde nude who for the first-time in art history is depicted with an unflinching stare back at her audience, thus questioning their gaze upon her and also breaking away from the neo-classical tradition up until then of painting nudes as purely aesthetically pleasing docile subjects.

French philosopher Jean Luc Nancy, proposes that the body comes with a two-fold failure - a failure to speak about the body and a failure to keep silent about it - the only possible entry being an access of madness.^[10] Perhaps the fact that so many artists try to understand and create in illness through self-portraiture and look at a projection of the world through their ailing bodies is one-way of managing this two-fold failure. Nancy himself had to take a break from his active career when he became gravely ill at the end of the 80's and was forced to undergo a heart transplant from which his recovery was inhibited by a long-term fight with cancer, but then he returned and wrote from this experience. The madness of the body isn't a crisis, he says, it is "an endlessly untied and distended place-taking, an offering of place." He goes on to talk about the ravaged body on multiple symbolic levels, hinting at a mad landscape, a situation of disease where a new "place" is possible only through dislocation, mutilation, and disembodiment.

A cancerous tumor is an unwanted body lodged inside a wanted body, a body whose certitude is shattered. It is presence of an external agent of decay suddenly taking over the internal working of the human being, trying to hijack its timeline, trying to conquer it. If one were to see the disease as a condition that returns the body back to its primordial condition, then one can indeed see it also as a site of potential,^[11] which unfortunately ends up being misplaced and without direction. The potential to re-build and grow exists in every point of origin, and these are only a few of the many instances in art that demonstrate that this primordial

condition that cancer takes one back to, is also a renewed opportunity to perceive, understand and create with fresh rigor. It is as much a psychological process as it is a physical process, the psyche and the physical self-coming together in this one act of coming to terms with and healing out of cancer. Much like forced meditation, like a crash course in recollection, memory building, and reflecting, much like a paused moment for one to recognize that one has just had an experience.

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