

Exhibition

Illness through the eye of the artist



Image courtesy of Cecily Brennan

Living/Loss The Experience of Illness in Art
 Lewis Glucksman Gallery,
 University College Cork, Cork,
 Ireland, until March 10, 2013
<http://www.glucksman.org>

"The moment of death is as slight as all those other moments, just one more electrical impulse fading. Yet, that one moment was the difference between all and nothingness, between hope and hopelessness...Time now is not measured by change, for the dead remain fixed and unchanging. Is this the meaning of eternity?" These are poignant words about grief and a perspicacious question to ponder. But the writer, Mary Rose O'Neill, is also an artist and when she deserts words for visual expression she adds another dimension to communication that allows her to probe in a more evocative way the profundity of grief and existence. *Lost at Sea* is a twelve panel composition, which emanates a sense of a haunting blueness, and depicts items a mother would like to see accompany a recently departed youth on his journey into the ever after— toys, eating utensils, a cup and saucer, sweets, a map. Egyptian mythology is captured here with expressive beauty and serves, one suspects, as a cathartic exegesis for the artist but it gives also voyeuristic solace for us, the viewers, who can now share, to some degree at least, the pain of loss.

This is but one example of what the exhibition *Living/Loss: The Experience of Illness in Art* achieves at Cork's Lewis Glucksman Gallery. As a physician Fergus Shanahan, who conceived the exhibition with its curator Fiona Kearney, remarks: "Science gives us a way of thinking about disease, but the arts and humanities provide insight, context, and understanding of what

"...it forces reappraisal of the terms in which we consider the human condition"

it means to be ill." That insight is evident in a series of harrowing works by Jo Spence, in which she focuses her camera on herself in a graphic visual record from the early cancerous lesion in her breast to the emaciation of her last days. Apart from the relentless progression of disease these photographs tell another story. Was the classic appearance of *peau d'orange* on the cancerous breast evidence that surgical treatment had been declined as she determined to control her destiny and not surrender her body or any part of it? One photograph shows the diseased breast with the words

"Property of Jo Spence?" emblazoned on it. Is her rage directed at the medical profession or at the cruelty of life that had meted this fate to her?

A more detached and objective response to illness can be seen in the works by Cecily Brennan, who portrays eczema and psoriasis in a disturbing series of paintings and a sculpture cast in stainless steel. *Bandaged Heart* invites the observer to reach out and undo the bandage that symbolises life's extinction and yet offers a ready means to restart the still organ. Perhaps this is the artist's tribute to the advances of modern cardiology with a caveat that there is a limit to life no matter what?

In the waiting room, where so many patients are destined to sit often in fear of news to be delivered, Bobby Baker's diary of paintings offers hope as she charts her progress to cure with a "borderline personality disorder". A series of chromogenic prints by Thomas Struth has a practical application that many hospitals could do well to emulate in that the eye of the patient in bed is drawn to a restful and engaging landscape and that of the visitor to prints of wild flowers. Damien Hirst's series *The Last Supper* creates a biblical allusion where the breaking of bread is replaced by the consumption of drugs, most of which are for terminal illness.

Comments from a board festooned with notes from visitors endorse the exhibition's success. "As a medic it was lovely to see illness from the patient's point of view"—surely encouragement for more interaction between art and medicine. "What does it all mean? Is there hope for us?" a response signed by "nine clapped-out pensioners from Dublin" epitomises what this exhibition does to the viewer: it forces reappraisal of the terms in which we consider the human condition.

Eoin O'Brien
 eobrien@iol.ie



Image courtesy of Terry Dennett

Illness Face by Jo Spence/Terry Dennett