A METHODOLOGY OF DEVELOPING
A SERIES OF PAINTINGS THAT
ILLUSTRATES SUFFERING’ WHILE EACH SUBJECT IS BATTLING CANCER:
A CREATIVE PROJECT
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER’S IN VISUAL ART
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Battling Cancer in Painting

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Acknowledgement

I would like to extend my deepest sympathy to the families of each cancer victim I chose as my subject for this creative project. Thank you for your understanding and patience in helping me collect information and insight into their individual stories. I hope that I preserved their dignity and their honor. They were all very courageous in their battle with cancer.

I would also like to thank all my professors in preparing me for higher education in the pursuit of a Master of Arts degree in the College of Visual Art at Ball State University.

A special thanks to my family, my mother who encouraged me to develop my talents, my children, Molly and Michael, for their patience during my absence from their lives, and my wife Cheryl for believing in me and pushing me forward.

Harold W. Mathias
Statement of the Problem

Can a painted portrait portray the visible destruction experienced by a person who is battling cancer? Surely artists have tried every approach to painting portraits, from Archimbaldo’s fruits and vegetables to Chuck Close’s gridded giants. My approach to painting portraits is not merely to record a person historically, but to use the human face as a tool to make an interesting painting that illustrates suffering.

My focus here is to also draw attention to the terminal patients at the final stages of the disease. I have an emotional connection to many of my subjects but I’m attracted to their appearance as well. I have incorporated a flash of recognition in each face of its destructive metamorphosis.

I’ve decided to paint people with cancer because of the shocking number of people who have died that I personally know. As I witnessed my mother’s nine month battle with cancer, I didn’t expect to be inspired artistically. Despite criticism, I knew I must record her final days in a painting. My first attempt to paint her was the day after her funeral in a traditional portrait. The painting wasn’t real. It was created from a family photograph that showed no emotional interest.

Cancer does not discriminate; there are many celebrities who have also died of this disease. The celebrities considered as subjects impacted my childhood and project an interesting image. It is shocking how the list continues to grow. Although cancer deaths have shown a decline in recent years, because of new discoveries in prevention, early detection, and treatment, it is still one of the leading causes of death in the United States. A recent report from the American Cancer Society projects an estimated 562,340 Americans will die from cancer in 2009.
By completing this series of paintings, I hope to raise awareness of the effects of cancer through my own style of painting. Three major painters, Lucian Freud, Chuck Close, and Jenny Saville, have influenced me with their subject matter, and painting techniques.

It is my belief that each of us can make a huge difference by using our skills and talent in the continuation of battling cancer. People have used a multitude of ways to raise awareness and funds; however, my involvement is just a minute piece of the puzzle. I hope I may impact others who share the same experiences with this terrible disease.
In the recent past, there have been many programs that raise awareness of cancer. A great example is the Livestrong wristband developed by the Nike Corporation and Armstrong Foundation, founded by cyclist and cancer survivor Lance Armstrong. The idea was to raise awareness and $25.1 million for the foundation in 2004. It gained worldwide popularity which has exceeded its goal and over 70 million of the yellow wristbands have been sold at one dollar each. [5]

Another approach to cancer awareness was the pink ribbon. Alexander Penny, editor-in-chief of Self, a health magazine, and Evelyn Lauder, senior vice president at Estee Lauder, came up with the idea to create a symbol for breast cancer. The pink ribbon caught on internationally and the color pink is used in numerous products supporting cancer awareness. [6]

Many programs, like these, are internationally recognized with the help of celebrities and corporate support, but throughout the world individuals are doing their part to just simply raise awareness of cancer. A former art student, Cordula Volkening, has reignited her passion with painting after being diagnosed with terminal brain cancer. The 52 year old artist claims that painting now is more of an urgent, spontaneous process than an intellectual pursuit. Her powerful images are full of color and spontaneity. There are winged characters flying into the beyond, hugging, crying and some laughing. She says her painting style is shaped by one thing: “I have nothing to lose.” [13]
The idea for my project derived from stories and links like Volkening’s. I had no intention of raising large funds or international fame. To pull off the idea in painting, Battling Cancer, I challenged myself to developing a technique that would give the viewer a feeling of suffering without compromising the dignity of the victim. Still, I wanted to make an interesting painting.

My most influential artist is Chuck Close because of his ability to force the viewer into the micro world of his paintings and back out to the macro world. Close creates an optical illusion in painting. His eight foot canvases viewed from a distance are recognizable as a face but as you walk closer, the form breaks down into miniature abstractions. [7]

Jenny Saville paints with a remarkable use of color when painting flesh. Her thin layers of transparent colors are like layers of skin. [9] With Lucian Freud, I admire his ability to sculpt, in paint, each surface plane of the face. His later portraits have a three-dimensional quality to them.

Like Close, I paint from photographs, which is time friendly. A live sitter may serve several hours in the studio. While Close chooses his artist friends, my subjects are deceased. I try to find images of my subject taken from the last days of their lives. I have a pre-conceived image in my head before I begin collecting photos. The real trick is to manipulate those images into the image I am happy with.

Close chooses his artist subjects as much for his regard for their work as for their appearances. He tried painting random subjects but didn’t like to paint anyone who was truly unknown to him. [7] To paint from a two-dimensional reference, the artist must have an understanding of the whole subject.

When painting a portrait I try to understand its three-dimensional form. Former knowledge of the human anatomy and elements of art all merge together like a puzzle.
Close breaks his photograph down into a grid pattern then transforms a larger grid onto his canvas. This allows him to enlarge the scale of his subject while breaking it down into small pieces. He has a unique ability to visualize each color and value, like pixels in a television screen.

One might think that painting from a grid would be a simple task, but I haven’t seen any work that resembles Close’s paintings. I would consider him a color expert to say the least. His remarkable ability to zoom in and out of a painting without moving back is unexplainable.

Jenny Saville’s use of color in her large portraits of trauma victims, obese women, and slaughtered pigs is equally impressive. Saville, who also paints from photographs, focuses on painting flesh. Working in many transparent layers, she produces images that are often compared to Lucian Freud and Francis Bacon paintings. There is beauty within her grotesque images. [10]

Like the work of Close, Saville draws the viewer into the painting. Her paintings do not allow a disinterested glance. Once you look, you’re hooked. It is like entering a special visual language. When you are up close to one of her paintings it seems childlike, you are surrounded by blurred marks and drips but at a distance, a face emerges.

The color palate of Lucian Freud resembles that of Close’s. It is their use of intense colors that merge with lighter pastels that combine in a fusion of cool and warm colors. While Freud identifies each surface plane with individual brushstrokes, Close creates tiles of doughnut and hotdog shapes to form the face in the dark and light areas.

Freud paints the skin like I have never seen. I am particularly drawn to his 1985 self-portrait where the face seems to appear in three-dimensional form. Freud also paints large nude women like Saville.
His subjects are pale skinned with expose veins, particularly in a woman’s breast. [11]

His basic pigment of flesh is Cremnitz white, a heavy pigment that contains twice as much lead oxide as flake white and less oil which gives the painting a grainy look.

From close-up, Freud’s paintings look like constructed layered frescos thick with surface. When light hits the painting surface the images look round as in a high relief. The sculptural textured quality of his painting style is what I most admire. I create texture by manipulating the surface of the canvas by gluing patches of canvas in a grid. Saville also glued torn bandage material to the surface of her paintings to create texture.
Description of Artwork

As Chuck Close uses a grid system for enlarging and transforming a photograph into an eight foot painting, my canvas surface is manipulated in a grid pattern, not to enlarge the image but to direct the viewer into parts of the painting rather than viewing the whole. To prepare the surface, I sometimes glue squares or strips of torn canvas in a pattern. This process adds a rough texture and produces drama. Another method is to apply a heavy coat of gesso with a large pallete knife to make each section less organized. It is exciting to me when I apply paint to a heavily textured surface as the raised areas catch a color, leaving a layer of color underneath.

After studying the form of my subject, I start on the eyes and work around that area. The eyes are the most captivating part of the painting and become a natural focal point. A study of the eye can reveal emotion or the health of the victim. Some patients have redness around the eyelids, probably from cancer treatments. The white in the eye is somewhat yellowed and the skin a neutral gray tone. As the skin shrouds over the bone structure of the face, it opens deep folds over the skeleton that reflect colors of its surroundings. I like to enhance the darker hues to give the painting a more intense color palette in contrast with the neutral lights.

For my subject, I prefer a three-quarter turn which is much more interesting than a frontal or side view. I like how the eyes look back across the face. It seems to give the portrait a better sense of depth.
Canvas sizes that I work with are no smaller than 30”x40” and no larger than 60”x72”. I try to zoom in on the face and the contour of the head while eliminating any detail in the background. Each image is slightly larger than life-size.

Working from a series of photographs has its challenges. I’m not painting a subject who is alive. I try to construct an image from a collection of references that I can identify a three-dimensional form, like a sculptor would.

It is not my intention to just paint sick people, but to reveal, in painting, something beautiful in something grotesque. Saville accomplished this by painting morbidly obese women and trauma patients. It is her use of color and composition within the elements of art that make a beautiful painting.

The following seven paintings are only a small number of people I wanted to select for this series. Some friends and family members didn’t want their loved ones depicted in this way. I feel that art should be created from the artist’s interpretation, however I respected their wishes.
Don Knotts was one of my favorite childhood heroes. His portrayal of the shaky deputy, “Barney Fife”, on the 1960’s television sitcom, *The Andy Griffith Show*, made him an iconic figure. Knotts was born in Elwood, Indiana but graduated from Morgantown High School in Queen Anne’s County, Maryland. He then enlisted into the United States Army, where he entertained troops.

Knotts is still my favorite actor. I was devastated when I heard that he passed away. I always admired his character and was interested in his physical image. I’ve painted Knotts several times, with and without his deputy uniform. I wanted him to appear as if he were ill but improving. After treatment he told his doctors he felt great but months later died in his home.

He has a bit of a smile and a gleam in his eyes, looking sharp in his jacket and tie. The tone of his flesh mimics his health. Some times he is pictured in a bow tie but I thought it looked too much like the characters he played, the shaky nervous type. I wanted to show his real side to give the viewer just a hint of his identity.
This painting has more Lucian influence, from my attempt to identify its surface planes. In Freud’s 1985 self portrait entitled, Reflection, each section of the face is distinctly divided from the next. Each color change looks like he sliced it with a single brushstroke.
Farrah Fawcett 1947-2009

Famous for her part in a 1970’s television series, Charlie’s Angels, Farrah Fawcett’s hairstyle, emulated by millions of young women, made her a pop icon and sex symbol and motivated me to choose her for a subject.

Growing up in Corpus Christi, Texas, Fawcett attended the University of Texas at Austin to study art. She appeared in a photo of “The Ten Most Beautiful Co-eds” from the university, which ran in Cashbox magazine. A Hollywood publicist saw the photo, called Fawcett and urged her to come to Los Angeles in 1969 during her junior year. Fawcett’s image broke poster sales in the 1980’s and she earned multiple Golden Globe and Emmy Award nominatons. I was inspired by her documentary, A Wing and a Prayer: Farrah’s Fight for Life, in which she showed grace and courage during the recording of her battle with colon cancer. [4]

She wanted her viewers to see the hidden side of cancer that is often kept private. Once a glamorous actress, she was reduced to a skeletal figure with a thinly layered shroud of skin. I portrayed her as she was in her last living days but added a touch of glamour. The painting became somewhat surreal in the attempt to cover up the cancer as the suffering seemed to appear all the more.
In this painting I pushed for a look of death as far as I could while painting her alive. It is the most gruesome of all paintings in this series. The shadows are shades of green and her flesh is pale but her lips and around her eyes are red as if she is hanging on to the last minutes of her life.
My uncle Jerry was a great man. He married my dad’s sister, Shirley who died of cancer only nine years after Jerry. He lived and worked in Marion, Indiana all his life. Although he worked as an electrician, he was a craftsman and an artist in many ways. When I was a kid I believed he could build anything. An old church was being demolished down the street from his house and Jerry asked if he could purchase its winding oak staircase. He disassembled, stripped, refinshed, and reconstructed it in his own home.

Jerry loved making miniatures. Every Christmas he assembled a village in his dining room that spanned around three walls. Everything to scale, it was like visiting something in a museum. He also built bicycles and motorized vehicles for parade clowns. He loved working with his hands as he enjoyed sharing his creations with people.
He was a creative thinker. On the wall of his workshop hung a clock salvaged from an old schoolhouse. When I asked him how he could possibly tell time on it because it was missing a hand, he simply replied, “When I glance at the clock it reminds me to always know where my hands are.” He was referring to all the dangerous tools he worked with.

I used the theme of battling cancer in this creative project and it is most obvious in the portrait of Jerry. My color palette consists of battleship grays, olive drab greens, and yellow ochre. I gave particular attention to his eyes. Most subjects seemed to have drooping eye lids or at least the upper incline downward. Jerry’s eyes are bulging as if he had no eyelids, probably from the intense pain or high doses of morphine.

Jerry’s attention to detail and craftsmanship inspired me to always do my best work. I symbolized that in painting his haircut. Although I was a barber for 20 years working in the family business, he claimed I could never cut a perfect flattop like his longtime personal friend and barber, Vick McKee. It always looked perfect.
Mr. Rogers was born and lived southeast of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He is best known for the children’s program, *Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood*, which aired in the United State from 1968-2001. He studied at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, in 1946. He received a Bachelor’s degree in music at Rollin’s College in Winter Park, Florida in 1951. In 1963, Rogers graduated from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and was granted 40 honorary degrees throughout his life. Rogers studied at the University of Pittsburgh, Graduate School of Child Development.

For almost thirty years he touched the lives of children all over the globe with his kind demeanor. He took an active role in his television program by writing songs, constructing puppets, and creating his neighborhood of make-believe. He was concerned that children learn to love themselves and others and encouraged parents to take an active role in teaching their children.
I became a fan when my children were small as we watched Mr. Rogers together but I really admired him after reading the book, *The Simple Faith of Mr. Rogers*, by Amy Hollingsworth. He was an advocate for teaching art and music in early childhood development.

Rogers was 81 when he died and in pretty good health before diagnosed with stomach cancer. He swam daily, maintained a healthy diet, and never drank alcohol or smoked. This portrait of him is probably the most recognizable subject that I’ve chosen because of his bright red sweater. I chose a complementary color, green, in his skin tone to symbolize his red-green color blindness. [2]

Because he died so soon after being diagnosed, he escaped the effects of cancer treatment; however, there were obvious signs of suffering and drastic weight loss. Like most of my portraits, I drew attention to the eyes but added glasses which gave me the opportunity to place a strong highlight on one lens. With the contrast of the dark frame of the glasses, it made an even stronger focal point in the area of the eyes. This painting is probably my favorite in this series because of its color palette.

I tried to give his face a stronger sense of depth by reducing focus on anything that appears further back. The hair and ears are softened and blurred, even somewhat blended into the background. The eyes, nose, and mouth are in focus, drawing the area forward to create a foreground, middle ground, and background, as you might see in a landscape.
Actor, dancer, singer, songwriter Patrick Swayze was born in Houston, Texas. He studied gymnastics at San Jacinto College for two years. In 1972 he moved to New York City and completed his dance training at the Harkness Ballet and Joffrey Ballet schools. He was best known for his role as a dance instructor in the film, *Dirty Dancing*, which achieved international success in video sales. Swayze was also awarded a Golden Globe Award nomination and co-wrote and sang one of the songs on the soundtrack of the movie. [1]

I selected Swayze mostly for his image. Although he died at only 57, his appearance was that of a much older man. My color palette was simple, almost monochromatic. The small hint of recognition was interesting enough in this painting. I want the viewer to become surprised after reading his name in the title.

Besides the pre-arranged canvas of gridded squares, I applied texture with a grooved palette knife to give the painting a sculptural appearance. I don’t texture all of my canvases. Texture just seems to be another element of art that conveys feeling.
From his deteriorating image, Swayze’s cheeks and jaw are more pronounced. Swayze lost considerable weight in his face, which made his ears and forehead seem huge. I painted them smaller than they actually appeared trying not to draw further attention to that area of the face.
Gene Linn held the mayor seat for over thirty years in Gas City, Indiana where I grew up. Linn was a large man, athletic and kind. He had a deep concern for the little person. I lived on the poor side of town and I remember him having a conversation with my dad about a bad sidewalk in front of our house that needed repaired. One of the elderly neighbors apparently fell on a raised section. It was fixed the next day.

He always smoked a pipe which looked like part of his face. Linn was loved and admired by Gas City citizens. Even people who disagreed with him seemed to have a respect for him as mayor. He was a man of good character and integrity.

As a young artist, he encouraged me to develop my talents and pursue my dreams. I was commissioned by him and the town to paint a mural in their new city hall building in 1997. He also referred me for other commissions.
Linn’s painting measures 5’x6’. I attempted a Freud approach to painting his skin. The grainy texture of the white oil paint was a challenge but I quickly caught on. With less oil, the paint would collect onto the brush quickly. I added to the paint a product called “Galkyd,” a medium to speed the drying time. It seemed to smooth out the painting surface and still maintain a gritty texture.

My portrayal of Linn was less grotesque than the rest. His wife, Janice, reported that you might not have known that he had cancer except in his eyes. After she viewed the painting she said I captured the pain in his eyes.
Jackie Mathias (Mom) 1938-2003

My Mother died at the age of 64, pretty young by today’s standards. She was raised in Marion, Indiana and attended Marion High School. Mom was the second of five girls. She married my dad when he returned from the Korean War in 1951, and lived a life dedicated to raising her children. The four of us, (a sister and two brothers), grew up in a nurturing, safe and creative environment. Because she didn’t work outside the home, we had total access to her.

It was a difficult time for her when we left home and started our own lives. My oldest brother left for Pennsylvania, my sister married, my younger brother enlisted into the United States Air Force, and then I married completing the empty nest. Mom’s whole personality changed. About the same year, the factory where my dad worked, for over twenty years, closed. She then slipped into a depressed state.

Eventually grandchildren came along and slowly she became herself again but health problems were soon to follow. She had a combination of illnesses that puzzled doctors.
By looking back, they realized that her symptoms were early stages of cancer related problems. When she was finally diagnosed with the disease, it was difficult to treat because of a rare skin disease called dermatomyositis, a disease that attacks the muscles. She had to gradually reduce her medication treatment from the skin disease, (which was caused by cancer), before treatment for cancer could be administered.

I was completely ignorant to what cancer was all about. My sister gained knowledge of the disease, after the loss of her mother-in-law to bone cancer. She urged me to recognize the signs and stages.

This painting of my mother represents the “hell” we went through for the nine months of the loosing battle she fought. At first glance the portrait looks like a war victim in a concentration camp. As the viewer studies the painting, and the title, (Cancer), they may begin to recognize signs, especially if they had similar experiences.

I was inspired to do this painting when I sat in a waiting area of the hospital as mom waited treatment. Other patients entered the room, most of them in wheelchairs, absent of hair, thin and frail with the same gray skin tone. All I could do was observe in shock, the effects of what this disease is doing to people.

In the portrait of my mother, the square tiles remind me of the cold, sterilized environment of the hospital. I hope to draw the viewer into this painting to recognize the miniature abstractions in the boundary of each tile.

Mom’s cancer started as a lesion on her temple. She tried to hide it with her hair and a bandage. I don’t know why she didn’t seek a doctor’s opinion. I illustrated the spot on the canvas by applying gesso with a palette knife, then rubbing it away with sandpaper after it dried.
Painting over the surface left a void in the skin. The left side of her face illustrates living on the edge of death. When she started losing hair, she asked if I would cut it off for her. We cried and laughed. I placed a shadow of another face in hers as a symbol that she would live in our memories.

As I started to develop the idea for this creative project, I compiled a list of over 150 people who died of cancer that I knew and admired. Most of these were family and friends. I was shocked by the numbers and knew that the subject deserved attention. During this semester I also lost a childhood friend to the disease.

Although my primary reason for following through with the project was to draw awareness to cancer and its affects on its victims, I too have benefited. Over 100 people attended my art exhibition, many of which shared their stories with me of dealing with loved ones during their own battle with cancer.
On April 4, 1974 the Cincinnati Reds and Atlanta Braves played the season opener. Hank Aaron was expected to tie Babe Ruth’s all time home run record of 715. I was about fifteen years old when I was invited to the game by a friend and his dad, Paul. He told us something that day that would change the way I viewed the world.

Paul said, “O.K. boys, you are about to witness history. Open your eye and you minds and take in everything you see. You may not understand it yet but you might later in life.” When Aaron hit the home run, some were cheering and others protested. A black man just broke a white man’s record in a segregated world. He was right, I didn’t understand then but the image of that event is still there in vivid color.

While my mother lay dying of cancer, I spent quality time with her, watching television, talking or just studying her face as she slept. The whole experience was about to take my artwork into a tremendous leap forward. As sad as it was, I finally learned how to see, how to look. The whole experience provided for me a time to just sit and observe. I didn’t realize what an impact the event would have on my ability to do art work until I entered the graduate program at Ball State University’s art department.

It was there I studied artist Rene’ Magritte. When asked in an interview if watching his mother being pulled from a river, after committing suicide as her dress covered her face, had any influence on his art. The question made him furious; however, several of his painted subjects were faceless. After the experience with my mother’s death, I could understand such an emotional impact on ones artwork.
I recognized that I had skills, in drawing, by the first grade, when I received attention from classmates. It wasn’t long that I was referred as the class artist, which gave me a multitude of opportunities to perform my talents. Most of my teachers kept the creative projects I completed in their classes. My high school art teacher encouraged me to pursue art in college, however; my grades weren’t adequate. I was average at best. I struggled in school because of a severe case of myopia, (nearsightedness).

Although I struggled in high school, I always knew I would pursue an art career. At age 35, I had a double cornea transplant to restore my sight. I eventually gained confidence to enter college as an adult and earned an undergraduate degree at Indiana Wesleyan University in Marion, Indiana in1998. The next year, I began teaching high school art at Daleville, Indiana, just south of my home in Marion. After twelve years, I’ve enjoyed learning as much as teaching visual art.

I enjoyed teaching art as I was constantly exposed to new artists, techniques, and challenges. My favorite artists are, Arcimbaldo, Lucian Freud, Chuck Close, and Jenny Saville. Although I enjoy reading about other artists, these were the ones who would help shape and develop my style. Most of my paintings are portraits that are somewhat grotesque. Unlike Arcimboldo, who combines fruits, vegetables, and sticks, to produce his composite heads, my objects aren’t always pre-planned.

My passion for art is as strong now as it was when I was a child. Learning about the subject isn’t something I planned, at any given time in my life. It is just who I am and what I am. It has become a language in which I have an understanding for, a visual language.
Bibliography

7. Friedman, Martin. Close Reading: Chuck Close and the Artist Portrait.
Appendixes

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