

Expressing Life's Inexplicable Events Through Art

BY SUSAN PATRICIA COOPER, ATR-BC, LCAT



White Plains Hospital, Center for Cancer Care is a comprehensive, community-based outpatient cancer center located in White Plains, N.Y. In 2018, a part-time art therapist position was added to the cancer program's existing Integrative Services department. As the hired art therapist, I offered a range of activities through group and individual sessions in the cancer center's infusion suite, main conference room, and (a few times a week) main lobby. Initially, I supervised several volunteers and students, who assisted with organizing supplies, creating sample projects, and providing general support to the program.

Then, in March of 2020 with the emergence of the novel corona virus (SARS-CoV-2), the volunteer program was paused hospital-wide for the unforeseeable future. During this time, the cancer center restricted visits from family members and caregivers, who previously accompanied patients to their appointments. Suddenly, patients were required to visit the cancer center alone for treatment—while many were also experiencing prolonged isolation from their friends and family throughout their daily lives.

In response to these and other restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, the art therapy program at White Plains Hospital underwent several adaptations to continue offering therapeutic art making opportunities for both patients and caregivers. These adaptations included incorporating iPad painting for patients receiving infusions and the development of a yearly calendar for the cancer center, featuring and celebrating the

art and craft work of patients and families. These innovations allowed our patients to continue to be involved in a creative process that is adjunctive and complementary to their medical treatments.

How Art Therapy Can Help

In response to the difficulties that occur in life, art and other creative pursuits can act as tools to express what might not always be available in language. The arts offer us the ability to communicate what is important, give a voice to express our experiences, and provide solace in times of duress.

During the initial phase of the COVID-19

shutdown, many patients either returned to previous hobbies or started exploring ways to occupy their time when they were not able to socialize, travel, or go to the grocery store. I had ongoing discussions with patients around developing new interests or returning to previous hobbies to reduce stress and build an ongoing, relaxing experience that would provide respite and encourage self-care during this time.

While many of the events that occur in life are beyond our control, there are ways in which we can modify how we respond. My focus as a creative arts therapist is to emphasize an individual's strengths,



Seashells by Vincenzo

"I take walks in the morning to collect branches to carve and paint into walking sticks, and I create assemblages with seashells."



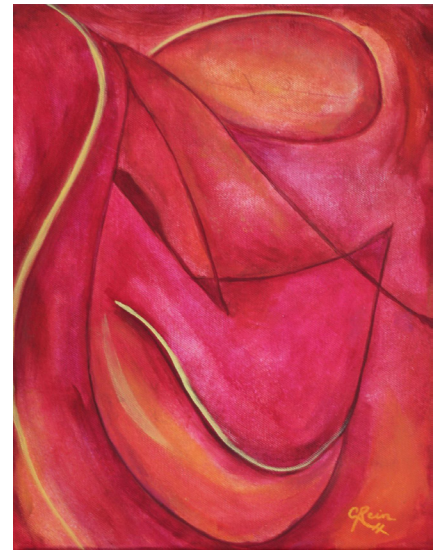
Rabbit Looking at a Butterfly by Lou

"I started painting while my wife was receiving treatment. It helped both of us to have something to focus on and talk about."



Campanula by Aurora

"These Campanula bloomed for the first time in my spring COVID-19 garden and filled me with hope."



Calm and Concern (left) and *Rise and Reach* (right) by Carmen

"Painting reduces stress for me. These pieces came through me trying to sleep and worrying and not worrying. That's where these two paintings come from. One is *Calm and Concern*, a dichotomy that is likely in all of us. The other is *Rise and Reach*, about moving on."

interests, abilities, and what is personally meaningful to them by engaging in purposeful activities. These activities can add meaning to life amid a serious illness and concurrent global pandemic.

White Plains Hospital's Annual Calendar

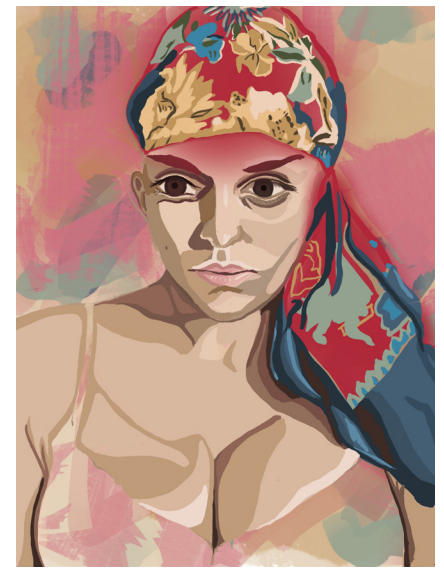
Titled "The Art of being Exceptional," this calendar is created using images submitted by patients, caregivers, and family members. The artwork is accompanied by statements and thoughts from the contributing artist about what inspired the project and/or image. Prior to the start of 2022, the calendar was disseminated throughout the hospital and cancer center and to staff and patients. To increase community involvement, the annual calendar was shared widely with extended family and others in the community.

I hope readers enjoy the featured artwork as much as our staff, patients, and community. The narratives shared from the contributing artists contain much that pertains to the human condition and helps explain why humans have created visual symbols (art) since the era of cave painting. The experience of making art can deepen the understanding of ourselves, our relation-



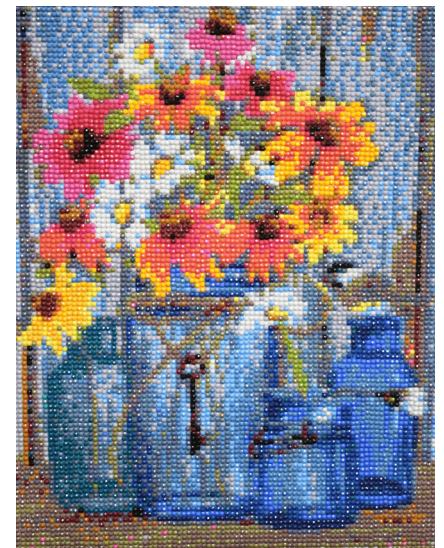
Magnolia by Carol

From the family: "Being included in this calendar meant so much to our mother. Her art inspired and supported her both through her illness and through COVID-19. She discovered she could still learn to grow and surprise herself, even later in her life and with all the losses that she'd experienced. She was so very proud of this newly discovered talent and so motivated to see what she was capable of and to share her gift with friends and family."




Digital iPad Self Portrait by Taylor
 "Creating art took away the pain and side effects I felt from chemo[therapy] and gave me something to look forward to."

Winter by Miquel
 "Paint is a very good medium for distraction...[from] your illness. You can imagine anything, a winter scene, a placid beach, or [an] abstract painting. You make an effort to forget your condition for a few hours and, at the end, you will see the results."



Still Life with Flowers by Barbara
 "Craftwork and using color in painting can put your mind at ease."

Dream Terrains by Miriam
 "I'm hoping to visit Ireland someday. I created this abstract landscape as a reminder of my dream and an escape to a different reality where I don't have restrictions and diagnoses—only the freedom to run freely on fresh colorful grass."

ships, nature, and the world, including a global pandemic and cancer diagnosis. 

Susan Patricia Cooper, ATR-BC, LCAT, is a licensed creative arts therapist at the White Plains Hospital, Center for Cancer Care in White Plains, N.Y. She is also a practicing and

exhibiting artist, which she has found to be personally important to her understanding of art's function as a tool for visual and symbolic expression that can circumvent the limitations of language. Susan works with patients both individually and in groups, where a range of creative arts activities are utilized to promote

personal exploration, stress alleviation, choices, a sense of control, and emotional resilience within a psychotherapeutic relationship. She has worked in hospital and outpatient settings for more than 25 years with both adults and children with medical and mental health challenges.