

WHAT LIES BENEATH

by

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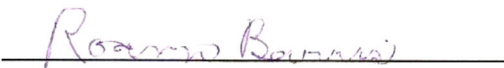
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Abstract

This thesis explores a partnership between art and mammography as a means of social communication about breast cancer. My imagery calls attention to the possibility of cancer by illuminating and visually displaying mammograms in minute detail. I deconstruct them into multiple layers of reversed imagery that, when reconstructed and placed in light boxes, become an illuminated three-dimensional rendering of a breast. All the light boxes are connected to a photographic centerpiece to visually depict the disturbing truth that a woman's body nourishes and shelters the cancer that could eventually kill her. There are eight light boxes that represent the statistic that one out of every eight women in the United States will be diagnosed with breast cancer in 2014. This work calls attention to breast cancer and emphasizes that fact that mammography and early detection are our best defense against this heinous disease.

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Dedication

This is dedicated to all the survivors, victims, and families that breast cancer has ever affected. It is my hope that this artwork touches someone enough that ONE potential victim will become a survivor.

Acknowledgements

It is through the mentoring and teaching of numerous talented professors that I have so greatly benefited throughout my academic journey. I have benefited from their strengths and differences, not just in my concentration, but more importantly, on how to be an engaging and effective instructor. Thank you, Roann Barris, Leah Gose, Bill Ratcliffe, and Andrew Ross for sharing your vision, knowledge, and experience with me. I am forever grateful and take something valuable from each of you into my new career.

I chose to study photography because of Kathleen Linkous. Her passion and knowledge of photography converted me from an Art Education major to Photography. I am truly indebted to her for showing me that my passion could be focused through a lens and become tangible in the darkroom.

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Thank you to my son Nathan and daughter Amber for being my biggest supporters and a constant source of encouragement and pride.

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Introduction

This thesis explores the combination of medical technology and art as a means of social communication about breast cancer. Every component of this work was selected with a specific representational purpose. It combines multiple techniques I have explored throughout my artistic career. These boxes, in various dimensions, symbolize varying breast sizes and are illuminated to mimic X-ray machines. Each box contains five layers of reversed mammograms that indicate the possibility of cancer. They show the veins, blood vessels, tissue, and cancer in minute detail. Each light box is connected to the female centerpiece to represent the disturbing fact that a woman's body sustains and shelters the cancer that might eventually kill her. These eight boxes exhibit the alarming statistic that one in every eight women in the United States will be diagnosed with breast cancer this year. One box glows pink to depict the positive mammogram and the survivor!

Next to skin cancer, breast cancer is the most common cancer in American women.¹ According to the American Cancer Society, twelve percent of women in the United States will be affected by breast cancer in their lifetime. During 2014, invasive breast cancer will claim one in eight women and be responsible for the deaths of one in every 36 women,² making it the second leading cause of death from cancer in women. Fortunately, breast cancer mortality rates have been declining since 1989 primarily due to earlier detection, increased awareness, and improved treatment options. However, these statistics are still high and prove that, as a society we must remain vigilant in promoting awareness. Mammography and early detection are our best defense against breast cancer. It denies cancer its power and takes control of this heinous disease.

¹ "American Cancer Society."

² "American Cancer Society."

My personal experience with mammograms was limited to my annual exams. I would go in, use humor to combat the 15 minutes of awkwardness during the test and then be on my way. The results would arrive in the mail a few weeks later reporting everything normal and life continued. However, during my last annual exam, all of that changed when I glanced over my shoulder and saw, for the first time, the striking and powerful mammogram image. It was 26-inches of illuminated majestic tonal value, intersecting lines and shape. I was stunned by its beauty and immediately began to wonder how this imagery could be used as art. My last annual exam turned into an avenue to obtain source material that could be used artistically to address cancer and possibly make a difference in women's lives.

Methodology

Light, layers, gridding, menacing subject matter, and repetition are constants in my work. These components have developed through influences of different photographers, and a never-ending journey to experiment with different techniques, mediums, and equipment. They have become the armature on which my work is built. My niche is construction, creating artwork through a series of individual builds. It provides me a way of producing photography through experimentation and kinesthetic learning. Working with my hands and devising, compiling, and creating things is where I find my artistic passion. Constructing satisfies my curiosity and need to touch and explore while learning through trial and error.

The challenge for this work was where to obtain mammograms. I started by purchasing my films. Immediately I went to the darkroom and started testing and experimenting what was the best way to produce these images. First I started with a straight contact print. This process is where the source material is placed directly on top of photographic paper and exposed to light, which creates a positive image of the negative mammogram. The image was amazing, and I knew then that I had found the focus of my thesis work. Over the next few months, I fine-tuned the contact prints and explored additional darkroom mediums such as ortho litho film to create combination positive/negative prints. My goal was to achieve a variation in the mammograms that would show depth and form. The ortho litho film produced stark black and white images that had little gray and the combination prints provided little to no depth. Realizing that the process wasn't working, I moved to the digital darkroom. Scanning my mammograms at a high resolution, converting them to positives and working them in Photoshop gave me the results I was looking for. It provided me an avenue to vary the density and contrast of the mammogram, reproduce the same image without variation, and

construct an image that could be layered together to create a three-dimensional image. Once I was able to reproduce exact images I focused on how to present the work.

There were three prototypes of this work, all three different and distinct. The first mammogram light box was an 8 x 10 tabletop version. It achieved the result of three-dimensionality but lost detail, making the image not very interesting or engaging. The second was of the same dimensions but instead of just changing contrast I added a distorted figure to represent the cancerous tumor to one of the layers. The figure was successful but was so small it was unrecognizable. I realized this work needed to be large and extremely detailed to produce a three-dimensional image. It was while I was experimenting with the layers in Photoshop of this box I realized working the contrast and brightness together created less intense darks and greater value of detail in the grays. Both of these prototypes were interesting, but they needed something more.

It was on the third prototype that I decided to provide the viewer with comparisons of breasts. After I had completed the first two boxes, I contacted the Susan G. Komen Foundation of the New River Valley and asked for some help obtaining some cancerous mammograms and gaining a better knowledge of breast cancer. A few weeks later I received a call from Dr. Bob Williams, a member of the board of directors of the local foundation and a breast cancer surgeon. During our conversation, I explained who I was, what I was trying to create, and the intentions of my artwork. He was able to obtain a cancerous mammogram and multiple negative mammograms for me, and I went to work. Using a three-shelf bookcase, mammograms, layers of Plexiglas®, Pictorico transparency film, and foam core board, I produced a light box display with six sections. Each section was twelve inches square and contained five layers of Plexiglas® with images attached and lined up that created the 3-D rendering of a breast. Each level contained the right and left breast of the same woman. It was

during a critique that I realized that, however beautiful the box was, the piece was more about shape, form, and light. The box did not convey the message of a heinous and dangerous disease. So I went back to work on how to present this subject matter in a way that represented mammograms and breast cancer. I came to the conclusion that this work needed a centerpiece that grounded the work in the realm of breast cancer and conveyed the message that it was a women's issue.

This work takes what was once a two-dimensional, dark negative film concealing cancer and reassembles it into three-dimensional light boxes of multi-layer positive films. In the cold and clinical approach, cancer is illuminated and reconstructed layer-by-layer, and exhibited in minute detail through beautiful mammogram imagery. Each element of this work has a symbolic purpose.

Darkness is representative of evil and mercilessness; light is symbolic of good and power. Illuminating the darkness denies it its power and exposes its harsh reality. This work uses light for that reason. It shines a light on cancerous tumors and brings the reality of what lies beneath out into the open for the public to see, denying it the ability to prowl in the darkness and kill silently.

For me, light has always brought to mind heavenly and celestial associations and has been synonymous with goodness and purity. When I started working with the mammograms, I struggled with the fact that the cancer was white. How could something so deadly and evil be white? Feeling it was more appropriate for the disease to be black, I inverted the mammograms, making what was once a negative white image a positive black image (Figure 1). I created eight series of five layered mammograms that varied in brightness and contrast printed onto Pictorico transparency film. Each piece of film was attached to a piece of Plexiglas® and lined up. All five layers were placed in a light box that created a three-

dimensional rendering of a woman's breast. Each box was constructed to mimic X-ray machines and to maintain a sterile and surgical feel.

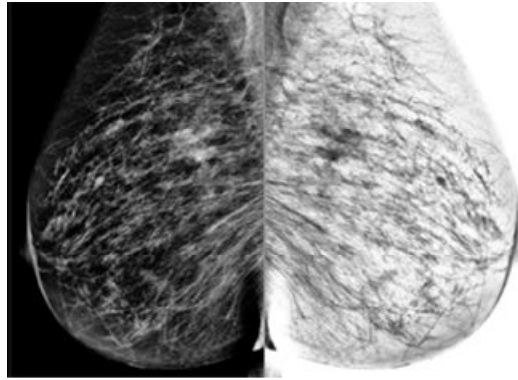


Figure 1 – Karie Edwards, Negative Positive Mammogram, 2014

The large rectangular photographic centerpiece is the prime focus of this installation. It depicts a woman attempting to protect her body from cancer by clutching her bare breasts. I chose to portray her in this pose to show her vulnerability and tension. The wires of the light boxes are left visible to connect directly into the centerpiece to represent that cancer can only survive by deriving its power and nourishment from its host. They are connected together to show the never-ending cycle of this disease.

Multiple layers of Plexiglas® were used to suggest the pulling back of the skin and exposing the cancer buried below. They represent a woman's physicality, as well as her vulnerability to cancer. The monochromatic palette provides a strong sense of visual cohesion and communicates the lack of emotion, so the viewer doesn't get absorbed in the beauty of the image. The exception is the pink light box that identifies the cancerous mammogram. The entire exhibition consists of two 17 inch by 17 inch light boxes, four 15 inch by 15 inch light boxes, and two 12 inch by 12 inch light boxes, each containing 5 layers of Plexiglas® with mammograms attached to each layer, and one 17 inch by 37 inch photographic print as a

centerpiece. There are two additional 17 inch by 17 inch light boxes that are hung separately to serve as introductory imagery to the gallery.

Placing My Work in History

Photography is the embodiment of light. Light is essential to all mediums, and every artist embraces it in different ways. Painters use chiaroscuro to depict light, sculptors mold their material to catch and reflect it, and glassblowers create prisms to refract it. However, for photographers, light is their only tool. They manipulate it to create a vast array of different images. Some photographers use light in the spiritual essence, and some through reflection and others use it to illuminate and bring attention to their work. Often the way light is used becomes synonymous with certain artists. For example, Ansel Adams is recognized for his “exceedingly pointed awareness of the light;”³ Richard Avedon is famous for his stark white backgrounds and harsh lighting; and Mike and Doug Starn are associated with massive illuminated moths and knobby and gnarled trees. Light is the most versatile medium available, however an artist chooses to use it.

Alfred Stieglitz and Eugene Atget set me on the path to the relationship I have with light. Their talents of manipulating and controlling light challenged and inspired me to make light the cotter pin of my artistic elements. Alfred Stieglitz’s series “The Equivalents” (Figure 2) is an abstract, metaphoric equation of his emotions and psychological states.⁴ I am captivated by their diversity and intensity of light and how they evoke a sense of spirituality. Eugene Atget’s approach to light was different but achieved the ephemeral result in his photographs. He visually told stories through light, repetition, and reflection. It is estimated that his total production of work was about 8,500 pictures.⁵ Through this prolific body of work, his mastery of light emerged. His multilayered shop windows infused with light depicted ordinary everyday items and conveyed a sense of spirituality and tranquility. These

³ "Ansel Adams: The Role of the Artist in the Environmental Movement."

⁴ Hirsch, *Seizing The Light: A Social History of Photography*, 194.

⁵ Szarkowski, *Atget*, 13.

elements of light and layering have inspired my multiple layers of mammography displayed in an illuminated box, mimicking his layers of reflection in shop windows.



Figure 2 – Alfred Stieglitz, *Equivalent*, 1923.

Through the process of construction and experimentation I have discovered myself as an artist. Envisioning something in your head and applying it at times just does not add up. However, it is through this experimental phase that discovery and success develops. Without visionaries like Man Ray and László Moholy-Nagy, I believe photography would not be as multipurpose as it is today. Both were risk takers that pushed the boundaries of what art could be. Man Ray even went as far as to rename his “reinvented” camera-less images as “Rayographs.”⁶ My thesis work pushes a series of boundaries. It takes something extremely personal, illuminates and hangs it on the wall for all to see, seamlessly blending the worlds of medicine and art. Both Moholy-Nagy and Man Ray challenged the barriers of art,⁷ I feel the need to continue their pursuit of redefining art.

Throughout history, art has always been a way to communicate beliefs and express human experience. Dorothea Lange and Lewis Hine chose to use their art in this manner, using photography as a means to effect social change. Through increasing support for new programs, Dorothea Lange helped improve the desperate situation of rural Americans. She

⁶ "Man Ray Biography."

⁷ "Laszlo Moholy-Nagy Biography."

traveled extensively, documenting the hardships and pain of what so many rural Americans were experiencing during the Great Depression. Lewis Hine attempted to combat rampant discrimination and prejudice of the new immigrants arriving on Ellis Island by photographing and sharing his images with people.⁸ He continued using photography as a tool of social change by becoming the eyes and ears for the National Child Labor Committee. Hine collected specific personal information on the children he photographed and photographically documented the abuses of children in the workplace in order to initiate child labor laws.⁹ He believed that a photograph could be "a lever for the social uplift" (Figure 3). My thesis work uses photography and mixed media as a vehicle for social change. It initiates a dialogue about breast cancer and visually depicts a dangerous statistic.



Figure 3 – Lewis Hine, Making Human Junk, 1986

Mike and Doug Starn are identical twin brothers and American artists that work in sculpture and photography. For the Starns, light is a metaphor for power and knowledge: “It is

⁸ Hirsch, *Seizing The Light: A Social History of Photography*, 221.

⁹ Hirsch, *Seizing The Light: A Social History of Photography*, 222.

history, the future, and spirituality...Light is what controls every decision and action we take; light is thought.”¹⁰ Light is the fundamental power of my mammogram work. In a harsh and clinical manner, it provides knowledge and brings us face to face with the fear and hate of what can kill us. The Starn brothers’ ability to articulate their all-embracing understanding of what drives them to create particular works of art captivates me. Their influence can be seen in the repetition and layering, gridded format (Figure 4), and the powerful illumination found in my work. Their beliefs and opinions have also taught me to see art everywhere--even at my annual mammogram.



Figure 4 – Mike and Doug Starn, *Attracted to Light 1*, 1996-2004

¹⁰ Starn, *Attracted to Light*, 23.

Conclusion

My installation, *What Lies Beneath* (Figure 5), is a visual reminder of what can happen if women postpone their annual exams. The intention of this work is to prompt women to ask themselves “When was my last mammogram?” However, through the process of research, discussion, and communication with others, I feel that my original scope was too narrow. The broader, more encompassing intention should be to empower all genders and relationships: husbands, children, brothers, sisters, moms, dads and friends, to ask the significant women in their lives: “When was the last time you had your mammogram?” taking the conversation from being an internal mental dialogue out into the open, involving the entire family, making it more difficult for women to procrastinate and put themselves second. This installation places the possibility of cancer front and center for all to see in the hopes that it motivates women to have their annual exam. However, being realistic, my expectation is that maybe one woman can be saved through encountering this work.

The opening of this show will be a night I’ll never forget. The intention of this was to open a dialogue about breast cancer. The reality of this work was so much more. All night long people sought me out, not just to compliment my work, but also to share with me their stories of survival and loss. For me, it was one of the most emotionally powerful occasions in my life. To create something that prompted total strangers to come and share their most personal stories has inspired me to work even harder to share this work with as many people as possible. This body of work isn’t just about prompting women to have mammograms; it is about sharing and healing too. This response validates me as an artist and proves to me that I created a successful body of work. My next step is to have this work displayed in as many hospitals and medical venues as possible.



Figure 5 – Karie Edwards, What Lies Beneath, 2014

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