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VISUAL ART

The Traumatic Arts

What Does Art Mean at a Hospital?

By JEN GRAVES



People who lose somebody close to them describe two worlds: the normal one they can't reenter and an unreal one of extreme grief. Being in a hospital room with a dead friend or relative is similarly mentally impossible: The person is there; the person is gone. It isn't easy adorning the rooms that contain these truths.

There is a room at the Hassenfeld Children's Center for Cancer and Blood Disorders in New York where the patients and their parents get bad news, and on the wall there is a painting, but it looks like no painting at all. The wall is a dusty green, and it looks like leafy trees have cast their shadows on it. Those "shadows" are a humble but transporting painting by New York-based artist Mary Temple. Temple has just finished a huge painting like this at the Seattle contemporary-art space Western Bridge. At first, it looks like there's nothing in the room but the light filtering in from the windows and the shadows of the trees outside. But there are no trees outside. And when you walk next to the painted shadows, you don't block them out with your body. An imaginary world has been laid down on top of the real one, and somehow you're in neither of them.

Temple's paintings are good hospital art because they are good art that naturally addresses the emotional situations that arise in a hospital. It sounds like a simple formula, but bad hospital art is rampant. (A nonprofit corporation in New York called RxArt has arisen to address the problem—that's the group that placed Temple's painting.) See for yourself at an art opening this week at Harborview Medical Center.

The new Norm Maleng Building at the First Hill hospital has operating rooms, inpatient beds, a psychiatric ward, an intensive care unit, and 60 newly installed works of art. The theme is landscape, because studies have shown that patients in rooms with views heal faster. Unfortunately, this means many small and forgettable paintings and photographs that barely register except as dots to be passed by or sat under.

There are two exceptions in the new Harborview building—both in places you don't want to find

yourself.

Early on a bright morning last week, the intensive-care waiting area was messy with slept-in makeshift beds of hospital-issue pillows and blankets spread on couches. An older woman held her head in her hands on one side of the room; across it a red-eyed younger woman told a phone, "She died last night." The art in here is by Anne Appleby, a Montana artist who paints dusty colored panels that seem to have light inside them. Three tall paintings in an almost alien yellow-green hue hang at one end of the waiting room, beaming almost too brightly—they're both easy and hard to look at—and a square of four of them in dark greens and sturdy pinks hangs at the other end. In between, a giant window-wall showcases the real landscape outside facing south, toward Mount Rainier.

This intensive-care unit, where souls just slip off and up, is on the top floor. Down a few is the psychiatric ward, for trapped minds. As you exit the elevator, you see the other exception, a photograph by Richard Barnes of a display of real-looking buffalo and a white wolf on a snowy landscape behind an incomplete plywood proscenium. Barnes took the picture in a natural-history museum as the display was being built. Caged lights and workers' tools deconstruct what's being constructed. The truths of nature and history are in the midst of being put together, and the mind is made to tunnel along, but in a calm way.

It's not only Harborview that has an art program; there are acres of art that's publicly accessible in all the hospitals on Pill Hill. Signs posted inside Swedish Medical Center explain that the art collection there dates back to the 1960s and includes more than 2,000 pieces. On a recent visit, I noticed a vintage street sign cut up and put back together wrong, but better, cleverly located behind the desk for surgery sign-ins. (It's by Seattle's Robert Yoder.) Nurses and hospital workers often help select the art—pointing out when it looks too much like blood or is too upsetting. I couldn't help but think of that when, a few chairs away from the surgery desk at Swedish, I noticed an older man rapt as Tom Cruise stabbed all comers to death for several minutes in a scene from *The Last Samurai* showing on television.

In my own experience, the art at hospitals is a kind gesture, but not much more, and it's hard to maintain the attitude that it's the thought that counts when you're miserable. Once, awaiting a sad surgery at Swedish, I was infuriated by a screamingly cheerful painting of garish red tulips. Another time, also at Swedish, I was in the pediatric-intensive-care-unit waiting room, where all that's on the wall is a large framed poster. The poster is of a painting that shows a gateway out to a beachfront under a blue sky. The thick strokes of white paint had been reduced to nothing in the process of turning the painting into a poster. In the next room over, nurses were preparing to take away the body of a friend of mine; it made me feel worse that this body of paint had been done away with, too.

At Harborview's Maleng Building, which is owned by King County, the art-selection process was overseen by the county's arts office, 4Culture. Its total art budget was \$320,000, derived from the Percent for Art program. All the intentions here are good. But I don't remember most of the art. A little more ambition wouldn't kill anybody. 🌟