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# Ephemerality & Abjection [ The Formless Nature of Cancer ]

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# EPHEMERALITY & ABJECTION

[THE FORMLESS NATURE OF CANCER]

HALLIE SELINGER

HONORS THESIS  
ART DEPARTMENT  
CONNECTICUT COLLEGE  
2013 - 2014











to max, for showing me how to embrace the present

# EPHEMERALITY & ABJECTION

[THE FORMLESS NATURE OF CANCER]

**HALLIE SELINGER**  
HONORS THESIS 2013 - 2014  
ART DEPARTMENT  
CONNECTICUT COLLEGE

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EXHIBITED MAY 2 - 18 2014  
CUMMINGS ARTS CENTER, CONNECTICUT COLLEGE



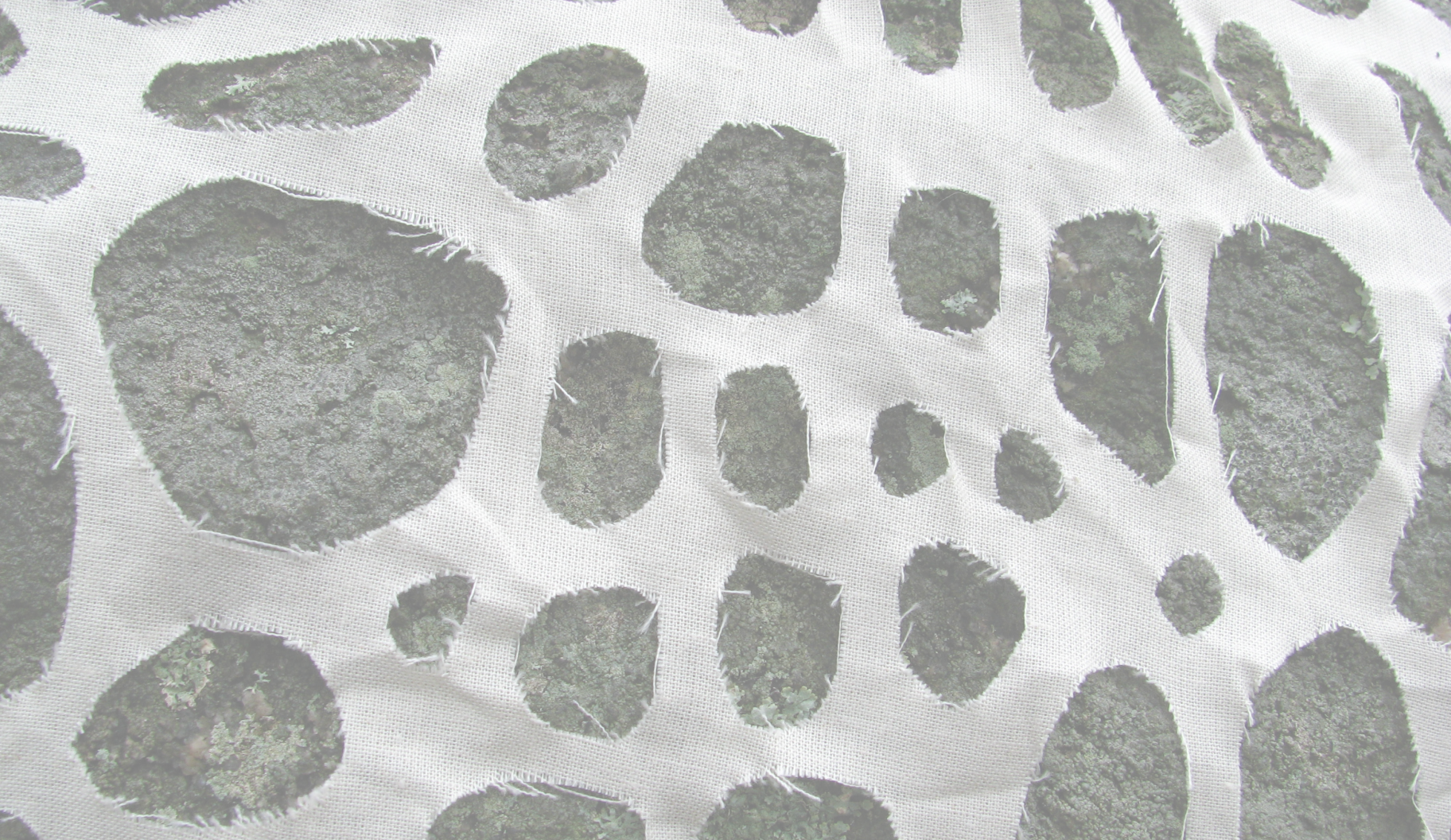
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## I. IMPERMANENCE

*entropy*  
inevitable deterioration of a  
being, society, or system

**greek**  
*entropia* — a turning towards

The human race is comprised of transient beings: all parts of these bodies age and deteriorate with time. Some physicians and philosophers believe that there is no such thing as dying of “old age,” in fact it is illegal to write this on a death certificate.<sup>1</sup> Congestive heart failure, poor circulation to the brain, and degeneration of cerebral cells are eventual outcomes of old age that cause death.<sup>2</sup> Those who die of “old age” do not die of disease, but succumb to the senescence of the body. Speaking metaphorically, a brain cell is similar to an automobile. A car is constructed of many parts that contribute to its function, however these parts are subject to wear and decline with use. When the parts of a car begin to fail, a mechanic can repair the damages to keep the car running. A brain cell's structural elements wear down over time, but the cell also has a mechanic that can inform the repair of these parts.

Eventually this mechanism will wear out, causing the cell to die. Brain cells, like muscle and heart cells, are unable to reproduce,<sup>3</sup> but can survive for decades before dying. When enough brain cells die, the brain begins to exhibit signs of age, as do the heart and muscles.

As a way of counteracting or perhaps negating our entropic existence, we as a species are constantly recording our lives. The human interest with both visual and written documentation is the reason why today we understand so much about ancient civilizations. Humans have created visual records since the civilizations inhabited Mesopotamia and painted on cave walls. The minerals of the earth preserved their documents. The ancient Egyptians were known for painting murals and discovering mineral elements that yielded vivid pigments. The ancient Greeks were the first to devise a method of mural painting that used a specific mixture of slaked lime, marble, sand, and water to





*Vascular*  
muslin cloth site-specific installation  
3yds x 4 yds  
Fall 2013





*Fish*  
fresco, 14 inches by 12 inches  
Spring 2013

By using mineral pigments on the surface of the wet mortar, a chemical reaction that took place during the drying process bound the colors within the wall. This process is called fresco and it is known for its extensive use in Europe during the Renaissance.

Unlike the human presence on earth, fresco painting is not temporal: it counteracts the briefness of human life. Cathedrals throughout Italy remain filled with frescoes, some dating back 700 years. The Franciscan church in Florence, Santa Croce, is still filled with 500 year-old frescoes that explain the life and faith of Saint Francis. These works remain in Santa Croce today after centuries and several devastating floods. Fresco was an ideal method for preserving what people of the time believed to be sacred or of incredible value.

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1. Nuland, Sherwin B., *How We Die* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1993) 43.
  2. Ibid, 52-53.
  3. Ibid, 55.









## 2. OBSESSION

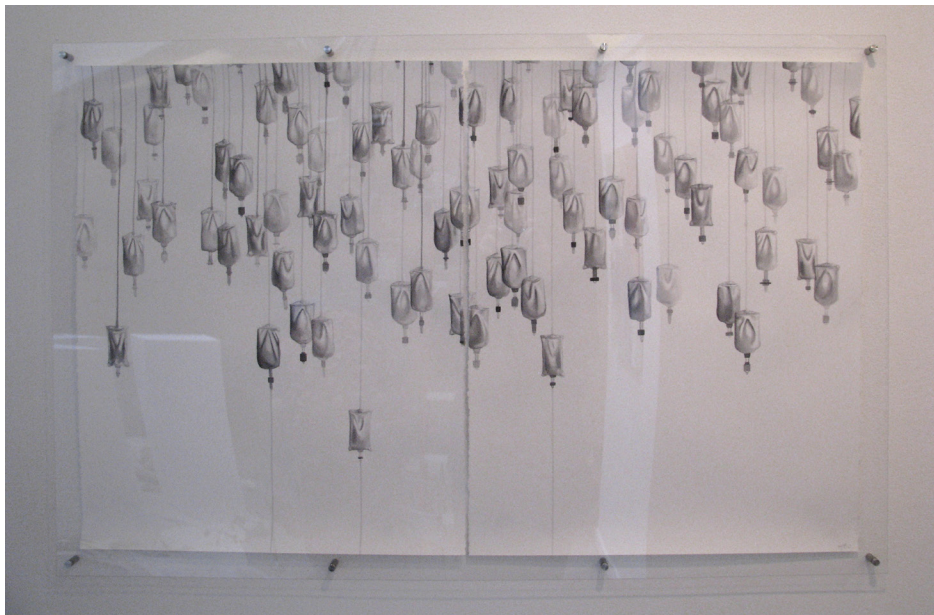
*decay*  
a natural process of  
degradation of a form into  
something else

Today, the average human is expected to live for 78.62 years,<sup>1</sup> almost fifty percent longer than the life expectancy 150 years ago. Advancements in medicine have improved living conditions and extended our lifespan drastically, yet we are continually occupied with further lengthening our lives. This is not a new obsession. Among many other documents left by the Egyptians, there is a recorded prescription that boasted the power to restore an old man to youth.<sup>2</sup> The Egyptians also believed that death was not finite. Most of the human life was spent preparing for an afterlife. Mummification, a way of preserving the human body after death, was a common practice. Egyptians wanted to prevent the body from decaying and dissolving to prepare for the afterlife.

Ancient Egyptians countered death through spirituality. Today we rely on science and medicine. Our preoccupation

with lifespan is not driven by desire for a better afterlife, it is driven by fear and uncertainty about death. A multi-billion dollar market of anti-aging cosmetics and procedures serves as evidence of our discomfort with ephemerality.<sup>3</sup> Fear of the unknown end has driven us to a state of obsessive control. Today there is a community of scientists and physicians who sincerely believe aging can be restricted and managed to the point of reversal.

Anti-aging cosmetics and services intervene in the intrinsic senescence of human life. Has our fear pushed us to an extreme in which we are tampering with the process of natural selection? Why don't we, instead of making our lives longer, make our lives deeper and wider? Death is the distinguishing aspect of human life,<sup>4</sup> but we are not committed to understanding or accepting this truth. On an individual level, death is evil, but on a larger level, death is "necessary good."<sup>5</sup> Life and death should not be considered as opposites but rather



*suspended/ sustained*  
ink on paper  
53 in x 33 in  
2014

as two halves of a whole. Some scientists believe it is possible to prevent or slow the eventual decline of our most necessary parts. Whether we could succeed in further lengthening our lifespan is not entirely predictable. Despite the amount of control we have gained over our existence, many lethal diseases and viruses still exist and jeopardize our chances of having a long life.

- 
1. "World Fact Book: Life Expectancy at Birth," *Central Intelligence Agency*, updated 2013. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2102rank.html>
  2. Nuland, Sherwin B., *How We Die* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1993) 86.
  3. McConnel, Charles and Turner, Leigh, "Medicine, Aging, and Human Longevity," National Center for Biotechnology Information, Jul. 2005, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1369277/>
  4. Barry, Vincent, *Philosophical Thinking About Death and Dying* (Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007) 233.
  5. Ibid, 234.









### 3. A METAPHORICAL PAST

*renegade*  
a thing that behaves against  
principles, rules, or normalized  
behaviors of its surroundings

The use of war as a metaphor for cancer dominates the way we talk and think about the disease. The phrase “battling with cancer” is used frequently to explain the process of dealing with the illness. Perhaps it is instinctive to align war and fighting with something like cancer, which is, in essence, the human body rebelling against itself. The final elimination of cancer cells from the body translates to winning the battle: the extermination of internal terrorists is the victory. Playing the role of the fighter is heroic and admirable. Succumbing to the disease sounds synonymous with failure. The metaphor for cancer has existed for decades; long before scientific developments yielded important information about the causes of cancer. A lack of knowledge about the disease sparked an intense fear, beckoning a combative and protective response.

On January 19, 1946, *The Science*

*News Letter* published a brief article titled “War Waged on Cancer.” Doctor Frank Adair, president of the American Cancer Society at the time, was quoted saying, “[cancer] is the disease we dread most.”<sup>1</sup> The short article, which seems as though it was a call for scientists, doctors, and researchers to work towards a cure, reads more like a military plan than anything else. The article talks about organizing “wartime research,” laying “battle plans,” and “enlisting” persons to work towards a cure.<sup>2</sup>

In the wake of World War II, the approach to cancer research in the United States instinctively evolved into a militaristic operation. Cancer, a disease that has always been dreaded, became a focal point during the mid-twentieth century. The solution was to attack, to gain control, and to align cancer with something that could be understood.

The American ambition to rid the nation of cancer returned once again during Richard Nixon’s presidency. On



December 23, 1971, Nixon signed the National Cancer Act into law, beginning what was known in the United States as the War on Cancer.<sup>3</sup> The act aggressively took action and generated optimism across the nation. With all the publicity, political attention, and funding towards the war on cancer, Americans grew restless after years without a cure. From a medical perspective, efforts of the past four decades have advanced our understanding of and ability to treat cancer, but science is not going to “win the war.”

When so little was known about cancer, the war metaphor was suitable, but it has become outdated given the immense scientific progress of the past few decades. Why is the war metaphor perpetuated today? The metaphor provides a concrete, relatable description for cancer, which is a difficult and terrifying concept to grasp. The advantage of using it is that it provides a vision for the patient to help explain what he or she is dealing with. One of the issues

with this metaphor is that our understanding of war forces us to associate it with death, therefore we associate cancer with death. It is not untrue that cancer causes death, in fact, the American Cancer Society reports today that cancer accounts for 1 of every 4 deaths in the country.<sup>4</sup> The military metaphor ingrains the notion that cancer has only two outcomes: winning or losing. In order to win, one must fight and be resilient. However, with cancer, there is no guarantee that fighting against the disease will result in victory. One can take all the necessary steps at the opportune times and still the illness will run its course. A cancer patient has almost no control over the disease. The physician has a more significant role in the battle and the patient is a passive figure, yet the patient is still called a fighter. When cancer cannot be eliminated, this then means that the war has been lost. The patient has lost a battle of which he or she had no control over in the first place.

*To form backwards*  
mixed media on paper  
26 in x 40 in  
2014



A metaphor can be a useful tool for a doctor to use when explaining the nature of cancer to patients, however the military metaphor is no longer relevant. In the 1940s and 1970s, fear of cancer as an inexplicable threat to human life created a vocabulary of militaristic descriptions. Now that science has made incredible progress towards understanding the behavior of cancer and treating it successfully, the military metaphor still dominates the way we talk about the disease. It is time for a new analogy: one that is less aggressive, less shaming, and a more accurate reflection of our current status with cancer.

1. "War Waged on Cancer," *The Science News Letter* (Vol. 49, No. 3 (Jan. 19,1946)) 39.
2. *Ibid*, 39.
3. Brawley, Otis, "40-Year War on Cancer," *CNN Health* (Dec. 23, 2011) <http://www.cnn.com/2011/12/23/health/forty-year-war>
4. "Cancer Facts & Figures 2014," *American Cancer Society*, 2014. <http://www.cancer.org/research/cancerfactsstatistics/cancerfactsfigures2014/index>



*Beyond boundary*  
mixed media on canvas  
45 in x 48 in  
2014







#### 4. FEAR/ABJECTION

*abject*

1. extremely bad, unpleasant,  
and degrading
2. completely without pride or  
dignity

Terror was the driving force behind the war on cancer and what led to the instinctive use of militaristic language. Illnesses such as heart disease, diabetes, AIDS, and cancer have certain attitudes attached to them: we have abjection towards the diseases that threaten us most in ways we cannot understand. This is especially true of cancer. Even though heart disease is currently the most lethal affliction, we have a much more deep-seated aversion towards cancer.

Heart disease targets people with specific health conditions such as high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and obesity, to name a few. Treatments for heart disease are not invasive: quit smoking, eat healthier, and exercise more. More severe cases might require medicines or even heart surgery. For those who do not have successful treatments, heart disease causes a quick and quiet death. In contrast, cancer

is and always has been unbiased and unpredictable. It can seize control over anyone, regardless of health or age. Cancer requires one or more surgeries and drawn-out, painful treatments that cannot promise the disease's total extermination from the body. The one thing that is certain about cancer is that it promises a slow and agonizing death. We can only associate it with the negative.

Illnesses that have a profound or lasting impact do not simply change our bodies, they change the way we exist and interact in the world. Depending on the affliction, this change is brief, but cancer forces an individual to not only restructure his or her whole life, but it also either damages or completely eliminates that person's physical existence. Cancer, being as unpredictable and threatening as it is, forces us to consider our vulnerability. Cancer affects the way we think about ourselves, others, and our temporary nature.





*dis/order*  
mixed media on paper  
22 in x 30 in  
2014







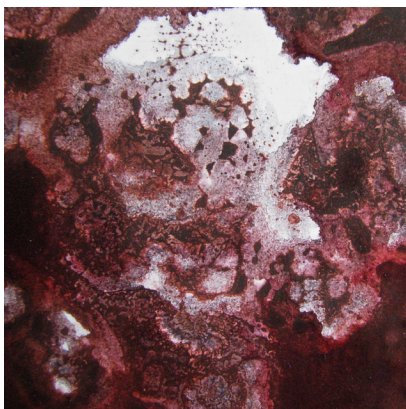
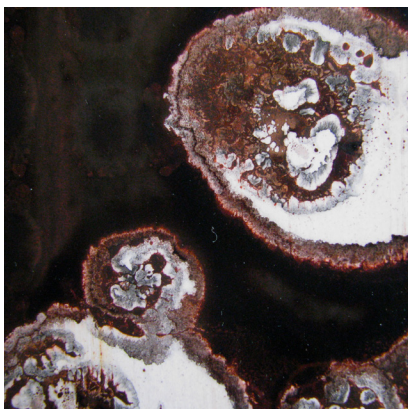
## 5. KARKINOS

<i>cancer</i>		hundred diseases. These diseases affect different parts of the body and can cause a variety of side effects. If found in an early stage, cancer can be treated, but depending on severity, cancer can lead to death.
<b>greek</b>		Cancer begins in the cells. Normal cells grow and divide in a controlled manner: as cells reach the end of their life cycle, new cells, constantly keeping the body healthy, replace them. This process, which is continually happening throughout the body, can go wrong. When the genetic information (DNA) in a cell becomes altered or damaged, it causes mutations that can affect the cell's process of growth and division. <sup>1</sup>
<i>karkinos</i>	crab	The cell can undergo multiple mutations but it will not die when it is supposed to. The body will continue to generate new cells that have the same DNA as the mutated cell. Because the body does not need these cells, they form into a mass of
<i>oncology</i>		
the study and treatment of		
tumors		
<b>greek</b>		
<i>onkos</i>	bulk, mass, tumor	
<i>ology</i>	the study of	

tissue called a tumor. The tumor cells grow uncontrollably and ignore the boundaries and functions of their surroundings.<sup>2</sup> Some masses of irregular tissue will never spread to other places in the body. These tumors are benign and not cancerous. Malignant tumors (cancerous tumors) have the capability to spread to other places in the body and can be difficult to remove.

DNA mutations are caused by carcinogens: mostly man-made substances in our environment that we either ingest or are exposed to. The National Cancer Society and the US Department of Health and Human Services offer extensive lists of substances that are either proven or strongly believed to be carcinogens.<sup>3</sup> The reason why cancer is such a formidable disease is because there is never a guarantee that a cell's DNA will or will not become mutated. A person could be continually exposed to a certain carcinogen and he or she may never develop cancer. A person who is almost never exposed to these





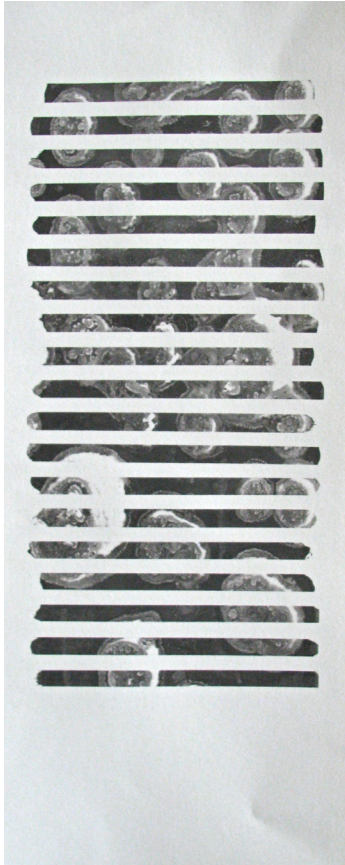
early material studies in  
ink, gouache, oil paint,  
and lithograph ink

substances does not necessarily have a decreased risk of cancer. It all depends on one cell and the rate at which it undergoes multiple mutations that eventually lead to cancer. And once the cell has mutated and generated identical cells, there is not one single timeline for tumor growth. Some tumors can grow for years, even decades, before they begin to affect the body. Others grow very rapidly and can metastasize quickly. It is cancer's disorganized and unpredictable nature that makes it so ominous to us.

Cancer is not a modern phenomenon; it has existed in animals and humans throughout history. Written documentation of cancer, fossilized tumors, and mummies date back to the ancient Egyptian civilization. As a result of the human tendency to record life, we know that ancient people also feared cancer. Manuscripts reveal that Egyptians tried various methods to treat tumors, but none guaranteed a cure.<sup>4</sup> During the sixteenth

and seventeenth centuries, Europeans devised ways to remove tumors and the invention of anesthesia permitted cancer surgeries.<sup>5</sup> The nineteenth century saw the development of scientific oncology with use of the microscope as a means to study and understand cancer. Today, five thousand years later, cancer still threatens us. Our inability to control the disease, despite technological and medical advancements, leaves us dreading cancer more than other illnesses.

- 
1. "What is Cancer?" *American Cancer Society*, published 2014. <http://www.cancer.org/cancer/cancerbasics/what-is-cancer>
  2. "What is Cancer?" *National Cancer Institute at the National Institutes of Health*. <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/cancerlibrary/what-is-cancer>
  3. "12th Report on Carcinogens (RoC)." *National Toxicology Program, US Department of Health and Human Services*, Jan. 23, 2014. <http://ntp.niehs.nih.gov/?objectid=035E57E7-BDD9-2D9B-AFB9D1CADC8D09C1>
  4. "What is Cancer?" *American Cancer Society*.
  5. Ibid.



manipulations of material studies  
using printmaking processes







## 6. MALIGNANCY

### *malignancy*

1. likeliness to grow and spread in an uncontrolled way
2. aggressive maliciousness

### *metastasis*

the spread of cancer from one site to another

Brain cancer is one of the most formidable varieties of cancer. Some tumors in the brain grow and exist benignly without compromising the organ's function. Other tumors grow rapidly and uncontrollably and can have detrimental effects on the brain. The brain is the body's control panel. Specific areas of the brain have certain responsibilities in the function of the body as a whole. Depending on the location and severity of a tumor, cancer can affect an individual's sight, speech, hearing, coordination, memory, mental and emotional state, personality, and their ability to move.<sup>1</sup> As with other cancers affecting the central nervous system, it is difficult to operate on and remove brain tumors. Cancer is a highly personal and excruciatingly painful disease, but our fear of cancer increases when it threatens our most precious organs.

The growth and metastasizing of brain cancer means that somehow and

somewhere, there is a loss of something else in the body. The tumor and the rest of the body have a relationship: with every addition of tumor tissue, there will be a subtraction of sight, speech, movement, or life. As the tumor grows, the body begins to deteriorate or fail.

Cancerous tumors in the brain can develop uncontrollably while surrounding tissues maintain their organized and regimented growth cycles. Malignant growths (cancer) are commonly described by the word "anaplastic." Medically, this term means a loss of structural differentiation within a cell or group of cells often with increased capacity for multiplication. The ancient Greek denotation of "anaplastic" is *without form*. This yields an abstract understanding of cancer's behavior and appearance. Cancerous growths are unlike other tissues in the body; it is formless and unfamiliar:

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1. "Brain and Spinal Cord Tumors in Adults." *American Cancer Society*, published 2014. <http://www.cancer.org/cancer/brainstumorsinadults/detailedguide/brain-and-spinal-cord-tumors-in-adults-what-are-brain-spinal-tumors>





Medical and material  
studies





*Grade III*  
mixed media on canvas  
46 in x 35 in  
2014







## 7. ANAPLASIA

*anaplasia*

loss of structural differentiation  
within a cell or a group of  
cells often with increased  
capacity for multiplication

**greek**

*ana* ————— on  
*plasis* ————— formation

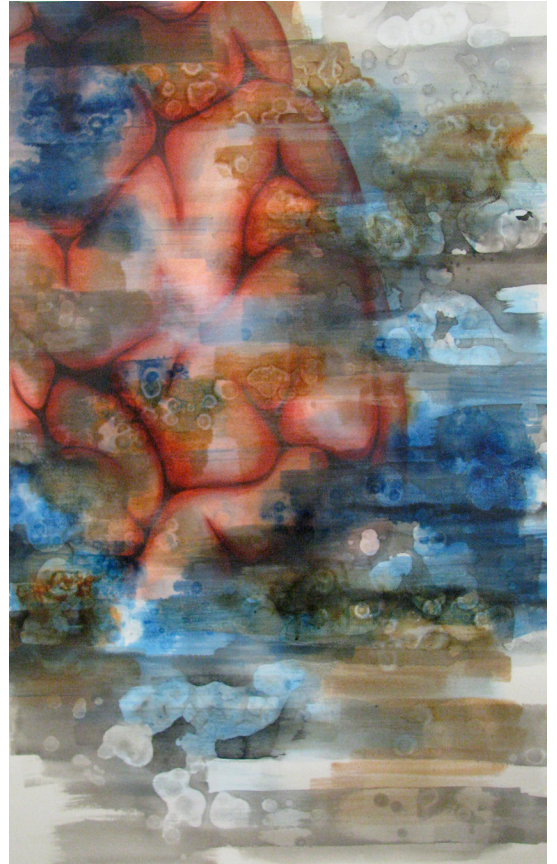
to form backwards | without form

Life is determined and organized by a series of creations and destructions. I am interested in the processes of life that demonstrate this order and art provides a means to understand this abstract and intangible concept. My paintings, prints, and frescoes work explores brain cancer within the larger context of human temporality and the growing intensity at which we attempt to stall our eventual demise. Similar to cancer, my work is defined by the relationships between control and chaos, structure and formlessness, addition and subtraction, growth and stagnancy, permanence and temporality. These parallels are explored through the materials, compositions, and colors as well as by my own involvement in the development of the work. By combining a variety of materials, the paintings, prints, and frescoes being to generate their own vocabulary of imagery.



*Compromise*  
mixed media on paper  
40 in x 26 in  
2014





*Untitled*  
mixed media on paper  
40 in x 26 in  
2014





process/reference wall in studio







## 8. PAINTING/DRAWING

*chaos*  
a state of disorder and/or  
unpredictability

Works on paper and canvas combine many different materials including charcoal, graphite, gouache, acrylic paint, oil paint, ink, gum arabic, heavy gel, turpentine, alcohol, and paint thinner. These works are created through multiple layers of pigments and many additions and subtractions of materials. Multiple studies of different material combinations yielded a wide variety of outcomes: some materials react to one another while others blend together. The abstraction is a result of opposing or incompatible elements. My paintings and drawings include one or more elements that are rendered realistically and carefully. Recognizable forms help give the work context while simultaneously attempting to visualize how cancer manifests itself. The imagery creates contrast between structure and formlessness, control and chaos, and growth and stagnancy.





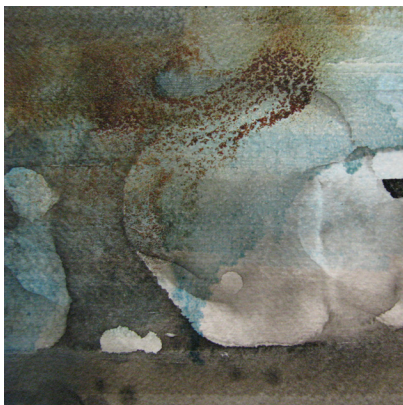
clockwise from top left:

*Compromise*, detail

*Without sense, without self*, detail

*To form backwards*, detail

*Untitled*, detail





*Without sense, without self*  
mixed media,  
40 in x 26 in  
2014





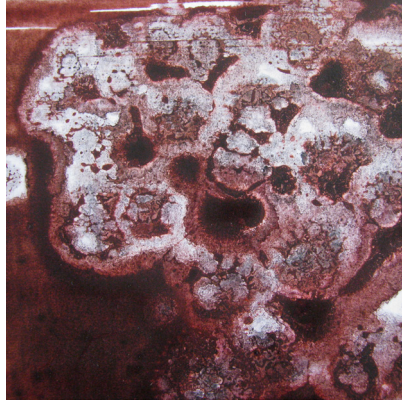




## 9. SYMBOLS

Symbolic imagery has communicative abilities similar to metaphor. The work begins to develop its own anthology of imagery to denote larger ideas. Intravenous therapy devices to explain our interest in sustaining our momentary lives. Amorphous abstraction denotes an invading and uncontrollable entity. Geometric and linear forms connect to the natural and ordered structures of the body. Representations of the brain are reminders of our entropic existence.





clockwise from top left:

*Compromise*, detail

*lithograph ink study*, detail

*Without sense, without self* detail

*suspended/ sustained*, detail









## 10. FRESCO

*fresco* **italian** *fresco* ————— fresh

The process of fresco painting is extremely particular and unforgiving. It requires precision and calculation, but if executed correctly, it has incredible permanence. Its historical purpose was to preserve imagery and icons that were sacred or highly valued. My frescoes address the human interest in challenging our impermanent and ephemeral nature. *La cosa che è sacro* reflects the values of our current population while being sensitive to the historical significance of the fresco method. By manipulating the drying process of the frescoes, I am able to achieve a surface that appears ruined and fragile. Despite our efforts of self preservation, we cannot surpass our temporality. Fresco painting was commonly done on the interior walls and ceilings of churches and structures so that the imagery reflected the sacred or social purpose of that building. My frescoes do not have a place within a structure, but instead are fragments representing something that has deteriorated, only leaving behind traces of itself.





fresh mortar:  
sand, slaked lime  
& water

*La cosa che è sacro*  
two frescoes on terra cotta  
2014







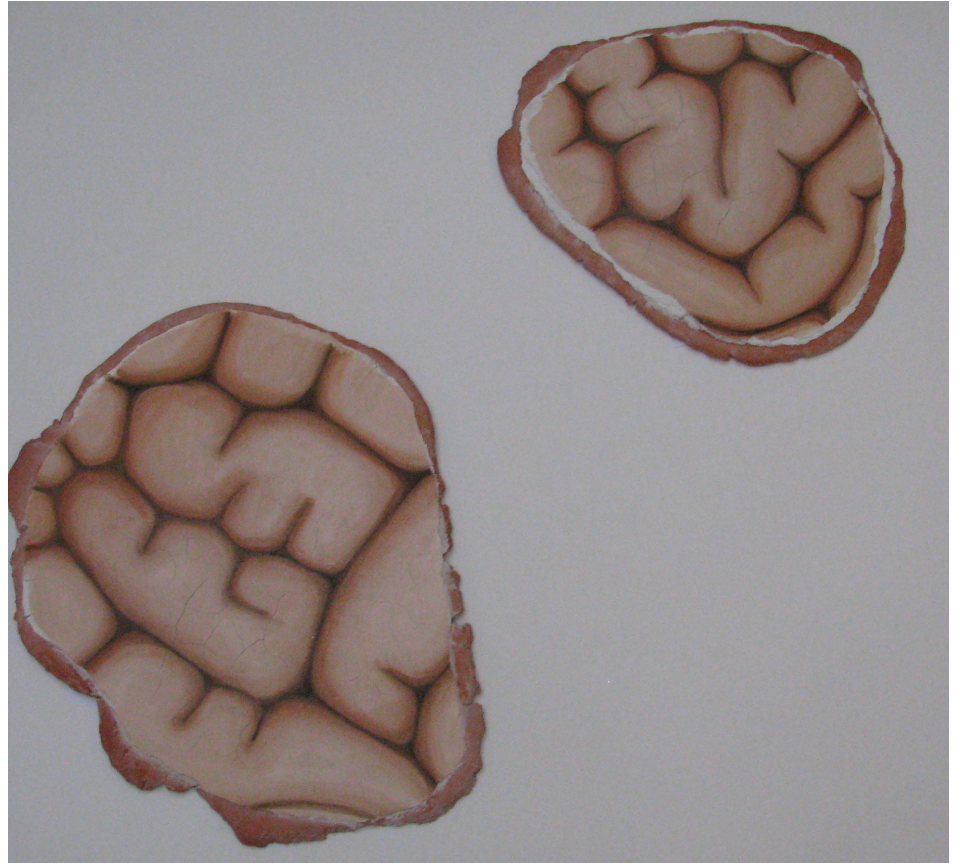


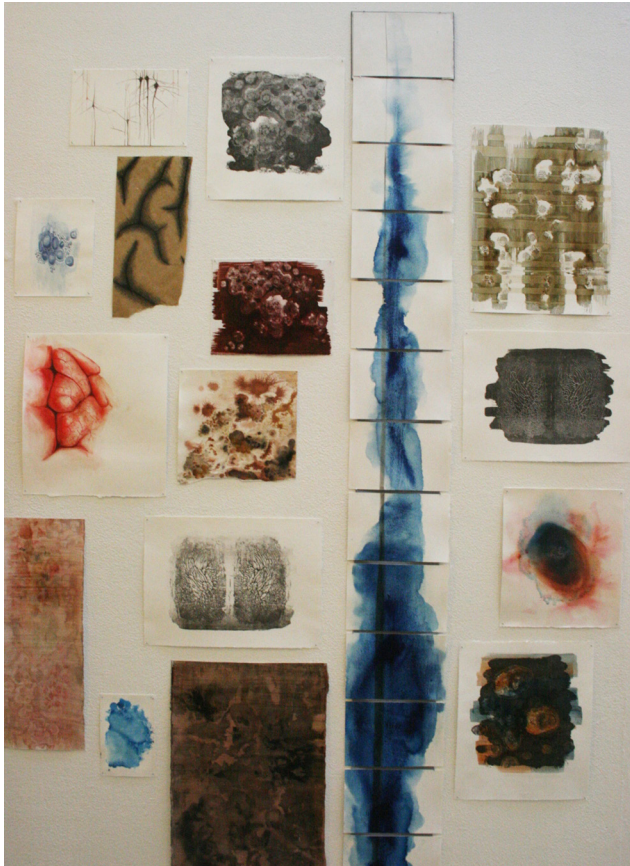
# EPHEMERALITY & ABJECTION [THE FORMLESS NATURE OF CANCER]

*Exhibited May 2 -18, 2014  
Cummings Arts Center*



*La cosa che è sacro*  
fresco on terra cotta  
2014





*Anaplasia*  
wall of process and material studies  
mixed media  
2014







## II. AFTERWORD

Without destructive and unpredictable diseases, our understanding of our own ephemerality would be significantly diminished. The amount of control we have over our bodies has always been precarious. We have few true predators, but cancer remains an inexplicable threat to the limited lifespan that we hold so dearly. Cancer invades us without logic or reason, leaving damage to our bodies and minds and altering how we perceive our reality. We need the formless and unforgiving nature of cancer to remind us that we are limited and temporal, otherwise we risk misinterpreting our existence.





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**CONNECTICUT COLLEGE ART DEPARTMENT**  
**CONNECTICUT COLLEGE ART HISTORY DEPARTMENT**  
for a wonderful and challenging four years

and as always

**FAMILY & FRIENDS**

for your amazing reliability, direction, and unconditional love

THANK YOU







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