

Art

The metamorphosis of cancer care

Science With Care is the installation of 250 porcelain pieces on the walls of Clinic 8, the outpatient cancer clinic at Charing Cross Hospital, London, UK. Kelly Gleason, a Cancer Research UK senior nurse, invited artist David Marques to create a piece that would “demonstrate the symbiotic relationship between research and care”.

Marques, a graduate from the prestigious art university Central Saint Martins, with an impressive background in Geneva’s watch and jewellery industry, has focused on creating ceramic pieces of the highest quality. “Why porcelain?” David says, tapping a piece affixed to the wall, “because of its toughness and fragility”.

Marques researched the commission in detail, spending time with a patient group, staff, and researchers at Charing Cross Hospital, as well as reading about hospital art. “85% of what I read said that people wanted to see nature”, he explained, “though [the concept] all started with the double-helix of DNA.”

The artwork is a series of white porcelain discs of varying sizes, dancing along the walls of Clinic 8, accompanied by a gentle kaleidoscope of butterflies. The patterns on both butterflies and flowers are gold and pale pink, blue, and grey. Marques chose the colours to match those of Cancer Research UK, who funded the project. The smooth, creamy texture of porcelain is an unexpected material to see in hospital artwork.

Two further sections of the clinic, the psychology room and the check out, each have a 1 m wall of the sculpture set against a backdrop of deep teal, setting off the gold, pink, and grey of the patterns. These sections of the artwork create an integrated theme throughout the clinic, and one can imagine it providing a sense of security and continuity for both patients and carers. It is refreshing to see oncology-inspired art metamorphosing

away from the traditional cancer memoir narrative and into a new, multi-dimensional space.

“Hammersmith Hospital is also keen”, David explains. “Some patients use both hospitals, and they are considering using the same patterns on the walls. Perhaps we can make it into wallpaper. It would be amazing to extend the artwork into the radiotherapy and chemotherapy units [as well].”

He put his foot down against any arguments towards shutting the piece behind glass, saying that it would create a sense of suffocation, destroying the aim of connecting with patients. “If patients want to touch it, they can touch it.” It is clear that he has put a great deal of time and compassion into the work.

“Patients wanted colourful, peaceful, easy-to-look-at art”, David explains. “The story behind the work can be used to engage with patients, or they can just enjoy looking at it.” As each butterfly touches a flower, patterns are transferred from the flower to its wing. “All of the patterns come from visiting the research labs”, says David, describing how molecular structures looked “like a beehive...with segmented repetitions”, and how “the petals [of a centrifuge machine] rotate around the centre point and create flowers”. It is clear that some of the butterflies’ patterns also change, in turn changing the flowers, showing how patients influence research, just as research influences patients.

Marques even learned advanced dental techniques, borrowing tools from his dentist to work on the porcelain. “Dental work with porcelain is super-precise, high-tech, and durable”, he says, “but porcelain artists don’t tend to use these techniques.” It fits well with his history of working in the Geneva watch industry, and one expects this artist to go far with his work in the art-medicine



Jeremy Johns

crossover, bringing new techniques and conscientious ideas to the fore. Cancer Research UK has commissioned only one previous artwork for patient engagement, David says, but this project has inspired the charity to set up a formal art grants scheme.

“I didn’t expect to be making butterflies”, he admits, “but they are a metaphor for transformation. With cancer, we all hope for the best outcome, but [no matter what happens,] the message is good care.” The reciprocal impact of patient and clinical care has already been reflected in the artwork itself: “when they installed the porcelain, they said, ‘Oh, we need to change the chairs; maybe improve the lighting...’”. David shows off some samples of new, more comfortable chairs in the clinic that compliment the colour scheme of his artwork. He is rightly proud of this progress, proof that thoughtful, beautiful art, “specifically designed for this space, and the people using the space”, can actively improve the hospital setting, thus providing Science with Care.

Kelley Swain