

The Same Body Seven Times: An Installation in Your Local Art Museum
By Madeleine Trees

I.

In this first portrait, covering nearly an entire wall of the entrance to the gallery, hands are overlapped in cold shades of latex blue, revealing in the negative space my body, contrasted in betadine orange, defined only by an absence.

This pair of hands belongs to a physical therapist; this one, a nurse practitioner; this one, an MRI technician; and so on,

each taking up only a minimum, professional amount of space, each laid with a purpose on the body-that-is-not-there. Behind each set of hands, a body lurks, unseen,

each returning to a life more hidden, perhaps parents, spouses, friends and neighbors, but here and now, unreachable.

Their movements are utilitarian. They manipulate my limbs in the pursuit of a goal, imaging, stretching, positioning, and so on—

I stiffen my joints as I'm asked. I try to relax into positions that stress me.

There is an understanding here: each touch of a thinly gloved hand is intentional, flattening my ankle against an X-ray board, scooting me further down the table, testing the drop of my foot.

The touches laid by these hands carry the same detached intention when turning on a light, drawing up a vial for injection, turning on a thermometer,

and so on. A joint becomes a tool. A muscle becomes a machine. The body is built by purpose.

(You twitch, your skin buzzing—are these hands the hands you knew?—your parents, lifting you towards greater heights, an offering to the future?—the ones who harmed you, memorialized in paint?—your own strength, propelling your own body day by day?—or is this body moved in search of stillness: immobilized, restrained, kept steady?)

Outside the walls, the whole world hastens on. Perhaps those same hands propelled now on their feet, back home, back to work, nowhere at all.)

II.

In this narrow hallway of a gallery lives a series of brightly colored blobs, the canvases laid out in sequence. If you squint,

you can make out that these blobs represent the organs as seen by computed tomography.

Each canvas shows a slice of a 3D model from the back up—here, the straining squares of the spine;

here, the very back slice of the liver; here, the encroaching iliac crest, and so on.

Some 70% of my inner workings are framed on similar canvases, each in different mediums and styles. From crown to colon,

a bit of the lower extremities here and there,

the entirety of my abdomen, pelvis, and spine, all painted and sculpted and projected in slices, adding up to *most* of a woman.

What characteristics are ascribed to the body viewed from this angle? Does the brain, shown with and without contrast,

tell you that I am a well-read person? Does my spinal cord give off a friendly impression? Do my kidneys rejoice in their functionality?

Some of these pictures have measurements marked out, areas of concern, bone irregularities invisible to the layperson's eye.

Others are marked with a radiologist's compliment: *Unremarkable*.

(You shudder at my inner workings rendered so brazenly—does modesty include the insides, too?—something turns in your stomach; can that be your own kidney, called to announce itself?—are we all made up of such oblongs, such straining peaks and sagging valleys—are you, too, a landscaped scarcely contained by flesh?—to think: the myriad worlds that we might all contain!

You eye your fellow gallery-goers, slyly, you think, only to find their own same low-lashed eyes doing the same. Wondering at the histories and futures that you live in and breathe life into, wear to work and school as if it isn't remarkable, grotesque, immense, and lonely. You smile sheepishly, caught looking at each other, wondering what some great computer's eye might see instead.)

III.

In this display, I am presented as a garishly large series of statistics. Numbers in various colors and retro fonts dominate the scene,

undermarked in smaller, more readable fonts with the elements they correspond to.

If you are patient enough to see past the numbers and read what they mean, you can form an invisible picture of the body,

pulsing with the metrics of the circulatory system, the rhythm of heart rate and blood pressure, and the production of urine.

In one corner, my vitamin levels are marked with yellow CAUTION signs, indicating that I am out of the preferred range.

In another, you can see that I have normal kidney function and am properly hydrated.

You can also imagine, from reading my vitals,

that I lead a sedentary life, that I must take care to stand up slowly, and that I'm not eating because something's eating me.

My most notable achievement is outlined in a block of its own, stamped with the date:

14 vials of my blood went into that masterpiece, all at once,

ruling out 11 disorders and ruling in none.

(Again, your thoughts turn inward before outward: how, absent of a caution mark in red, could anyone tell if they were really sick?—must you understand the science before the art?—does one's blood panel reveal a greater secret; could the lab technician tell you have a bad hairline—that you sweat profusely when nervous—that you take the elevator more often than the stairs?

You feel the eyes on you before you cast your own. You meet the gazer's eyes without qualm, knowing this will happen more than once.

You take a guilty joy in imagining the numbers, their blood reading out a series of sins, vices, insecurities, and unhealthy habits. This one lets his dog lick his face too often; that one drinks caffeine too close to bedtime; that one is a reckless driver.)

IV.

This one is called "Patients is a Virtue." The installation splits the room in two: in one half, a waiting room; in the other, a hospital suite.

A sculpture of me, made from sharp angles in clay and fiber, sits sideways in an awkward position in the first half. The row behind it shows me on the floor

with my belongings scattered around me:
a book lies discarded on the chair; my knitting is limp in my lap; I have my eyes closed.
In the hospital room, I am tucked up under the sheets. A vague male figure occupies the corner chair.
The television is playing on mute, but I am not watching. On the wall behind me, an abstract mural is meant to capture nausea and pain in color.
(You are forced to wait in the sterile monotony with me, growing antsy and then tired all at once, observing the passage of time, until the performance in the next room starts over.
By this time, you don't even want to go in.)

V.

In this room, you are treated to an interpretive dance performance, mostly choreographed on the floor, or on a streamlined cube that we are meant to interpret as a bed.
This is the one with me crying.
As the dancer languishes on the floor, collapses onto the cube-bed, and twists her body into a claw of despair,
scenes are projected onto the wall behind her.
In one, there is a timelapse of a very long car trip, ending in an exam room, where a doctor (subtitled) says "There's nothing else I can do."
Then, for an uncomfortably long time, a letter is displayed which expresses an insurance company's denial of a claim.
Finally, there is a very large picture of a man in a doctor's uniform smiling against a corporate background. The picture zooms in very slowly as the dancer starts to expire, her movements growing heavy, her head hanging low.
Now the picture is only the man's white teeth and the words

GUARANTEED SYMPTOM RELIEF

scrolling across the bottom over and over again;
the lights are dimming, and the dancer emulates a dead flower curled in on itself;
the music stops.
(Dance is a hit-or-miss metaphor, and you focus instead on the projected images, the dancer's flickering shadow obscuring them here-and-there, though they remain on her body in warped proportion.
The subtitled doctor, the text, and you think: is this like when you sprained something or another and a faith healer accosted you on the street?—haven't you had family fall prey to similar guarantees?—wouldn't we like to think, after all these years, science has come a little farther than this?
Yet the silence,
dance in the empty room, cold objects standing in for living ones, bears down on you. You are starting to realize that questions are the intended consequence of art,
and that not a single one of yours has yet been answered. Most unsettling: the man's teeth, set too straight behind his promises,
as if to imply it is the teeth themselves that lie.)

VI.

The next room holds a colorful clutter of objects on the far wall, and the rest of the walls are filled with sheets of paper.

The sheets are arranged so that the densest pieces of text show the figure of a person sitting on the ground.

Upon closer examination, the sheets bear phrases like:

Prescription pending authorization from patient's insurance.

Rate the level of difficulty you experience when walking for a long distance.

"I am recommending that the patient remain home for seven (7) days and ask that she be excused from attending for this time."

"You have an outstanding bill of \$1,108.40. REASON: [illegible]."

On the far wall are 3D, oversized versions of pill bottles, pill counters, pill cutters, and pills of many shapes and sizes.

There are also canes, crutches, a recliner, and a heating pad.

These objects are cast in resin, sculpted in clay, and blown from glass, their normality made garish by their presentation.

Compared to previous displays, there is a distinct lack of a body here. It is as though the person to whom these objects belong has discarded them, exhausted by their constant presence.

(Your first impulse is concern: surely giant, neon relics of medical supplies imply a massive, neon person who needs them dearly?—what has happened to this person, so colorful and soft-edged, without these things?—are they all right; have they *died*?)

Your second is that surely, surely, with a good job or a spouse with a good job or good savings or good sense, these bills and denials and labored referrals are exaggerated to the point of art. Of course,

that must be it! Exaggerated as the objects on the fourth wall. Surely? No, of course.

You would be fine if this had happened to you.)

VII.

Here I am, *finally*.

The room is dark and filled with comfortable places to sit. On the wall, a projector plays my days in timelapse,

and the story they tell of this very same body is striking in its mediocrity. And it is *powerful*.

You might be expecting a colorful display of illness, a room filled with art to soothe a life robbed of vibrance, a gleeful defiance of normality.

Or perhaps you expected a soul in agony, with the shades drawn, hopeless and alone.

Perhaps, above all else, you are seeking closure, an answer to your questions, embodied. A how-to guide, a disclaimer, a footnote, a period.

(Without these, the body grows unending, surely: blooms into unspeakable immensity in your imagination,

unrestrained—and something within you is afraid of this; this simply will not do!)

In this picture, I am all of those things, and more, and none of them at all. Demedicalized at last, I prove to be beyond category, beyond explanation.

I am an empty space. I am unremarkable. I am overwhelmed. I am sad.
I am colorful. I am mysterious. I am playful. I am ironic.
On screen, my cats sleep on my chest. I nap with the TV playing. My friends cook a meal
together while I rest. I knit enough socks for a whole schoolyard.
I pop my hips disconcertingly. I stim. I sit like a frog. I sprawl like a summer day. I fidget with my
wrist brace. I lie on the floor to keep from fainting.
And yet, like anyone else, I wake up when I am done sleeping. I eat when I am hungry. Gravity
affects me. I breathe in oxygen and breath out carbon dioxide. I require nutrients to live.
You are deeply fatigued and vaguely unsettled. You are unsure, at this moment,
whether this is the general exhaustion produced by pretentious modern art,
or the uneasy beginning of a paradigm shift within yourself.
The timelapse fades to black, and words fill the screen:
THIS IS THE ONLY ROOM