

to anticoagulant, the deadly trypanosomes? Or is it because I was reminded that nature can be truly cursed, apt to inflict misery at random? More generally, do we have the life we have created for ourselves, or the one that fate has visited upon us? Is it a case of “As you like it,” or “Like you ’as it”?” The man in the tuberculosis ward, the threatening tsetse fly, flash before me. Was he responsible for his situation? Was I? Are we? I thought that I grasped it then, but now I no longer know for

certain. The causes of so many of the disease predicaments I was faced with seem now to be so complex.

The dallying between predicaments wrought through cause and the others wrought by chance seems to be part of everyday medical practice. For our patients — and for us, too — day-to-day experience brings such a curious mixture of choices that we can freely make and of surprising happenings that we can only live through. Between cause and chance, we live the humdrum of

each day, hoping to grow and dreading to die — perhaps from the fateful bite of some fearful bug. Given the cause, most of us will choose to act; given chance, we can only respond. By cause we live; through chance we grow.

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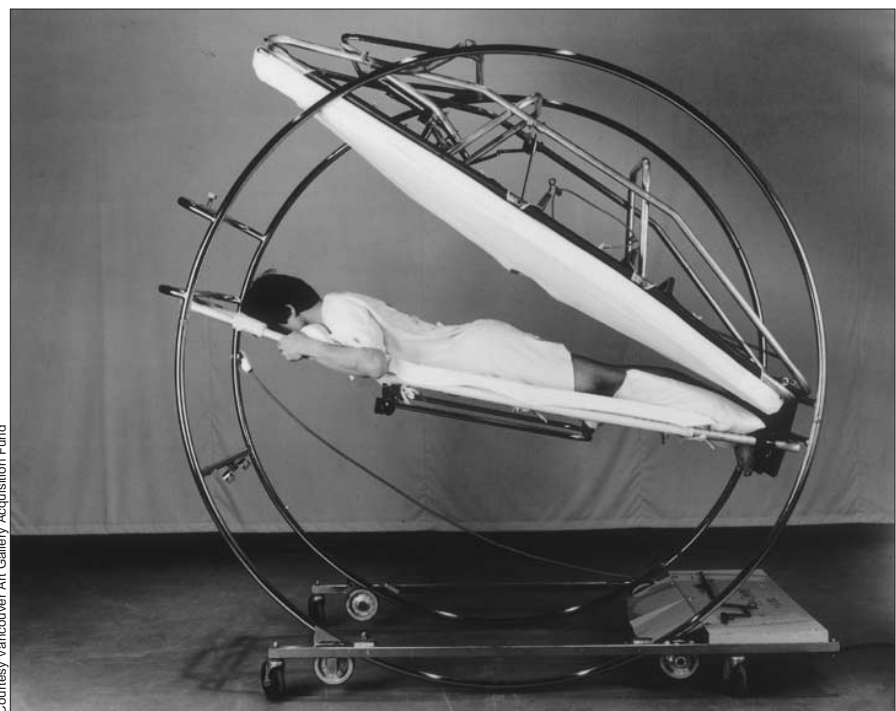
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Lifeworks

A mark on his body, a mark on us

Theodore Wan marked his own body and placed himself at the centre of his most powerful images. In a series of medical and dental photographs taken at Dalhousie University’s medical school and faculty of dentistry in Halifax, the photographer played the patient. In so doing, he created work with a powerful dual nature. The photographs included in the Dalhousie Art Gallery’s recent posthumous survey of Wan’s work from the 1970s and 1980s illustrate our complex relationship with our own bodies. On the one hand, the body signifies strength, gives a sense of identity and is a source of pleasure. But through aging, illness and accident, the body is also vulnerable and, at times, may even elicit disgust.

Despite the inclusion of other body-oriented work (such as those of nudists at Vancouver’s Wreck Beach or of dancers in the city’s strip clubs) created after his return to his hometown in 1980, it is Wan’s multiple series of medical and dental photographs that have the most powerful impact. Created with the full cooperation of the two university faculties, Wan’s photographs were technically accurate and thus usable as visual aids in the education of young doctors and dentists. He spent a year as a staff photographer at the faculty of dentistry. At the same



From the series, *Bound by Everyday Necessities I* (1979).

time, Wan’s artistic sensibilities, honed while completing a Master’s Degree in Fine Art at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) between 1975 and 1979, allowed him to apply a more subjective layer of meaning to his photographs. He recognized that all of us, at one time or another, must assume the role of patient. Often, health care

procedures seem to be done not so much *for* us as *to* us.

This point is not lost on the show’s curator, Christine Conley, a professor of visual arts at the University of Ottawa. Conley first met Wan and became familiar with his work in 1982, while, as a student at the University of Alberta, she worked at the university’s

Sub Art Gallery. “I was intrigued by them because, partly, I was a nursing student before at McMaster University on my way to apply to medical school. I dropped out,” Conley explained as the show was being installed at Dalhousie Art Gallery.

“The reason I dropped out was my feeling very uncomfortable about the way medicine worked and the way people were treated, the lack of treating the spirit. I was always very disturbed [in nursing school] and always found myself protesting things — knowing there was no room to protest within that milieu — so those photographs, once I saw them later, immediately raised all those issues for me.”

It’s easy to see why Wan’s work has resonated in Conley’s mind over the years. Looking at the images in the *Bound by Everyday Necessities I* (1979) series, Wan assumed the role of patient with the help of an orthopedic nurse from the Victoria General, one of Dalhousie’s affiliated hospitals. In the series, Wan is placed in a large, tilting apparatus (called a Circ-O-Lectric) that locks the patient in position to make

him accessible to nurses and doctors. The nurse stands passively with the control box in her hand. This image is unsettling for some viewers, who feel forced to confront the impotence of the prostrate patient.

But it also arouses quite different emotions in others. “For many people there’s a real erotic charge to that photograph,” Conley suggests. “You still get get-well cards with jokes about nurses.” Wan’s awareness of this eroticization is illustrated in an out-take image from the *Bound I* series, which was included in a concurrently run show of the artist’s archives at NSCAD’s Anna Leonowens Gallery. In this image, Wan pictures himself lifting up the nurse’s skirt as she straps him in the apparatus.

The field of dentistry offered similar potency for Wan. While he depicts correct positioning of radiographic equipment in *Dental X-Ray Positions* (1979), his choice of camera angle and his passive facial expression create the impression that the machine is aggressively butting up against his patient’s face. Wan visually communicates the message that this technology can be helpful or menacing to individuals, depending on their feelings about oral health.

For Marilyn Klein, who worked with Wan at the Faculty of Dentistry, x-rays and related procedures were part of the profession. “I was impressed that he saw art in situations many of us overlook as routine [in the school],” offered Klein, the chief biomedical photographer and manager of the Dental Instructional Resources unit at the



From the series *Dental X-Ray Positions* (1979).



From the series *Bridine Scrub for General Surgery* (1977).

Faculty of Dentistry. “There are many different ways of seeing the same scene. You have to step away from what is familiar to you and see it from another perspective.”

Dalhousie Art Gallery curator and director Susan Gibson Garvey marvelled at the different perspective Wan offers in *Bridine Scrub for General Surgery* (1977). “He’s so passive, but he’s marked with these divisions almost like he was a piece of meat.”

We are all made of flesh; flesh that changes over time. In Wan’s case, his Dalhousie University work eerily foreshadows his own later experiences as a patient. In the *Bridine* photograph, he appears muscular and healthy. By contrast, he appears slight in a self-portrait taken shortly before his untimely death in 1987 from cancer of the sinus. “If you look closely you can see the radiation burns on his face. He did document his illness,” Christine Conley states.

It’s the same image that in smaller size appears at Wan’s mausoleum.

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