

CREATIVE COMMENTARY

CHEMO-WASTE

Dellas Henke

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The 'Chemo-Waste' project was a refuge from the impairment of quality of life, and the associated intense emotions of having and dealing with a life-threatening illness. The project works as a witness, a document, a narrative for staying vigilant in the battles of strength and willpower to overcome cancer. The image above is a traditional process silver-gelatin photograph and is the title of this commentary. Sometimes I was in a room with many other patients in a circle – it was very weird to be in public during such an intimate, personal moment of our lives but it made the process efficient for the amazing nurses. I had to be careful taking this photo so no one would see me making it and so that none of the other 30 people in the room appeared in it. The chemo-waste tub on wheels was full of toxic stuff, used needles, tubes, blood and flotsam from the process.

Introduction

Late in 1997 I woke up with a massive lump on my neck that only lasted a few days then vanished as mysteriously as it appeared. It took many specialists many months to track the cause. They had been poking in the wrong places because back then people in their early forties didn't get Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia (CLL), a cancer that affects the blood and bone marrow — a kind of leukemia that mainly only showed up in people in their seventies or eighties. I was told to go home, live life as normal and when it developed to a dangerous and treatable point then they would deal with it. That took six years. The fact is, they really didn't have treatments but because this tumour in the blood was showing up more and more often and in younger and younger people, research and even clinical trials were started during that six year wait. During the year of waiting I

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would have produced a couple hundred pieces of work – some finished and some just ephemera, trials of drawings, snapshots and prints – a kind of diary scrapbook of thoughts and emotions tucked away in memorial boxes for future reference.

The Chemo-Waste project lasted six or seven years although I didn't know it was a project until I realised that there were hundreds of visual notes – silver-gelatin photos, drug-store photos, drawings, a small suite of etchings and some mixed media work. Much of it is unfinished ephemera but from that extended effort and focus some of the sketchbook work was gathered into something complete. There were other bodies of work made at the time which were directly or indirectly influenced by the experience. Emotions are controlled by creating other off-shoot image series '*Markers*' and '*Garden and Tangles*' to vent through creativity by documenting thoughts of entanglement and recognising that what you thought of your life may become very short. Most of the series of '*Markers*', '*Garden and Tangles*' photographs were made during the prolonged six year wait – these images stood for or were influenced by what was going on, tangles in my blood, watching the spent lush garden returning to the soil, toppled trees – and the waiting, the waiting had a profound influence on these photographs.



Figure 1: '*Markers*', Henke 2000 and '*Garden and Tangles*' Henke 2000.

The Early Years – Introduction to Photography

I grew up in Rochester NY, home of the Eastman Kodak Company where my father worked. Growing up with the latest Kodak cameras in our hands at a very young age we captured everything, the forts we built, the same artificial Christmas tree year after year – all the usual suburban memorabilia was photographed. None of us were very savvy or skilled and what we shot was rarely considered – (heads cut off being a common, rarely corrected problem). Kodak was an iconic brand in the twentieth century making photography available to the middle class and allowing the concerns, traditions, rituals of the family to capture moments that otherwise, we assumed, would be lost. So, photography for me during those early times was driven by sentiment and carefree middle class values. The first time I saw serious photographic images was in high school when we were introduced to the Brady Civil War images and then remarkably, a student in a World History class brought in her father's photo album of the lynching of Mussolini and his family. At that time I am sure those photographs were never published as they are so incredibly gruesome although, you can now find them on Getty Images. Seeing those photographs shook me and I wondered at the time – and I still do wonder – how growing up with those albums in your house might shape your life. It was an early lesson about the power and possibilities of photography and a far cry from photos of Christmas presents and tree forts! Thinking of that album of photographs I am reminded of the hundreds of mobile phone-photos made at the US Capitol on January 6th and how close the mob came to creating and documenting another gruesome scene. And I think of how quickly those images were circulated world-wide. Today millions of photographs are uploaded to social media platforms on a daily basis.

In college a couple of years later I happened to see the remarkable 'New Topographics' at the Eastman House in Rochester NY exhibited from 1975-2009. This exhibition of urban landscape photography was a turning point in the history of photography that signalled a radical shift away from traditional depictions of landscape: 'Pictures of transcendent natural vistas gave way to unromanticised views of stark industrial landscapes, suburban sprawl, and everyday scenes not usually given a second glance' (SFMOMA 2021). Curated by William Jenkins this historical exhibition has been critiqued a number of times over the years and in 2010 O'Hagan, a reporter from the *Guardian*, discussed its value and importance for landscape photography and questions if the images have the same impact today:

The New Topographics exhibition in 1975 was not just the moment when the apparently banal became accepted as a legitimate photographic subject, but when a certain strand of theoretically driven photography began to permeate the wider contemporary art world. Looking back, one can see how these images of the 'man-altered landscape' carried a political message and reflected, unconsciously or otherwise, the growing unease about how the natural landscape was being eroded by industrial development and the spread of cities (O'Hagan 2010).

Although as a young man at the time I can't say I understood the radical re-visioning in the New Topographic exhibition but I can say that it was the first time I took a hard look at the reality of our culture in America represented photographically because I grew up in one of those post-war middle class housing developments as depicted in so many photos in that exhibit. From this I learned to question what I see and what I have been taught to value and take for granted and what not to value. In any case, I have always had a camera near-by and I photograph just about everything. It was and is a tool much like a sketchbook. By the time the Chemo-Waste photographs were made it was only natural for me to use the camera as much as I use drawing and printmaking, as a means to see the world and to try to grasp a relationship to it. I often go back to old photographs, prints and drawings to get a sense of what I was thinking or wondering about when the images were first made. I almost never really know what I am doing and so going back and looking is useful. Another way to say this – and this took me a long time to learn – is that I draw or photograph *in order to find out what I was thinking, feeling and wondering about*.

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I have no formal training in photography outside of an introductory course in college. At some point around the late 1990s I recognised I was taking a deeper dive into the medium. This discovery was made when I noticed that of the last 100 art books I purchased 90 of them were photobooks – this realisation was the signal to set up a dark room and try to come to a deeper understanding of the medium. Although a dying art, the darkroom is literally a dark room made for the development of photographic traditional film and printing. I have to say, I was pretty irreverent to the teachings of Ansel Adams or traditional methods of photographing. Experimentation was key and I often drew on my photos, painted on them, cut them up, in order to finish them or to see what else they could reveal – I hardly ever made a good print and if I did I didn't know how to do it again. During this time I also realised that I did not like the commercially printed photograph as they don't *feel* as good in your hand, they don't sound good when you handle them especially today when I think about how we view photographs now – just pixels on a screen – we can't even touch them. I love to work with etchings and particularly as printed objects to touch and feel. This has to do with the beautiful papers and inks used to make them. Etching is a process where an image is created by scratching with specialty tools onto metal or polymer plates, the plate is then inked and pressed onto dampened art-paper to make a print. The love of printmaking led me to taking a workshop with a colleague at Anderson Ranch Art Center in Colorado working in copper plate gravure and learning that the process was too toxic, expensive and arduous. The next step was to learn photopolymer gravure – a perfect marriage of photography and printmaking – producing and seeing photographs printed with ink on beautiful papers. It is a process combining photography

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and intaglio printmaking. Intaglio is where the image is etched onto a plate. Interestingly the first photogravure method for printmaking was invented by William Henry Fox Talbot and Karel Klič in the early nineteenth-century, which then became the main process for commercial printing. Photopolymer gravure is a modern non-toxic process, not so arduous as in traditional gravure, where an image is etched direct onto a plate which I intend to work further on this practice in the near future.

The Experience

The following is the artist statement from the 2007 Coe College exhibition of the Chemo-Waste suite of work. Coe College is in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, USA.

Artist statement Chemo-Waste 2007

It was a question. . . what do you do with this? What *do* you do with 50 or 60 waiting rooms, an unknown void that fills you like a water balloon, and what about the boredom? To document this experience was something to do while waiting. And with a concern that this kind of experience might easily be squandered. The camera is a kind of blanket to peek out from under, a note pad, with a hope for eventual lucidity, maybe a silver lining caught in the silver grains. Meanwhile a small pile of pictures grew: What is showing? In what way? And was this experience 'worth it'? One wonders.

When I look back at my pictures they seem hardly a mirror. Can *that* be me? As far as I could see, there was no self-portrait with cancer. What I saw was this bizarre passivity, a mental mud. In Houston USA I saw thousands of people being ushered onto wheelchairs, though weirdly, the greeters in their lily white coats were so kind and decent you could hardly believe it and I was convinced that it was a six year-long dream that might or might not end soon. That's who is in the pictures.

When you sit in a chemo clinic, (chemotherapy, the latest and greatest new state-sponsored lottery game; our elected officials *add* the cost of cancer to the gross national product), it's like sitting in a life-and-death hairdressing salon – except half the people are hairless – and you can't exactly ask the 20 or 30 folks around you if you can photograph them, what would be the point? Though you become so outraged at the suffering, and the profiteering that you do feel tempted to acknowledge it, to expose it. Besides, if this phenomenon, this epidemic, this industry was rare you might feel, *Why me?* But you feel much more, *Why do we let this happen?*

When I was a boy I remember hearing that one in five Americans would get cancer, this said with the inflection—*This is too much*. Now it is one in two men and one in three women. This is way too much. On the 16th and last day of chemo, by timing drips, I counted 16,800 drops of Rituxan, Fludarabine, and Cytoxin. Then I did the math. Thirty-two cents a drip. Do the math. It is boring sitting there; you nearly hope something will go wrong with the needle in your arm just to be touched by one of the nurses; you want to know something is happening, something *else* is happening. And they do seem to have answers, a genuine response to this. The doctors, who are truly, respectfully brilliant do have a response ... they just don't let you see it.

Energy drops to flu level, toxin quickens in every cell, mind slows and numbs, stomach churns. Now you know something is happening. What? Make pictures to maybe find out. It somehow seems better than reading the science or charting the weekly blood counts that seem as incomprehensible and fickle as the Dow Jones. And though you know all of these things have an effect on you and those you care about, you don't really believe in any of these abstractions. Rebound. (Almost). Forget this is happening. 16,800 drops of nausea ... make up songs ... 'I'm a raging toxic waste dump' sung to the tune of 'Glory, Glory Hallelujah'.

The information gathered isn't journalism, nor what we call art, more of a documentation. The burden of meaning has again outweighed, outmaneuvered any ability to stick it on a pin. I also realise that after looking at the six-month pile of pictures that I was instinctively interested in imaging what I was likely to repress (in this way they are a kind of anti-symbol). *Instinct* because regarding what is repressed may be of value for healing. By trying to describe our appearance in the world, in a small way they may help define what is human ... functioning right on the boundary, maybe on each side of the boundary where we lose our humanity, where we discover madness

and death. Where we discover hope...

Conclusion

The portfolio of images published here are a selection of the final works from the visual notes, photographs, sketchbooks and diaries made during the experience, through all of the time waiting and during the treatment, and the aftermath.

References:

O'Hagan S. 2010 New Topographics: Photographs that find beauty in the banal, *The Guardian*: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/feb/08/new-topographics-photographs-american-landscapes> (accessed 05/03/2021).

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Biography

Author : Photographer : Printmaker

Dellas Henke earned a Master of Fine Arts in printmaking from the University of Iowa where he was exposed to fine letterpress printing. Over his career he has made three artist's books illustrating with his etchings *Waiting for Godot*, *Company*, printed by The Iowa Centre for the Book, and *Ill Seen Ill Said* by *Samuel Beckett* and recently completed making a fourth book *In the Penal Colony* by *Franz Kafka*, a new translation of the text by Breon Mitchell printed by Deep Wood Press. Henke has been teaching printmaking and drawing at Grand Valley State University for his entire career. Dellas has exhibited his work widely in North America and internationally with work in numerous museum, university and private collections.



113-4: 'Waiting Room'. Silver photograph. Sometimes I got a room to myself to wait out the hours during chemo. This image has always had a creepy resemblance to an electric chair.



131-22: 'More waiting!' A digital photograph with just normal manipulations. This was the first chemotherapy day. They put you in a hospital room. A few hours after this late afternoon photo was made I was glad I was in the hospital.



120-11: 'Untitled. Silver photograph'. This photo shows that it was clearly a moment when I was looking at a recent image I made and speculating about it. It comes from questioning the image on the screen and my situation.



126-11: 'Moments'. Colour commercially processed photographs. All standard drugstore 4X6" images. All photographed while bored waiting for a doctor to show up.



135-26: 'Jewelry'. Also a digital photograph minimally manipulated. The chemo sessions lasted two to three days each so they thankfully left the apparatus attached.



119-10 'You and You and You'. Silver photo scanned and digitally reprinted and drawn on with graphite and a chalk pencil. Obviously posed – and I can't at all recall what I was thinking at that time except to say that I often draw or photograph with no conscious intention, letting the making of a visual diary develop and flow – in order to find out what I am thinking.



128-19: 'Leukey Boy'. Printed from traditional film on silver-gelatine paper of self-portrait in front of a white chalk drawing on black paper. Digitally scanned and levels adjusted then printed on mat inkjet paper, hand-coloured and reprinted on satin inkjet paper. The emotional strain made days feel like this.



135-27: 'Kid Gloves'. Digital photograph manipulated to remove background with etching printed on top then hand coloured. I could not explain this if I tried!! It must have bothered me because I only printed one of these.