

HYPERALLERGIC

GALLERIES

Artists Share Their Personal, Tragic Experiences in Health and Care

by **Gretchen Coombs** on August 5, 2016

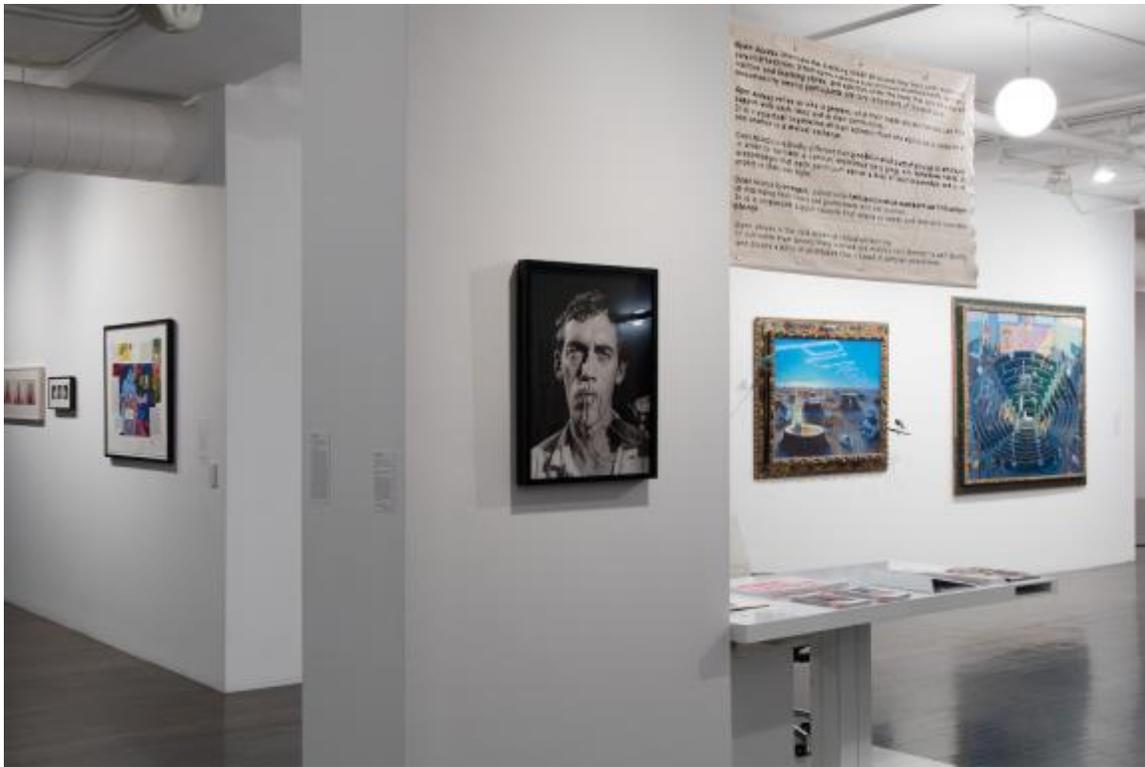


Installation view of Jordan Eagles's "Blood Mirror" in 'The Power of Your Care' at the 8th Floor, New York (all photos courtesy the 8th Floor unless otherwise noted)

In the small foyer of the 8th Floor gallery, a video shows artist

Carmen Papalia with a bullhorn in place of a cane — Papalia, who is blind, beckons those who pass him as he strolls the sidewalk of a busy Vancouver street, making a public declaration of his need to cross. This video, titled “White Cane, Amplified” (2015), gives insight into one of his daily challenges and implicates viewers in the question of responsibility for care — or, more specifically, how cultural environments support disability. As I walk inside the main gallery, I see another piece that points to our seeming failure to “care”: the 1990 iconic AIDS-related image by Andreas Sterzing, “David Wojnarowicz (Silence=Death)” (1989/2014), which hangs prominently, and offers a sobering reminder of the prejudices we bring to disease and the crisis of health care in the US.

How do we care? What are the societal conditions that produce the need for care? How do we talk about disability? How do we make visible those forms of care necessary to make life bearable for all, and how then do we elicit empathy and better care? These are some of the questions curator Sara Reisman poses in the exhibition *In the Power of Your Care*. Using all manner of media, artists share their personal stories in works such as Pepe Espaliu’s sculpture “El Nido (The Nest)” (1993), a symbolic piece about AIDS support networks; Frank Moore’s painting “Arena” (1992), which confronts the bureaucracy of the health system; Sunaura Taylor’s “Intersex” (2011), a digital print on paper about the struggles that occur at the intersection of gender identity, discrimination, and disability; Hunter Reynolds’s “Medication Reminder” (2015), a sound and video installation about the intimacy of caregiving; and Mladen Miljanovic’s “Show Where it Hurts With Your Hand” (2012), a digital projection of photographs dealing with trauma. The show details how artists have and continue to find alternative ways to sustain, improve, and repair each other and society.



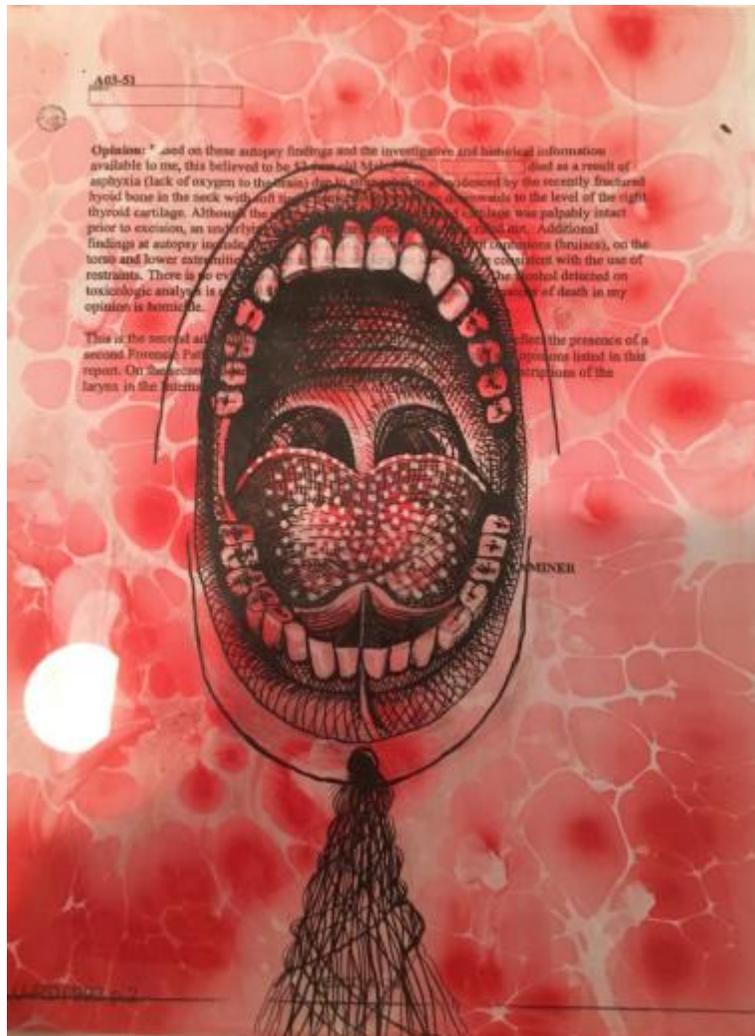
Installation view of 'The Power of Your Care' at the 8th Floor

At the far end of the gallery, inside an enclosed room, is a bench. On the wall facing it, two sconces project an amber glow, while hospital blankets hang, ghost-like, on the adjacent walls. An ambient soundtrack combines a shaman's meditative healing chant with clicking, the voice of a nurse, and the noise of an MRI machine. The artist duo caraballo-farman's "Contemplation Source Room" (2016) offers a space of temporary immersion in the artists' experience of the health care system. As a way to explore the physical nature of breast cancer, caraballo printed her tumors in 3D and then enlarged them to become the sconces. Not only do we hear the clinical sounds of battling disease, we also see illness externalized as a grim and haunting reality.



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One of the most visually compelling works in the show is Jordan Eagles's "Blood Mirror" (2015), wherein large plexiglass plates splattered with blood are illuminated to project their red designs from ceiling to floor in one corner of the gallery. The blood is real, collected through donations from gay, bisexual, and queer men. Blood donations from these men were banned in the US until as recently as last year, revealing the prejudices within the health care system and pointing to the communities that remain underserved by it. Blood here becomes something that binds and connects us, as does the need for care.



Rajkamal Kahlon, 'Untitled Series of Autopsy Reports' (2011) (detail) (click to enlarge) (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

In contrast to Eagles's work, in which something internal is projected outward and amplified, Rajkamal Kahlon's *Untitled Series of Autopsy Reports* (2011) magnifies trauma on a small scale, forcing us to take an unsettling look at the framing of death in clinical reports. In "Did You Kiss the Dead Body?," titled after a line in a Harold Pinter poem, Kahlon obtained, via the ACLU's website, autopsy reports of Iraqi and Afghan men who died in US military bases and prisons in Iraq and Afghanistan. On each report she drew bodies and body parts, then marbled it with red ink. This technique has a personal, visceral effect on the clinical reports.

Looking at them along the length of the narrow vitrine tells a story of power and abuse, speaking to the trauma and lack of care many detainees have experienced as well as offering a pointed critique of the culture of war.

Harking back to *caraballo-farman*, several photographic series in the show reflect feminism's enduring battle against expectations of beauty, in particular how women have taken control of their bodies as they battle disease. Draped only in a sheet gathered around her breasts and fastened with diaper pins, the late Jo Spence rejects the possibility of being defined or consumed by her cancer. The "X" mark above her left breast signals an impending mastectomy. Spence's portrait resonates with two triptychs by Hannah Wilke: "Truth of Consequences" (1991), one of her "performalist self-portraits," and "Untitled" (1992), which chronicles Wilke's transformation after undergoing chemotherapy for lymphoma. Both pieces feature the artist's head in profile, face-on, and from behind, suggesting a mug shot as well as a performance of defiance. Nearby, Wilke's "Why Not Sneeze" (1992) connects her personal journey with the medical industry that has shaped it. A readymade birdcage filled with medical paraphernalia, including empty bottles and syringes, transmits the weight of her illness through metaphor — the body is caged and under the control of the industry, unable to escape. Both Wilke and Spence resist expectations of beauty by performing how they really are — diseased bodies and all — and not an expectation of how they should look.



Hannah Wilke, "Why Not Sneeze" (1992) (photo by the author for *Hyperallergic*)

Jody Wood's photographic series refocuses this theme of care and appearance in her project *Beauty in Transition* (2014), documented in a video that shows her driving a mobile salon around New York City, offering free styling and beauty services to homeless women. While basic necessities and structural support are the most important needs for the homeless, self-care is also a part of their identity and well-being. Large-scale portraits reveal Wood's clients after they've been through her salon. In a way, the joy these women project affirms how beautifying is a form of care, but it also demonstrates how touch and intimacy are missing for so many, while being critical to self-representation and agency. But Wood's work doesn't address the structural issues that perpetuate homelessness, and I wonder if or how these small

interventions can push beyond the need for self-care to a directive for community care.



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In the Power of Your Care attempts to cover a great deal of ground in a very small space, which doesn't serve the intensity of the narrative. I wanted each work to have more room to speak, to move me the way "Contemplation Source Room" did. Many works competed for my attention and I sometimes lost the thread that tied them together. There are so many stories, so many tragedies, reinforced by looming questions about health care, its costs, and how we can have societal accountability. As a whole, it can be nearly incomprehensible, but ultimately the experiences in this exhibition are personal ones: stories that affirm how we have and continue to care for one another, that the body is truly a site of interdependence. Exiting through the foyer, we see Papalia's piece once again, and it seems more optimistic this time, as two children eventually come to his aid — the power of *your* care on

full display.

In the Power of Your Care continues at the 8th Floor (17 West 17th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through August 12.