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Review: Photographer and cancer survivor

Constance Thalken gives new meaning to “personal”

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Talk about art is full of mushy tributes that have a way of ending conversation. There are the savorless compliments “interesting” and “unique,” and the mawkish endorsements “genuine” and “authentic.” And there is “personal.” What does it mean to say that art is “personal,” anyway? Is there a more cloying expression of praise?



Constance Thalken's "Self-portrait #2"

I have a peeve about the word “personal” when it comes to art. What bothers me is not that it raises questions about how works of art are particular to their creators, or how they sometimes reveal

the interiority of an artist, or afford direct engagement. Rather what bothers me is the ethos of the word, the auratic haze surrounding it. More than an informational or analytic term, “personal” tends to be an honorific label that imbues whatever is confidential to the artist with a certain intrinsic fascinatingness or prepossessing value. A mystique about the artist, in this logic, underwrites the work of art as its deepest and most enduring subject.

Among many problems with this way of thinking, it raises basic questions of genre. Why should we presume works of art to be non-fictional rather than fictive, or to be one to the exclusion of the other, as if they did not very often emulsify the distinction? And there is the related problem of an imputed correspondence between artwork and the person of the artist, as if one were a reliable guide for the other. Ultimately, there seems to me to be a bait-and-switch lurking in the label “personal,” in which speaking about work — studying, analyzing, praising, criticizing — becomes an exercise in flattering and judging the artist “behind” or “within” the work. I would argue, on the contrary, that the primary freedom an artist exercises in making work entails, at the least, a freedom from having to become a surrogate for that work. I would argue further that an artist’s creative freedom occasions a corollary freedom in a viewer, namely to evaluate the work on *its* own terms.

One of the many successes of “1.2 cm,” Constance Thalken’s show on view at Whitespace gallery through February 16, is its nuanced handling of “the personal” in relation to the artist’s intensely personal subject, her own battle with breast cancer. Far from self-indulgent and distinctly reticent about emotional confession, Thalken offers a matrix for thinking about cancer in several registers simultaneously: archival, computational, procedural, medical-historical and symbolic. She also offers a startling self-reckoning, and a deep account of the psychological mettle that surviving cancer requires.

From January 2010 through February 2011, Thalken underwent a battery of cancer treatments, including surgery, chemotherapy, radiotherapy, targeted drug therapy, hormone therapy and acupuncture. She saved the bandages, patches, wrappings, gauzes and dressing materials used in these treatments, plus the pony tail she lopped off in anticipation of the loss of her hair, and meticulously archived them in ziplock bags. Later she photographed the contents of selected bags close up — life size or larger — together with strips of masking tape on which she identified treatments and dates of use. Grids and single lines of these photographs form the bulk of the show.

On the one hand, these pictures are stark and insistent. Each presents a relic of a therapeutic event and functions as an index of that event — direct evidence in very much the way that photographs themselves are understood to be physically derived from their referents by the action of reflected light. On the other hand, these images are full of riddles. They signify a great deal about Thalken's treatment history but describe very little of it, and what they do describe — tiny bloodstains, the particular wrinkles of peeled-off medical tape, disposable bar-coded bracelets — is often generic.



Thalken's "Herceptin #8"

More than this, these images withhold the afflicted body as both the object and experiencing subject of treatment. The photographs do not show the physical effects of the treatments or interpret what any procedure felt like. We do not learn which were harder to bear and which easier, which were critical and which ancillary. We do not learn of progress and setbacks, good days and bad. The grids neutralize narrative, equalize the events and episodes involved, suppress our recognition of pain suffered, and leave the body as the absented object of medical science. Or to put it differently, inasmuch as the itemized bandages are metonyms for Thalken's illness, they are parts that stand for an undisclosed traumatic whole, and her ordeal remains largely unreconstructable from the details of its detritus.

But for all the work's forbearance, strategy in this section of the show does not trump sentiment, which enters unexpectedly through the strong association between warm flesh and the texture and color of the marble flooring. Its grain and fibrousness are uncannily carnal, and its saffrons and pinks precisely complement the skin tones in the show's three large self-portraits (see below). The indexical pictures that at first seem a cold catalog of medical information re-emerge on second look as Color Field works whose marmoreal swirls and veins almost have the pulse of life. The evidence they contain is qualitative as much as quantitative, the data become warm, and the repetitive photographic acts seem one aspect of an expanding field of healing. The sense that Thalken is wrestling with the disease's self-alienating effects and the medicalization of the ill body — its dissolution into statistics and pharmacological syllables — morphs into an awareness of an extraordinarily focused resolve to survive.

The heart of the show is the set of three nude self-portraits that Thalken made one afternoon after four months of chemotherapy. With rings on her fingers and without removing the bandages stuck to her skin — a powerful link between the show's distinct sides — she positioned herself on a simple upholstered bench in the natural light of a window. Using an almost clinical approach, she photographed herself from the back, the front and the side.

The results are riveting.

The human creature that we behold defies categories, a strikingly androgynous figure with the attributes of both age and youth, sickness and strength, weakness and will, aliveness and decline. It is rare, in my experience, to encounter self-portraits perched so expertly — so victoriously — between the poles of countervailing truths. These are studies in mortality, which is to say studies in unsentimental tenderness and non-judgmental self-appraisal. They show us a woman who is acutely vulnerable but fierce, uncertain about the future but certain about facing that uncertainty frankly.

Standing before these pictures and looking into them for a long time, I recalled the advice of my rabbi on how best to approach Yom Kippur, the day of judgment: go through the day with two pieces of paper in your pockets, one reminding you of impermanence, that you are but ashes and dust, and the other reminding you, in the words of the Mishnah, that the whole world was made for the sake of each human being, and you.



Details from a Thalken self-portrait, excerpted by the reviewer.

At a certain point, I found myself studying Thalken's self-portraits by making photographs of their details. From her frontal portrait, for example, I made a diptych focusing on each of her hands as separated by her left knee. The distinctions between the hands seem

as indicative as anything of the dual consciousness in these works. The right hand is taut with energy, each finger articulated in an anticipatory arch, the palm lifted slightly from the bench. Her left hand, by contrast, is calm, each finger articulated as an aspect of serenity, the palm firmly pressed into the fabric of the seat. The two hands and Thalken's bent arms serve as a frame — or a parenthesis — for the rest of the figure, as if to suggest that the whole is contained between all that the two hands mark out.

Are the artist's poses self-consciously struck or unself-consciously assumed? I can't say and I don't know that she herself could say. At some level the distinction is moot. Going through cancer, she seems to say, requires both regimen and repose, activities strictly executed and as much equipoise as a person can muster. It requires the person to synthesize opposites without unduly fusing them, and to do so over and over again for months and years.

And it requires a person to contemplate the mystery of how, with cancer, the body produces its own destruction, how normal cells become carcinogenic, and how the disease changes — or in Thalken's case, does not change — the well self into a cancered self. Her photographs teach us that keeping the spirit healthy as the body ails requires inhabiting — enhancing, performing — whatever health exists at a given moment, in whatever repetitive and spontaneous ways are necessary.

In the light box that forms the coda of her show, we learn that the 1.2-centimeter tumor in Thalken's breast was the equivalent of 1.2 billion cancer cells, \$285,748.24 in medical expenses, 60 doses of the drug Dexamethasone, 95 doses of Compazine, 5,064 milligrams of Herceptin, 1,000 to 2,000 photons of centiGray, 139 medical appointments, and other facts that draw the contour of her malady. Her case is, of course, just one example of the "iconic disease of contemporary society," as she ably puts it in her artist's statement — "the emperor of all maladies," in the words of Pulitzer Prize-winning physician Siddhartha Mukherjee. Combining a precise economy of means, a rigorous artistic intellect and a deep heart, in "1.2 cm" Thalken has made personal work of the best kind.