



Living in the shadow of cancer makes every daily action an affirmation of life. I see the importance of accepting death in a non-fearful way and the importance of finding joy in life.

ROBERT POPE

Robert Pope: Images of Illness

by Jock Murray



Robert Pope seems always to have been an artist. He was talented in science and graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree with studies in mathematics and physics from Acadia University. Even during these studies he was sketching and doodling, and when his father, Rev. William Pope, started a book publishing company, Robert provided some cover illustrations.

He realized that he wanted to explore his art further and dropped ideas about a life in science and entered the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD). He learned a lot of new skills and was able to expand his approaches to expression, but became uncomfortable with the emphasis on conceptual and experimental art and the other movements that were exciting the art world of the 1960s and 1970s. He realized that he had to undo some of the things he was learning and develop his own method of expressing himself. He developed early what artist and friend Alex Livingston said was his artistic concept, something many artists struggle to find much of their lives. He would consider an important concept, such as relationships, and then do almost fifty works on that theme, as he did with his exhibit, *A Seal Upon Thine Heart*, or our relationships with machines in the thirty works in the exhibit, *Accident*. His art was soon fully developed, expressing a scene and an idea in a sparse but super-realistic setting with magical overtones. The scenes in his works have a photographic realism, but all extraneous components of the scene are removed. He had a methodical and regimented approach to his work that resembled Alex Colville, the celebrated Canadian artist he admired, who lives in the same area of Nova Scotia's Annapolis Valley.

He was turning out works on a few major themes, and receiving increasing attention and acclaim for his exhibits. Just when he seemed on his way to a successful career tragedy struck. One morning while shaving he noticed a lump on his neck and after consultations, was diagnosed as having a particularly aggressive form of Hodgkin's Disease.

His art had to be set aside to a great extent as he spent the next few years going through radiation and chemotherapy, with some periods of remission, followed by recurrence. He worked hard at trying to recover, doing all he could to assist the medical therapies.

When he was feeling better, and distanced enough from the experience to reflect broadly on the experience of illness and healing, he embarked with enthusiasm on a grand project which would result in almost one hundred works in various media depicting images of the cancer experience and all that illness means to human existence.

Anatole Broyard, when he developed cancer, wrote a book with the provocative title, *Intoxicated by My Illness*, reflecting on how life-threatening illness changed his view of the world.¹ Many people with a serious illness, like Robert Pope, realized that an illness opened their eyes to experiences, relationships, and the meaning of life in a way not possible before. But time is required to be able to see the experience in context and as Robert showed, a phenomenon beyond himself. When Robert was distant enough from the period of chemotherapy and the roller coaster of relapses and remissions, he began to translate his perceptions, perspective and feelings onto his canvases. There was a sense of immediacy and urgency to this creative act, and he worked at a feverish pace over the next few years, completing almost one hundred works in various media.

In November 1991 his works were shown at Dalhousie Art Gallery in an exhibit entitled, *Shadow Area: Images of Illness and Healing*. The exhibit was accompanied by a book containing his words and images, *Illness and Healing: Images of Cancer*.² The response was overwhelming, and it was not only the poignancy of the theme that excited viewers, it was the recognition that there was now on the scene a major young artist.

Sparrow

1989

acrylic on canvas

61.0 cm x 76.2 cm





Mountain

1990

acrylic on canvas

91.4 x 137.2 cm

I had met Robert some time before when we were just starting the Medical Humanities Program at Dalhousie Medical School, and one of our staff members, June Penny, told me there was a young man painting his experience with cancer. Intrigued, my wife Janet and I made an arrangement to meet him in his large cold warehouse studio near the waterfront. We were taken aback by the power of the large paintings leaning against many walls. He was a little unsure of us, I suspect because he wondered if we would understand what he was doing. He trusted enough to accept my invitation to come to the medical school and present an illustrated talk to our students. It was interesting to watch as the quiet thin young man who looked slight and frail, came to life in front of the students, leaving them with an experience they would not forget.³

The medical students initially wanted to hear what he meant by each picture and what the symbolism meant, but they soon learned he was more interested in knowing what they thought, what they saw in the pictures and how their lives and their experiences led them to interpret a scene in the way they did. He told them he believed, like Duchamp, that an art work was only complete when the work and the person perceiving it came together, because everyone has a unique life and thus a unique perception.

The message that was so clear to students and physicians was the different perspective on the things they saw each day in the hospitals and the clinics, things they were seeing from the patient's perspective.

In the fifteen years since Robert's untimely death we have continued to hold a discussion and a presentation of his book to the entering class of medical students so that they would begin their medical studies by seeing illness and healing from the patient's perspective. We believe this introduction is a good way to effect a balance and a sensitivity for the people they will be seeing.

The impact of his paintings has grown through the guidance of the Robert Pope Foundation, formed by his mother and father, William and Isabel Pope, and supported by a board of artists, health care workers, writers and community leaders. The works have now been exhibited in over seventy cities in North America, United Kingdom, Australia and Europe, in every medical school

in Canada and at many medical and community conferences. Copies of Robert Pope's book with his words and his paintings are distributed to other medical schools each year. In carrying on Robert Pope's views and message, the Foundation also supports the Medical Humanities Program at Dalhousie, and provides scholarships at NSCAD, as well as a Visiting Professorship in the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada in the name of Dr. Balfour Mount, a long time supporter of the Foundation and a pioneer in palliative care in Canada. The message of Robert Pope is growing year by year.

I have selected a small number of paintings that have had a particular impact with cancer survivors and their families, health care professionals, students and members of the community who have experienced illness in themselves or in their families.

SPARROW

So many cancer patients remember the experience of lying in bed like the young man quietly observing the sparrow on the chestnut tree outside the window, remembering the feeling of fragility and hope as they went through treatments. He wrote that the title of *Sparrow* "applies as much to the man as to the bird." The scene was Robert Pope's room at the Princess Margaret Hospital, a cancer hospital in Toronto.

MOUNTAIN

Often inspired by the songs of Springstein, Dylan and other musician-poets, he said he based this painting on an Elvis Presley song, "Lord, you gave me a mountain this time." Like many of his paintings, the scene in the room and mountain in the distance are a metaphor for his illness. In the room we see the relationship of the person weakened by illness but comforted by a concerned caregiver, while the distant mountain representing the looming cancer lurks in the distance. Although not present in his initial drafting of this picture, the presence of a caring person makes an important statement about the illness experience. Illness is not usually a singular experience, it involves many others, and for

Chemotherapy

1989

acrylic on canvas

61.0 x 91.4 cm





the ill person the relationship with their loved ones is more important than with the doctors and nurses. He noted that there was an element of dark sexuality in the scene as well; two sweaty figures in a hot room. He acknowledged the many friends who sat as models for his paintings, and although he says the portraits are not truly portraits in the true sense, they give a sense of authenticity for him, and many will recognize the models he used.

Mother and Son

1989

acrylic on paper

25.0 x 34.0 cm

CHEMOTHERAPY

Robert knew the anticipation of a chemotherapy infusion. Lying there as the nurse arrived and placed the tray with syringe and swabs; the wait for the doctor to administer the drug; the ambivalent feeling about an injection that will bring nausea and discomfort but has with it the hope it will bring recovery and health.

MOTHER AND SON

A lot of caring for others involves just being there. Sometimes there seems to be nothing one can do, and nothing one can do to change things, but one can be there. The act of being there is a heroic act. In the Dalhousie Art Gallery exhibit of his work, I noted the number of cancer survivors who came, and how many stood before different paintings with tears running down their cheeks, as they relived the experience of their personal experience with cancer. This simple scene, with his mother Isabel sitting at the foot of his bed, hands in her lap, resonated with so many, as they remember being in that chair. It is one of Robert Pope's most minimalist scenes, but one that captures a profound human experience. It was also an important one for him, and he wrote about being very sick from his chemotherapy, nauseated, hardly able to see or hold his pencil as he drew the scene from his bed.

SELF-PORTRAIT WITH DR. LANGLEY

Robert based his picture with his hematologist, Dr. Ross Langley, on a similar picture done by Goya when he was suffering with yellow fever and being cared for by his physician, Dr. Enrique Garcia Arrieta. Both artists capture the protective embrace of the physician around a vulnerable person who sits passively, anxiously staring into space. Robert Pope believed in a combination of factors for healing to take place, and these included the physicians and modern medical science, but also spirituality, healthy lifestyles and self-responsibility for all aspects that would enhance healing.

NUTRITION

Symbols abound in this painting of a woman being fed, supported by family. She is receiving nutrition from the food, represented by the pie in the foreground, but also from the husband feeding her, the family represented by the sitting daughter, the IV solution that brings the benefits of medical science, the connection to the world outside her illness as seen through the TV screen and the window on the city. He commented that all of these may not always be healthy, but they are the reality of the needful patient. Many of his paintings have TV sets and windows to show that there is a world for these individuals outside the dominating presence of the illness, and the hope is that they will be able to return fully to it without the burden of the illness.

VISITORS

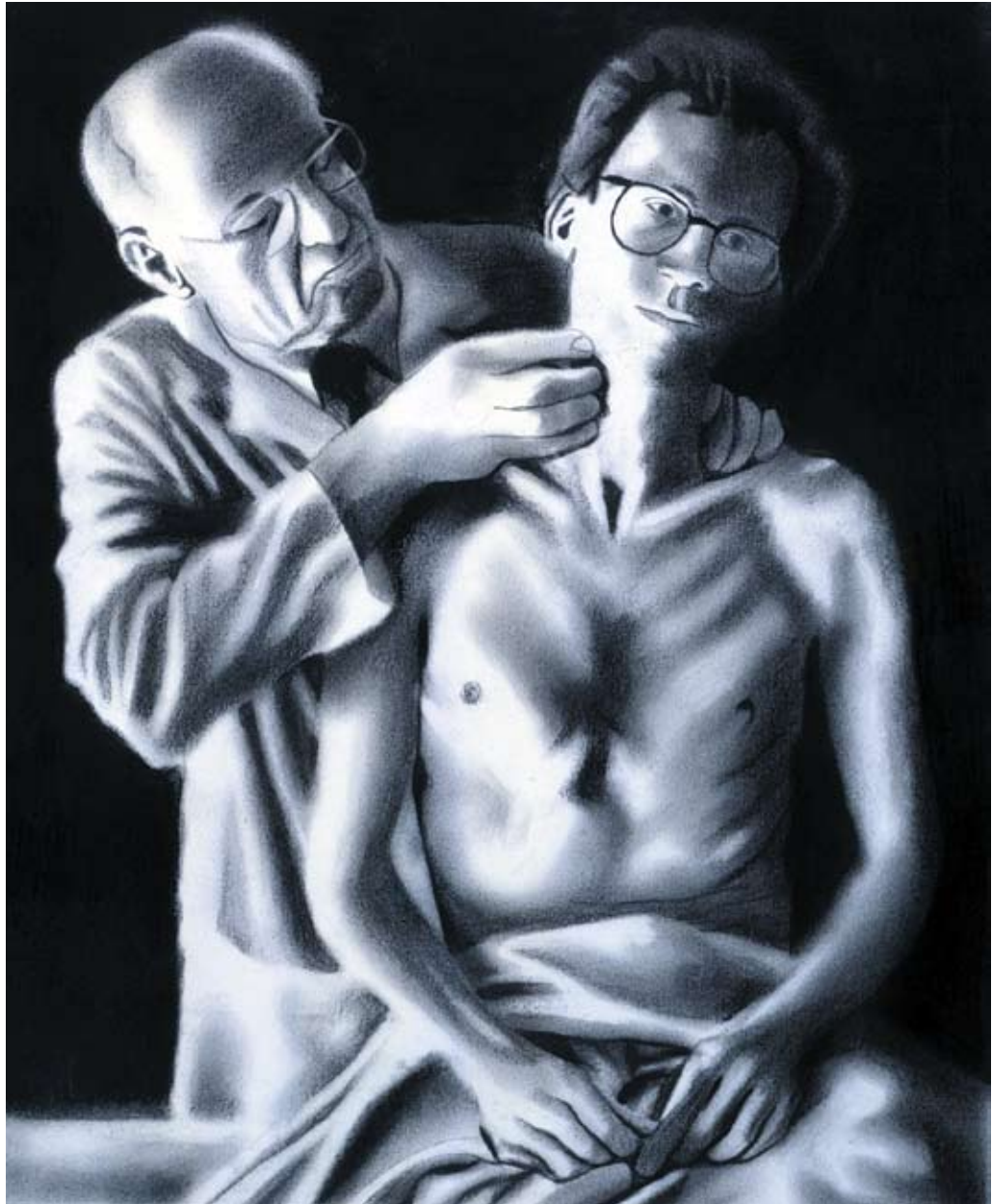
One of the most intriguing of Robert's paintings is *Visitors*. When we use the painting in sessions with medical students, they are most anxious to explain the involvement of each of the people around the bed. What are they each doing? Thinking? Feeling? Robert liked to ask the students what they thought about each person rather than to explain. He wrote about this painting, saying that as he healed his art changed, moving from the fragmented views of the isolated individuals and couples to "a more wholistic social vision." More people came into his scenes, and he described this as "a psychological ecosystem where the

Self-Portrait with Dr. Langley

1990

charcoal on paper

40.6 x 33.4 cm





Nutrition

1990

acrylic on canvas

97.8 x 121.9 cm



Visitors

1989

acrylic on canvas

81.3 x 121.9 cm

worlds of the healthy and sick meet.” The patient in bed is viewing his community and sees emotional elements of concern, indifference, pessimism and support. There is the more aggressive man pointing with a this-is-what-you-should-do stance on one side, with a gentler woman offering a book that may help guide the healing on the other side, with the family in the center, more patient and accommodating. The models for the people are from his family and friends and although he recognizes that the scene seems somber, it is “an optimistic work, expressing faith in the continuity of our human community.”

Many of Robert Pope’s paintings show his body and feet, with the scene and world beyond. He said this is how patients see the world, lying in bed, looking at the people with their feet in the picture. We talk about his ability to convey the patient’s experience of illness, but nothing makes the point so clearly as a scene with his feet in it.

ERICA

We are all touched by the quiet picture of a young girl, her head bald from the effects of chemotherapy, reaching out to touch the machine that has both the capacity to hurt and to heal. She and the room glow with a positive spirit. She seems unafraid and touches it with understanding that it is her friend. Griffin Award-winning Nova Scotia poet Anne Simpson wrote a poem *Luminous*⁴ about this painting which begins:

*The child has a bald head, luminous
as a moon clam
on the beach*

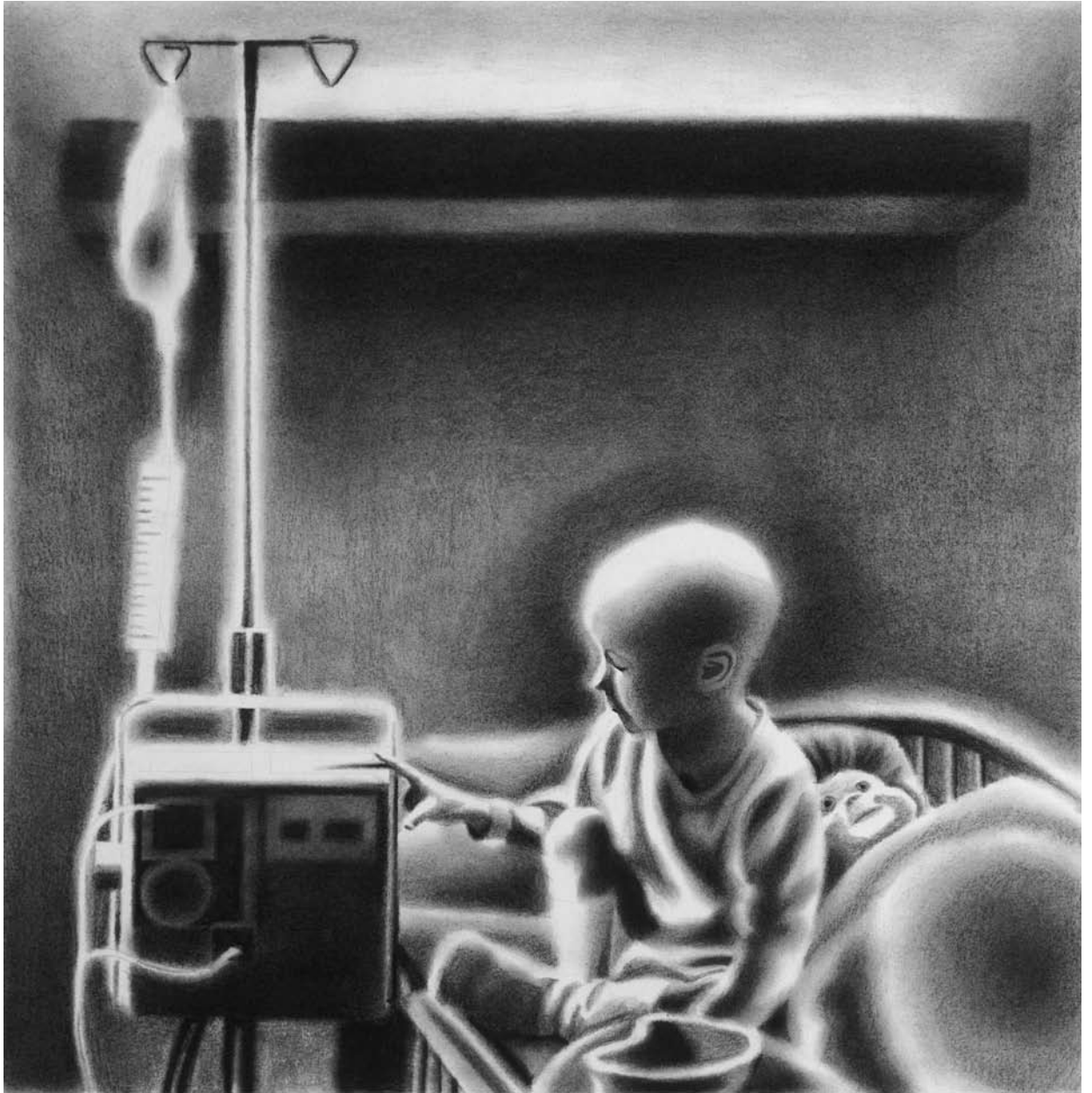
The hope and promise we see in the painting has been fulfilled. Erica is now a charming teenager, off to university with a scholarship from the Robert Pope Foundation.

Erica

1990

charcoal on paper

35.6 x 35.6 cm





Doctors

1990

acrylic on canvas

56.0 x 112.0 cm

DOCTORS

Although Robert Pope had great respect and gratitude towards his doctors, many of them are concerned that they looked somewhat ominous and scary in the many paintings that included physicians. Robert responded to one saying, “Well, sometimes you are somewhat scary. You have knowledge about us, ability to make life saving decisions about us, and you stand over us as we lie in bed.”

I was impressed with his sense of the elements of healing forces. He wanted the best that the physicians and medical science could provide, but felt strongly that this must be combined with spirituality and self responsibility. He had his role to play as well, whether this was exercise, healthy diet or altering life style. One comment he made that particularly moved me was that an aspect of responsibility that aided healing was to develop better relationships with people.

HUG

The monumental image of a couple embracing among the medical apparatus has become a captivating symbol of modern medicine. It shows a patient and companion, who share the pain and distress of an illness, hugging, surrounded by the crucifix shaped IV pole and tubing, supporting each other.

The original is owned by Dalhousie Medical School and hangs in the Kellogg Health Sciences Library. Many medical institutions have a grand painting of a great man or great medical event, but it seemed more appropriate for the medical school to have a patient and family as a representation of modern medicine, and when I was Dean of Medicine I purchased this image as our symbol.

The major Canadian artist Tom Forrestall, who has given generously of his time and talent to foster the legacy of Robert Pope, emphasized that no matter how helpful and instructive his works are, and how they illustrate important messages, it should not be forgotten that he was also an important artist.

Some people live life fuller and faster than others, so longevity is not the measure; it is the legacy we leave behind. By age 30 Robert had acquired maturity,



Hug

1990

acrylic on canvas

182.9 x 78.7 cm

wisdom, insights and a calm understanding that comes to most late in life, if at all. He had honed his artistic metier early, even before his cancer, something most artists come to only after a long period of artistic meandering. He knew he had travelled a treacherous journey, and there were risks ahead. He lived as though there was a long life ahead, but worked as if time was limited.

He wrote: “Living in the shadow of cancer makes every daily action an affirmation of life. I see the importance of accepting death in a non-fearful way and the importance of finding joy in life. For the present I continue to live in a complex world with an uncertain future, the same as everyone else.”

Robert was only 35 years old when he died, but he left a legacy that will continue to touch and enrich the lives of the many who must suffer, endure and heal with serious illness in themselves or those they love. And his art will live on for what it is: the vision and creativity of a unique and important artist.

REFERENCES

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The American Academy of
Hospice and Palliative Care Medicine
honored the late Robert Pope
with the

AAHPM Humanities Award

presented in Phoenix, Arizona
to Robert's parents, William and Isabel Pope,
January 24, 2004
at their Annual Assembly
with approximately 1,000 attending.

*Robert Pope was the first Canadian
to receive this prestigious award.*

CONTRIBUTORS

Elissa Barnard has been an arts reporter for over twenty years with the *Chronicle-Herald* in Halifax, Nova Scotia and is the mother of seven-year-old Miranda Davidson.

Susan Gibson Garvey has worked as an artist, teacher, writer and curator in Nova Scotia for over thirty years. She is currently Director/Curator of the Dalhousie Art Gallery.

Gordon Laurin has curated over thirty visual art exhibitions over the past fifteen years, holding positions as the Director of Saint Mary's University Art Gallery from 1997 to 2003, and the Director of the Art Gallery of Newfoundland and Labrador from 2004 to 2006. He currently works as a freelance curator and arts administrator living in St John's, Newfoundland.

Shawna Macivor is a writer living in Toronto.

Dr. T. Jock Murray is Professor Emeritus at Dalhousie University and former Dean of the Medical School. He was founder of the Medical Humanities Program and of the Dalhousie MS Research Unit. His clinical and research work has been in the care of MS patients. He has been awarded three honorary degrees and is an Officer of the Order of Canada.

Doug Pope is a writer and filmmaker. Coming from a family active in the arts, he has had a longtime interest in this area. He studied art history at NSCAD University and at Concordia University. He presently lives in Montreal.



The Robert Pope Foundation

is a non-profit society that nurtures artistic endeavors, provides services to cancer patients, and promotes a healthy lifestyle. Among its current programs are eight scholarships, given annually to students at NSCAD University, a yearly donation to the Humanities program at the Dalhousie Medical School, the ongoing exhibiting of Robert Pope's art, funding the Robert Pope IWK Concert Series, and a continuing publishing program.

