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REFLECTIONS

ILLNESS AND HEALING: THE ART OF ROBERT POPE

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Per Varios usus artum experientia fecit
(Through varied trials, experience creates art)

The last time I saw Robert Pope was about six weeks before he died, and the experience remains with me like a scene in one of his paintings. It was just before Christmas, along the harbour front in Halifax, and we saw him coming out from the Farmer's Market, a tiny Christmas tree tucked under his arm. He was pale and thin, but greeted Janet and me with that ever-present, slight smile and twinkle in his eye. Robert would have noticed the scene as well; the verticals in the stone buildings signifying strength and healing and the horizontal and slight curve of the street, with the young man adding the contrast of illness and health, fear of death and hope, dark and light, reality and dream. He would have liked the shapes, contrasts, opposites and multiple feelings.

I first met Robert after hearing that there was a young artist who had cancer and was devoting his work to the experience of illness. I called him, explained that I was at the medical school at Dalhousie University and asked if we could visit his studio. We arrived at a warehouse near the waterfront and knocked on a dingy door. We were met by a quiet, polite, frail-looking young man who showed us into a crowded, cold room with huge canvasses and panels leaning in stacks against each wall. At first he just pointed out a picture or held up a panel. As Janet and I alternately commented or asked questions I could see he was watching our reactions. By the time we left, we felt a connection.

Later, Janet and I worried about Robert in his frigid studio. I don't know if he minded the cold, but other things were clearly more important. He had come to a vision of his life-work, and although it might be inappropriate to describe how this quiet, gentle man worked in his cold warehouse as "feverish," he certainly was determined, relentless and driven. Robert had something to say, and he was always conscious that there may be a limit on the time he had to say it.

Over the next two years Robert became involved with Dalhousie's medical school, the university and the medical students. A major show of his work at Dalhousie Art Gallery was well attended and received unanimous acclaim, particularly by those who had experienced cancer. Robert spoke to our students in a hushed lecture theatre and then took them on a walk around the gallery, explaining the scenes and feelings in his works. They were deeply moved. During the weeks of the show it was common to see visitors standing in front of a picture, with tears running down their cheeks, hugging each other and remembering an experience of dealing with life threatened by cancer.

Science and Art

Robert's art springs from his strong humanism coupled with his background education in science. He was a BSc graduate of Acadia University, Wolfville, NS, in mathematics and physics. Three years

after he left university he enrolled at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) in Halifax, to develop his ability as an artist.

His early drawings were about teenagers aimlessly and restlessly driving around in the night, but when he entered art college his work became more "conceptual and imitative."* NSCAD, a century-old institution fostered by Anna Leonowens (Anna of the movies "Anna and the King of Siam" and "The King and I"), jumped into the forefront of the dynamic art world of the 1960s when it linked with the conceptual art excitement in New York and became one of the foremost "happening" art colleges in North America. Robert was immersed in this, but by the time he graduated in 1982 he was concerned about what he was learning and about the aloofness of international conceptual art and its tendency to have its own language and a limited audience. He distrusted the American influences on the art world of the '70s and '80s and the elitism of modernist art "preoccupied with codes intelligible only to the few." He went back to black-and-white realism, grasping themes and concepts, initially drawing on imagery from singer Bruce Spring-stein's music. He wanted his art to speak to everyone in a way that they could understand, and so he set about relearning how to be an artist. After graduation from NSCAD with a Bachelor of Fine Arts he rented an unheated loft in downtown Halifax and began to work.

Hodgkin's Disease

Soon after graduation, while shaving, Robert found a walnut-sized lump in his neck; Hodgkin's disease was diagnosed. He regarded the diagnosis as a death sentence. The response to repeated courses of therapy wasn't as hoped; each time, his cancer recurred. His physician, Dr. Ross Langley, was supportive and honest. The odds for survival dropped, eventually to 20%. He spent time at the Princess Margaret Hospital in Toronto under the care of Dr. Simon Sutcliffe.

Robert turned to methods for taking some control over his own health and destiny while cooperating with his medical advisers. He immersed himself in the philosophy of the macrobiotic movement, incorporating the diet, lifestyle changes and the mental attitudes recommended by that approach.

He accepted and believed the medical model of cancer as the enemy, with therapy as the ammunition to blast it and destroy it. When he switched to macrobiotics he changed his approach and concept; he began to strengthen his body so the cancer would not thrive there. He liked to quote Hippocrates: "Let food be your medicine." He did not disparage or criticize medicine and continued to communicate with and follow the advice of his physicians.

He wanted to have as good a quality of life as was possible, for as long as he could. "Hopefully that will be until I am 90," he added with a smile. "I find that is best for me. I can't dwell on Do I or don't I have cancer? The real question is: Do I feel good today?" He continued to paint, and his work was gaining attention.

"A Seal Upon Thyne Heart"

The experience of art college was important in honing his view and technique. Upon graduation, he returned to realism in his art and to the concept of multiple images around a theme. He painted about life's experiences; each painting encouraged a different perspective. He was profoundly affected by Elizabeth Smart's 1945 novella with that wonderful title: *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* (Nicholson and Watson, Editions Poetry, London, 1945). He thought about the relationship between Smart and her married lover, British poet George Baker, and his wife. He created 47 paintings and called the collection "A Seal Upon Thyne Heart," taking a line from the Song of

Solomon.

Reviewers of this major 1988 show commented on two features that would also be seen in his later themes: although he based the work on Elizabeth Smart's adulterous love affair, he generalized the experience to all relationships.^{1,2} Despite the complexities and pain of the Elizabeth Smart affair, the theme of Robert's paintings was relationships and love. He said: "Love is a simple word, but a complex idea." Nancy Bauer,² a Fredericton writer, said that Robert's works on Smart were about "lamentation, about the end of love, separation, betrayal, exile, but they are also about the power of image and language to transform and ennoble even the most tawdry or hopeless of human experience."

"A Seal Upon Thyne Heart" was his first major solo exhibition. He was 32 years old. More shows were to come and, through a constant output of works and themes, he left a lasting legacy when he died four years later.

"Accident"

In 1989 he had another gallery show, called "Accident." It featured a series of 30 dramatic and haunting images of cars and car wrecks that explored the relationship of people to technology and their environment. The paintings portrayed a stark realism that he referred to as "layered realism." As Richard Mueller³ noted in the brochure for "Accident," Pope "managed to penetrate the flash of overt sexuality and depict the underlying psychological tension between technology and modern humans." Most reviewers have noted that his paintings have a dream-like quality, and the viewer is incorporated as one of the observers in the scene.

Healing Through Art

During the period between 1982 and 1989 Robert created many works for his initial shows while labouring under the fears and pain of the diagnosis and treatment of his cancer. In 1985 he was told he was in remission. He then turned to the experience of his illness, to capture it in his art. In 1988 he returned to the Princess Margaret Hospital to talk to the personnel and the patients.⁴ He toured other hospitals and obtained permission to watch operations. He visited research and clinical laboratories. Although it was disturbing to return to the place where he had been so sick, he regarded it as part of his healing. Then he began photographing, sketching and painting.

Marcel Duchamp, Hank Snow and Bruce Springstein

Pope was influenced by many people, and he freely acknowledged them. One can see Goya in the painting of Dr. Langley, and in others the influences of Edvard Munch, the Bible and, of course, Elizabeth Smart. One painting may have been influenced by an Elvis Presley or Hank Snow song, the next by the views of Marshall McLuhan or by a Bruce Springstein lyric. His lighting reflects Caravaggio in some, film noir in others. Many paintings, especially his black-and-white pieces, have a luminescence and glow that is unique.

He referred to Marcel Duchamp to explain his strong involvement of the viewer in his paintings: the viewplane is from a person looking up from the bed or examining table, often showing only the lower half of the viewer's body, feet parted like a gunsight. Marcel Duchamp believed that only when the viewer is there is the work complete.

I spoke to Robert once of how his paintings differed from those of Freda Kahlo, who painted herself

and her illness so personally. In most of his works Robert tried to capture the experience of illness rather than his own illness, but Kahlo was still a strong influence on him.

By the end of the 19th century, painters had moved away from communication with large audiences and relinquished it to film makers. Many of Robert's images are the view of a camera, but a movie camera. His greatest influence, I think, was TV and film. Paintings are often scenes, like the world outside a window. In film, the view is of the eye - the person behind the camera. Robert often worked with a camera and had a pile of photos that he cut and pasted to plan his paintings. He placed us, the viewers, into the painting and made us part of the work.

He liked to link his images with inter-titles like the old silent films, especially the German expressionists that he admired. His works resemble the narrative and the multi-drawing story board of a film. The shapes, angles and cropping of his paintings suggest this strong influence from film. Robin Metcalfe,⁵ in the Gallery notes for "A Seal Upon Thyne Heart," commented that the paintings were like stations of the cross, recording incidents of a passion or suffering. But I see them as the loose storyboard diagrams used to plan the action and scenes of a film. Many, especially his black-and-white paintings, look like stopaction clips from a movie.

Images of Cancer

When he had found his medium, his view and his direction, Robert was then able to address something that had occupied his thinking and his life during all of those years since his graduation from art school - his cancer. In talking about this stage of his work he said

What goes on in the quiet desperate world of cancer is extremely revealing of our own culture. I am attempting to show what really happens: those who get better those who die, the doctors, the methods of treatment, the families of those who are afflicted. I am attempting to explore the psychology of cancer and challenge perceptions of illness and health. In dealing with this subject I hope to not only express my own experience, but to be a voice for the millions of Canadians who are affected by the disease.

Robert wanted to show that life could be treacherous but relationships and spirituality were healing, that there was always hope but dying was not necessarily bad. Cancer can be a devastating experience, but it should be discussed openly and realistically.

Robert did not believe in art created solely for the elite. "I want to engage the whole of society." However, he recognized that his images were multifaceted and read on many different levels. He regarded cancer, illness and life as both complex and personal, and he wanted that represented.

His book, *Illness and Healing: Images of Cancer* (Lancelot Press, Hantsport, NS, 1991), was published to correspond with the opening of his show at the Dalhousie Art Gallery, Halifax, in November 1991. At the same time there was a showing of his sketches and preliminary drawings for this series at another Halifax gallery, Studio 21. The book was a best-seller locally and won the 1992 Evelyn Richardson Memorial Literary Award. It contains 93 paintings and drawings accompanied by Robert's narrative on each painting, his philosophy and personal story. It is an important work, widely acclaimed.

Some reviewers of the book admired his unflinching view of the cancer experience.⁶⁻⁸ But one reviewer said that, of course, Robert was lucky because he was cured and that maybe he would have done different work if he had another form of cancer or if he wasn't cured.⁹ Ironically, by the time the review was printed Robert was dead.

After Robert's death the Robert Pope Foundation was established. It distributes a copy of the book to every first-year medical student at Dalhousie University. The Foundation plans to distribute the book to an even wider audience; this year it was provided to three other Canadian medical schools. The Foundation grants art scholarships to the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and gives an annual award to someone who has contributed to the concept of healing and wellness. They also have programs for cancer patients at the Victoria General Hospital and the Izaak Walton Killam Hospital for Children, both in Halifax. Robert's father Reverend William Pope, publisher, Lancelot Press, chairs the Foundation. He recently published a book describing the family's experience throughout Robert's illness.¹⁰

Layered Realism

Robert referred to his paintings as "parables of contemporary life," with each viewer creating his or her own story. He used mixtures of media to achieve his effects: acrylic on canvas, acrylic on paper, ink drawings, wet painting, water colours or even wood cuts. The colour is often muted, and shadows are prominent. "Colour is used on a content level., maybe there are lot of greys because I see things in grey, not black and white. I am drawn to complex and murky situations."

He first sketched his ideas in pen and ink, then in charcoal and then in other media. To arrange the scene he used a large file of photographs of posed models, moving them around to produce a collage. His paintings erased much of the unnecessary detail and took on stark and clear images. He used elemental images like those described by Jung and Freud. Water is depicted as life-affirming, whether it is pouring out of a faucet, lapping the shores or cascading over rocks. Crosses appear in the form of IV poles, steeples and bedside table objects. Windows, television sets and syringes all have multiple meanings.

He spoke of the distances between individuals, classes of people and philosophies. He regarded himself as a true tribal artist, producing work that is meaningful to everyone - a healing approach in a fragmented society.

In the brochure for his show "Illness and Healing" at Glendon Gallery, York University, North York, Ont., a show in association with Allison Brannen, who also painted images of illness, he noted that there was often a 5-year time lag between the experience and the creation. "During this gestation period, the creative faculties act as a filter where personal opaque and chaotic data is made public, transparent and ordered. This is a process of mythologizing. Myth and dreams are similar: the difference is that dreams have private, personal meaning while myths have public meanings.

"My drawings in correspondence to myths, have elements of psychology, symbolism, metaphor and narrative. Most myths involve some sort of reconciliation between the physical world and the spiritual world. I see mythology as an attempt to establish a holistic vision. Myths integrate the realistic and the fantastic, their function is essentially one of healing." Like the Yen and Yang magic glasses, as expressed by Japanese philosopher and educator George Oshawa, Pope attempted to pair complementary opposites as a way to understand a situation. "The magic glasses . enable me to create images, that, like myths, project symbolic, metaphorical narratives."¹¹

Astrid Brunner,¹² arts writer and critic, has stated that his work is neo-realism and follows a tradition of Alec Colville and Tom Forrestall, but is more concerned with social and personal issues and social comment.

Physicians Learn From Art

Medicine has often been the subject of art. Medieval paintings portray the sick and show the concerned family, the wise women and other helpers surrounding the sickbed, often with the physician standing behind the others, staring thoughtfully into a flask of urine held to the light. It is the view of an artist who has come upon this scene, and we expect that he will next turn his artist's eye to the market square or farmyard. We can view the cool anatomy in the work of Michelangelo or da Vinci, or the social groupings of fashionable physicians by the Dutch artists. The famous bedside scene of Sir Luke Fildes' titled *The Doctor* depicts the artist looking at the doctor, not at the child near death or the fearful parents in the shadows. Throughout much of medical history, images were created by artists viewing doctors, the sick and the dying in a detached way. Robert not only wanted you to see the cacophony of emotions of being ill, he wanted you to be a participant in the event.

All of us who work with the sick have a great deal to learn from Robert Pope's art.¹³ As a doctor I spend a lot of time with patients and in hospitals. I visit patients' rooms, comment on the sunny day outside and talk to them about how they are feeling. I visit the radiology department, walk through the waiting areas and see the other health professionals and visitors. But, although I have been doing this for over 30 years, I have not seen any of these things or experienced them the way Robert did. His work has given me a new understanding of my world of medicine.

The experience of illness is universal. Although writers have attempted to capture the pain, suffering and loneliness of chronic illness and the possibility of death, only rarely has this been captured on canvas. Robert reveals the wider experience: the world of family, friends, doctors, hospital rooms and machines. This is the experience of cancer as it could only be felt and seen by a person with cancer. As a physician, I find Robert's art powerful, disturbing, humbling and wondrous.

He shows the medical community how to see with new eyes what we see every day. A pale, ill woman lies in bed, headbands covering the baldness caused by chemotherapy. She stares at a syringe filled with a powerful red drug and awaits the doctor who will inject the medicine that brings nausea and rigors, hope and life. A small child, Erica, bald from chemotherapy, reaches out a finger in curiosity to touch the machine beside her bed.

Each haunting, dream-like portrait of an experience could be a focus for a medical school seminar. They re-enact for the viewer the jarring and disturbing experience of tests, investigations, treatments, side effects, altered relationships and re-entry into life.

Although Robert depicted his own and other specific individuals' cancer stories, ultimately it is the universal experience of illness that he portrayed. The surface scene is not what he captured. It is as if he closed his eyes and penetrated to a subconscious level of reality.

His unusually insightful view is not judge-mental, bitter or cruel. When viewed in sequence, the development of a spiritual strength emerges. The symbolism of the crosses, of patients, family members and medical staff indicate a growing need for inner resources and spiritualism as a person calmly learns the hopes and limits of science. He does not reject one for the other, but couples the need for personal strengths with the benefits of modern medicine. Robert's work teaches me about my world as a physician in a powerful manner. All of us can relate to the fragile nature of our health, lives and daily world and see salvation and hope through this view.

Perhaps we can understand why physicians are drawn to Robert's images by remembering Albert

Altemann's comment¹⁴ in 1926 that artists and physicians share one outstanding property - "the single eye to reality, the all-embracing insight, the great gift of seeing things as they are, which impels them to pierce all risks, to see the kernel within the shell, the quickening of life underneath the surface of things."

A Last Word From Robert

The last word should be Robert's. In a CBC radio interview ("Open House," Feb. 19, 1992) Robert said

There were certain points in my illness when I was in a lot of pain and I can remember thinking at times that if only I could live without pain that would be wonderful. But then, if you just start to look at all the things in life there are to enjoy, just to be able to breathe air or to enjoy food or to enjoy the company of friends or the people that you love, the possibilities just multiply. There is so much richness in the world to enjoy. A feeling of rebirth, a sense of the almost overabundance of good things, is the feeling that comes to me.

And in his book he concludes:

Art is powerful preventive medicine. Looking at a picture is like walking through an endless series of doors, with each succeeding door leading us deeper and deeper into a rich experience. This journey stimulates our minds, our emotions, our souls; it makes us more alive. Ultimately the esthetic experience heals us and makes us whole.

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* [Any quotation not referenced was a personal communication between the author and Robert Pope. - Eds]

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