

BEHIND THE MASK

30 PORTRAITS, 30 DAYS FOR 30 MINUTES

AUGUST 2020



ARTIST STATEMENT

“Behind the Mask”

30 portraits, 30 days for 30 minutes

As a final year Master of Art Therapy student on placement at the Olivia Newton John Cancer Wellness & Research Centre during the Covid-19 pandemic, is certainly not how I envisaged 2020 to look.

Working with infection control protocols, the additional layers of PPE and facilitating online groups has added a unique perspective to my learning experience. I feel quite honoured to be able to offer support and a sense of connection through art therapy to our isolated patients during this time.

This experience has also provided great insight to the tireless effort of healthcare workers at the Austin.

Drawing on my art practice, drawing skills gained from working in the animation industry, as well my art therapy training, I was seeking ways to make self-care activities during this time a part of my everyday experience.

The pandemic was getting to me too. I saw the challenge to draw 30 faces in 30 days and thought that this was an opportunity, not only in making time for my own self-care, but also as a way to capture this moment in time and in the process encourage others to create.

“Behind the Mask” – 30 portraits, 30 days for 30 minutes’

was birthed out of my own reflective process and my growing awareness of the deep story behind every masked face. I found it very powerful to notice how much we can say with only our posture or our eyes. I wanted to capture this as best as I could.

Creating the portraits during the hard lockdown in Melbourne became a reflective process for me. Focusing on others assisted me to process my own feelings of isolation and provided a greater sense of connection with others.

The project began with people I know personally who are based in Melbourne. However, I soon gained interest from friends in quarantine in Cambodia and the USA, and started to include staff at the ONJ Centre.

The exhibit is a growing piece that aims to incorporate artwork and words from staff at the Austin and those in the wider community.

The hope of this project is to build a sense of connection amongst the wonderful staff here at the ONJ Centre, and offer support through a visual, fun and creative outlet. The mask being symbolic of this moment in time offering protection, connection and support.

Susan Tanner

(Master of Art Therapy student - La Trobe University)



Creating my self-portrait, on day one of the challenge, I noted how confronting it is to capture the essence of self. Seeing myself from a different perspective. My eyes, trying to smile, feeling hidden behind the mask. Even before the project became something to display here at the ONJCWC, the internal dialogue and emotion felt during this pandemic was felt during the making as well as in the viewing of the end product. Keeping to 30 mins, allowing the not so perfect parts of self to be seen was in itself a therapeutic process.

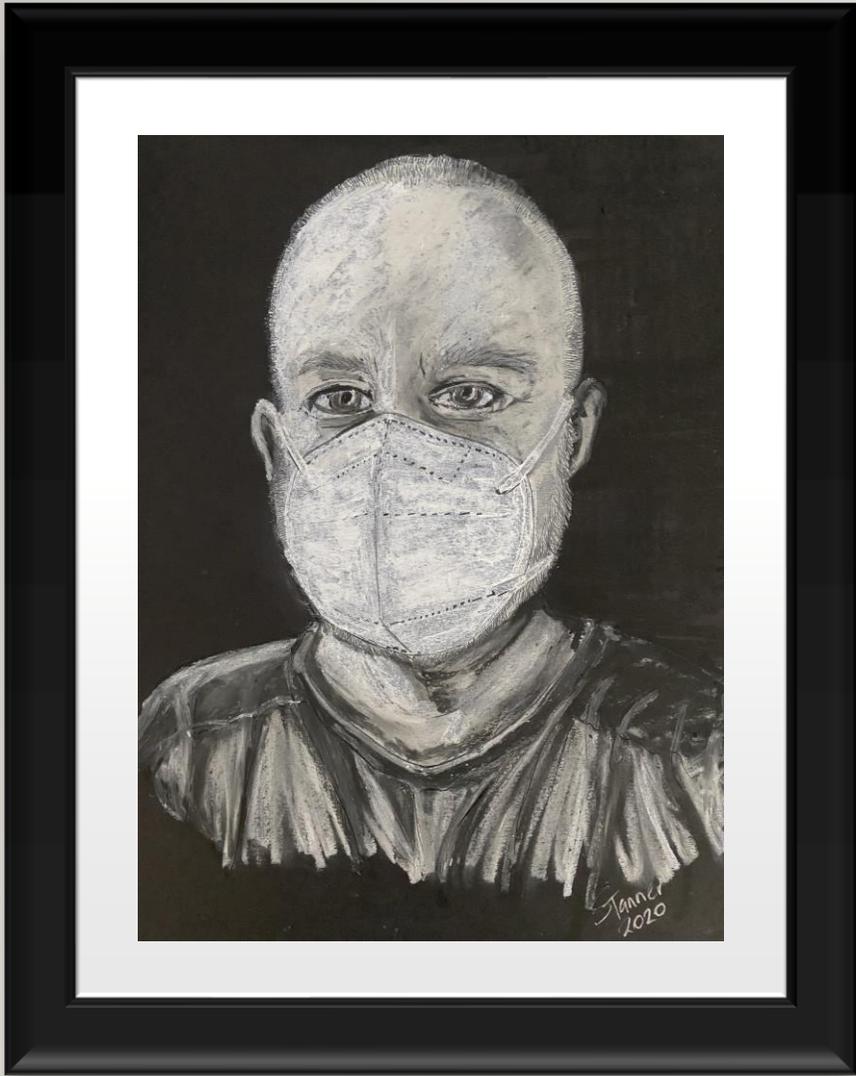
The displaying of the images came later and I noticed that the emotions felt during the self-portrait process seemed to be soothed by the growing sense of community as each participant responded to their portrait so warmly.

DAY 1

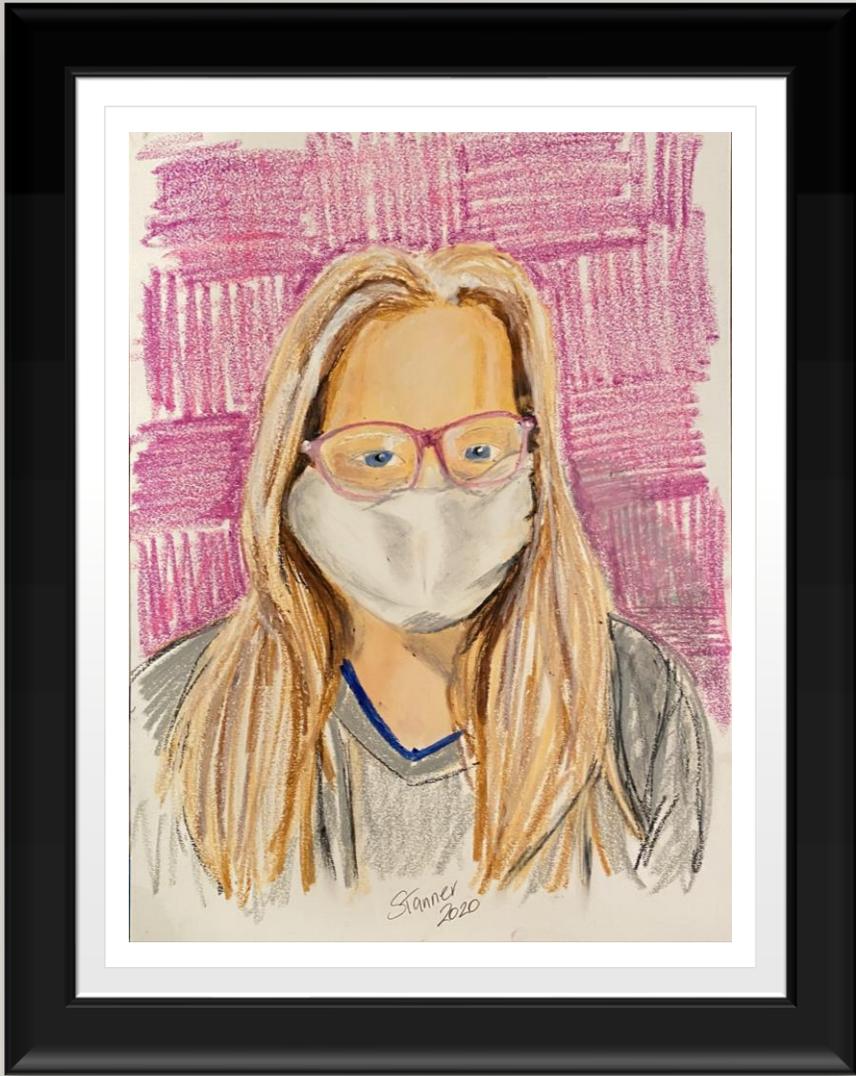
Observing responses from staff walking through the corridor, pausing to look, suddenly realising familiar faces and the beautiful creative responses now looking back across the hallway, has provided me a warm feeling of creative inspiration and connection to others.

This creative self-care activity, which began as something just for me, has allowed me to become a witness to an evolving conversation of art speaking to the heart and strengthening community.

Susan Tanner
Student Art Therapist



DAY 2



DAY 3



DAY 4



DAY 5



DAY 6



DAY 7



DAY 8



DAY 9



DAY 10



DAY 11



Working as a nurse during a pandemic is something none of us would have ever considered. The way we provide care has changed dramatically over the past 6 months.

As health care professionals we usually encourage family and friends to be involved in care and now we are asking them to stay out of the hospital whilst we see their loved one through cancer treatment.

We also provide reassurance through a smile, but now we have a mask and face shield over our facial expressions. We are the ones to hold the hand of a patient to reassure them, but now we are sitting socially distanced from them.

DAY 12

We have shown up for work, we have provided patient care and support and we have worked together to deliver optimal health care to our patients.

I feel that this portrait will remind me in years to come, of the challenges that we all faced and that we survived it. It will also remind me that when you smile under a mask, so do your eyes.

Kirsten Oataway
Nurse Unit Manager – Radiotherapy Oncology



DAY 13



DAY 14



DAY 15



When Susan told me about her unique way of responding to this period in our lives; the challenge of 30 portraits in 30 days for 30 mins, I envisaged how meaningful it would be as an exhibition here at the ONJ Centre!

This wonderful display of portraits, capturing the uniqueness of each person is compelling to view and such a contrast to the environment of uniformity that has become our life... day in day out.

Reflecting on the concept of 'behind the mask' I realise that the mandatory wearing of masks has some unexpected benefits. The need to make direct eye contact has become more evident, as that is the only way now available for assessing another person's emotions.

DAY 16

It is amazing how the eyes speak in a particularly unique language, and reveal the feelings hidden behind the facade. I can appreciate more than ever just how beautiful the eyes are, and how reactive they can be, just how important it is to engage with others with our eyes.

The mask has brought a feeling of camaraderie, a social leveller where we are truly united and reminded of our fragility and mortality. The mask here at the Austin is a symbol of our mutual respect and common purpose.

The mask is one of many ways we are caring for each other, protecting each other and declaring that we are in this together.

Penny Sanderson - Divisional Manager, Integrated Cancer Services



DAY 17



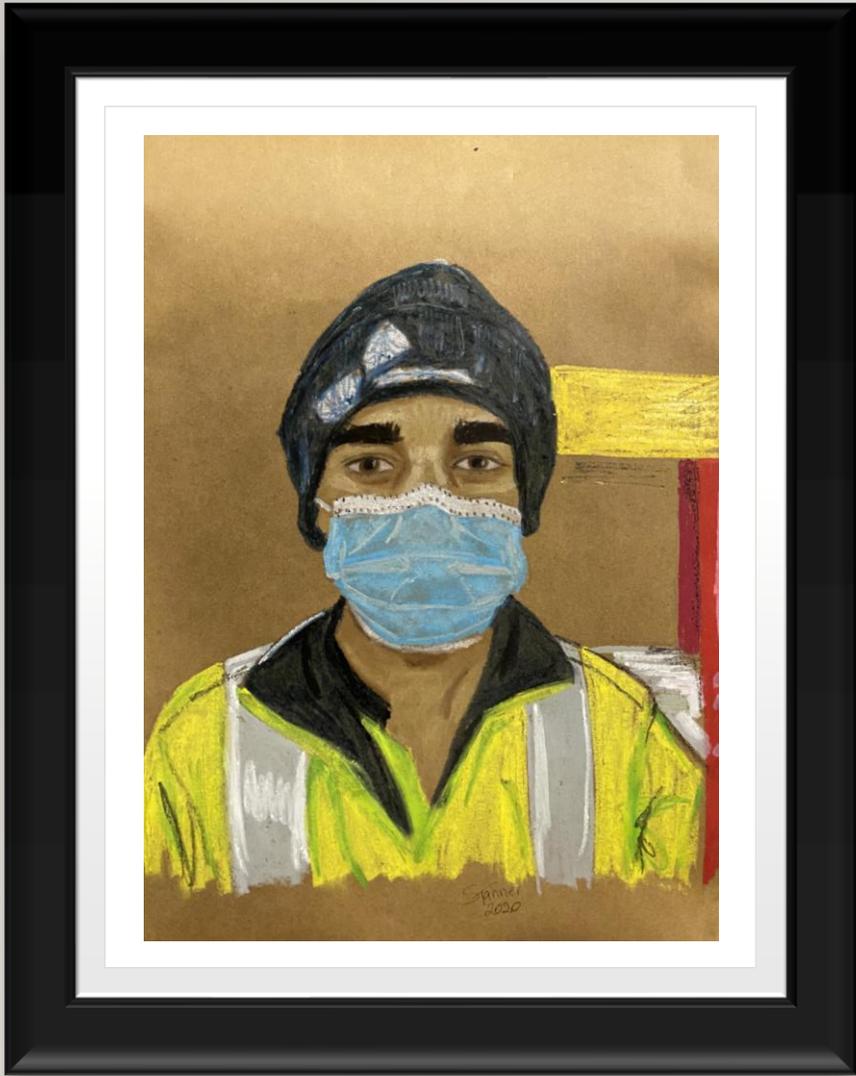
DAY 18



DAY 19



DAY 20



DAY 21



I only wore masks occasionally before COVID-19, now I wear one every day, just like so many other people around the globe. The mask has changed what I look like, how I hear, the way I listen, the way I speak and sing, the way I play my harp, and the way I connect with people. But even as I grapple with singing from behind a mask and creating that musical connection with people, the mask has become a habit and I have grown used to it: as I grab my ID badge in the morning, I also pick up my mask as I prepare to greet the world.

DAY 22

When I thought about what the mask represents to me in the hospital, what struck me so forcibly was how music can change both my own and other peoples' responses to the mask and face shield. Sometimes in the initial moments of a meeting, there might be confusion as someone tries to work out who I am, or hear what I am saying, hidden and muffled behind my layers of PPE. I sometimes find myself unable to hear those words that were...

DAY 22 CONT...

... whispered into the silence, or unable to clearly see the person in front of me or the strings on my harp as my face shield fogs up. In these moments, I am acutely aware of my mask and face shield and the potential they have for creating a barrier between me and the people I am caring for. But as I talk with patients and we get caught up in the music together, something magical happens we forget about the mask and face shield and we are just together in the music. We weave a blanket of sound, bright with the colours of remembered songs and favourite pieces, woven through with reflections and contemplations, and lined with hope, peace and love. For a moment, just a moment, music transcends the mask.

This song “The Music behind the Mask” is set to the melody of Leonard Cohen’s *Hallelujah*, a song that so many people have asked me to play for them – the haunting melody and beautiful harmonies have a wistfulness and sublime simplicity that seems to speak to many. The lyrics to the song are not meant to represent specific individuals, although each idea in the song came from a patient/s. Rather, the song is a reflection of many people that I have met over the past months, who have responded to me in my mask and face shield in various ways.

Dr Lucy Forrest

Senior Music Therapist

BEYOND THE MASK (LYRICS)

DR LUCY FORREST – SENIOR MUSIC THERAPIST

When you first came to visit me

I wasn't sure it was reality

Was I dreaming or was I awake?

Is it an alien in a face mask and shield?

I thought "Should I fight, or should I yield?"

And then I heard sweet singing like an angel...

Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah

Well now I'm older I don't hear so well

Are you Jess or Sally? I really can't tell

Behind the mask it all sounds a little bit muffled

And what was it you said you wanted me to do?

Play a harp? Don't be ridiculous, I'm 82!

But what a lark, I haven't laughed so much in ages...

Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah

You helped me when I was feeling scared

I couldn't see you but your voice told me you cared

Your music reached out and touched my soul

I closed my eyes to listen to you

It didn't matter that I couldn't see you

Your song filled my heart with peace and calm...

Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah



BEYOND THE MASK (LYRICS) CONT...

DR LUCY FORREST – SENIOR MUSIC THERAPIST

I met you first in my hospital room

And then I went home and we met on zoom

And finally I got to see your beautiful smile!

It's nice to see your face when we chat

But the mask doesn't matter, for all of that

Because in your music I feel your warmth and
kindness...

Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah

At first you all looked the same to me

Your masks made it tricky for me to see

Whether you were a nurse, a doctor or an OT

But then I saw you carrying your harp

“Can you sing me a song or play me some Bach!

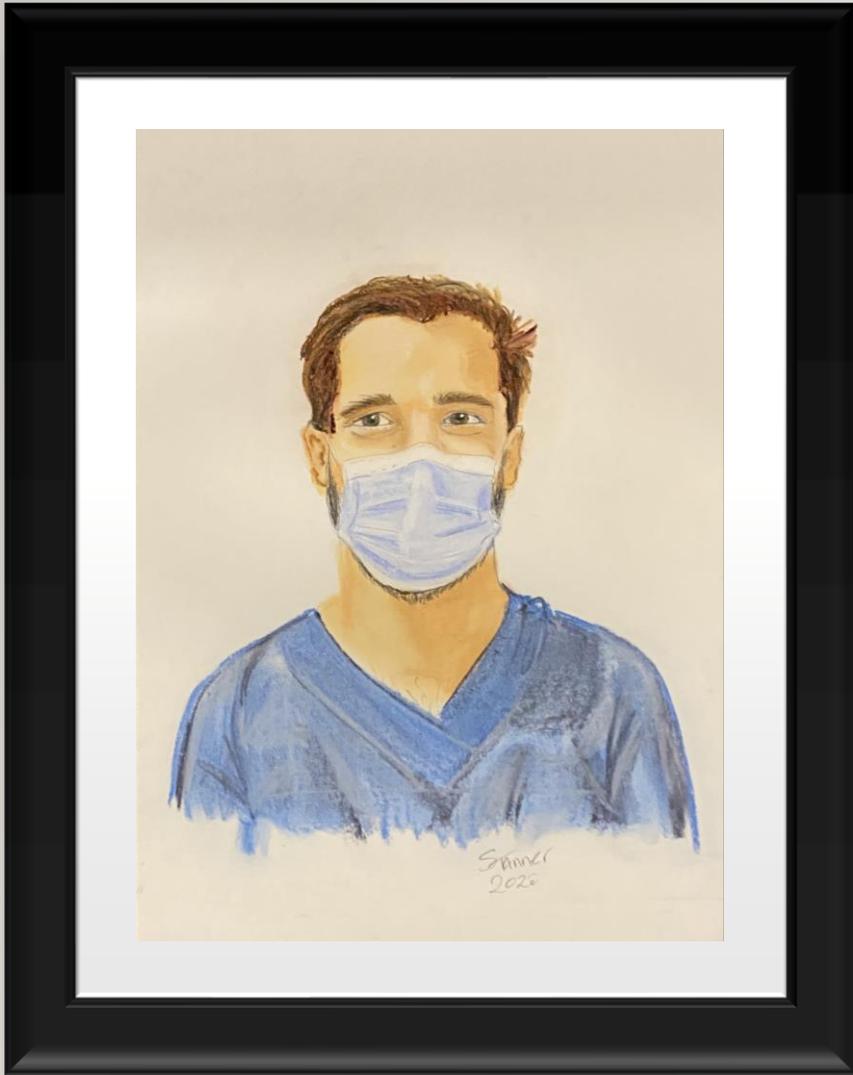
Or maybe some Beatles, some Elvis, or
Hallelujah...”

Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah





DAY 23



DAY 24

The sterile and busy nature of the hospital provides a great backdrop to creative outlets like this project. The idea that someone would take the time to produce such varied and interesting pieces to capture a moment in our working days was a warming surprise.

Especially at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic has interfered with most public works of creativity. Thank you for providing some colour to the halls of the ONJ centre Susan!

Dom Flanders
Urology Resident



DAY 25



I am now in my final year of Palliative Care training. Certainly a difficult specialty to train in during a pandemic. With lots of travel, now my days are 12-15 hours long.

The hospital environment places barriers we usually try to strip away in order to effectively do our jobs.

Unable to shake hands or sit down in a room, with no visitors and still provide comfort to the dying from behind masks, face shields and gowns the way we practice our specialty is now especially challenging and even more emotionally draining.

I was asked to be part of this art project, 30 portraits, 30 days for 30 minutes.

My first thought was I just looked tired. My wife Gen says she can tell I am smiling but feel a little awkward and

DAY 26

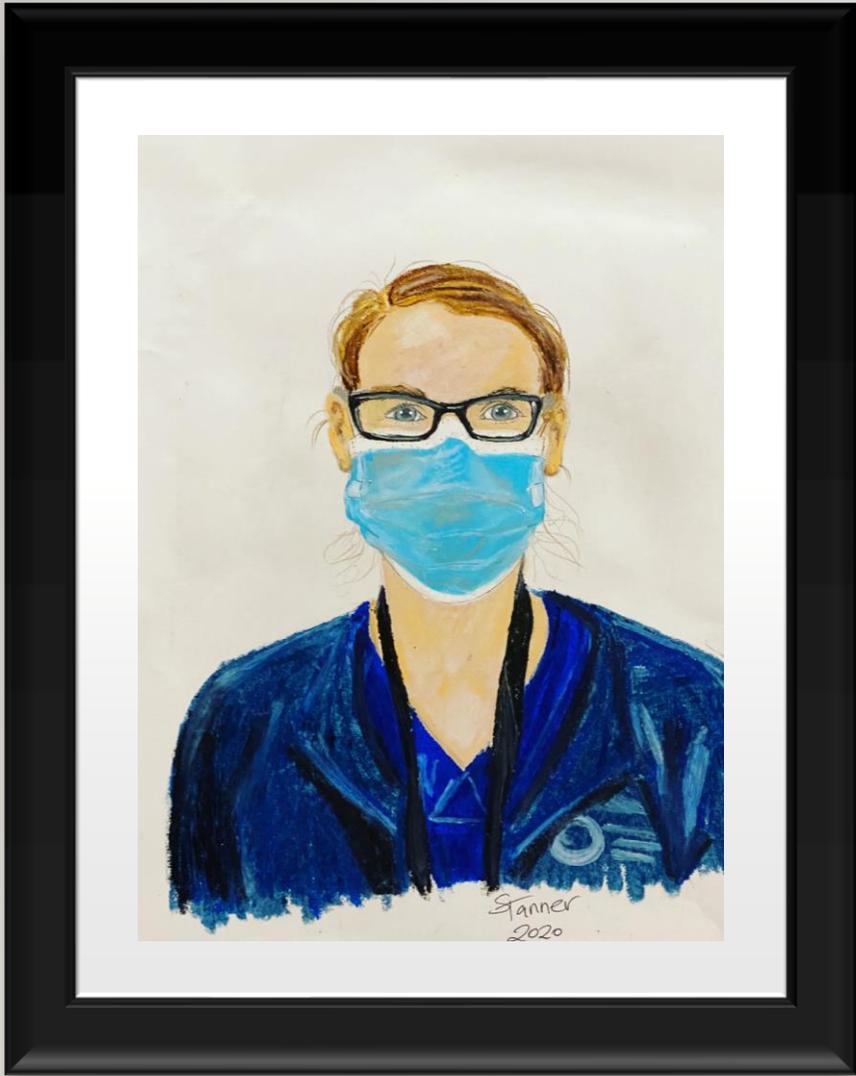
embarrassed. So certainly Susan has captured a snapshot of the essence of my emotions here in my workplace. At work I still try to be myself despite the challenges of the environment and provide the high level of care that we must. And I am only one of the thousands of various hospital staff walking by this exhibition every day trying to do the same.

Thank you Susan for having me as a part of this project, a little something for my children that can remind them of the hard work I did during this terrible time and was the reason why I couldn't be around them as much as I dearly wanted to be.

Dr Glenn Mathieson
Palliative Care Registrar



DAY 27



DAY 28



DAY 29



DAY 30



“Behind the Mask”

Staff responses

‘Behind the Mask’ is a growing exhibition that aims to build a sense of connection amongst staff at the ONJ Centre, and offer support through a visual, fun and creative outlet.

This wall displays the artwork and responses from ONJ staff.

If you would like to help the exhibition grow you can submit your own artwork, words or photographic portraits!

Requirements:

- Artworks must be A3 (29.7 x 42.0cm or 11.69 x 16.53 inches) in size We will frame it and add it to the exhibition!!
- Words can be comments in response to the exhibition, poetry, prose or music compositions that reflect your own experience of COVID
- Art submissions to Level 4 Reception, ONJ Centre
- Word documents, videos, music can be emailed to arttherapy.onj@austin.org.au

More Information:

Please contact Fiona Scottney, Senior Art Therapist on extension 9972 or email arttherapy.onj@austin.org.au

I'M ABSOLUTELY LOVING THE EXHIBITION. IT'S A FANTASTIC RECORD OF THESE TIMES, AND YOU'VE BROUGHT SUCH SKILL AND TENDERNESS TO THE PORTRAITS.
KATE MCMAHON
REGISTERED MUSIC THERAPIST



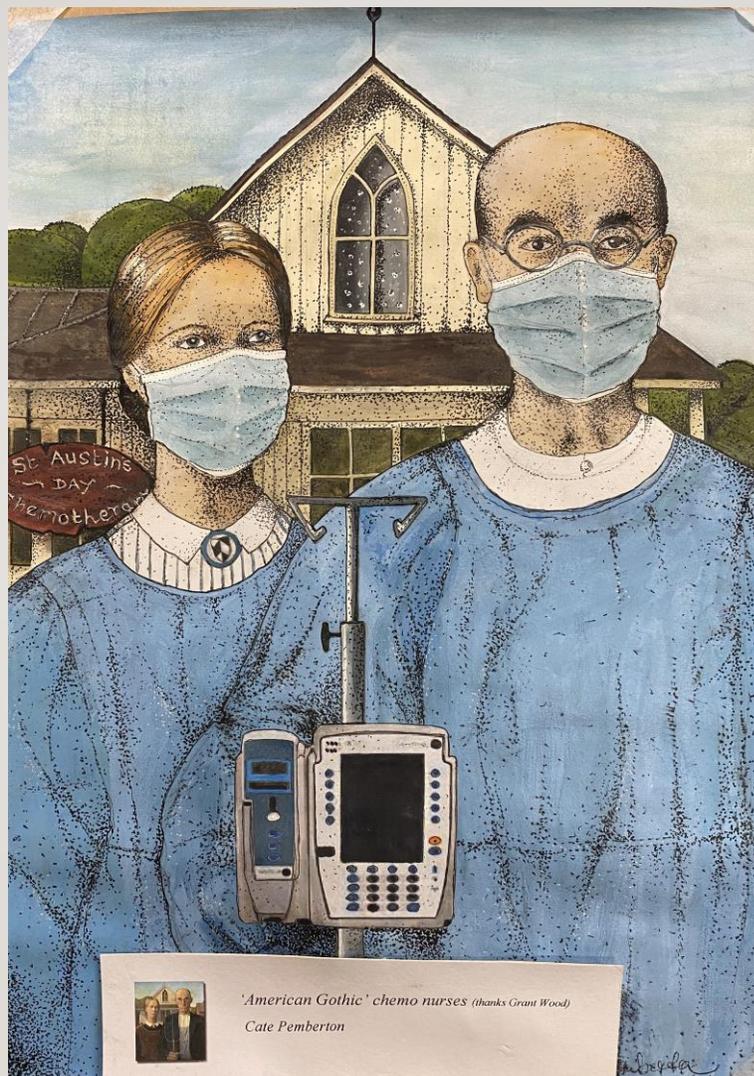
Can I just say that I absolutely love this exhibit!
It was so special to see so many staff caught. I think this is a fabulous idea and with so many people working harder than ever before and in ways that are so different to 'normal', this is a brilliant way to celebrate the staff without any particular focus group and show appreciation of the staff.
This pandemic impacts every single staff member in the entire organisation in a way that honestly nothing else ever has and this is a beautiful way to capture, support and reflect on ways to acknowledge that and support mental health too.
I just think it is brilliant concept and beautiful work. True embodiment of art therapy.
I look forward to seeing it grow as more submissions are received.
Lisa Walker
Clinical Trials Co-Ordinator



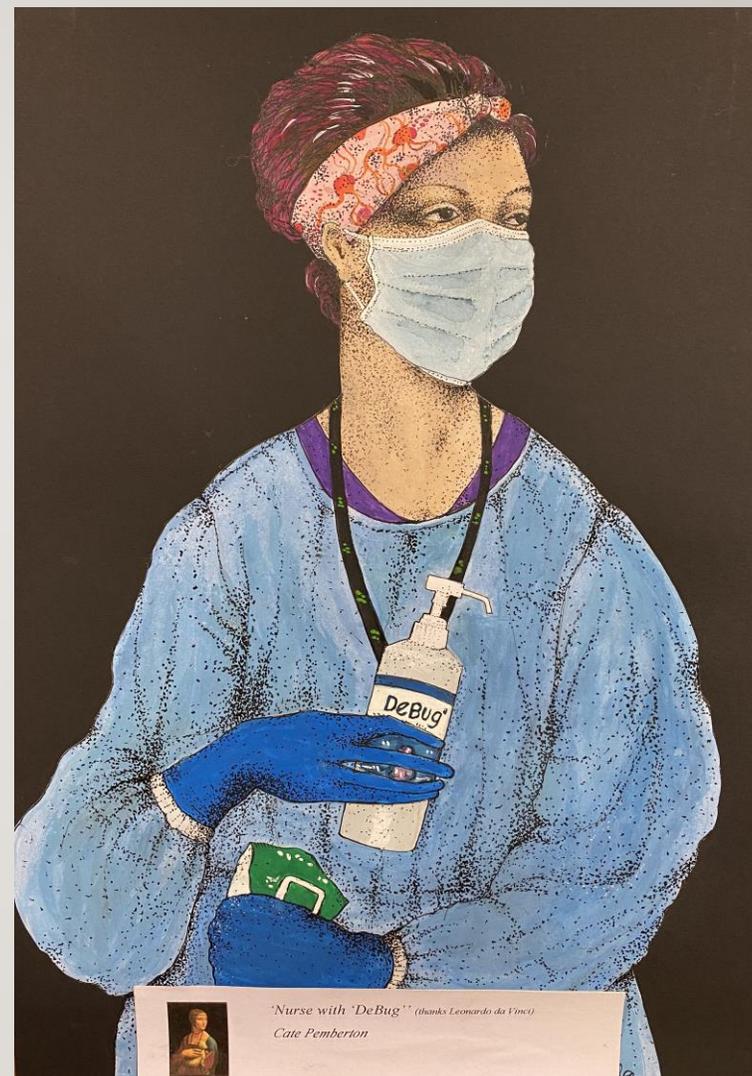
Emma Flory
Clinical Neuroscience







'American Gothic' chemo nurses (thanks Grant Wood)
Cate Pemberton



'Nurse with 'DeBug'' (thanks Leonardo da Vinci)
Cate Pemberton

Seeing the portraits on the wall here, I felt passionate to sat something and produce something a bit playful based on some old favourites.

I did a lot of painting up to the age of 20, but after starting nursing I lost all desire and focus to paint (not sure why, maybe the scientific took over) and haven't painted for 34 years. When I did pick up a pencil again, I felt too self-critical to follow any work through.

We are in an extraordinary year professionally, hopefully one in a professional and personal lifetime. As nurses, we are suddenly in the spotlight and some of the public may realise the extent of what we do.

I dislike the media terms for the healthcare workers like 'Angels', heroes' etc. we do what we do, what we chose to be paid to do to the best of our ability (I am happy to be defined as a nurse).

Cate Pemberton
Registered Nurse



I am also an Art Therapy student and along with Susan, have been on placement this year at the ONJ Wellness Centre, supporting the Art Therapy team.

I was lucky enough to view (via Zoom) a presentation on portraits that Susan showed to the Open Studio Group she co-facilitates, as I was also speaking to the group that day. Viewing the images of the portraits Susan had created so far (there were about 26/30 at that point), I soon realized there had been quite a process to Susan's experiencing. From Susan's own self-care, to a hospital-based exhibition, Susan demonstrated the portraits she has created.

My eyes were instantly drawn to the eyes in each portrait.

Just as in real life, the images wore masks. During Covid, I had become used to mask faced people passing me by in every environment I was in, besides my home. And my view was drawn straight to people's eyes. I am used to expressing myself with a smile. I generally walk past people and give a nod, with a smile – just a note of recognition – you are here and I am here. But with masks, this has become hard. I still attempt to look at people, and sometimes notice I am smiling under my mask. But I really don't think they can see that. Then I seem to feel a bit silly, for smiling under my mask, recognizing it was an inept instinct.

Often, I noticed, people didn't look back. I'm not sure why. Were they angry? Were they embarrassed? Were they happy, queasy, tired, excited? I didn't know. Their eyes were down, faces covered.

But in Susan's portraits, the people mostly looked straight back.

I imagined what it would have been like to create so many portraits, in such a short amount of time. This thought, motivated me to sketch my own self-portrait during the Open Studio Group. I was surprised with my style – a deep, but gentle line, consistent in black, sketchy in parts. And it looks like me. I hadn't sketched in quite a number of years, and was quietly pleased my drawing hands hadn't lost too much of what they had practiced, so many years ago.

With our connection to people shifting in the last 6+ months, it is a relieving comfort to know, as I walk down the hallway to the ONJ Centre for my placement every Monday, the portraits will be looking straight back at me. I can see laugh lines around eyes, a commonality in pose, a playfulness in the colour, an almost tribal connection of a shared similarity – we all have to wear them, here we are.

Sarah Foley - Student Art Therapist

