

# *Reflections with Cancer*

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I was a baby when my parents divorced. Custody was awarded to my mother. My brother and I would generally visit our father a few times a year. Just long enough to know the man, but not really know him. I was fourteen when my father was diagnosed with terminal colon cancer. He was given six months to live. In the frenzy of his predicted fate he reached out to my brother and I more and more often. He aimed to see my brother graduate from high school, and he fought to do so. He succeeded. His morale was up and he quickly set a second goal, to see his second son, me, graduate high school. He continued to fight for another eight years, and his final goal became to watch me receive my college diploma. It was a goal he could not meet. He died February 18<sup>th</sup> 2011.

His cancer was a catalyst that bonded us. Remarkable how the fear of having so little time left ultimately created a rewarding relationship that might not have ever been, if not for his approaching death. The time I spent with my dad was limited, but the mark he left over the past years is eternal. As grateful as I am, the longevity of his battle lead to a more difficult goodbye. Grief is constantly lurking in the silence of my thoughts, in a book, in a film, in the stories of another, or in a gift thrown in the closet and discovered months later. It can be difficult to face, but it need not be faced alone. Grieving is universal; it escapes the barriers of language, religion, politics, and even time and history. *Reflections with Cancer* acts as an icon, a timeless reminder that the negativity of grief has been and will continue to be bested by the positive influence of relating individuals. The universality of grief can then be represented through a collectively understood form, and what better than the human body. I am the message and figure sculpture is my messenger.

Eyebrows are pressed downward, the bottom lip pushed out because of the upward pulling of the chin: sadness. Eyebrows rise creating wrinkles in the forehead: excitement. The addition of a wide-open mouth becomes fear or shock. These facial gestures are but one device. An extended hand: yearning. A lean backwards and a flailing foot: instability or lessening. The addition of more figures creates a relationship. Gestures and expressions are dramatically altered from their formerly lonely unreality. Through figure sculpture any implication can be planted, any emotion evoked.

However, the fragility of clay modeling will not suffice. If my work is to be as timeless as grief, the everlasting nature of bronze casting is the obvious choice. The impressiveness of its physical durability is matched only by its profound longevity. The appeal of leaving an impact on future generations, the desire to be remembered, and the need for fame in forthcoming history is wanted and wished for by numerous people, including myself. Bronze casting is my instrument of influence, my gateway into the minds of future generations.

Furthermore, it is not enough to simply sculpt figures in grief; doing so lacks the diversity in emotional, physical, and mental outputs that arise during the process. It would be untruthful to say there aren't moments of overbearing desolation. Conversely, to smile and to laugh is a marvel, heightened to new levels by contrast. Tracing grief to its origin, it acts as a parasite tarnishing what were once blissful memories. In these memories I explore past regrets, moments in which I laugh so hard I cry, the death of an old friend and the birth of new family members, the delusions of achieving that exceptional girl, successes and failures, sensational cuisine, my future ambitions, and my family. It is these reflections that represent my grieving process. Accordingly, the series is just that, a visual representation of the reflections stimulated from a grieving son in response to his recently deceased father.

While each individual sculpture in the series shares the same origin, they stand individually unique as visual reflections. The very first sculpture of the series was influenced by the nature of human interaction and emotion. Particularly, the false nature of how individuals present themselves in contrast to their actual persona. The act of being openly honest and genuine is quickly becoming bested by a superficial front of fraudulence. Too often can honesty encourage hurtful criticisms. In response, the need to be accepted among peers and colleagues produces a fakeness that spreads like an incurable cancer. Thus, the first of the series, "Judgment" came to be (Figures 1, 2 and 3).

**Figure 1**



**Figure 2**



**Figure 3**

The second piece was influenced by the performance, Sankai Juku. The dancers of Sankai Juku use unhurried minimal movement to express conversation through motion and body language alone. Sankai Juku can be loosely translated into “studio by the mountain and the sea,” hinting at the dance’s tranquil nature. As I watched the all male artists, their faces covered completely in white and their heads shaven, minimally dance, they were each capable of capturing and freezing emotion within every gesture (Figure 4). The performers were both daunting and fragile. Most influential: their passion was easily evident, exerting themselves physically and mentally in profound ways. They inspired the second piece “The Artist” (Figure 5).



**Figure 4**

**Figure 5**



The third piece was fashioned from the exploration of fate. No child grows up dreaming about becoming a waitress, a McDonalds salesman, a grocery store clerk, or a garbage man, and yet these jobs are critical to the advancement of everyday activities for those who have higher-paying jobs. How does one receive a desired

and rewarding career, or perhaps hear a calling? How does one fall into an unfulfilling job, a means of simple, unrewarding survival? Ultimately I concluded upon two key influences regarding the ability to obtain a desired calling. The first is passion. Of course it is cliché, but for a reason. People can register and feel others’ passion. The second is upbringing. We are

who we are because of our upbringing, both influenced by the people we looked to as leaders along with the physical environment we are encompassed within. Quickly, I drew a simple conclusion. My passion as an artist must come from my father, a passionate pilot and mechanic up until the very day he died. A sudden realization! I had selfishly overlooked my mother's passion, evident through unconditional sacrifice. My father enjoyed his work.

**Figure 7**



My mother was not so displeased with her job, but by no means did she love it. She worked primarily for my brother and me. Her passion is her

sons. Not only did she work from early mornings to late nights, she attended every childhood and teen event she could, the big and the small. She took care of us when we were sick with no one to care for her. She miraculously continued to educate herself by receiving a degree while working and raising us. Perhaps she can control time? I'm not sure how else she was able to accomplish so much. Her passion drove her. It is her passion that encouraged "The Loving Acrobat", the third piece in the series (Figure 6, 7, and 8).

**Figure 6**





The final piece was the most physically and emotionally demanding project I have ever undertaken. Absurd amounts of time poured into the life-sized piece and my desire to work turned to an unhealthy addiction. It became all I knew, and for a very good reason. During the beginning of my second semester my father's cancer levels peaked at an all time high. He was dying, and at a horrifyingly rapid rate. Charles Darwin once said, "it is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change." This holds true to the success of an artist. As my life had begun to rapidly change, my work changed. I dropped every sculpture and aspirations that were in progress; I knew I only had so much time before he could see the work. The final piece was to be not just a tribute to my father and his dedication to his family, but to act as an icon for all those sons and daughters and mothers and fathers who have experienced the chaos of emotions that only cancer and death can generate. It would be a fallacy to say the end wasn't as horrible as I had always anticipated, but the eight years he fought would not have been as fulfilling to either of us, or any of his close family and friends, if it were not for his ever approaching fate. Cancer frightened us together; it connected us. My father, his cancer, and my reflections inspired the final piece of the series, "Goodbye" (Figures 9, 10, 11).



**Figure 9**



**Figure 10**

**Figure 11**



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