

Treatments 2019 / 2023: Essay
By Michael Workman

It's not possible to separate the artwork from the experience, as the curator of this exhibition of Mat Rappaport's work, and as a participant in organizing this volume to accompany it. I remember hanging out with Mat and Shana and their daughters. Having dinner at their Evanston home, and the vibrancy of that life at gatherings in the summer, warm summer evenings with music and laughter, chickens taking dirt baths in the backyard.

Treatments 2019/ 2023 demarcates the years of the project, of the endless time spent in treatment rooms fighting off the cancer that eventually ended Shana's life. What evolved out of the experience was this expanded photographic project, which began as snapshots reflecting on the role of artwork in the waiting area and treatment rooms they'd sat in, and that became a conduit for something larger and more indelible.

Throughout the process, Mat and I had numerous conversations about grief, poetics and architecture that eventually evolved into an exhibition at Material, the Chicago artist-run project space.

Mat's work manifests a traumatic reflection into the shadow between his point of view and the reality of his wife Shana's too-early passing. Located within the sequential experience of medical facilities spread across three states, associations and meaning-making became companions as he navigated the process of illness and pre-grieving. There were all multiple associations that ricocheted around as he began to work through the process of grieving. This experience builds an image collection containing historic paintings, pastoral landscapes and generically beautiful nature photography. He was beginning to ground the space of treatment rooms with a sense of how they inhabited the space. Through examining the resulting images, Mat discussed both the prevalence of depictions of nature as well as instances of artificial plants and flowers which functioned as efficient stand-ins for the real thing.

Concurrently, Mat regularly posted pandemic experiments growing microgreens, seedlings, sourdough, and mushrooms - an act of resistance that seemingly the whole nation had engaged in. At a moment in the tidal upheaval of the COVID-19 pandemic, Mat and Shana traveled and later moved their family from Evanston to Los Angeles to enroll her in an experimental clinical trial. Upon settling into a new and temporary home, Mat again began his experiments while documenting a new series of treatment sites.

When we as a global community were seemingly unable to even help ourselves, this gesture, the simple act of helping along living things, was an expression of a collective trauma and simultaneously a yearning for some sort of collective healing response. So within this mirror dimension, of individual experience and collective affirmation, of shadow passing over the artworks, there emerges a fragmentation and new-faceted interiority within Mat's work. One of the pivotal images, grounding experience in reflection, is a photograph of a faux concrete planter in a waiting room hallway. The artificial nature of the plants and the large scale of the plant enclosure make this placement in an institutional transitional space particularly jarring.

Out of this grounding grew the inspiration for a micro-corner installation featuring planters, microgreens, adhesive photographs and mirrors mounted vertically. (sketch figure) The composition of materials fractures the immediate space, enlarging and duplicating it: a reflection into the space of that emotional/artistic bifurcation, diagramming through art not only the reality of grief and loss, but of a point of view on the limits and uses of art. Through that refraction, the idea for a kind of "reflective architecture" started to coalesce.

This illusion eventually becomes part of the infrastructure of the exhibition space itself, echoing the shadow-cast alteration of the photographs as they are mounted on tall tinted slightly-smoked mirrored surfaces. (installation figure) This splitting or twinning of reflection becomes a theme throughout, eventually emerging as itself part of the altered experiential space and as itself a means of survival.

Throughout this volume, Rachel Jamison Webster's poetry pairs with and joins in allusions to the grinding human processes in Mat's work, having also lost her own spouse, Richard, too-early, to ALS, in 2011. Capping the volume, Josh Honn, whose wife Pam passed away in 2015, also from cancer, echoes Webster's earlier texts, creating a resonance in the book as a shared space to experience loss. Their contributions make this volume into an exploration of sorts of the inner worlds and the places where grief is experienced, and extends the exhibition through their own voices beyond the waiting rooms of Mat's photography.

These memories echoing throughout the aftermath of loss creates a transformative interiority, a shared experience of surviving paralyzing trauma. But in Rachel's collection *The Well: Grief Poems*, we go through the aftermath with her, and through the mundane, quotidian moments that emerge almost spectrally. In that sense, they engage a space within the project that echoes the shading of the waiting room art-images, and that similarly expounds on the familial echoes, the patterns and habits of their daily lives together. These few summarizing lines succinctly capture the transition in her extraordinary *A Load of Darks*: "But when I woke it was the worst pain / to realize that nightmare was false / and this one, with you gone, goes on."

By contrast, Josh Honn sees loss everywhere in the natural world. His poem, *A Slow Archive*, originally published before his wife Pam's passing as a chapbook, pairs his enthusiasm for birding with the work of grieving and writing. In it, you can almost smell the wind and fresh lake water as he writes about a particular visit to the hospital when "it became known that it would be one of our last." In an extraordinary reflection, he looks up and grasps the moment of transformation: "Time mute like robins in Fall / Together / All / All this / This then this always." In its eternally frozen state, emotion seizes loss to become something other than itself, an image of a moment of loss preserved in time replaces the live-wire of raw pain, transmuted by the setting amber of two robins in migration together.

Each of the contributors seeks to wrestle with how we face this impossibly heavy sadness, considering it through the prisms of their own constructed poetics and consider it in the light-making mystery of a mind reflecting on its own suffering. In that effort to work through it, to preserve what they can of themselves and their lost loves through these simple acts of breathing poetry into sound, into life that honors their continued relationships together, they transmute the unbearable into a new past that persists in the present, and illuminates a new way forward.

"Poetry is a life-cherishing force," Mary Oliver wrote in her renowned *Poetry Handbook*. "For poems are not words, after all, but fires for the cold, ropes let down to the lost, something as necessary as bread in the pockets of the hungry." Ultimately, this volume represents a shared endeavor to nurture the wounded, through the lens of recording their experience of these losses, and preserve what helped make them who they are, through the thin tethered memories of this work to those they valued most.