



'Our work is about joy': the artists redesigning hospitals for kids

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Derrick Adams Installation at NYC Health + Hospitals/Harlem, 2020.

The power of art in connection to wellness has been chronicled for decades with countless studies showing that any sort of creative expression can help maintain immune systems while elevating moods, reducing stress and blood pressure. Not-for-profit system of hospitals Intermountain Healthcare goes one step further, positing that the relationship between the fields runs even deeper, claiming that "research shows that patients who are exposed to art during a hospital stay actually heal quicker and have a better overall experience."

Diane Brown's idea to establish an organization tasking artists of all calibers to transform hospitals into beautiful art destinations should, therefore, come as no surprise. For the last 20 years, RxArt has been adorning children's hospital rooms with designs aimed to ease each patient's hospital stay. Since its inception, the non-profit has worked with over 60 artists across 40 different hospitals in the US and it is now looking to incorporate in Canada as a charity while also having conversations about potential involvement with British medical institutions.

As the organization's president, Brown recalls the inspiration behind the group by reminiscing on her own hospital stay in February of 2000. "I had some health issues and had to have a CAT scan," she said to the Guardian. "When I got to the room, it was cold, it was super unpleasant and I really wanted to get out. My only escape was in my imagination: I imagined a painting going across the ceiling of the room." Following her test, Brown – who had already built a career in the art world as a curator and gallery owner – started contemplating potential ways to turn her daydreaming into a reality.

"I started asking artists, curators, critics and collectors: do you think I could put museum quality art in hospitals, not charge the hospital but still pay the artists?," she recalls. At first met with skepticism, Brown was eventually able to secure the program a three-month trial run at Rockefeller University in New York City, a research hospital with a relatively small number of inpatients.

"It was a success," she says. "And they asked if I could do more." Although initially aimed at tackling spaces all throughout hospitals, a few years ago the nonprofit's board decided to focus on wings and rooms dedicated exclusively to kids. RxArt's core team is only made up of just three staff members, in addition to the advisory board that helps with securing potential hospital spaces and artist selections.

Among the relatively long list of projects that RxArt has worked on is Derrick Adams' series of treatment rooms in the pediatric emergency department at NYC Health + Hospitals/Harlem. Derrick opted to cover each wall with playful and colorful designs like doughnuts and swimmers.

There's also the visually striking work of Takashi Murakami for the CT/PET scan suite at Children's National Hospital in Washington, DC. The artist came up with a vibrant design marked by clouds and flowers that then turned into a wrap to be placed around the scanner, plus wall coverings throughout the entire room. "One little boy said that he was getting CAT scans regularly and he was so afraid," says Brown about Murakami's project. "He said that [the first time he walked into the newly designed room], the smiling flowers made him happy."

Other heartwarming reactions include that of a 9-year-old girl who was getting a CT scan at CHOC Children's in Orange, California. Afraid she would be "swallowed up by the machine," by Brown's own telling, the young girl felt at ease after noticing the picture of a bird on top of a machine, part of artist Rob Pruitt's installation. Although each hospital ultimately picks an artist to work with, the RxArt staff thinks hard about candidates. "We try to find an artist that matches the situation, the demographic, the site," explains Brown. "There are some artists that work on a really big scale and you don't want to give them a tiny little wall. Others' work is more intimate so you don't want to give them a 200-foot-long corridor." The nonprofit also gives each artist free rein in terms of a design plan.

The organization's methodology most recently coupled brothers Nikolai and Simon Haas with the Children's National Hospital in Washington, where Murakami's work is also featured. "As artists, we're super privileged to have our jobs and do what we want to do and make good money and it's very important for us to be able to give back," says Nikolai. "So doing something with people like RxArt is very rewarding and kind of the whole reason for our practice."

The duo is also working on the non-profit's first sculpture installation for the site. "We are making a big beaded tree that is loosely based on a Sumerian tree and has a monkey sitting in it," explains Simon. The brothers enlisted the help of two groups of women, one based in South Africa and the other in central California, to actually make the beads needed to build the sculpture. "Our work is about joy and building a connection between people and objects, so we think it's an ideal setting for that," says Simon.

Perhaps most remarkably given the span of their work and their filing as a 501 c3, RxArt actually pays each artist. To do so, the staff sets up events and projects throughout the year – from studio visits to published coloring books and more. Needless to say, given a pandemic that has made it impossible for people to organize any sort of live get-together, the non-profit has had to slightly pivot its efforts to include Instagram live sessions that kids could join also and other attempts at productive creativity.

"Covid has made it clear that our work is more important than ever," says Brown, mentioning the uptick in hospital stays all around the world.

On a more practical level, given each medical building's increased traffic, the installation of various art pieces has had to stall in the past few months. Although designed by the selected artists, each composition gets digitally reproduced on wallpaper that then gets installed on walls by fabricators ("Murals aren't practical,"

explains Brown, "because hospital walls move and change). The various fabricators were able to get back into their workshops by May and, just a month or so later, new projects were already being put up. As for timing, Brown reveals that, in normal times, the process – from the initial reach-out to the actual installation – lasts about 12 months.

"I am just imagining myself sitting in the hospital waiting and looking at that thing," says Simon Haas. "If you can look at [our] sculpture and be joyful or sit and wonder about how it was made, that's a great portion of taking your mind off what you're in the hospital for."