

SURFACE

How Artists Are Bringing a Dose of Fantasy to Children's Hospitals

March 23, 2022

By Ryan Waddoups



Nicolas Party for Children's Hospital Los Angeles. Photo courtesy RxART and CHLA

Before today, patients at Children's Hospital Los Angeles were often wheeled down a frightening, starkly lit corridor while en route to the Operating Department. Now, the journey along the 207-foot-long hallway has been made brighter with visuals of a lush, magical forest thanks to Swiss artist Nicolas Party, whose audacious sense of color and flair for the uncanny has captivated the art world's attention and landed him solo exhibitions at Xavier Hufkens and Hauser & Wirth. The nonprofit RxART enlisted Party to create a calming pathway for patients, parents, and doctors to pass through. Given that the hospital provides 16,500 surgeries per year for local children, creating a calming environment was paramount.

"It's been a privilege to think about how artwork can make a difference in the context of a children's hospital," Party says. "The colorful forest I painted for this long corridor will hopefully do a little to make this experience a bit more tolerable. Working on the project in such a charged environment has been challenging because artists usually work in spaces fully devoted to host art. The use of the corridor makes the creation of artwork difficult and has to be handled with care and respect, always keeping in mind who will be seeing the work every day—hospital staff and patients."

RxART has been breathing life into antiseptic medical spaces since 2000, when founder and former gallerist Diane Brown needed a CAT scan and found herself anxious and daydreaming of paintings covering the walls to soothe her nerves. "When I got to the room, it was cold, it was super unpleasant, and I really wanted to get out," Brown told *The Guardian*. "My only escape was in my imagination."

She soon launched RxART with a well-received trial run at a research hospital at Rockefeller University, which asked her to bring on more works. Since then, RxART has commissioned 50 installations at more than 35 hospitals across North America, often by major names like Takashi Murakami, Jeff Koons, Derrick Adams, and the Haas Brothers with their own distinct visual languages.

A few years back, RxART started focusing exclusively on children's hospitals, with Brown describing the approach as "stealth education" that she hopes will also galvanize an interest in art following each patient's stay.

RxART's rise dovetails with recent research about the benefits of art therapy in treating mental health conditions, including anxiety, depression, and phobias. "When we engage in art-making, it helps the neurological system relax," says Margaret Carlock Russo, president of the American Art Therapy Association. "Brain chemical levels will decrease and bring about relaxation for many people, which also helps the nervous system calm down." RxART's success suggests that simply being in the proximity of art elicits a similar positive response. Architects and designers are also catching on to the idea that beautiful environments can be an antidote to fear, with some incorporating whimsical touches like vibrant colors, slides, pools, and forested play areas into medical spaces to help ease the mood.

Given the research behind art's positive effect on mental health and cognitive functions, not only do we endorse the expansion of these types of programs in children's hospitals, we can't help but wonder what type of impact they could have on other pivotal areas of society such as public schools, prisons, and the government.