

I was never a healthy child. The members of my church saw my constant injuries and illnesses, such as my reconstructive knee surgery, as an indication of a moral failing on my part. This pressure to fear my pain and illness, to feel ashamed of it, drove me to try to find a way to redefine the situation for myself, to reclaim the beauty in the transience of life through my work.

Shortly after my knee surgery, another medical setback resulted in a period of rapid hair loss. Unable to immediately process this shock, gathering up the drifts of hair to be saved became a daily ritual. Growing up, my mother had a similar ceremony; she kept a bag of braids from every major haircut since my birth in a drawer in the living room. Without thinking I mimicked this behavior as an adult; saving my hair with the subconscious desire to one day memorialize this period of my life.

Having grown up in a community with quite a number of ceramic raku artists that used horse hair to create surface designs on their pots, I decided to experiment with the effects that could be achieved by burning my hair into the surface of enamel. Like some of the previous materials this process became a balance of chaos and control. The final pattern of the hair was almost impossible to predict but could be somewhat manipulated by temperature and placement, and easily burned away for another try.

It took multiple experiments and attempts before the desired surface was achieved, something that was both intriguing and repellent. The back of each brooch was used as an opportunity to contrast the front, to show that within every difficult moment there is an opportunity for beauty, and that life is a balance between these two states.



Figure 14: *Shadow Brooch*.  
Copper, silver, brass, steel, paper, acrylic, enamel, hair, wood.  
2015. 5" x 3.5" x 0.5" (HWD)



Figure 15: *Shadow Brooch*. Back view

Many of the artists who inspire my work investigate similar imagery and themes, mainly mortality, the body, and gender. Melanie Bilenker, an emerging metal artist from New York, was

inspired by mourning jewelry to create contemporary hair work that captures scenes of everyday life. Using herself as a model, Bilenker outlines her images in strands of her own hair to render a still life of the mundane, the domestic, and the ordinary moments of femininity.



Figure 18: Melanie Bilenker, *Pinning brooch series*.  
Hair, paper, gold, mineral crystal.  
2013. 1.9" x 1.2" x .3" (HWD); Photo: Sienna Patti

Losing my hair had so many implications for me. A woman's hair comes loaded with cultural significance, both within my religion and society as a whole. It is a symbol of health, fertility, and gender, and to not be able to conform to the traditional expectations meant that I was failing to meet my societies' standards on both levels. We live in a culture that goes to great lengths to avoid confronting the idea of death as a natural part of life. We fetishize youth and vitality and disparage or disregard anything that contradicts this. In my experience, when you live with chronic illness you go through periods of physical and emotional erosion. Sometimes this happens slowly over time, sometimes all at once, and in the end you are left with something different than what you started with, something less. But with erosion comes change and the possibility for transformation, to redefine it not as less, but as new.



Figure 16: *Void Brooch*.  
Copper, silver, brass, steel, paper, acrylic, enamel, hair, wood.  
2015. 5" x 3.5" x 0.5" (HWD)



Figure 17: *Void Brooch*. Back view

Paper plays a prominent role in these pieces; the fragility and impermanence of the material lends a conceptual connection to the idea of health and the body. Anyone who has had a brush with the medical industry is familiar with the mountain of paperwork that it generates, from drug warnings, to bills, to insurance benefits. By scanning and layering my medical documents shown in Figure 11, abstract patterns were created and etched into paper using the laser system.

As I cut more and more of the paper I became attracted to the burned and smoky quality on the back of pieces that had been cut at a higher power setting. It has a beautifully random pattern, a chaotic contrast to the carefully controlled surface of the etchings. Altering the values of the layers between light and dark gives a sense of different moments in time, of the varied up and down experiences of living with chronic illness.

With its small, intimate scale and intricate detail, my work is meant to draw the viewer closer, seducing them in, simultaneously holding them at bay. They do not know how to approach it, how to handle it, and it sometimes feels as if the gentlest touch is crushing. At just a palmful they are meant to be cradled close, to be sheltered, to be held against the body.

This series has become a metaphor for living and dealing with constant pain and illness. Pain is something carried around; it can close you off from others and leave you fragile and exposed. You build walls around it, layers of protection, to keep it safe and contained.

Even when the piece is worn out in the open, a part of it is always hidden, always kept back. The only way to know it fully is to have been there, to have made it, or to be invited in. There must be an act from the viewer to investigate and the maker to participate, to share, in some degrees, levels of intimacy.