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Artist unveils 'cancer drawings' created while he was undergoing chemotherapy

VU art professor Robert Sirko goes through personal and professional transformation

When Robert Sirko was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer, the longtime professor of art at Valparaiso University instinctively began drawing images of "evil cancerous beings," as he put it.

"They were hideous creatures created from my fear," explained Sirko, 59, whose form of cancer,

mantle cell lymphoma, typically affects men older than 60.

Once Sirko saw those drawings with a less fearful eye, he stopped creating them. He didn't want his artistic expressions to be poisoned with strictly cancerous imagery.

"I wanted to go beyond that kind of thinking," Sirko said.

Instead, he reminded himself

to continue with his artwork, influenced by introspective whimsy, visual puns and personal examination.

"Sirko's influences reveal the complexities of his art ... steeped in autobiography ... as a professional graphic designer," Gregg Hertzlieb, director of VU's Brauer Museum of Art, wrote in an essay about Sirko's work. "His elements



JERRY DAVICH

of design (serve) as vehicles for metaphor, and for the conveyance of physical and spiritual states."

Sirko knew he had to stick with his original style, drawn organically, not reactively from the devastation of a serious illness.

"If my time was indeed up, I wanted to go down with something memorable to my body of

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ROBERT SIRKO

One of Robert Sirko's "cancer drawings."

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Artist draws through life transformation

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work,” Sirko said.

Easier said than drawn, he would soon learn.

When Sirko began a rigorous six-month regimen of chemotherapy treatments in June, he was determined to continue his drawings if physically able. Many days he wasn't. Sirko spent six weeks in a hospital and three more weeks battling serious complications to his chemo treatment.

Some days he couldn't even dress himself, and had to be wheeled into his home's art studio. Other days, his artwork became his only cure.

“The past is a refuge, but it is also a place of strength into which Sirko can reach as he ponders questions of time and life,” Hertzlieb wrote.

While waiting for a doctor appointment in Chicago, Sirko wandered into the Chicago Cultural Center and witnessed the work of Phyllis Bramson, a respected artist and long-time art professor. She's known for using images “infused with lighthearted arbitrariness and amusing anecdotes about love and affection, in an often cold and hostile world,” as she writes on her webpage.

“I knew immediately that I wanted to emulate her approach,” Sirko said.

What came from several months of chemo-tainted artistry has since been called his “cancer series drawings.” The 40-plus colored pencil drawings illustrate the convergence of his trademark style with subtle traces of mortal fear or existential confusion.

As Hertzlieb said, “Since learning of his cancer diagnosis, Sirko has been creating work with passion and commitment.



ROBERT SIRKO

Robert Sirko takes a break recently from drawing in his home art studio.

In these works he has blended new insights and subjects from earlier art-making periods to wonderful effect.”

I previously spoke with Sirko in 2015 about his “Inner Visions: Sacred Plants, Art and Spirituality” exhibit at the Brauer Museum of Art. These days he isn't the same man, nor is he the same artist. Cancer has a way of sharpening the focus of its victims.

“My time was ticking, and I realized that I needed to tap into something deeper,” said Sirko, who took a leave of absence from VU since his diagnosis.

At that fragile time in his life, Sirko became overwhelmed by potential remedies for his rare cancer.

“People were coming out of the woodwork with suggestions of what I

should do,” he recalled.

They suggested he start smoking cannabis, or begin a strict diet, or join prayer circles, or try cutting-edge drugs, or allow well-intentioned believers to lay their hands on his stricken body to cure it with faith alone (which he did). As many cancer survivors understand, including some of my family members, no remedy is off the table when mortality starts tapping its toes.

Through a stroke of sheer luck or designed fate, he bumped into someone on a South Shore train who gave him a more conventional recommendation. Sirko has been receiving treatment at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago while also changing his lifestyle habits.

The lifelong artist has been creating his own customized wellness plan, merging the hope of holistic practices with the promises of modern medicine. Sirko is being treated in a clinical trial using a relatively new drug. He won't know its results until next month, but he's feeling hopeful.

Sirko also has made dramatic dietary changes with no processed foods, coupled with a strict vitamin regimen.

“I'm practically a vegetarian these days,” he said. “Cancer has turned my life upside down.”

Earlier this year, a study by Johns Hopkins Kimmel Cancer Center concluded that two-thirds of all cancers can be attributed to, essentially, “dumb luck” as normal cells miscopy and then multiply.

This study rocked the medical community but it led me to conclude that, essentially, many of us can be stricken by cancer through random chance. It also may bring comfort to those people with cancer who blame themselves for lifestyle choices or environmental factors.

“There could be a hundred different reasons for my diagnosis but likely it's just my genetics and bad luck. That is what I was told,” said Sirko, whose particular cancer strikes only three people out of a million.

When I first told Sirko that I wanted to write about his “cancer drawings,” he paused for several seconds to compose himself.

“I'm sorry but since I've been ill, so many people have been so supportive,” he said. “I'm looking forward to celebrating life through my artwork again.”

Sirko will begin this act by publicly exhibiting his cancer drawings, among other works, at 6 p.m. Friday at the Nest gallery, 803 Franklin St. in Michigan City, followed with a public chat at 2 p.m. May 13 at the venue.

On May 12, another piece of Sirko's artwork, a wall mural, will be displayed at Hunter's Brewing, a nano-brewery in Chesterton. Its owner, Amy Gentry, described it as a “transformative piece of art.”

Since his diagnosis, Sirko can be described as something similar.