

At the end of the day he makes quick rounds with the residents to make sure all is well: another day of doctors triumphing over disease. He ought to feel exhilarated. All of the surgeries have gone well, but he knows that the second patient will not graduate from college in two years; her cancerous brain tumour will have claimed her by then.

He stumbles back to his office at 6:00 p.m. to do paperwork and gets home at 8:30. His dogs greet him enthusiastically; his wife and daughters less so. His wife smiles wryly and tosses a meaningful glance toward the girls. Another family supper missed. He summons a loud "Hi" for each of his daughters; they reply with garbled grunts. He makes a gin and tonic and after gulping it in 20 seconds pours a glass of red wine to lubricate the rapid downing of his first meal in 24 hours. He has a bath and pours a scotch and takes it with a tall glass of water to his study, where he turns on the computer to check emails. He writes a tormented piece like this one and falls asleep watching television, trying to dream about fishing or being a monster jazz saxophonist. He loves his family and they love him, but everyone's struggling with the same thing he is. At 3:30 a.m. he wakes up and does it again.

He's a little depressed, pal. But has he figured it out yet?

The next evening he gets a phone call from one of his daughters, who is out on the town with friends. She sounds so grown-up, yet so dear and tender — the youngest of three precious daughters, who was born with a large birth-mark on her upper lip that eventually faded, who had a few febrile seizures as a baby that scared him and his wife shitless, and who is struggling with the things teenagers struggle with. Before he hangs up he tells her how much he loves her. Then he sits on the side of the bed and sobs like a baby.

He's a really depressed man. What is he going to do about it?

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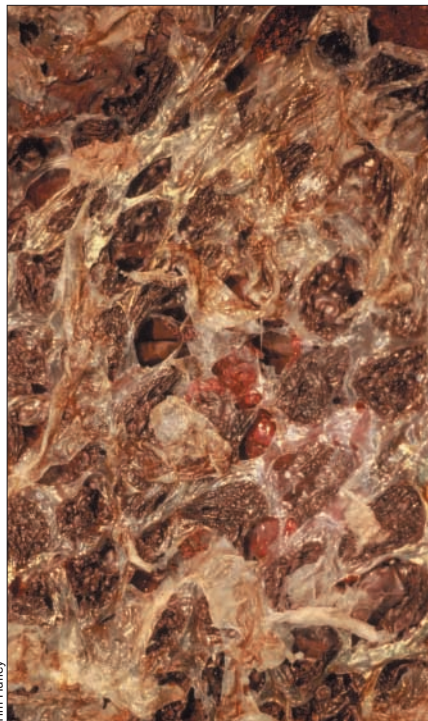
## Lifeworks

# A terrible beauty

"While we may be flesh-coloured on top," says artist Patricia Chauncey, "there's a whole lot more that's underneath us that is actually shockingly beautiful."

Chauncey's textile art pieces vividly illustrate this idea. Some look like chunks of dinosaur hide, others like magnifications of animal cells or tissue samples. One looks like something you'd glimpse in an antismoking ad: a thick, textured mat of moist greys, browns and purples. All are potent and organic, like things excavated from the earth or the human body and exposed to daylight for the first time.

Chauncey has been interested in organic and biological subjects for a long time, having spent many childhood hours looking for dinosaur bones in the Alberta badlands. She has used medical imagery in her work for years, while doing art shows, designing and distressing costumes for the film industry, and raising a family in Vancouver.



Patricia Chauncey, 2001. *Flesh* (detail)

Although she had been feeling sick for years, she was diagnosed with an aggressive form of breast cancer only last year. "By the time they found the tumour in my body it was the size of a grapefruit ... I had a lymph node that was completely replaced by cancer. So, I moved instantly from not knowing I had cancer into metastatic cancer." Fighting her cancer, she's come to incorporate her awareness of her body into her art.

"Since I've been diagnosed with cancer ... I've had the opportunity, very differently than most people who are healthy, to see what that looks like. I've seen what my cells look like, I know what my DNA is like, I know what my skeleton looks like. I've been living up in the library in the cancer clinic. People think I'm reading to find out if I can improve my situation ... But what's amazing to me is the visuals of it. I'm absolutely fascinated by the beauty of cells, and by how magical the connection between body parts and everything is. ... [Cells] are like gardens, they're like little constellations. I mean they're just absolutely amazing. Sometimes the cells that are pretty are the ones that are sick."

These are the images and ideas that Chauncey incorporates into her art. She works in destructive textiles, which involves "slashing, cutting, burning, melting and leaving [metal] in the yard to rust, and applying different kinds of materials so that the textile takes on a different form. You can start with a plain cotton and come out with something entirely different, or a plain white piece of polyester and have something that's very three dimensional and very carved-up, very mineral-like. It takes on completely different qualities." Her work also includes embroidery, dyeing, printing and silkscreen techniques. She studied at Capilano College under Leslie Richmond, one of the world's foremost destructive textile artists.

Some of her work consists of mem-

ory pieces, such as *Grandfather Story*, with items from her grandfather's life embedded in wax. Others are political, such as *Altered Gulf*, with images of Middle East warfare printed on pieces of leather that were buried in her garden with rusted metal. In her art, artifacts and items are taken out of their usual contexts and put on display as in a museum, as a way of relaying history.

Her biological pieces also use display techniques as a means to storytelling. In her *Material Witness* show, for example, organic textiles were placed in jars and Petri dishes. *Hive*, made of cast paper and acrylics, is a honeycomb-like piece with tiny pictures of animal and plant cells in the hexagonal compartments.

Another work, *Blood, Water, Salt, Rot* is about the frailty of life and death. "All of those are very elemental," says Chauncey. "All of them — blood, water, salt, rot — are absolutely necessary to what we need to live, but each one of them can be toxic. You can drown in water, salt can become poisonous. Blood

itself, we've learned a lot about since HIV. Those kinds of things are both beautiful to me, but also quite terrifying. Those kinds of things are absolutely necessary. We require everything that may not be so pretty to survive. [But] those things can change. Our flesh can change. It can become something that can kill us."

Not only has cancer killed 27 members of Chauncey's family, but her mother was prescribed the synthetic estrogen diethylstilbestrol (DES) when she was pregnant. This drug was subsequently found to increase the risk of cancer in both mothers and their children. "In an attempt to create the per-

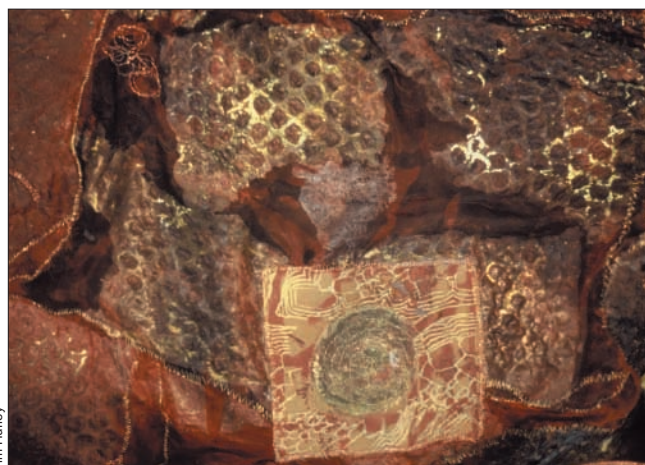
fect pregnancy, they created these horrible cancers for women in the future, women who were born of DES," Chauncey says.

In a way, Chauncey is a product of medical science, and it still affects her life through her cancer treatments. "One of the things about being in chemo is [that it] changed my cells." She lifts up her hat, revealing the pale fuzz on her scalp. "My hair is just coming back in, and it's pure white. It was brown before, dark, dark blond. It'll come back in naturally curly. "[Medical science] can change your hair colour, how you look, what your skin texture is like," she explains. "It's all really amazing to me."

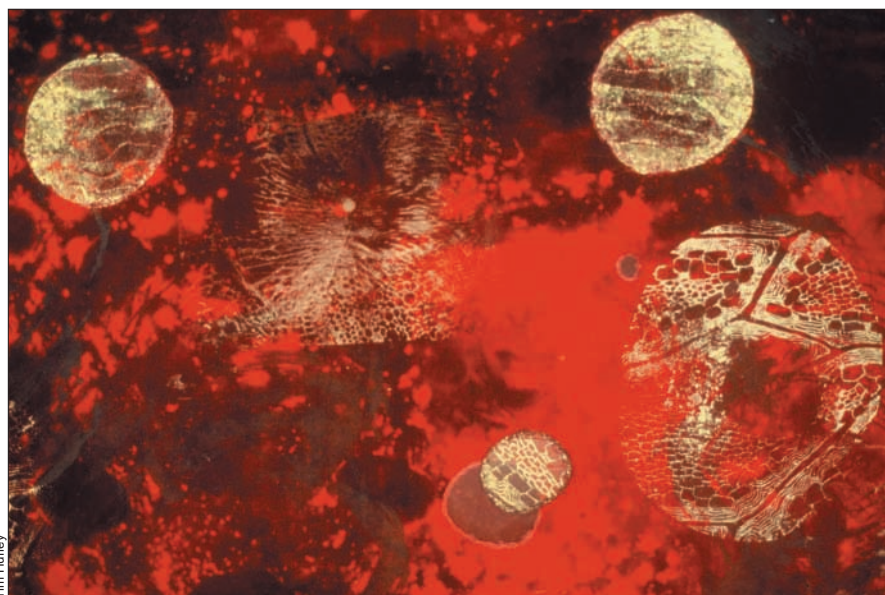
She sees her disease as "my body's attempt to clone itself. I have these cells that keep duplicating. There's something so incredibly fascinating and beautiful about [that]."

Even though it may kill her? "It could," she says. "We'll see what happens."

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Patricia Chauncey, 2002. *Returning Selkie's Skin* (detail)



Patricia Chauncey, 2002. *Return to Mecca* (detail)