DISABILITY ART
& EXPRESSION

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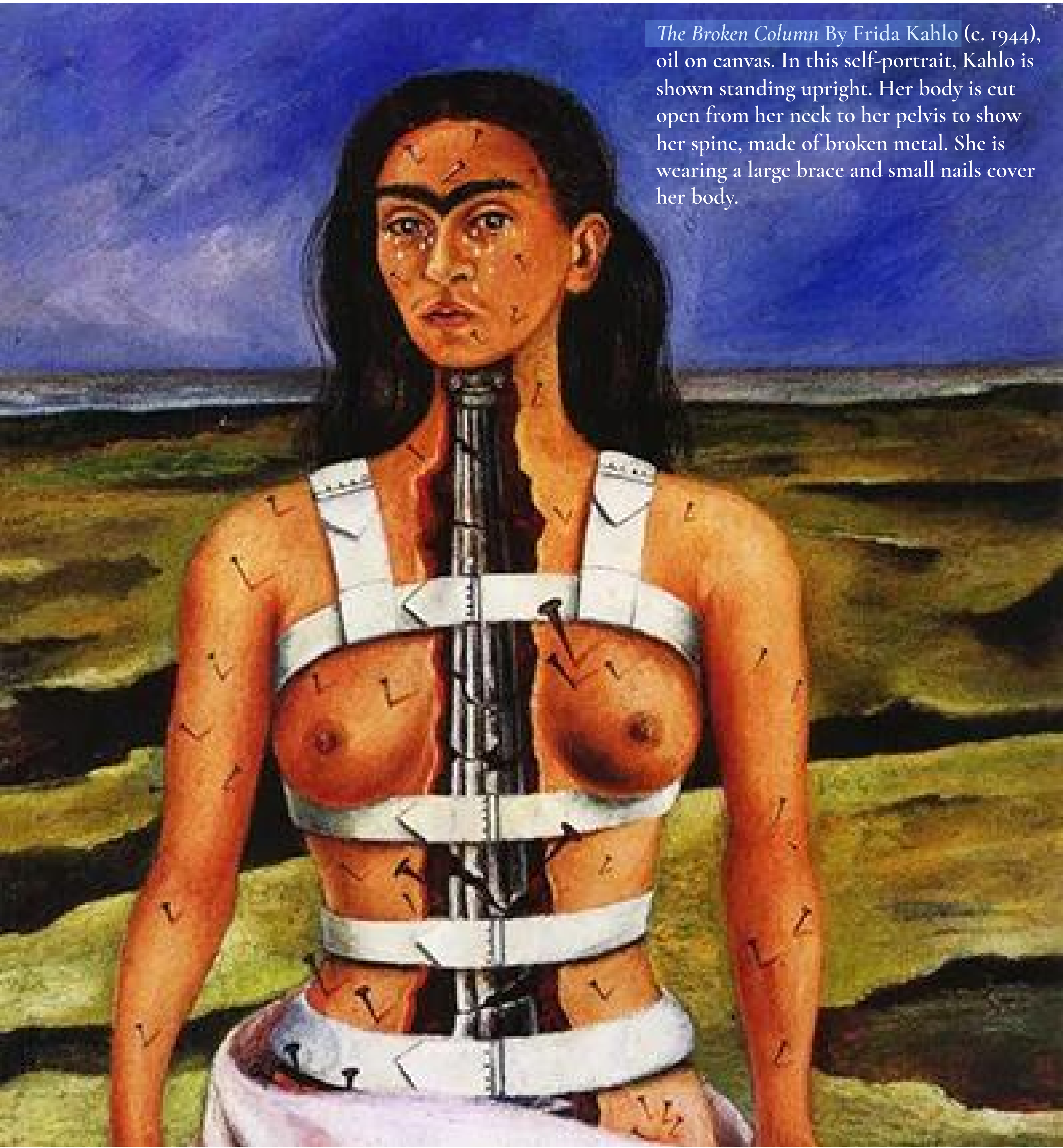
Exploring how art of all forms is used to express the disabled experience, and how art lends to disability culture and the process of embracing disability.

DISABILITY ART IN HISTORY

Many famous (and not as famous) artists throughout history lived with disability. Many of these artists brought their disabled experience into their art at some point in their career. Frida Kahlo was one of the most famous disabled artists who frequently used her incredible artistic skills to portray her numerous experiences living with disability,



The Broken Column By Frida Kahlo (c. 1944), oil on canvas. In this self-portrait, Kahlo is shown standing upright. Her body is cut open from her neck to her pelvis to show her spine, made of broken metal. She is wearing a large brace and small nails cover her body.

PORTRAYING STIGMATIZED BODIES

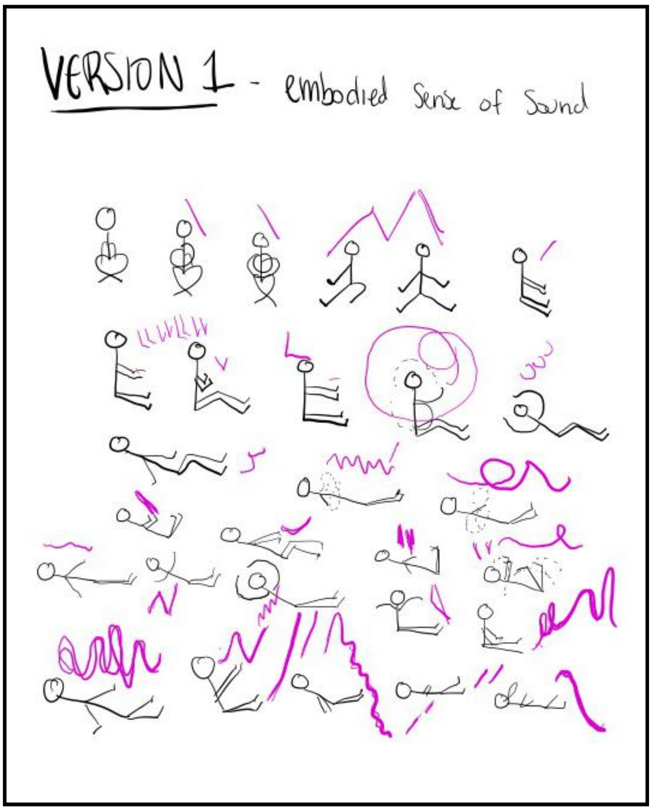
The Risk Pictures: Alice Sheppard (2016) by Riva Lehrer and Alice Sheppard

At 54 (2013) by Riva Lehrer

Riva Lehrer combines her experience, knowledge, and skills to create portraits that do not run from stigmatized bodies. Between self-portraits and portraits of others who identify with having "othered" bodies, Lehrer leans into capturing her subjects sometimes murky and complex relationship to their body-minds in order to portray genuine experience.

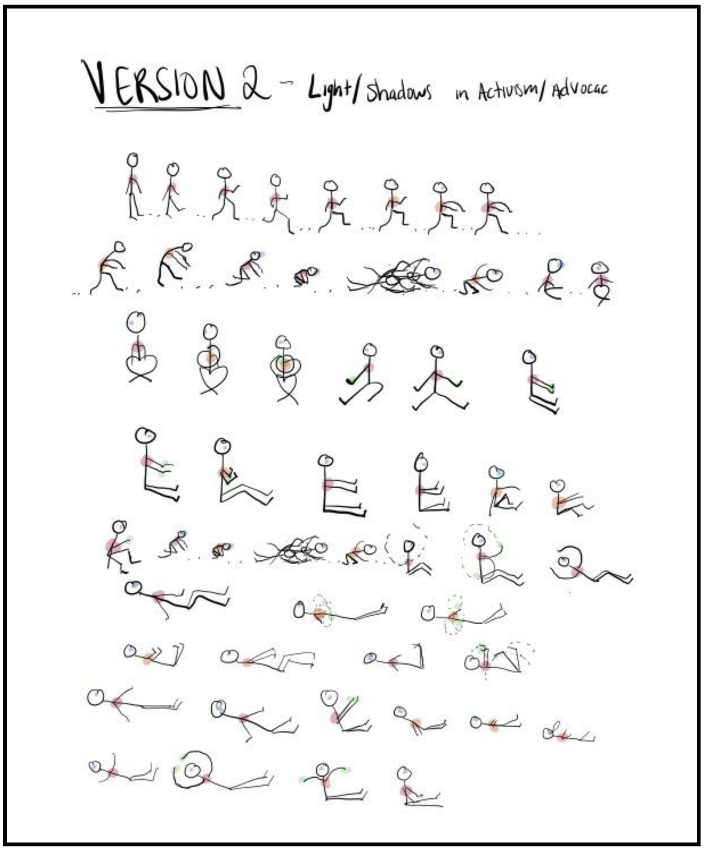
Lehrer pushes against societal norms and wants to hide from uncomfortable things. As a disabled person, she feels it is her place to create art of and with other disabled people. She does not take it on herself to know each persons experience and always works to make sure each portrait is authentic to the subject, even risking her artwork and space in order to give the subject freedom to edit and add to the portraits.

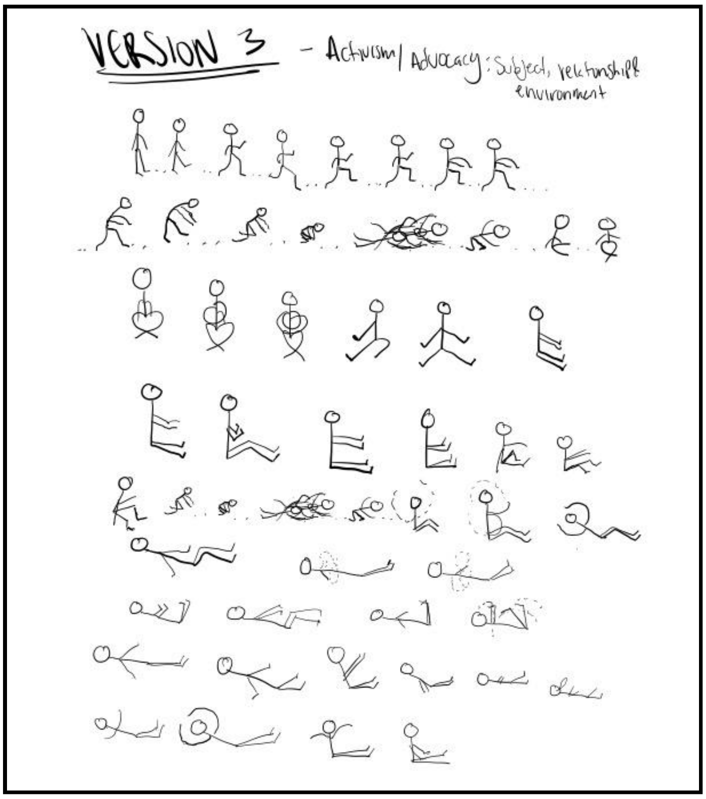
CREATING ACCESS IN DANCE



In my dance composition class this semester, I had to find my way around an able-bodied dance space. My physical ability fluctuates all the time. I was not able to dance much and especially not for extended periods of time. We had to create a movement study on our relationship with advocacy/activism, creating three versions of the same movement phrase with different intentions to each. I had no idea how I was going to get this done. I knew I was going to focus on disability advocacy, but I also knew that my body was not allowing me to create movement in the traditional way I envisioned.

Lucky enough to have a professor willing to get creative, I decided to try sketching my dance phrases. I was shocked by how much I was able to express through stick figures and colors. While the intention for these sketches was not to take the place of movement, I ended up feeling that this captured and embodied the meaning behind my study more than just movement would have. It not only conveys the difficulty of being a disability advocate while disabled, but the difficulty of not just trying to do what able-bodied people can do and instead finding a way to make it work for me, as a disabled person. I learned that this dance piece was not to show others the struggle, but to accurately portray my experience doing what I've always thought I had to do: be as able-bodied as possible.



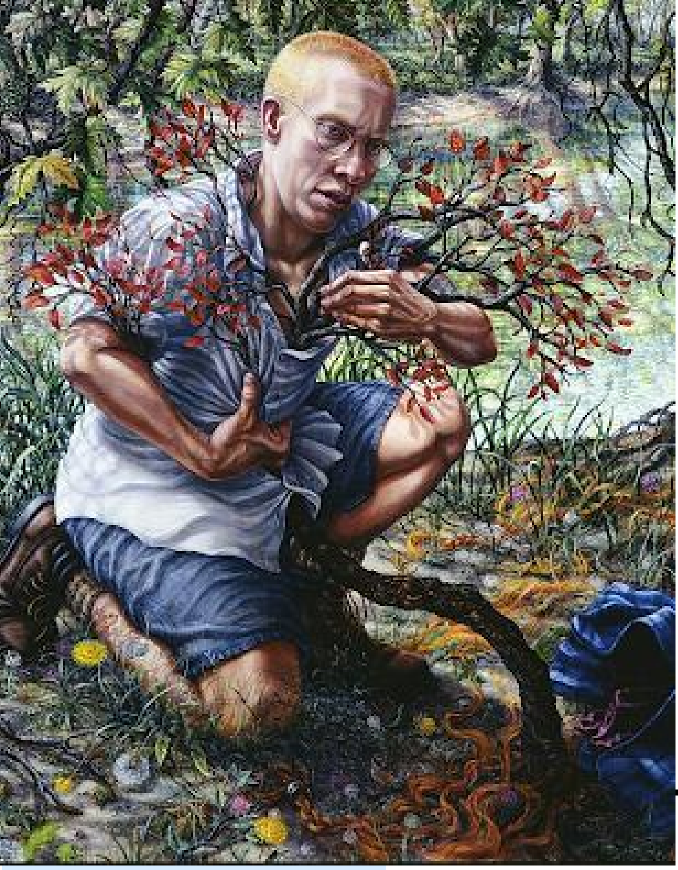


UNDERSTANDING DISABILITY ART, AESTHETICS AND CULTURE

Around the same time that I was working on my sketched dance study (on the previous page), I was learning about disability culture and aesthetics. Watching a video of Alice Sheppard dancing and discussing her methods and beliefs in disability art helped me feel grounded in my work. It allowed me to recognize that art that incorporates disability isn't about necessarily teaching others, but showing your full authentic self and experience for yourself and other disabled people. It's about embracing yourself and all that comes with you, whether it is mobility devices, a certain way of walking or talking, or anything else.

This is the important distinction between a focus in disability rights and disability culture. They are both so important. One is focused on creating inclusive space for disabled people and giving people with disabilities the same level of respect, importance and value as anyone else. The other is focused on creating community and space for disabled people to be for themselves. It's not about getting others to see, but having space to just be.

Alice Sheppard and Laurel Lawson perform in Kinetic Light's dance work Descent.
Photo by Jay Newman/BRITT Festival (photo from arts.gov)



Eli Clare (1997) by Riva Lehrer

A REFLECTION AND REVIEW OF ELI CLARE'S *BRILLIANT IMPERFECTIONS: GRAPPLING WITH CURE*

Another form of art is through writing. Eli Clare's book, *Brilliant Imperfections: Grappling with Cure*, is as he describes it a "mosaic" of thoughts, conversations, and experiences surrounding the concept of cure. Between his beautiful prose and poetry, Clare brings the reader into the complex and personal discussion of "cure".

Not only is this a great expression through various written art forms of internal and external struggle for disabled people, but it is an immensely enlightening and resourceful book for disabled and non-disabled people.

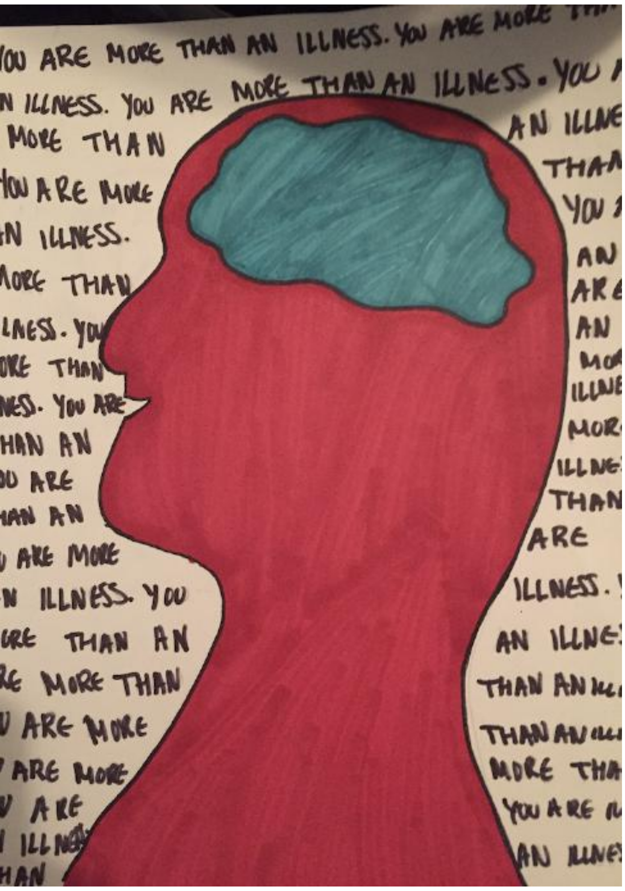
The language of "grappling with cure" is a very accurate one for many disabled people. It's a troubling spot to be in when the medical system is built up around treating and curing everything. Questioning or resisting the current concept of cure does not necessarily mean that a person is against any sort of treatment or medical intervention. It just means that being disabled is not all about becoming non-disabled.

It's not about "overcoming" a disability or "fighting" hard enough to be able to get back to "normal." Clare brings up an incredibly important point about what restoration really means. What point are we restoring ourselves to? Are we looking to go back to how we used to be? Where we think we should be? There is no way to do that perfectly.

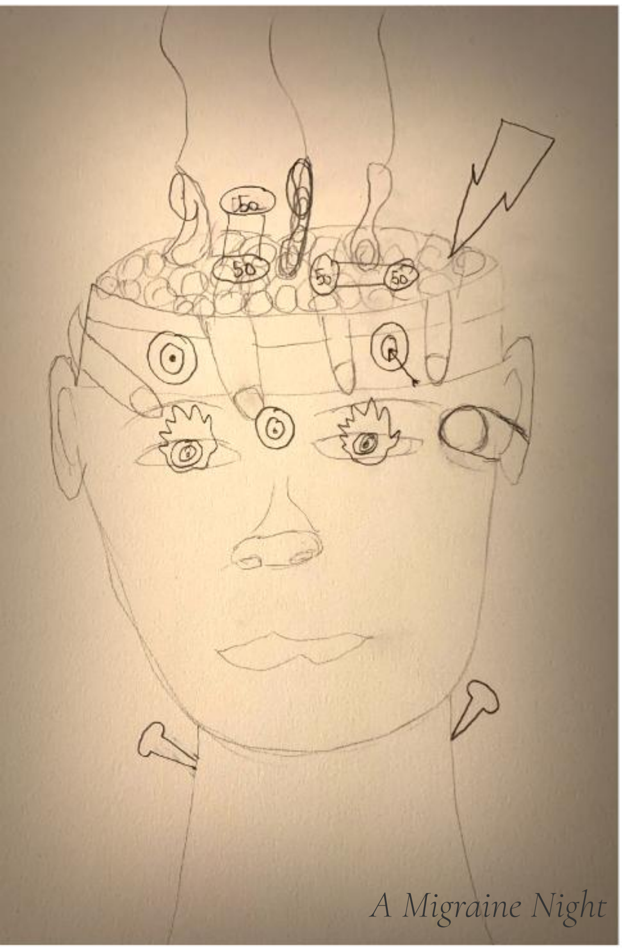
Cure doesn't need to be about getting to a certain point deemed "normal" again. It can be about moving forward in your life the way in which you want. Clare grapples with the difference between resisting cure as a disabled person who is not "unhealthy" and as a chronically ill disabled person where their disability is ultimately tied to their overall health. He recognizes in the chapter, "Nuances of Cure," that his "anti-cure politics has all too often shut out chronically ill people." (pg. 61) He recognizes that wanting to work towards treatment does not need to counteract working towards a less ableist world. The "cure" to ableism is not forgetting about treatment and medicine, but that one cannot live without the other.

"The restoration of health doesn't only involve the use of medical technology to repair a boy's lungs and return his breathing to normal or to stop the ravages of cancer in a woman's body and create permanent remission. Cure also requires dismantling racism, poverty, and environmental injustice. I let health and cure take on multiple meanings."
- Eli Clare (*Brilliant Imperfections*, page 62)

PERSONAL ART FOR EXTERNALIZING PAIN



When I started to have chronic daily headaches, I didn't know why. I knew it had something to do with a mild concussion but there was no understanding of why this headache should have been persisting. There was also nothing I could do to help it. In high school I was always a determined person, but I then started to have to deal with pain that kept me from doing what I knew I was capable of. In some ways it made me more determined, but also I would sit in class, unable to focus. I started to bring sketch pads and markers to class as drawing was one of the only ways I could keep myself from panicking. When feeling lost in the uncertainty of pain and wondering if anyone would ever understand it, I turned to art to try and express what I was feeling internally. That's always been the hardest thing about chronic illness for me. NO one can see it. And someone else could be experiencing it completely different than me. I found that art was one of the only ways I could externalize my experiences.



A Migraine Night

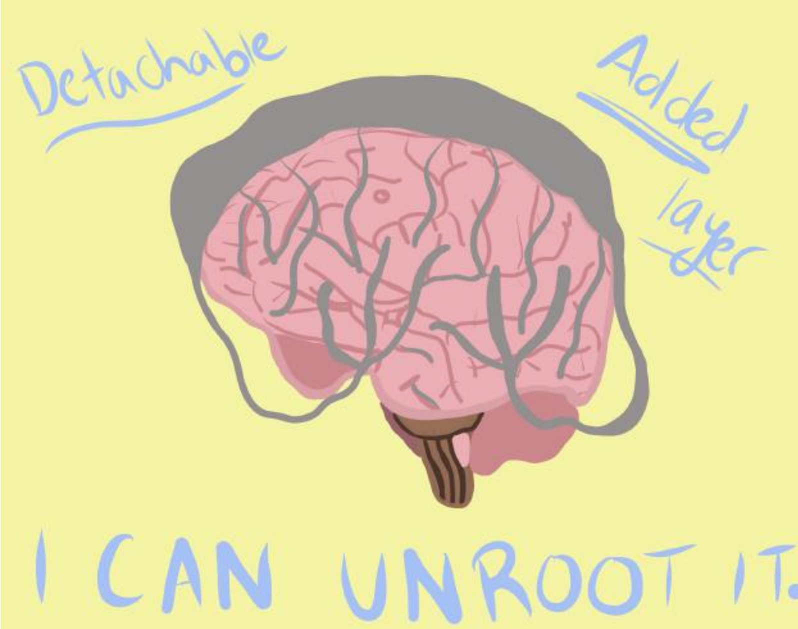
I remember the night I made the drawing *A Migraine Night* I was just sitting in my room in college in complete pain unsure what to do with myself. I couldn't work, I couldn't be around others. So stuck in my own brain, I needed a way to externalize all the sensations I was feeling. I made this drawing and at first didn't want to share it with anyone.

I didn't want anyone to think it was a cry for pity or help. I ended up sharing it with a select group of friends, with the caption: "not looking for pity. Just want to know that someone is seeing a mere glimpse into what I experience in my own body." This art was more for me than anyone else, but also important to me that others saw it. Even if they didn't know what to do with it or how to react, neither did I. It's okay to share that discomfort with others, whether they understand it or not.

Bang. Bang. Bang.
Someone's voice bombards my head.
Is it loud? I wouldn't know.
Pain. Boom. Push, pull, crash, ow.
Twist around and around.
Wrap tighter and tighter
An embracive hug
        Sculpted around my brain.

Yanking, grabbing, pulling
All to be flat. No standing. No sitting.
Just flat.
Flat.
Ok. I'm flat.
Am I better? No. BAM
Sharp shooting pain
Straight through the forehead
Eyes close. Eyes close!
Burning, burning lifting the forehead.
Close!
Closed.
Grab. Wrap. Hug. Embrace. Squeeze. Pull.

Everything runs in circles around
Flashes by and I remain.
Lost.
Confused.
Still.



An elastic band wrapped around your head
Snapped into place every 10 seconds

A drill trying to find gold, only to be unsuccessful
But don’t worry. It’ll try again in a new spot. And then another one.

Surrounded by bricks being pushed in from all sides

Dicing onions and I'm the cutting board

Someone sifting through all the guck and tangles

POEMS
(2019)

A collection of poems written throughout my first semester of college. This time period was when I was starting to learn about some causes of my pain, and also learn about disability and disability community.

It's been a long time.
I don't remember what it feels like to not just be in some kind of pain.
Yea, it changes. Sometimes worse than others but it’s there. It's always just there.

The thing is..
It's not just the pain.
It's not just the feeling.

It's not just the fatigue.
It's not just the scraping against the skull.
It's not just the screws in the neck.

It's more.

The thing is..
It's the mindset
It's the weight
It's the personal guilt

The thing is..
It's just not simple.

No one thinks it is.
No one is telling me I should be okay.
But I say that.
I want to just be okay.
I want it to be simple.
I want there to be an answer and go back to how things were

But what even was that?
Is it that I want to go back or just move forward?

The thing is..
It wasn't easy.

Life wasn't an open field of daisies and sunshine
Life wasn't just going along and doing what I want
It was hard.

The thing is..
It gave me freedom.

Now there's a rope.
Holding me back.
I can move forward but I don't get any slack.
It's a constant yank and pull until I can't pull anymore.

Somedays there's a little slack given.
Excitement all around.
Until it's gone. Then we are back.
Back to the strain and tightness of the rope wrapped around my body keeping me back from moving forward.

POEMS
(2019)

No.
Wake up.
Ow.
Fight. Push. Stretch.
GET UP!
Ow. No.
Fine.

Another day. Fighting through.
I mean constant pain? Really?
NO.
No one can see it.
NO.
No one can understand it.
NO.
No one can help it.

Ow. Ow. Ow.
But I keep going.
I do what I can.
There's a constant feeling of NO.
I get out of bed. NO.
I go to class. NO.
I sit in a loud and crowded room. OW.

But I keep going. OW. NO.
Yes, you are right. No more thinking right now.
No. I don’t want to stop. I don’t want to be behind.
OW. Okay, fine. I'll stop.

Alone. Bored. Tired. OW.
Social. Loud. Present. OW.

RESOURCES

Alice Sheppard and Laurel Lawson

- Article: https://www.arts.gov/stories/blog/2021/beautiful-and-wild-ways-being-conversation-alice-sheppard-and-laurel-lawson-kinetic-light
- Kinetic Light website: https://kineticlight.org/bio
- Video interview: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjLRPVnmY30

Riva Lehrer's Website:

- https://www.rivalehrerart.com/self-portraits

Eli Clare:

- Book: *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* https://www.dukeupress.edu/brilliant-imperfection
- Website: http://eliclare.com/

Frida Kahlo:

- Website: https://www.fridakahlo.org/

Disability Art Resources:

- https://www.disabilityartsinternational.org/about-us/
- https://disabilityarts.online/