



Kathryn Ko, MD, MFA

Life Lines



Self Portrait – Pastel on toned paper by Kathryn Ko

The instructor comes around to my painting. She sighs at the muddy canvas and advises me to “stick to medicine.” Laughter rises up in the class and my spirit falls. In that airless moment I think, “Get out, interloper. Pack up the brushes.” I stare at my still life composition. It’s not breathing. My teacher threw me a lifeline — quit painting flowers and fruit. Best advice ever.

The landscape of neurosurgery is an artist’s wonderland of color and light. The headlight beam ricochets off the bevel of a #10 blade with

such precision you can almost hear it.

The chiaroscuro of the living brain has light that tumbles off the gyri and uncannily fades to dark in the valleys. The foreboding ultramarine vein and the ferocious crimson within the surety of an artery are magical. Look for the complement, a near cobalt green, lurking in the shadows. The palette is full. There’s no need to squint. When the view becomes too overwhelming, withdraw home to the safe earth tones of the bones.



Danger Trumpet Man – Acrylic on canvas by Kathryn Ko

Art and neurosurgery each have their own set of rules and techniques to surmount, but they share the unremitting pressure to succeed. No surgeon or artist can survive with a beginner’s eye or unsure hand. Both surgeons and painters are masters of touch and observation. Neurosurgeons are experienced in value analysis for interpreting CT and MRI scans. These are a complex version of the artist’s linear value scale, which traces white to black and the in-between halftones. Neurosurgeons are also dimensional

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LP Shunt – Acrylic on canvas by Kathryn Ko

navigators who render 2D radiology slices into a 3D patient. Painting and drawing reverse this process. The 3D subjects are transferred to the flat canvas at the end of a brush.

Anatomy is a language best translated by its native speakers – surgeons. The anatomy of the operating room is special and different from the anatomy of the dissecting table. The absence of vital signs makes medical illustration static. The work of Harvey Cushing elevated medical illustration to art. He lived his drawings. During art

graduate school, my professor advised, “Paint as if your life depended on it.” Cushing’s art teaches that the patient’s life depends on you. Medicine is both the medium and the message.

Of course, no art can completely capture what we do. If any field can match art in its passion, majesty and roller-coaster highs and depths, neurosurgery can. It is what calls me back to the easel night after night. There is unfinished treatment and time is short. The life line may not be enough to amend the outcome.



My Rongeur – Oil on canvas by Kathryn Ko

I cannot depend on it this time around.

On occasion, my studio reminds me who I am and where true north lies. I hear Matisse’s ghost warning to keep my sight fresh; to look as if it is the first time. Even in the midst of brushes and paint, I sense it will be that early gaze at the operating field that I will remember last. If art is wondrously long, then this artist would humbly offer that neurosurgery, still young, is already beyond wonder. Here be magic. Lives will depend on it. ❌