



# THE ART OF HEALING

Working closely with the medical community, McMaster Museum of Art's **Carol Podedworny**, Director and Chief Curator, and **Nicole Knibb**, Education Coordinator, explain how art exhibitions and public programmes can help people deal with trauma

## Can you highlight some of the current trends in museums in terms of exhibits?

**CP:** For the past 10 years, museum work has incorporated a view to social responsibility; to the production of exhibitions and educational programming that address issues which affect the day-to-day lives of visitors. Over the past five years, the medical community has developed an arm of research and practice commonly referred to as medical humanities. More recently, medical schools and professionals have teamed up with museums to produce research, exhibitions and programmes that use collections as the entry point to train the next generation of healthcare professionals, develop self-care practices amongst current practitioners and facilitate healing in patient populations.

New museum theory and practice since circa 2005, as well as literature on activism, social responsibility and social work in museums over the same period, has revealed a shift in the post-modern museum from 'community' to the

engaged and empowered community. In the 1980s and 1990s in Canada, the tradition of the modern public museum was transformed – along with that of sister museums around the globe – from a discipline-specific autonomous institution to one which highlights issues of identity, diversity, access and representation.

The so-called medical humanities are defined as 'an interdisciplinary, and increasingly international endeavour that draws on the creative and intellectual strengths of diverse disciplines, including literature, art, creative writing, drama, film, music, philosophy, ethical decision making, anthropology and history, in pursuit of medical educational goals'. In concert with the museum, the medical humanities feed the interests of the museum by connecting its practice to the larger everyday life outside its walls.

**Artwork pieces that present issues related to trauma can make an impact on individuals. In your view, what role do museums play in sparking social engagement?**



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**CP:** A quote by Lois Silverman from her book *The Social Work of Museums*’ best answers this question: “The need for health is a social issue, supported or thwarted by

public health concerns, social policies and the availability of appropriate care. [...] Museums contribute to the self’s pursuit of health in at least five major ways. Museums can promote relaxation, an immediate intervention of beneficial change in physiology, emotions or both. They also encourage introspection, a process of understanding

one’s feelings and thoughts that is essential to mental health. Museums foster health education that helps equip individuals to care for themselves. They address broader social conditions related to health through public health advocacy and by enhancing healthcare environments.”

**Your latest exhibition is called ‘Picturing Wellness: From Adversity to Resilience’. Can you explain your approach to picturing wellness? How have you worked within the context of co-located health science training programmes and a children’s hospital?**

**CP:** This is actually a two-part exhibition – ‘Picturing Wellness I: From Adversity to Resilience’ and ‘Picturing Wellness II: Museums & Social Engagement’, as follows:

The didactic component of this duo of exhibitions, ‘Picturing Wellness I: From Adversity to Resilience’, is designed to provide the visitor with the knowledge and experience of ‘learning to look’; what it does and how to do it. The visitor moves through an introductory component that details The Art of Seeing™ and the specific incarnation of it through Engaging and Educating in Child Maltreatment. Subsequently, six ‘stations’ explore individual medical practitioners’ experience with visual literacy in their own contexts as social workers, physicians, psychiatrists and/or medical educators. A final, seventh station, details the transition from classroom to clinical practice.

‘Picturing Wellness II: Museums and Social Engagement’, is an exhibition that presents the work of five visual artists, including Michelle Bellemare and Yvonne Singer. There is nothing didactic nor literal here beyond the presentation of works of art that ponder, in broad scope, issues related to trauma, the body, memory, history, medicine, health and the museum. What is consistent is a consciousness of an ‘impact’ on/to the person and the place art can play in the interpretation, processing or healing of that. The impact could be either physical or mental, individual or societal.

**What is the focus of the exhibition’s complementary education programme and how does it enable better resilience through treatment, care and social action?**

**NK:** ‘Picturing Wellness I: From Adversity to Resilience’ illustrates the visual art-based programmes we’ve done here at the McMaster Museum of Art with students, residents, administration, and faculty. They’ve learned the skills of deeper looking through formal analysis of visual

The art exhibition entitled 'Picturing Wellness' takes place at the McMaster Museum of Art, Canada. Launched on **17 December 2015** and ending 26 March 2016, the exhibition brings together the work of six artists from the McMaster Museum of Art collection: **David Blackwood, Blake Debassige, Betty Goodwin, Tadashi Kawamata, Tony Scherman,** and **Michael Thompson** and five contemporary Canadian artists: **Michelle Bellemare, Rebecca Belmore, Catherine Heard, Nancy Kembry** and **Yvonne Singer**, whose work is variously concerned with trauma, the body, health, memory, medicine and the museum.

researchers whose interests cross over into aspects of visual culture – whether their home discipline be art or art history, medicine, physics, astronomy, neuroscience, cultural studies, film studies, English, Indigenous studies, and so on.

art, which teaches learners to see how artists use colour, lines, textures and such details in order to get ideas across in a visual way. Learners build on what they're seeing to find meaning and interpret the artist's message. It's here that history and culture meet with the viewer's own personal experiences. As learners unravel the stories behind the works of art, they discover their own biases but also a better understanding of humanity. This builds resilience through improved understanding and awareness of themselves and their studies or clinical practice.

The majority of learners who participate in our programmes, both 'Engaging and Educating in Child Maltreatment' and the 'Art of Seeing™', have positive outcomes and feel they are very good for promoting self-care. This is an interesting outcome and it means a lot to us that we can have such a positive impact on participants' personal and professional lives. The exhibition features faculty and student responses to works of art based on these lessons learned. Their responses are also personal reflections on what the programmes mean to them as health practitioners in terms of resilience for themselves and their patients.

#### **How is a university-based museum able to target community resilience? Is there a stronger tradition of collaboration with academics and their research networks?**

**CP:** The McMaster Museum of Art, in part because of new practice in museum work, but also as a response to our position as a university-affiliated museum (with a larger public art museum within the city of Hamilton), produces exhibitions that bring together the work of faculty

In terms of targeting resilience, we can offer the community a means towards resilience. One example is our research and project in visual literacy with the health sciences, which have allowed us to work with physicians in various specialties, who are interested not just in a programme that can assist clinicians with patient wellness, but also with self-care for providers.

**NK:** A large part of what makes our programmes meaningful is the art museum's learning environment, welcoming learners into our galleries and painting vaults, into a reflective space very different from classrooms, offices, labs and clinics, engages them in new ways. Our spaces are not very big and so we keep groups small, which is great for encouraging discussion.

One of the most important aspects of our programmes is to create a safe and open learning environment in order to focus on facilitated discussion around visual art. We don't want to lecture, we want to ask questions and learn together. Beyond the health sciences, we've welcomed groups from all across the campus community to use art objects as discussion starters. You can explore so much through works of art – history, culture, language, problem solving, and even the ambiguous. All of these can help learners address those unanswerable questions work and life can throw at us. Therefore, McMaster Museum of Art is a meeting place for different disciplines and faculties to explore learning through works of art.

[WWW.MUSEUM.MCMASTER.CA](http://WWW.MUSEUM.MCMASTER.CA)

In conjunction with the 'Picturing Wellness: From Adversity to Resilience' exhibition, there will be a Picturing Wellness Conference for Health Care and Service Providers on 3rd-5th March at the Hamilton Convention Centre. To register, visit:

[WWW.PICTURINGWELLNESS.CA](http://WWW.PICTURINGWELLNESS.CA)





# PICTURING WELLNESS

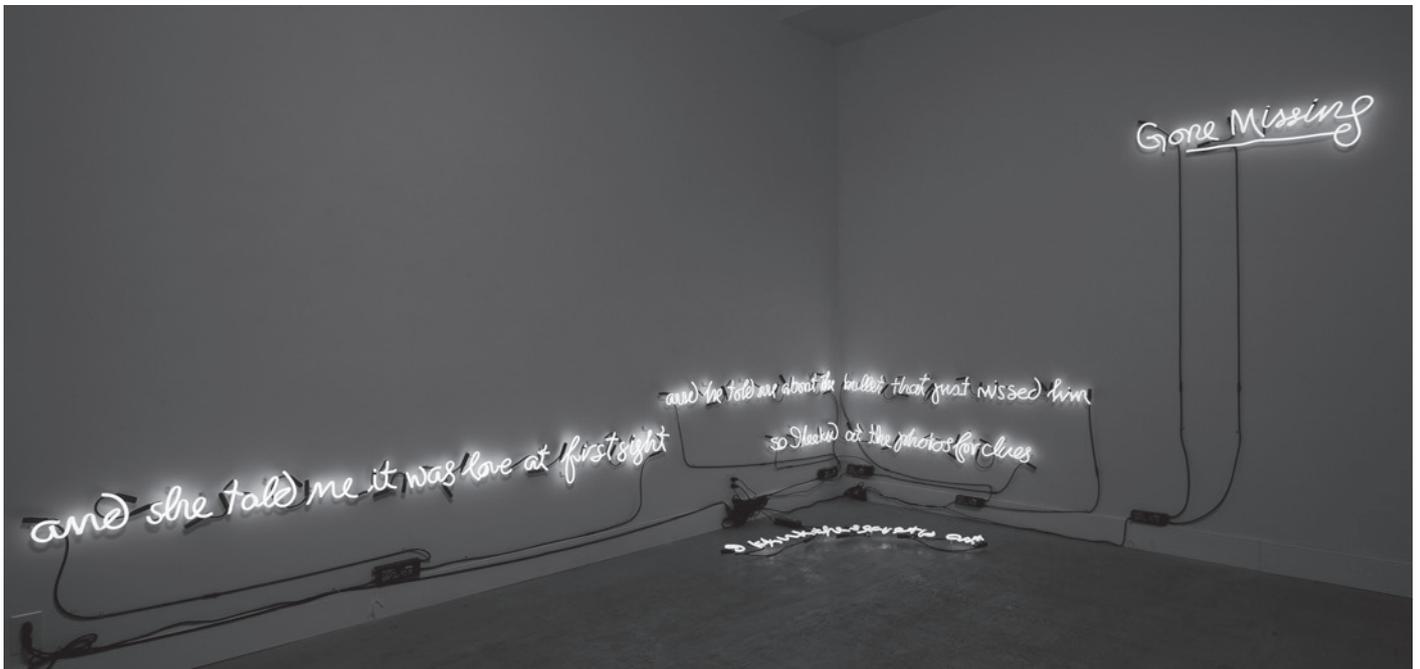
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2.



3.



1. Blake Debassige, *West Nile Virus*, 2006, © John Tamblin. 2. Michelle Bellemare, *Tensor Teddy*, 2002, © Isaac Applebaum.  
3. Yvonne Singer, *Gone Missing*, 2010, © Thomas Blanchard.