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As a child, I had wished to paint the world in precious tints and exquisite rare tinges. Such wild notions dissipated with time, leaving me unsure of their verity. One day, I found myself immersed in an ambient of clinical white, the color palette of hallways and operating theaters, gauze wrappings, coverings and gowns. An artist could have properly distinguished the shades and subtle hues: ivory and egg white; alabaster and sea shell; bone white, its name now sounding more ominous than ever. I was engulfed by it, one of many in a student retinue, our hospital coats standing out against the bare ward background.

October was always a month of contrasts in the city. Sometimes it was eerily warm, with untouched greenery basking in the mellow light of an amber sun; other times, it was crisp and rainy, with weathered leaves blowing aimlessly across the hospital grounds. That year however, summer didn't slowly fade away. Nature counteracted by means of overindulgence in color, thickly splashed all over, in vibrant hues that seemed to deepen every night. It was the month I started my clinical rotations. I would leave home in the very early morning, just in time to stroll by florists and newspaper agents arranging their displays. I sipped overheated, bitter coffee as I passed them by, often tempted to smudge my fingers with fresh ink and pollen. I would need to scrub down anyway.

Every round would bring on more new tasks, something that as a medical student I had become, if by no means prepared for, rather accustomed to. The morning walks were *my time*, I would whisper, the thoughts then fleeing to patient charts, bedside visits, and pending lab results. There was,

however, something else that had started to capture my attention. As I made my way towards the imposing gates of the hospital park, I took one last glance at the neighboring facades.

I was scanning for stickers, small adhesive tags “slapped” on buildings, railings and light poles. A quick glance in the right places would reveal something that had not been there the day before: irregularly shaped pieces of colorful paper, handmade Band-Aids placed on the decaying walls. It is hard to describe why I had become so enthralled by them. Perhaps it’s because they resembled the wound dressings I was just becoming familiar with, along with the countless types of sutures and knots. Removing a sticker was in itself a matter of almost surgical precision. I would gently stroke the edges, looking for tension points and attempt to detach it slowly, one corner at a time. Sometimes, the damp autumn air would permeate the paper, making it easier to disjoin. The following step was tearing it off with a firm yet gentle hand. It came along with pieces of plaster and thin layers of paint ever so similar to the organic detritus caught in a web of gauze.

Over the course of a few weeks, I had amassed an assortment of stickers that included samples of undecipherable writing, neon teddy bears, a hairy pubis and one glossy piece, as big as my hand, which proclaimed “I Could Punch Damien Hirst.” Then one day, I came across an anatomical rendering. A roughly drawn rib cage, bursting open at an angle foreign to any medical atlas, displayed its contents to the passersby. I was intrigued by its strange likeness. Standing in the middle of a busy sidewalk, I took note of the length of the trachea and its well-defined lung lobes. In truth, I couldn’t take my eyes off it, but once again, I had to hurry to my ward.

I used to draw everything surrounding me: the bits of blue sky that showed themselves between the leaves of a tree; sunlight incarcerated in an oil puddle; a violent reverberation of color caught between the grim reflection of tower blocks; girls with new hairdos and lips in a perpetual pout; butterflies; the coming and going of seasons; my sparkling ballet slippers; old men playing chess whilst wearing basketball caps. Traveling across Europe, I had sketched tunnels and highways, sleepy villages and cathedral towers defying the sky.

And then one day I stopped. My pencils never got sharpened again; my pastels cracked and turned to fleshy dust; the paintbrushes sat unused until the hairs slowly spread apart under the weight of dried pigment and contorted into fan like shapes. My desk became strewn with diagrams of the Krebs cycle and the paraphernalia of a first-year medical student: test preparation manuals, highlighters, and strategically embellished notes. I’d sometimes draw study aids: perfectly rounded cells, seemingly bursting with cytoplasm, each component emphasized in thick black liner and labelled meticulously on the side; anatomical cross-sections of the circle of Willis or of Scarpa’s triangle; pressure-volume curves of the respiratory system, page after page of sinuous lines.

Occasionally, I’d tell myself that one day or another, I would have another try, only to postpone it to some uncertain future. What I never stopped doing, however, was looking at art. I had spent the summer in crammed studios, where the most prized possessions were often pristine canvases and incandescent strobe lights, monochrome dots in florid, cluttered rooms. I was becoming versed in

a new way of looking. Unknowingly, I had started to make observation an integral part of being present, a deep probing that brought it all together: pathology and physiology notions that had seemed impenetrable and that I had spent so many sleepless nights trying to better understand; the hidden world of blood and tissues and nerves, in countless hidden tints and tinges; how healthy cells and altered cells co-existed in the same interior landscape. It all became connected, and it all turned lifelike and grander than life. Years later, whilst completing residency, I would embark on a study of the medical gaze in contemporary art, an attempt to understand how such a way of seeing could propagate outside hospital walls.

In current times, the impact of stickers, graffiti, and assorted artwork “has never been so powerful and urgent” (Howard). Christian Guémy’s (C215) final Parisian street piece before quarantine was aptly presented as “L’amour au temps du coronavirus” (Guémy): love flows freely though the textile coverings. Glasgow-based artist The Rebel Bear offered passersby a furtive glance of a couple caught engaging in a kiss, their masks hanging down. It is a hopeful reminder that, in the artist’s words, “a time will come when; the masks can be pulled down, the borders will reopen, and connections can be remade—hopefully stronger than ever” (Rebel Bear). Pøbel depicted a more passionate embrace on a wall in Byrne, whilst in Pony Wave’s Venice Beach mural the touching masks of a couple are covered in blooming flowers. The opulent petals are set against a dark background, reminiscent of Dutch still life paintings: a *vanitas* for the twenty-first century. Since then borders have opened and closed back; personal bubbles shrank and expanded; masks became symbols of dissent and acclaim; and day after day walls across the world blossomed with the art of the people for the people, works that now fade and crackle as we’re leaning into an uncertain future. Their message still stands.

Street art is usually, by its nature, ephemeral. As I looked around me, I spotted a shriveled bit of paper, glued to the railing. I must have passed by it a dozen times without taking any notice. The figure was faded beyond recognition, wrinkled by the rain and bleached by the sun. Stickers have their own stories; but sooner or later, be it political slogans, doodles or anatomical illustrations, they all succumb to the elements and turn themselves to ghostly renderings. I never took up drawing again. Memories of it and of defunct and decrepit artworks turned to a personal compass I’d seldom share with others. They made me keen to delve into the finer details, to search in unfamiliar places, to reflect on what my gaze meant. That balmy autumn morning became etched in my memory. I remember taking one last glance then rushing to meet my attending.

### **Header Image:**

Andreas Schwarzkopf. Sticker Art in Freiburg in der Fischerau (April 2020). Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sticker\\_Art\\_in\\_Freiburg\\_in\\_der\\_Fischerau\\_2.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sticker_Art_in_Freiburg_in_der_Fischerau_2.jpg))

### **Works cited:**

Howard, Caroline. (2020). “Covid on the Street: Pandemic Graffiti from around the World”. *Forbes*

*Magazine.*

The Rebel Bear. (2020). "Artist Statement". Instagram. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/B94pLZYjrny/>