

Table 6 | Representations of Health and Illness in Media, Literature, and Art



Prior to the most contemporary works, nuanced portrayals of illness and disability in art and literature are the exception; instead the arts have reflected society's long history of stigmatizing or glorifying people with illness and disability.



Preface

Illness and Well-being in Literature

- In times past, traditionally, discussions of illness and health were considered taboo, uncivil, best kept hidden
- Well-being and illness were relevant only to the more affluent
- Illness among the poor was an issue only if death was imminent
- Mention of physical illness was as taboo as mental illness
- When illness of the more well-to-do was discussed, it was always very discretely, cryptically, metaphorically, in hushed voices

Rita Kranidis • English, TPSS Campus • STEAM 2022

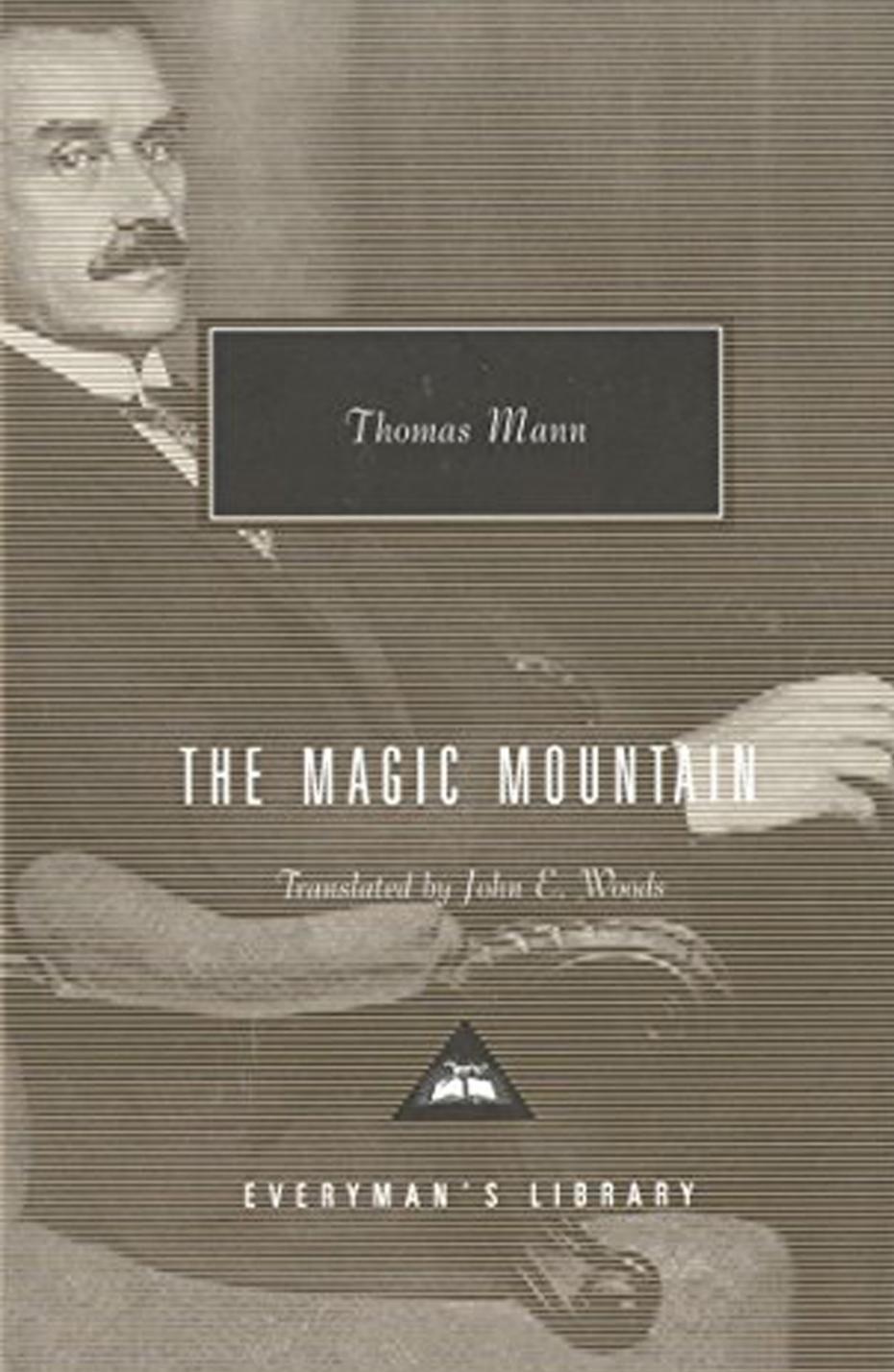
Susan Sontag

Illness as Metaphor

Illness as Metaphor by Susan Sontag [1978]

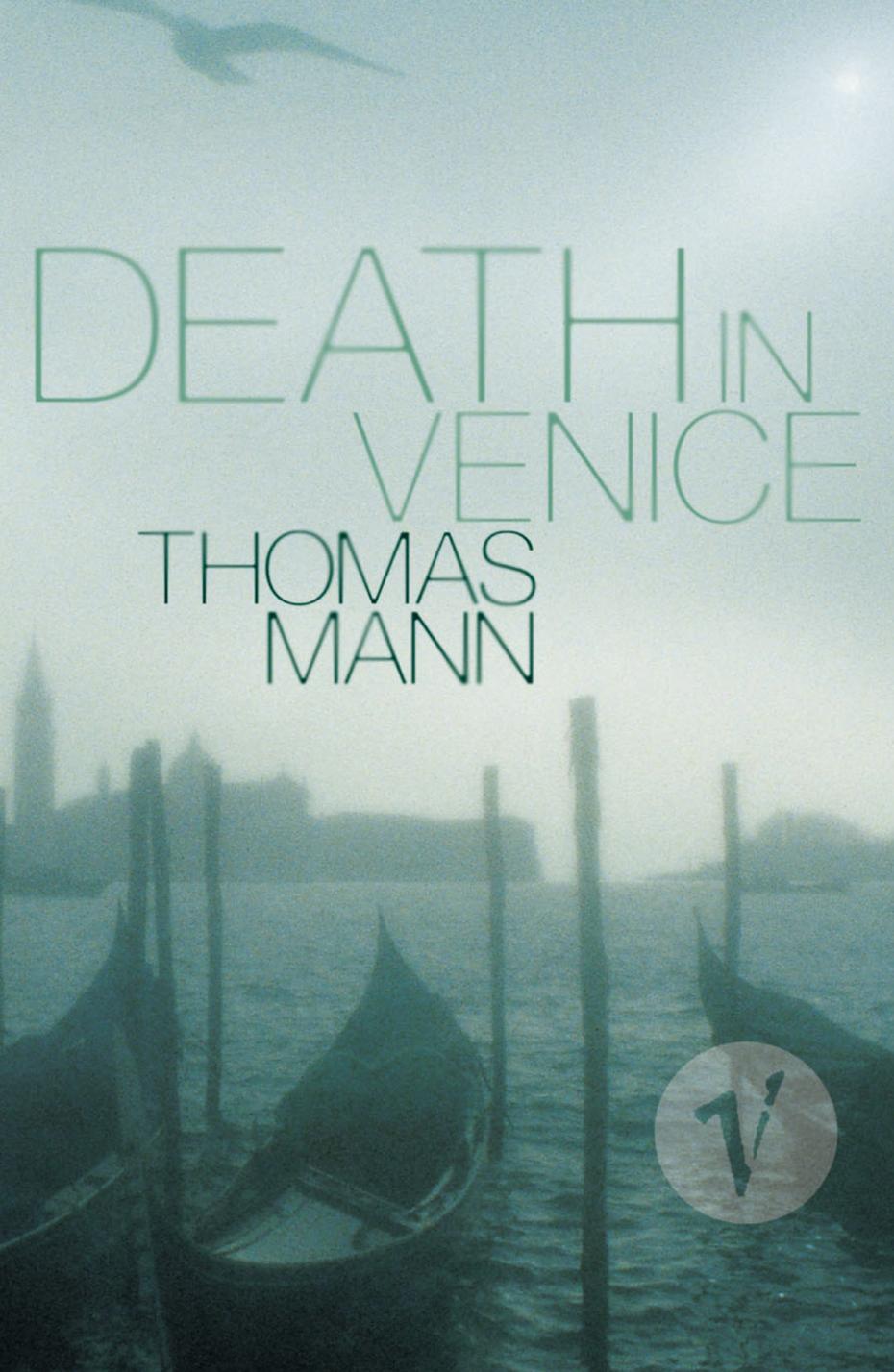
- The role of an illness was experienced as a **ruthless, secret invasion**.
- The very names of “incurable” diseases are felt to have a **magic power**.
- There has been a conviction that **dying people are best spared the news that they are dying**, and that the **good death is the sudden one**, best of all if it happens while we're unconscious or asleep...





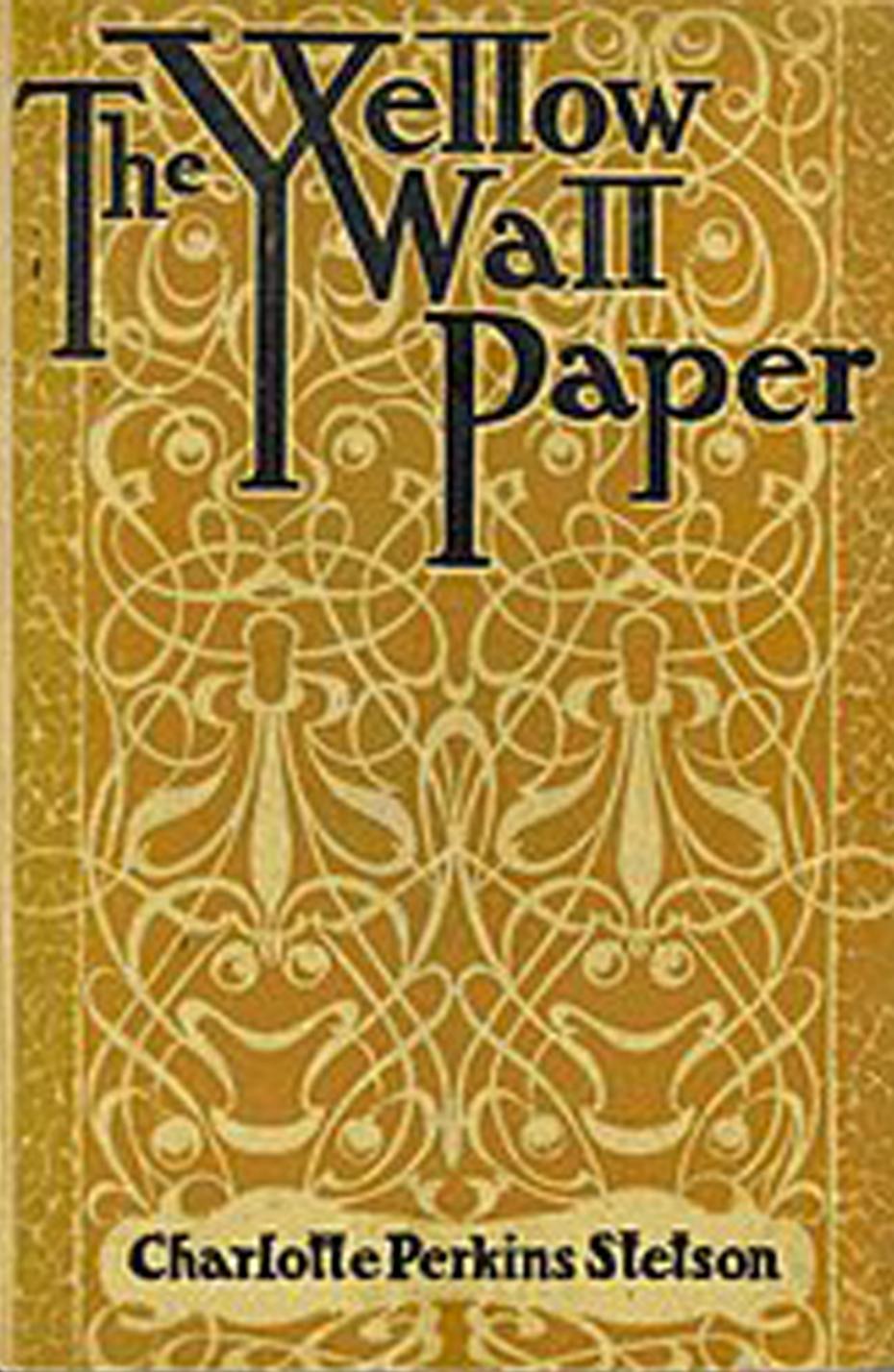
The Romantic, Magical Qualities of Illness

- **Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain* [1928]**—about life in a tuberculosis sanitarium
- **Represents TB as a purifying distancing from all in life that is vulgar and mundane;** the sanitarium is a magical place where transformations happen
- **"down below"** is initially **presented as real life, vibrant and ever-changing**, whereas the above is like death, where nothing happens
- The patients end up more humane and insightful, more wise because they are removed by their illness from wall that is normal



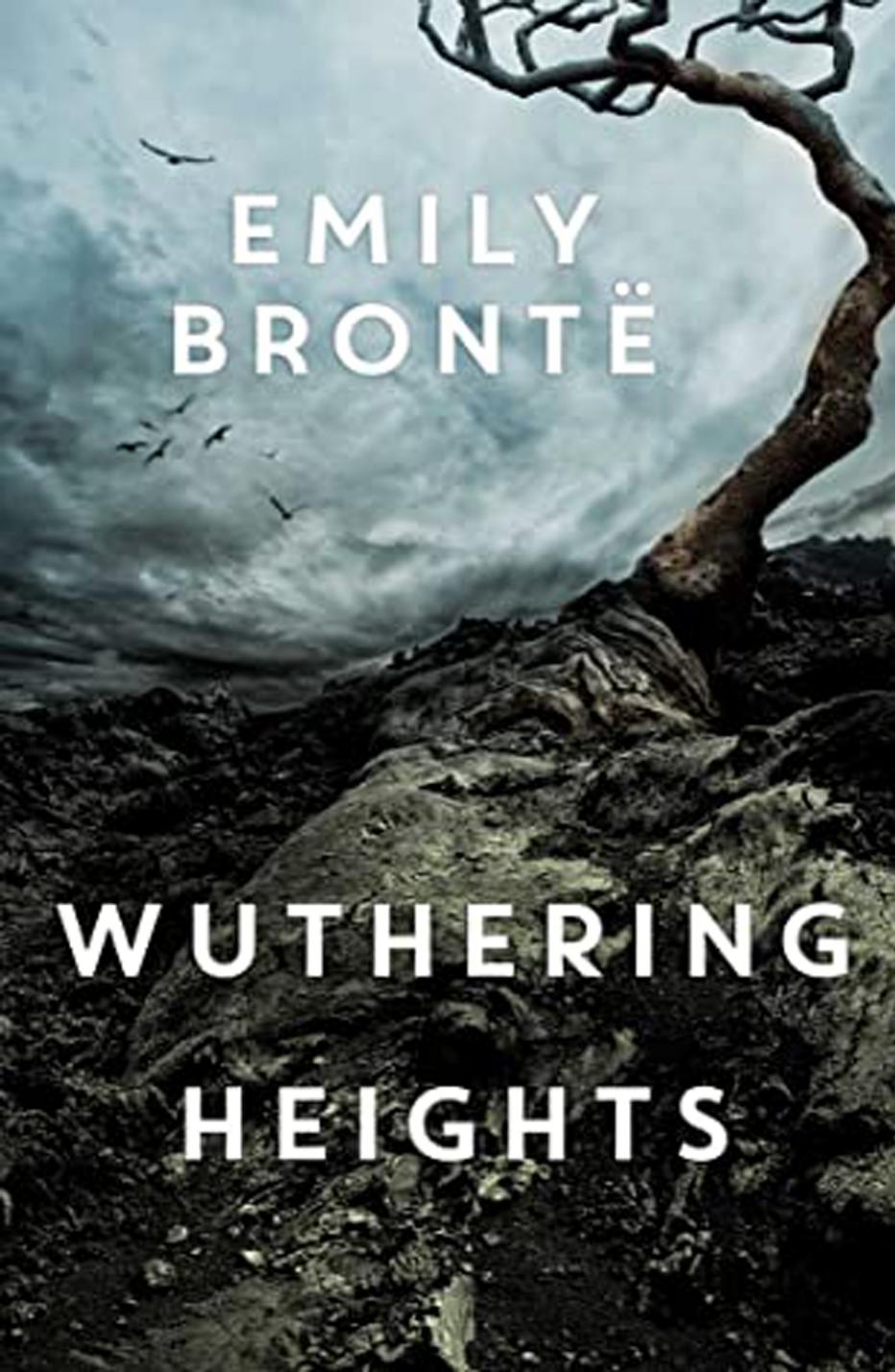
The Intricate Dance Between Life and Death

- **In *Death in Venice***, Mann depicts an elderly man lusting after a beautiful youth, wishing for life and vigor by association
- **In *Dr Faustus***, Mann portrays the man who has sold his soul to the dark powers so as to continue to enjoy life force indefinitely
- **In Romantic poetry from the late 1700s on**, a great fascination existed toward those who died young; traditionally heroically at war, but increasingly more from diseases like TB: the poet John Keats, who died at 27, was idolized for his fragile health and his short life. Other poets and writers with TB were idealized for their blushed faces...



Mental Illness

- In Modern literature, losing one's mental health became more important – "neurasthenic" patients suffered from a vague condition for which there was a common cure: leaving the city and retreating to towns near the sea; it was thought that the sea air could cure any condition, **magically** somehow.
- **Mental illness was puzzling, misunderstood, and feared**
- ***The Yellow Wallpaper***, written in 1891, depicts a heroine whose post-partum depression is feared and must be contained; she is not allowed to write or read so that she can recover her strength and sanity; she is prescribed "rest" in the country

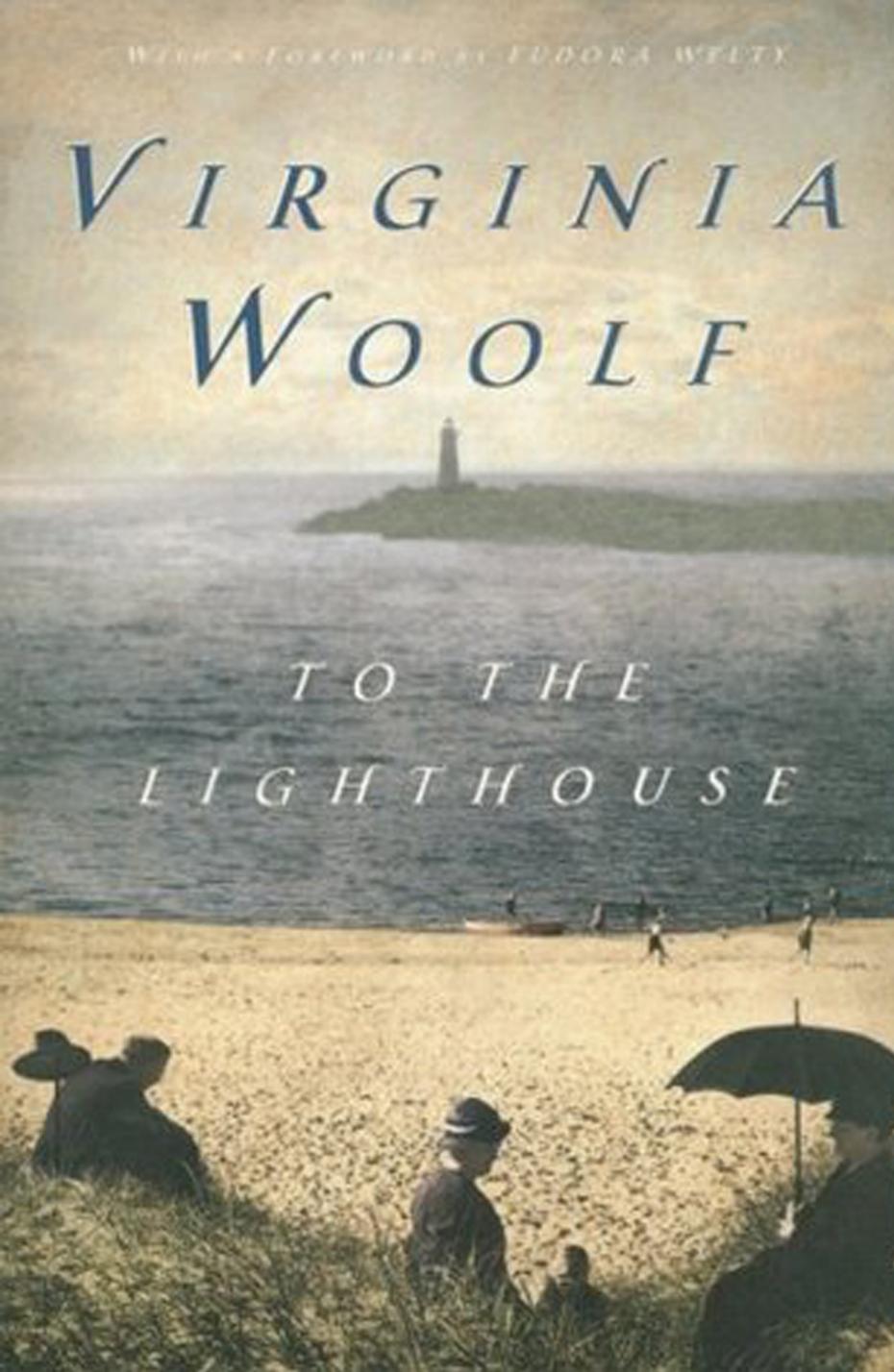


EMILY
BRONTË

WUTHERING
HEIGHTS

Illness is Frightening

- In *Jane Eyre*, the madwoman in the attic is the mentally ill wife of the hero in the story, who is shameful and thus hidden from the world. No one knows she is there; she appears as a ghost.
- In *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë depicts two lovers who are haunted by deception and death and cannot find peace together
- In *Dora: Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, Freud represents the mind as a dark and dangerous place full of metaphors and contradictions: “No one who, like me, conjures up the most evil of those half-tamed demons that inhabit the human breast, and seeks to wrestle with them, can expect to come through the struggle unscathed.”



Healing and Recovery

Prescription for the cure was leaving life behind, leaving the activity of the town or city for nature, usually the sea

In *To The Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf places a family by the shore as they spend days at the beach recovering from the mother's death and finding their sense of reality again...

In *The Waves*, Woolf's stream of consciousness writing obliterates the distance between the self and nature/the sea

"Rest Cures" were prescribed broadly for any number of illnesses

Illness and Disability in Contemporary Art

Art and media are littered with images and stories that reinforce the stigmatization, infantilization, and glorification of people with chronic illness and disability. For centuries, these tropes have negatively impacted how society views people with disability and chronic illness.

Robin Meyer – Art Rockville Campus

Jennifer Wilkey – Guest Artist

Robin Meyer

The disability community explains that:

The social model of disability explains that the label “disability” is a result of people being forced to live in a society that is one size fits all rather than trying to embrace the full range of human difference.

The medical model of disability says people are disabled by their physical impairments, difference, or illness - as determined at the point of diagnosis. *The power of diagnosis and cure are in the hands of the medical world.*

It is up to each individual to accept the responsibility to work at fitting into the societal mold of health . You must listen to all things doctors say if you want to get better. Take your medicine!!

Science is not fixed.

So what happens when the science
changes and grows?

THERAPOGEN



DESCRIPTION: The indications or uses for this product as provided by the manufacturer are: Germicide; Deodorizer ; For dressing wounds, douching, gargle or mouthwash, enemas, bathing, spraying. Invaluable for sore throat, catarrh, fever blisters, mouth ulcers, bleeding gums, bad breath and teeth, running sores, wounds, cuts, burns, bites and stings, eczema, ringworm, hives, itch, prickly heat, body parasites, perspirative odors, piles, leucorrhoea, and infectious discharges.

Description from The National Museum of American History in Washington, DC

So, how has the general public
defined disability?

DISABILITY = TIME BETWEEN DIAGNOSIS AND CURE

Diagnosis – first day of illness

Without a diagnosis you are not disabled or ill. Once the scientific community has made a discovery, you are.

Cure – last day of illness

Once you are "cured" your troubles are gone. You will now live forever and never have to think about being ill ever again!

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*Have you found yourself in
between diagnosis and cure?*

*Do you have a plan to
deal with the stigma?*

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5 Easy Ways To Overcome the Stigma of Disability!

(brought to you by centuries of negative portrayals in the arts and media)

1.

BE EXTREMELY GOOD LOOKING!

5 Easy Ways To Overcome the Stigma of Disability!

(brought to you by centuries of negative portrayals in the arts and media)

1. Be extremely good looking.

2.

BE FILTHY RICH!

5 Easy Ways To Overcome the Stigma of Disability!

(brought to you by centuries of negative portrayals in the arts and media)

1. Be extremely good looking.

2. Be filthy rich.

3.

BECOME A SUPERC RIP!

SUPERC RIP

A person awarded able-bodied status for displaying superhuman qualities or achieving awe-inspiring feats. Their superability balances the deficit of having a disability.

Examples:

The news showing a segment on a person with a disability climbing a tall mountain, or a person who is blind being a world class piano player.

Disability activist Eli Clare shared and popularized the term in the disability community.

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1. Be extremely good looking.

2. Be filthy rich.

3. Become a Supercrip!

4.

**HAVE A HETEROSEXUAL
EPIPHANY!**

* Term coined by Adrienne Rich and adapted for disability Robert McRuer.



Final scene of "The Best Years of Our Lives" 1946

5 Easy Ways To Overcome the Stigma of Disability!

(brought to you by centuries of negative portrayals in the arts and media)

1. Be extremely good looking.

2. Be filthy rich.

3. Become a Supercrip!

4. Have a Heroic Personal Epiphany

5.

GET CURED!

Even though people may be able to identify Frida Kahlo and Chuck Close as artists with disabilities, due to the large quantity and visibility of arts programming designed with the purpose of providing activities, rather than to educate; the term *disability art* tends to conjure images of outsider or folk art. This can contribute to the infantilization of people with disabilities.

For the general public to appreciate the full range of work in the world by people with illness or disabilities is for people to be more comfortable identifying as having a disability. BUT WHY WOULD YOU?

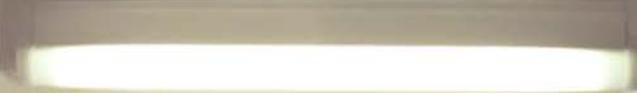
Robin Meyer

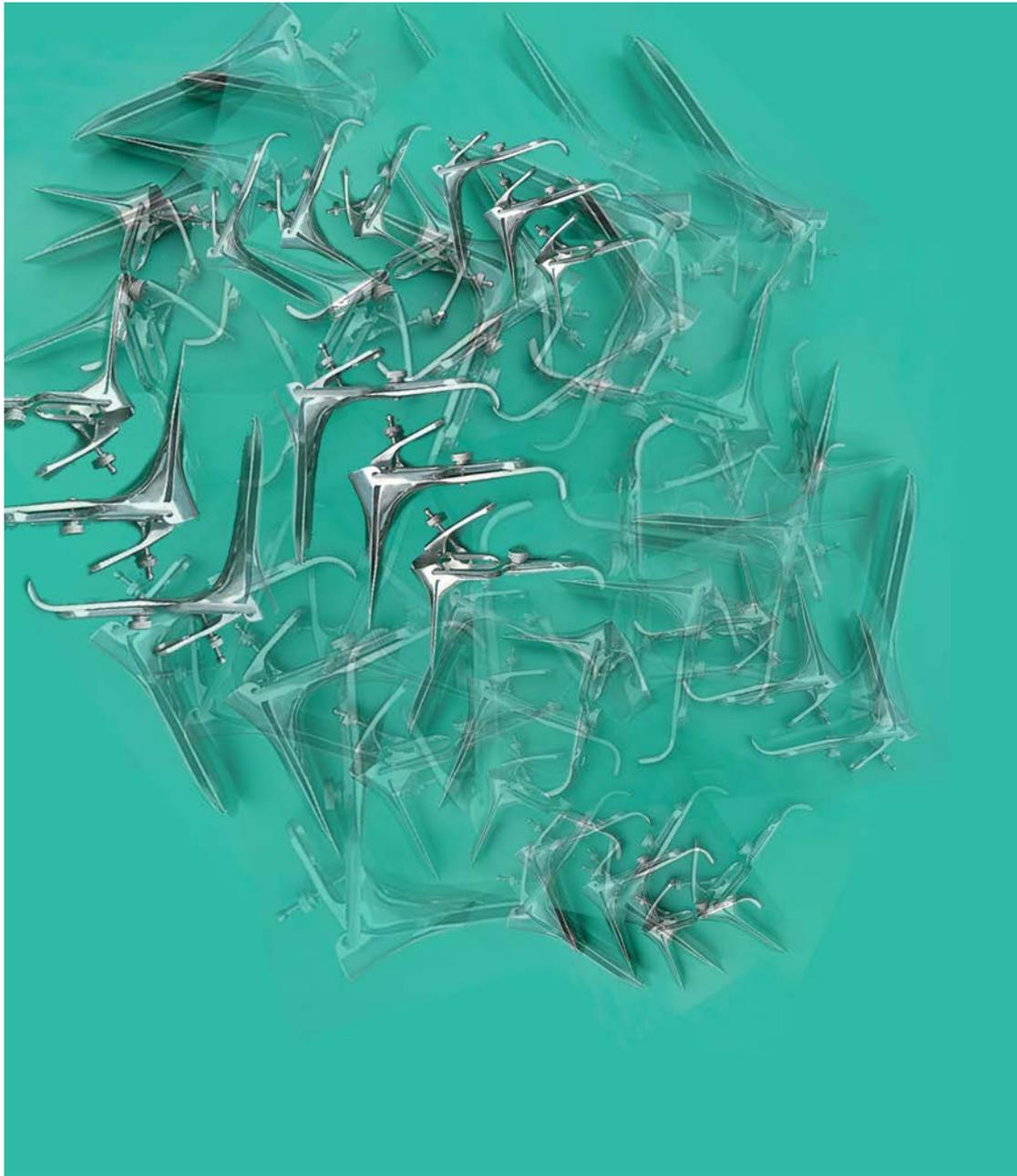


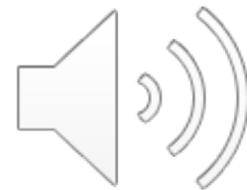




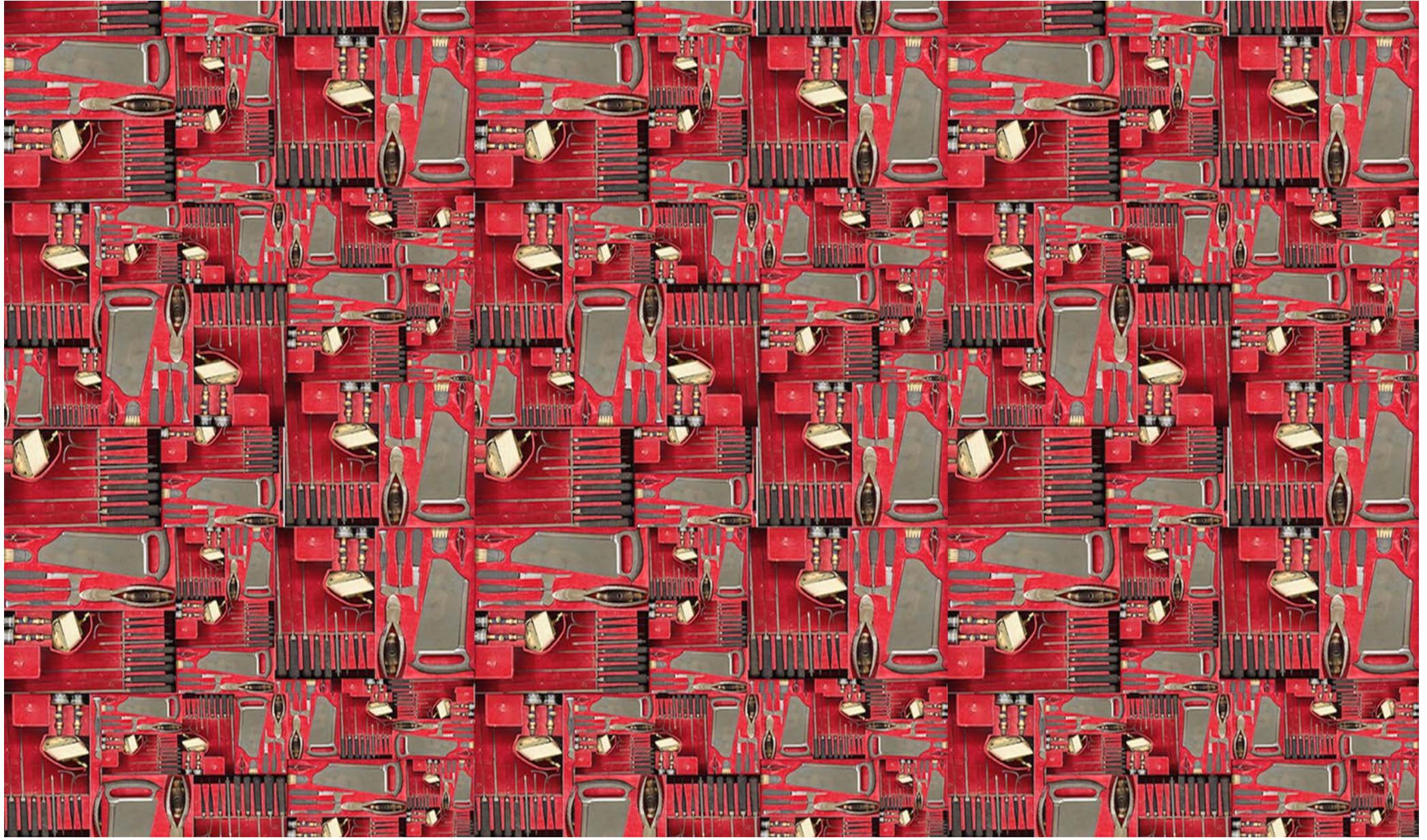










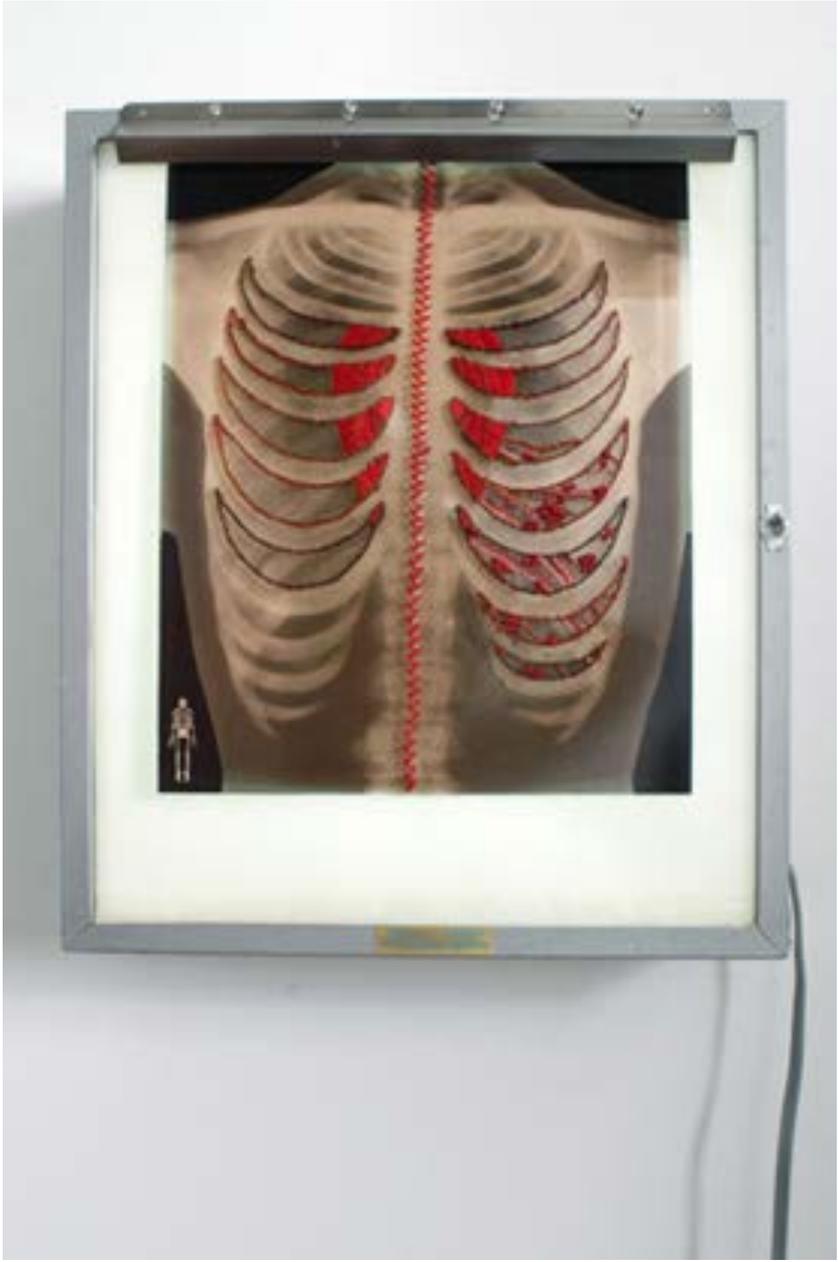


Jennifer Wilkey

Installations





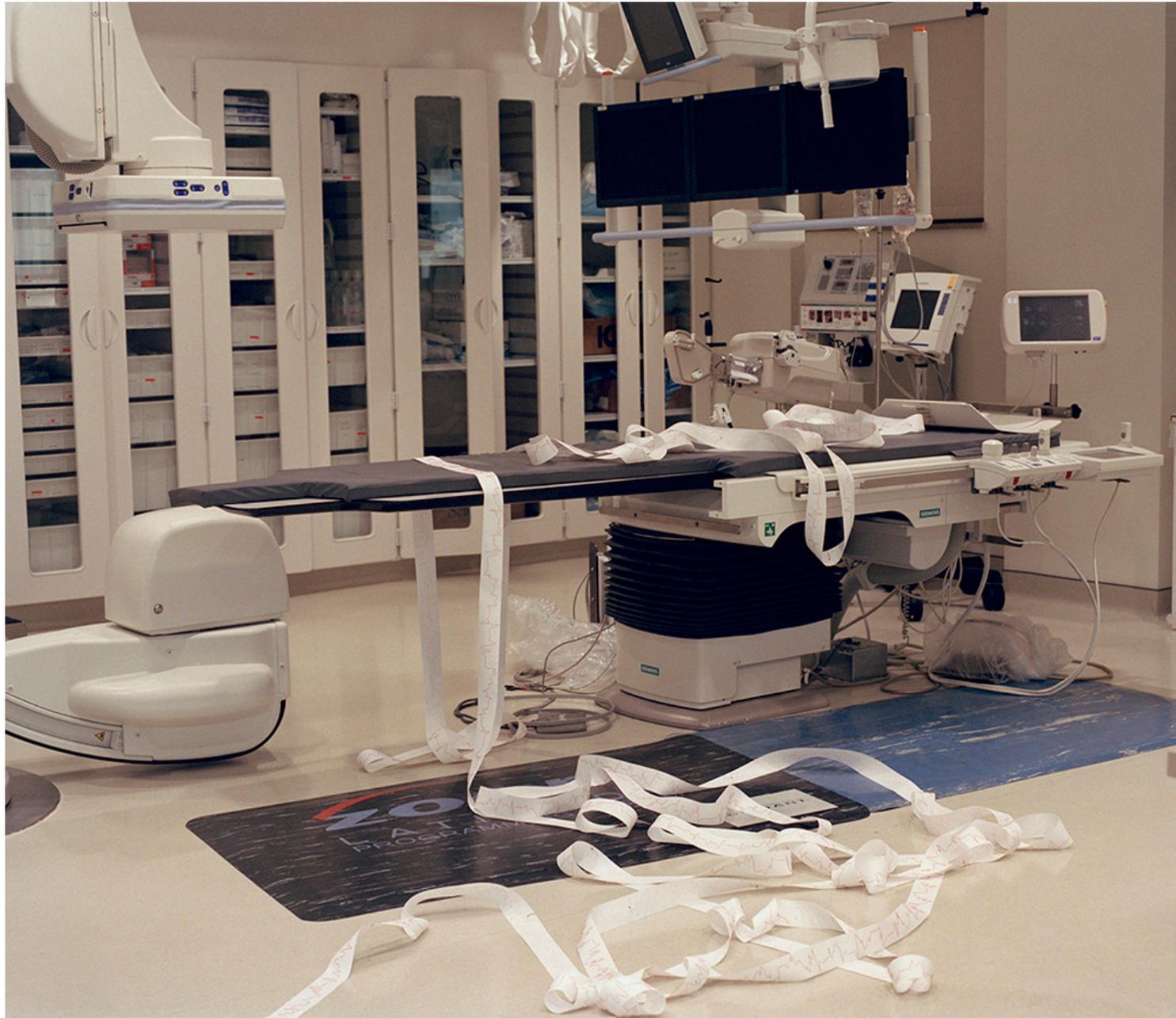














Film Stills













Photographs











Thank You!