Reflecting

by

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One stroke at a time, as I move closer and closer to my goal, my mind empties and the only thing left is sensation. My body goes on autopilot where I focus on breathing; always with a specific vision clear in my mind. I let my body take over and before I know it, I am finished. Another completed painting in front of me, or another race under my belt. The process is the same, although there has always been a dichotomy between arts and sports. In media, the athletic jock is always pitted against the quirky artist. I never expected to find myself straddling this fence. I did not grow up athletic, but I have been painting and drawing for as long as I can remember. To my surprise, the process is the same. Practice, refine, produce, repeat. Practice so much that your body knows the feeling all too well and takes over for your mind. This type of inner peace is rare and addicting.

I never intended to become addicted to swimming. As a child, I always found pools uncomfortably cold, and I was against swimming at the surface of the water. I wanted to stay underwater like a sea turtle, where the world was quieter. I did not realize it at the time, but I was extremely underweight and my body could not regulate its temperature in water. I have an identical twin sister who was always the same size as me, if not slightly smaller than me as we were growing up. My mom put us both in soccer as many parents do, and my sister excelled while I became increasingly slower and smaller than my teammates around me. By middle school, I was tired of being the benchwarmer and quit the sport. This was the same time that I shifted my focus more towards arts and music and slowly abandoned any remaining athleticism I had left in my body. Middle school is a time where children grow, change, and mature. I, however, stayed the same. My identical twin sister kept growing and eventually towered six inches above me. I was too young to understand what was going on, but my parents realized that I was not turning into the young lady they always imagined me to become.
The first time I was admitted to a hospital was seventh grade. I endured a night of excruciating, paralyzing pain which I assumed was another case of the flu that always circulates around school districts in the wintertime. When I stayed home from school that day, I asked my mom if she could prepare me something to eat because I was feeling hungry despite all the discomfort I was experiencing. My mom became suspicious of my appetite presence and asked where I felt pain. After pointing to a specific spot on my abdomen, my mother instantly recognized the appendicitis and took me to the hospital. I do not remember much of this hospital stay because it all happened so fast, but I do remember that I never felt scared. I was in pain and I knew I was in the place where people could help me. After a short visit and quick surgery, I returned home with new scars and without an appendix. I thought that would be the extent of my childhood medical issues, but this was just the beginning.

By the time I reached high school, I had no appetite and no energy. I spent most days laying in bed in some sort of discomfort. My family couldn’t understand why I was always so lethargic. For me, eating became associated with pain so I avoided it as much as I could. It developed so gradually that I never noticed I was living differently than I was supposed to. After all, what else do I know besides my own experience? After a series of testing, I was diagnosed with a severe case of Crohn’s disease. I was told it was rare and incurable. “Don’t google your disease. It will just scare you and I promise your experience won’t be like that,” the doctor told me after confirming my diagnosis. My parents were devasted but I hardly understood what it meant for my future. I was happy to have an answer at least. My doctors put me on a strong chemotherapy medicine but I did not know how to swallow pills. This would not work for me, so instead I moved on to another medicine in the form of capsules. These capsules could be emptied into a liquid that I could take instead of swallowing a pill. However, the powder inside of the pill
was bright orange and extremely bitter. After a period of trial and error, I determined that the only way I could take this medicine and override my lack of appetite was to mix the pills into Sunny D, a yellow juice with a strong flavor that was able to mask both the color and the taste of the powder. For months, I had to drink medicine mixed into a bottle of Sunny D twice a day. I became so sick of the taste of the medicine that I began pouring it down the drain instead of drinking it. I did not understand that the medicine would help me and decided I did not really need it. Naturally, I became increasingly sicker as my unmedicated Crohn’s flare-up worsened. I was forced to learn how to swallow pills because my doctor enhanced my treatment plan with steroids. My previously frail body quickly became bloated with the side effects of the steroids. I had new insatiable appetite and my face and abdomen swelled up. I spent most of my first two years of high school absent and homeschooled while my body fought the chronic inflammation. I hardly considered being embarrassed by my ‘moon’ face because I did not notice the changes and I was not around other people much. Although I was actually taking my medicine now, the steroids failed to control my Crohn’s disease and I continued to become sicker.

I spent weeks at a time in the hospital while doctors performed imaging and explored treatment options. I do not remember much from this period of my life. I was lucky to have caring parents who advocated on my behalf because I was lucid with painkillers and antibiotics as I struggled to find the energy to get out of bed. After a few years of attempting different medicines to treat my symptoms, my doctor decided that it was time to resort to my last option: an intravenous infusion of immunosuppressants. My parents refused to put me on this medicine because of its severe side effects and potential risks. They had avoided it for as long as possible while I tried any alternative form of treatment that was available to me. All of these medicines failed which meant it was time to go on Remicade. I knew my parents were scared, but I did not
have the energy to be afraid and could not comprehend the risks of the medicine. To me, there
was just one problem: I had a phobia of needles. Any time I had to get an IV or bloodwork, I had
to psych myself up for hours in advance to mentally prepare for the needle. Then one day in the
emergency room, the impatient nurses decided they could not wait for me to be ready for the
needle and had several large men hold me down while they inserted the catheter. Once I was
admitted, the doctors gave me a PICC line so that I did not have to change my catheter while I
was on intravenous antibiotics. The plan was to keep this PICC line in my arm until my first
Remicade treatment so that I did not have to get another needle. For the first round of infusions, I
was spared the needle poke. However, I knew that being on an infusion medication meant
periodic needles. Over time, I was able to become used to the process and overcame my fear of
needles as I familiarized myself with the nurses and hospital in which I received my infusions as
an outpatient. The Remicade proved to be the holy grail treatment for my Crohn’s disease flare
up and as my body gradually healed, I began growing again and had the energy I needed to live
my life. Throughout this entire process, I spent a lot of my time drawing in my bedroom to
escape the disease and my skills and passion for art developed.

I started college with a newfound zest for life and determination to obtain my art degree
while maintaining my health. The Remicade granted me remission and I was prepared to take
full advantage of my energy. Over the course of my college career, I gradually found myself in
the campus gym learning how to lift weights. I took a nutrition course which sparked a curiosity
in healthy eating. I learned about the Low FODMAP diet, a strict food guide designed to mitigate
intestinal inflammation and relieve gastric discomfort. With the memory of my painful
adolescence the back of my mind, I became obsessed with my physical health. I adopted the Low
Fodmap diet and followed a strict exercise regimen. At first, I felt strong and energized. I was
not used to fueling all of this movement, however, and with the highly restrictive diet I followed I accidentally became underweight again and. I abandoned the low FODMAP diet, deducing that as long as I was still in remission I could eat more freely, barring the foods I knew specifically triggered my flare-ups. Unfortunately, I could not just ignore everything about nutrition I had already learned and slowly developed an eating disorder known as Orthorexia, which meant I exercised compulsively and obsessed over health and eating nutritiously. While navigating the academics and social life of college, I struggled with the fixation to live what I believed to be a healthy lifestyle.

At the height of this, when I was in my last year of college, I sprained my ankle and was sentenced to a walker boot for eight weeks. My exercise routine was suddenly interrupted, and I was forced to stop running. With the fear of gaining weight or losing my health, I had to find a different way to stay active. With doctor permission, I began visiting the campus’s 25 yard pool. I borrowed a swimsuit, cap, and goggles from my girlfriend and nervously entered the pool. At first, I struggled to make it from one end of the pool to the other. My fear of a sedentary lifestyle kept me showing up to the pool. I gradually fell in love with the feeling of swimming and became addicted to the mood it left me in for the rest of the day. I was determined to improve so I consumed every article and tutorial I could find about improving swimming technique. The learning curve for a new sport is steep and thrilling. I improved quickly and realized I had a natural aptitude for swimming. Soon I was able to swim two laps at a time, and then three, followed by more and more laps until I could swim continuously for an hour at a time.

Swimming accidentally took over my life. I fell in love with the sport and trained on my own every day, working to improve as much as I could. In my gap year between undergrad and my enrollment at SUNY New Paltz to pursue my MFA, I signed up for a membership at the local
gym so that I could maintain access to a pool. Swimming started to occupy my mind more and left less room for obsession about food. I shifted my eating habits to supplement my swimming and fuel my new activity. By the time I graduated from my undergraduate school with my art degree, I was eating to fuel my life instead of eating as my life.

It was during my gap year before grad school that the global Covid-19 pandemic hit. I was already in a period of pause before transitioning into the next stage of my life, but now the rest of the world joined me as society shut down. I lost access to a swimming facility and turned back to running except this time it was out of love of movement instead of fear. I had just received acceptance to New Paltz’s MFA program but now I was unsure what the future had in store or what my first semester would look like. By the time September rolled around, I was craving time in the pool and desperately awaited access to the campus pool that was about to be my sanctuary for the next two years. I was anxious and hesitant because of the virus but too determined to swim. Luckily, the pool was rarely occupied so I could swim my laps in peace without fear of catching the virus. While my swimming continued to improve throughout my first year at New Paltz, my anxiety and stress escalated. A new environment, new academic program, and new pandemic lifestyle left me feeling isolated and my anxiety became constraining. I developed an obsessive-compulsive disorder called dermatillomania which causes me to compulsively pick at my own skin as a form of self-soothing. I became increasingly self-conscious of the open wounds on my face and back but I could not control the picking. After consulting the internet I decided to meet with a psychiatrist and a cognitive behavioral therapist. I began taking medication to mitigate the anxiety and worked with the therapist to develop tools to overcome my anxiety. My experience in therapy gave me the confidence to reach out to the New Paltz swim team coach. In June between my two years of the MFA program, I emailed
Coach Distler inquiring about the possibility of joining his swim team. Graciously, he replied and we worked together over the summer to research my participation eligibility. Coach Distler was well aware of my lack of competitive swimming experience but had seen me show up to the campus pool on my own day after day. Although I was 24 turning 25 mid-season, he recognized my dedication to the sport and positive attitude and decided to help me join the team. I had to write a letter to the NCAA committee requesting an extension of eligibility so that I could compete. Typically, athletes are granted 10 semesters of eligibility and I was just beginning my 11th semester of my college career. However, due to the COVID pandemic, many athletes missed out on a season of their careers while campuses and subsequently their sports teams were shut down. Technically I hadn’t missed a season because I was not an athlete the year prior but I was hopeful that the NCAA would grant me eligibility.

The swim team began training towards the end of September, a few weeks into the Fall semester. I was not yet officially on the team but I began training with them while I awaited their response. My new teammates welcomed me with ease despite me being an inexperienced swimmer and six years older than the freshman on the team. I was the same age as my assistant coach and swimming with students who had upwards of fifteen years of racing experience under their belts. I was surrounded by people who grew up as athletes their entire lives while I was raised in a non-competitive environment where my twin and I could support each other. For me, it was a sequence of hesitant first-time experiences. I learned how to share a lane with my teammates, how to read time intervals for training, how to dive off the blocks, and countless other skills. Even before the NCAA accepted my request for eligibility, I was having the best time of my life. I got to experience being a college athlete; something my bedridden self never would have imagined for my future. I proudly stored my team suit and cap in my locker and
embraced the swim season as fully as I could. I had never been a morning person but found myself excited to hop into the cold pool at six in the morning, simply because I was still shocked that I even had the privilege of being there. I felt such a sense of belonging while on that team that I had never encountered in my life. Every minute of the season was surreal to me. My new teammates and I shared long bus rides, long days of training, and long weekends at swim meets. Fully immersed in the few months of competitive swimming I got to do, the season flew by incredibly quickly. I managed to swim a qualifying time in the 100-yard breaststroke to go to the SUNYAC conference championship in Buffalo against other qualified swimmers in the conference. Throughout the season I was dedicated to improving my times and worked tirelessly to refine my skills and increase my speed. The SUNYAC meet is the pinnacle of the swim season and was the final meet of my career. At this meet, it was now time to perform the goals I had set and worked towards all season. I was even able to place top sixteen in the 100-yard breaststroke and 200 yard breaststroke which meant that I got to score points for my team. I was so thrilled to do that for my team after all the support and encouragement they had provided me with all season long. It is difficult to articulate how it felt to be on a college swim team and will certainly spend the rest of my life reflecting on the memories, but I can already be sure that it was the most radical and fulfilling thing I have ever done.

The series of circumstances that had to align in order for me to join the swim team is simply a matter of good fortune. Acceptance into the MFA program, acceptance by my coach and acceptance by the NCAA eligibility committee all enabled me to have this experience while pursuing my MFA in painting. While in my studio, I had difficulty thinking about anything besides swimming because it consumed every part of my life. I did not resist this obsession; I knew that this was such a unique opportunity and I had to give it everything I could. When
exploring ideas for my MFA thesis, I concluded that I had to paint about something I cared deeply about and was willing to talk about. The summer between my first and second year in the program proved pivotal in my career. It was during this time that I began communicating with my future swim coach and began considering the potential possibility of competing. That same summer, I was hospitalized for several days due to complications with Crohn’s disease. Typically, I have been in remission for several years and I do not think about my chronic illness regularly. However, being suddenly hospitalized caused many suppressed memories to resurface. I realized during this hospital stay that I had unresolved feelings about my struggles with Crohn’s disease that I had been repressing throughout my remission. By the end of that summer break, I resolved to dedicate my thesis to documenting my story through chronic illness to college athlete.

The whole situation was so circumstantial, bizarre, and at the forefront of my mind at all times. Prior to graduate school, I was not making sophisticated paintings. I discovered early on in my painting career that I am drawn to intricate textures and surfaces. I enjoy the challenge of trying to render these surfaces with paint because they can be tricky for the eye to comprehend. I have found interesting texture in reptile skin, tree bark, and reflective or shiny surfaces. When considering subject matter for my thesis, I refused to sacrifice my interest in these surfaces but I needed to find a subject matter that was more refined. This was the beginning of exploration that led me towards my thesis process.

The subject matter of my thesis is autobiographical and therefore is less research-based than other theses may be. I spent time reflecting on my journey and all the circumstances that aligned to enable me to have this experience of graduate school. In a way, all the time I spend with the swim team; lifting, swimming, and racing, is a form of research for me because it is a
completely new experience. I am learning how to be a skilled swimmer, competitive athlete, a member of a college sports team, and how to manage my time between swimming, working, and participating in the MFA program. I am fond of asking my teammates about their histories as swimmers. One of my teammates even has Crohn’s disease and has had similar issues with it. I connect to people I encounter with similar histories of chronic illness. There is plenty of time to think while swimming endless laps. Things I think about include identifying what it is about swimming that made me become obsessed with it so quickly. I also think about how it feels to swim and how I might translate this feeling into an image. As someone with a history of chronic illness who was not always athletic, I feel differently in the water than my teammates who have been swimming for a decade or more. I want to collect as many stories from swimmers about how they ended up as competitive athletes to see if anyone else can offer a unique perspective. At swim meets, invitationals, and championships I talk to many swimmers and coaches to learn as much as I can about the swimmer experience in my lone season as I possibly can. My coach is another important resource. As someone who can almost single-handedly take credit for my swimming career, I can talk to him about my development as a swimmer and why he offered me a spot on the team. This season of competitive swimming was one of the most memorable and life-changing experiences that occurred simply as the result of several random factors aligning. To get to be a part of a college sports team as an older, inexperienced student is a completely unique opportunity. I felt such an overwhelming sense of belonging as a participant in competitive swimming that I have never felt in other aspects of my life.

As my work addresses my history of chronic illness and how it led to me becoming an athlete, I am also exploring the depictions of chronic illness in art. I look at other artists who suffer from illness and how they represent or depict their illness in their work. Every experience
with a chronic illness is unique to the individual. Some painters are impacted in ways that affect how they can create work, and others are influenced in subject matter or representation. I am using my time in grad school to not only become a fast swimmer, but to learn what it means to be an athlete. I am also unraveling my intricate journey through severe illness and how this history has impacted my painting practice, both in subject matter and the way in which I paint. I am not able to freely visit hospitals at this time due to COVID protocols, but I can still unpack Crohn’s disease in other spaces. I can reflect upon my own journey and that of my twin sister who shares the same disease. I do not remember a lot from my time in the worst of my illness, so this process was challenging for me. I have only a select few memories and understanding of what I went through. There are also online forums where people can discuss their experiences or struggles with Crohn’s disease. Through these platforms I can connect with other people who have IBDs, considering I only know a few people personally who have Crohn’s. If I am active in these virtual support groups, perhaps I can be a source of hope and inspiration for other young people who are in the midst of a severe flare up. When I was at my sickest, I did not believe there would ever be an end to my misery, and I never would have imagined my life play out the way it did. Although there is no cure for Crohn’s disease and remission is not guaranteed for anyone, I want to remind people who have it that there is a reason to keep fighting through the flare ups.

When thinking about my journey, I outlined the significant events and factors that led me to this point. Once I had this timeline mapped out, I had to think about how I could represent these events through painting. In my painting practice I am very fascinated with texture and surfaces that reflect light in an interesting way. I approached my timeline with the intention to visually depict my story, so I have been looking for different textures that appear in my timeline.
As I am going about my daily life, I am always on the lookout for textures that catch my eye as well. I am interested in the interactions between these patterns and surfaces. In this way, I see my paintings less as individual pieces and more as parts of an ever-growing puzzle. I pair surfaces with each other to explore the relationships between them. The process of painting for me is an opportunity to meditate on all of the different relationships in the world. By painting extremely detailed compositions using oil paint, I have an opportunity to slow down and meditate. The feeling of gliding through water is mimicked in the sensation of oil painting.

As I encounter a surface that interests me, I take photos on-the-go or of staged compositions using my phone. From there, I crop the images into compositions that include as little information as possible while maintaining all the important details from the reference that interested me in the first place. I use these reference images to make my oil paintings, building up the paint layer by layer. I always begin my paintings by stretching and priming a canvas. Then I block out the forms of the composition using pencil and transparent washes of color. From there, I mix my oil paints and apply them layer by layer until I am satisfied with the image. The composition is typically as close-up as I can make it without losing parts of the image that I want to include. This can have the effect of

Nicki Robibero, Reflecting, Oil on 24”x18” canvas, 2022
MFA Thesis Exhibition at the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art
abstraction because the surfaces sometimes become unrecognizable if enough information is cropped out. The interesting, shiny surfaces are rendered larger-than-life which forces viewers to take a step back from the canvas. I choose surfaces that I suspect will be challenging to render because then I feel a sense of accomplishment when I finish a painting and I have achieved the effect I aim for. My typical painting style is to find surfaces and textures that interest me and challenge myself to paint them. However, I needed to find a more sophisticated subject matter besides the whimsical reptiles I typically enjoy painting. Refusing to compromise my interests or painting style, I found a meaningful subject matter that I could represent visually while honoring my interest in surfaces.

The challenge of accurately rendering intricate textures reminds me of my mindset in the pool where I have a challenging practice or race ahead of me and I must focus and put in the work for the result. The subject matter I paint forces me to work very slowly and deliberately. While painting I am constantly undulating between hyper focus and a flow state where my mind

Nicki Robibero, Reflecting, Oil on 24”x18” canvas, 2022
Nicki Robiero, *Reflecting*, Oil on 24"x18" canvas, 2022
is allowed to wander as my hands work. This is also exactly like swimming, where I am not only literally undulating in the water, but I must focus on form or breathing during practice and then during a race I allow my body to take over. Both aspects of my life are tests of endurance-practicing how long I can maintain a state of focus in the studio and discomfort in the pool.

I carefully selected six surfaces to depict in my thesis that could tell the story of my journey through Crohn’s disease and my swim career. I decided to unify these paintings through canvas size, composition, subject matter, and color. The canvas sizes are all uniform and displayed in an evenly spaced, gridded format. The subject matter of each painting highlights one or more specific aspects of my journey. For example, one of the paintings includes imagery of my tattoo with a catheter in my arm. The tattoo is evidence that I overcame my fear of needles, and the IV catheter is imagery from my hospital visits and medication infusions that I have received bi-monthly for over ten years. I have previously explored paintings of tattoos because of my interest in the skin texture and the way tattoo ink appears through skin. Another painting features my racing cap and goggles, important gear for competitive swimming. I also painted the Elting Pool competition lane lines, which I have spent many hours staring at during practices and meets at the campus pool. This painting also allowed me to practice challenging skills such as painting water. I spent a lot of time considering the subject matter for each painting. The Scandinavian Swimmers painting was the most naturally derived composition. I stumbled upon this candy packaging while grocery shopping and found the shiny surface appealing. It also reflects my identity as a Scandinavian swimmer myself. The inclusion of candy in my thesis is meaningful to my story because of my struggles with disordered eating and fear of unhealthy foods. Finally, I highlight my anxiety issues in the paintings of my pills and my damaged skin from dermatillomania. Each piece is some type of reflective or shiny surface that stood out to
me. I also looked for imagery that contained blue or orange; the school colors of New Paltz and the colors that have been significant to my journey. Finally, the compositions, when lined up in display, depict the ‘ups and downs’ of my life. The compositions direct the eye either diagonally up the canvas from the bottom left towards the top right; or diagonally down from the top left to the bottom right. These angles are reflected in the neighboring canvases, leading viewers’ eyes around the series just like a story.

While working in my studio, I considered other painters who have influenced my career thus far. A young New York City based painter, Francesca Facciola, comes to mind first. Francesca is a long-time family friend who I have known since we were both children. Always a promising artistic talent, Francesca’s art career evolved gracefully as she attended the School of Visual Arts and is now regularly showing her work in galleries around the world. As an impressionable child a few years younger than Francesca, I watched her in awe and found myself influenced by her work. Francesca is a hyper-realistic oil painter who composes surreal, whimsical imagery that is always unexpected. Some of her past work, however, includes extremely detailed paintings of skin texture and imperfections. Francesca’s ability to capture texture has inspired my own interests over time.
Another painter who inspires me is Janet Fish, a renowned oil painter recognized for her paintings of glass and plastic. She shares the same fascination with transparencies and reflective surfaces and the trickiness of successfully translating this to canvas. I also researched artists who referenced chronic illness in their work. Some artists depict their symptoms, others their feelings, and even some do not address their illness visually but are still impacted by their limitations. Elizabeth Jameson is an example of a painter whose subject matter includes dealing with her chronic illness. Diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis, Jameson turned to painting. She uses vibrant colors and scans of her brain to create self-portraits that invite viewers to ask new questions about illness. Similarly, Jameson’s art practice serves as a way to celebrate herself and accept herself throughout struggles of illness. I have adopted this practice in my art as well. Forced to stare at imagery of my struggles for hours at a time, I have the opportunity to practice reflection
and acceptance. The suppressed memories of hospitalizations, symptoms, emotions, and everything else that comes with a chronic illness are allowed to float to the surface. While remembering these challenges I have faced has been difficult, it has also enabled me to fully celebrate the health and athleticism I have found a decade later. Remission is not guaranteed forever but as my thesis, *Reflecting*, depicts, I have fully embraced the experience and made the most of the opportunities presented to me while I can.

Elizabeth Jameson, *Self Portrait of the Artist’s Brain 1*, painting on silk, 2009