

Disintegrating

There is a bell on the fifth floor of Children's Hospital patients ring when they are cancer-free. I have been battling cancer since I was in kindergarten and although there has been no evidence of cancer in my body for over ten years, I have never rung that bell. When I was diagnosed with cancer the third time, my doctors told my parents there was nothing they could do for me and I had a 2% survival rate. At age eight, I thought I was going to die.

I view each of my cancer diagnoses as battles, one, two, and three, but there is a fourth battle that is not talked about even though I am fighting it every day. Although there may be no evidence of cancer in my body, cancer continues to impact my life on a daily basis. There are days I can not breathe. There are days I can not leave bed because I am in too much pain. There are days the word "cancer" sends shock waves up my spine. And there are days I can not escape because everywhere I go, there I am.... "*Disintegrating*." This series confronts my late side effects, both physical and emotional, and are representations of the feelings, memories, and moments I do not talk about lightly.

I started working on this series at the end of November in 2020. My initial focus was to gain some control over my PTSD because the flashbacks are so intense I lose the sense of present-day reality. I wanted to try to defuse the flashbacks by attempting to understand them. This is a challenging process as I am triggered easily and I am working with materials or images that are emotionally charged. I have to carefully test my boundaries to balance what I want to create and what I can healthily manage. A few ideas were abandoned along the way because I am not ready to face those truths yet.

My work captures flashes of me in my most vulnerable states. I have been working from the outside to the inside, literally, as each piece is a self-portrait. Artists normally create self-portraits to identify themselves but I create mine to show who I am not. I am slowly detangling myself from years of trauma as it does not define me. Art provides a healthy release of emotions so I do not get crushed by the overwhelming weight. The work in this "*Disintegrating*" series represents the trauma that wants to devour me and allows me to release my anguish as I relocate it into my art. Each piece contains a painful moment in my life that brings me one bit closer to resiliency to continue the never-ending daily battle.

I do not expect people to understand what I have gone through because I certainly do not. However, it is an opportunity to get a glimpse of the destruction childhood cancer has had on my life. When I feel isolated, I remind myself every person is also fighting their own war. We all have things that eat away at our core making us feel like we are *disintegrating*.

Although I plan to continue documenting the visual manifestations of my PTSD, my artwork has taken a turn to focus on the years of pain from my uterus and my inability to have children. Now that I am an adult I am starting to realize all of the things cancer has taken from me. It has taken my kidney, my hair, birthday parties, holidays with families, ignorance, and the choice to have children. Art allows me to work through these complex emotions and is an outlet for my grief. I will never get to ring the bell at Children's Hospital because I will never be truly free from cancer.