

Episode: *Author Interview: “Self-Portraiture, Embodiment, and Adaptive Creation”*

Guest: Julia O’Brien

Host: Tim Hoff

Transcript: Cheryl Green

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[bright theme music]

[00:00:03] TIM HOFF: Welcome to another episode of the Author Interview series from the *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics*. I’m your host, Tim Hoff. This series provides an alternative way to access the interesting and important work being done by Journal contributors each month. Joining me on this episode is Julia O’Brien, a comic artist and illustrator who explores identity as a matrix of biology and experience. Julia is also a former Art of Medicine intern with the Journal. She’s here to discuss her collection of multimedia paintings and sculptures, *Time Capsule*, in the June 2025 issue of the Journal, [Embodiment in Art Practice](#). Julia, thank you so much for being here.

JULIA O’BRIEN: Hi, Tim, it’s great to be here. Thanks for having me. [music fades]

[00:00:47] HOFF: Perfect. Can you briefly visually describe your piece and also tell our listeners what they’re supposed to be looking at closely in your artwork?

O’BRIEN: Yeah, my piece is a collection of multiple artworks, drawings, and embroidered paintings. Embroidered paintings are creating pictures with color, except instead of using paint, you’re using thread. And it’s a self-portrait. It’s a very lengthy self-portrait because I think the issue I’m trying to look at in ethical terms is really holistic being and how we are multifaceted, and our bodies respond to our experiences, and our experiences are also shaped by our bodies.

[00:01:35] HOFF: So, can you describe the key point you’re trying to investigate through this collection about embodiment and ethics?

O’BRIEN: When I think of embodiment, I imagine how we, as people, traverse through society in a container that is our body, that is our capsule, and it is impossible to escape. And we live through history where certain bodies have been oppressed or privileged, and certain bodies are more susceptible to change and alteration. And what I mean by that is this idea that we sort of imprint what we go through. There is talk of generational trauma in epigenetics, right? And then our body holds onto this information. And when we go to the hospital, we go seek medical care for any reason, certain bodies are more likely to just experience something that could be pathological.

[00:02:49] HOFF: What do you think might be particularly important for health professions students and trainees to be considering about your artwork?

O'BRIEN: Mm-hmm. The big thing in my artwork is identity and different ways that you can define and look at identity. And a lot of people may not feel safe in health care settings because of one or more of their identities, right, and will sometimes have to fight to be heard if visually they seem to fit into one box while actually being multicultural, right? We all are made up of multiple identities, and looking at your patient from a holistic point of view and making sure that they are also happy and getting enjoyment and fulfillment out of their life instead of just, can they function in terms of can they wake up and go to work, right? We have this idea of what it means to function, and therefore, that's when we start to define pathology. And I'd like to challenge the thought that many people can be sort of passing, functioning sort of pretty well through their life, and yet, it's still difficult. [theme music returns]

[00:04:14] HOFF: Julia, thank you so much for your time on the podcast, and thanks for your contribution to the Journal this month.

O'BRIEN: Thank you. It's been really great.

HOFF: To read the full article, as well as the rest of this month's issue for free, visit our site, [journalofethics.org](http://journalofethics.org). We'll be back soon with more *Ethics Talk* from the *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics*.