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## ART OF MEDICINE

### Self-Portraiture, Embodiment, and Adaptive Creation

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#### Abstract

*Time Capsule* is a collection of multimedia paintings and sculptures that visually consider significant contributors to collective and individual health events and experiences. This collection compares body parts to individual items found within an imaginary time capsule, with the body acting as a vessel for reflections on society.

Anatomical structures inform our experiences of health, our embodiment, and our physical versatility over time. *Time Capsule*—a collection of multimedia paintings and sculptures—is intended to capture how our bodies change over time, investigate **roles our environments play** in the pathologies we suffer, and reflect on the question: *What is the nature and scope of responsibility we should attribute to ourselves, our families, and our societies for the health effects we endure and impose upon generations throughout time?*

Figure 1. Cave Paintings



**Media**

Red ochre pigment, charcoal, white chalk, embroidery, and photograph on 5' x 3' canvas.

**Caption**

The *Cave Paintings* triptych includes a negative self-portrait inspired by early paintings in modern-day France and Argentina.<sup>1</sup> I cut canvas to my exact height and approximate width, and asked my sister to outline my body, creating a silhouette. I used water, charcoal, and natural red ochre pigment, which would have been used during the Stone Age, to reproduce possible experiences of earlier humans. My right thumbprint, captured using tape and graphite, is enlarged as my facial identity. A unique aspect of my biography can be inferred from handprints in white chalk, which show grips I once wore on my hands as a gymnast. I also included a photo of myself working, which exacerbated my back pain; I signified pain flares in pink in the central image.



**Figure 2.** *My Dad's Genes*



**Media**

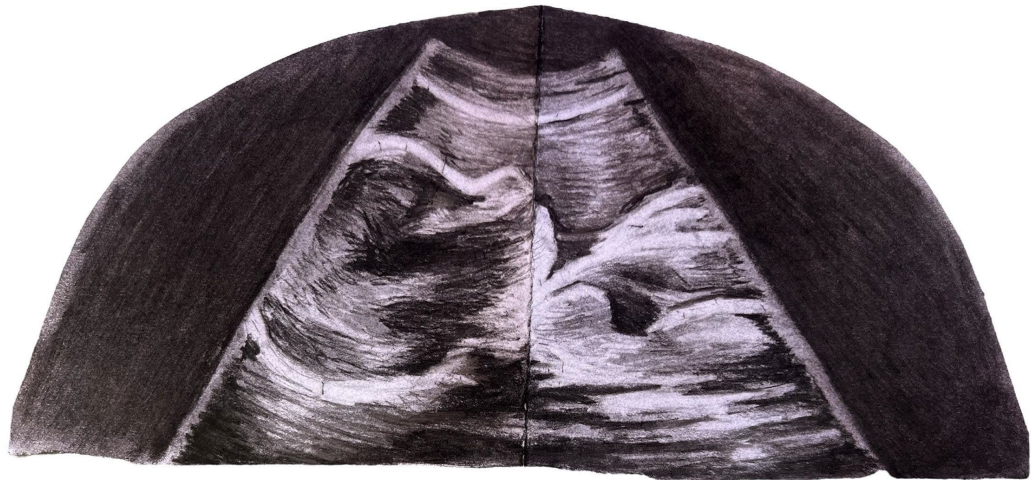
White fabric paint on worn jeans.

**Caption**

*My Dad's Genes* depicts hajichi (ハジチ) on an old pair of his jeans. Hajichi is the traditional art of tattooing women's hands exclusively by women artists of the Ryukan Islands (琉球). My great-great-grandmother had these tattoos before tattooing was banned when mainland Japan colonized Okinawa.

Across cultures, body arts—including tattoos, dance, lip stretching, and hair protection, for example—have **cultural and ethical importance**. We decorate our bodies as expressions of self, culture, self-care, and survival. As a mixed-race person, my relationship to ethnicity is key to my experiences of embodiment, cultural preservation, and self-preservation.

**Figure 3.** *Early Self-Portrait*



**Media**

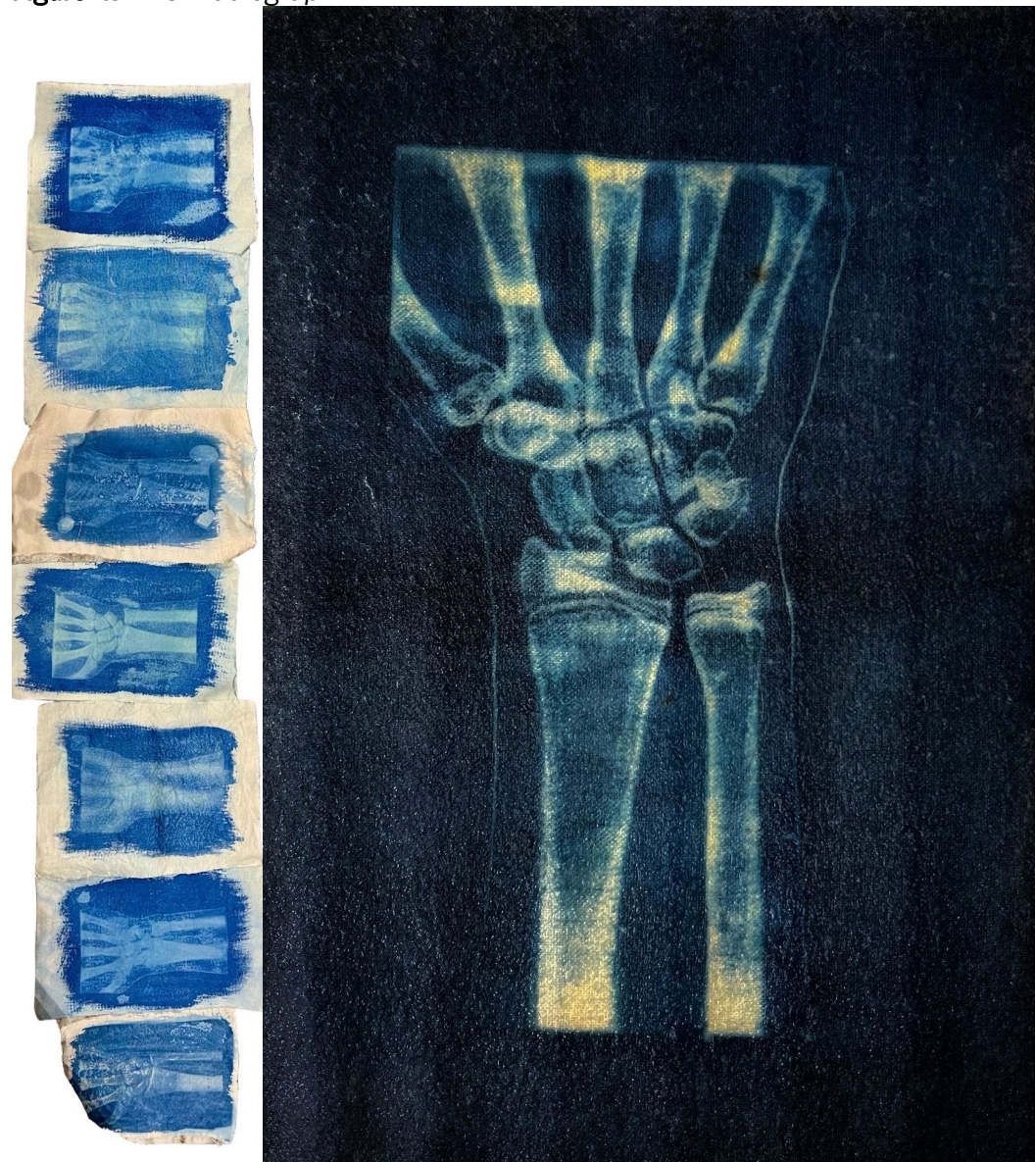
Charcoal and graphite on paper.

**Caption**

I found a sonogram, taken 39 days before I was born, in one of my mother's photo albums. I recreated this image using charcoal and graphite on paper. Such technological images can complicate one's sense of "self" and challenge our conceptions of what constitutes a "self-portrait."



**Figure 4. Wrist Radiograph**



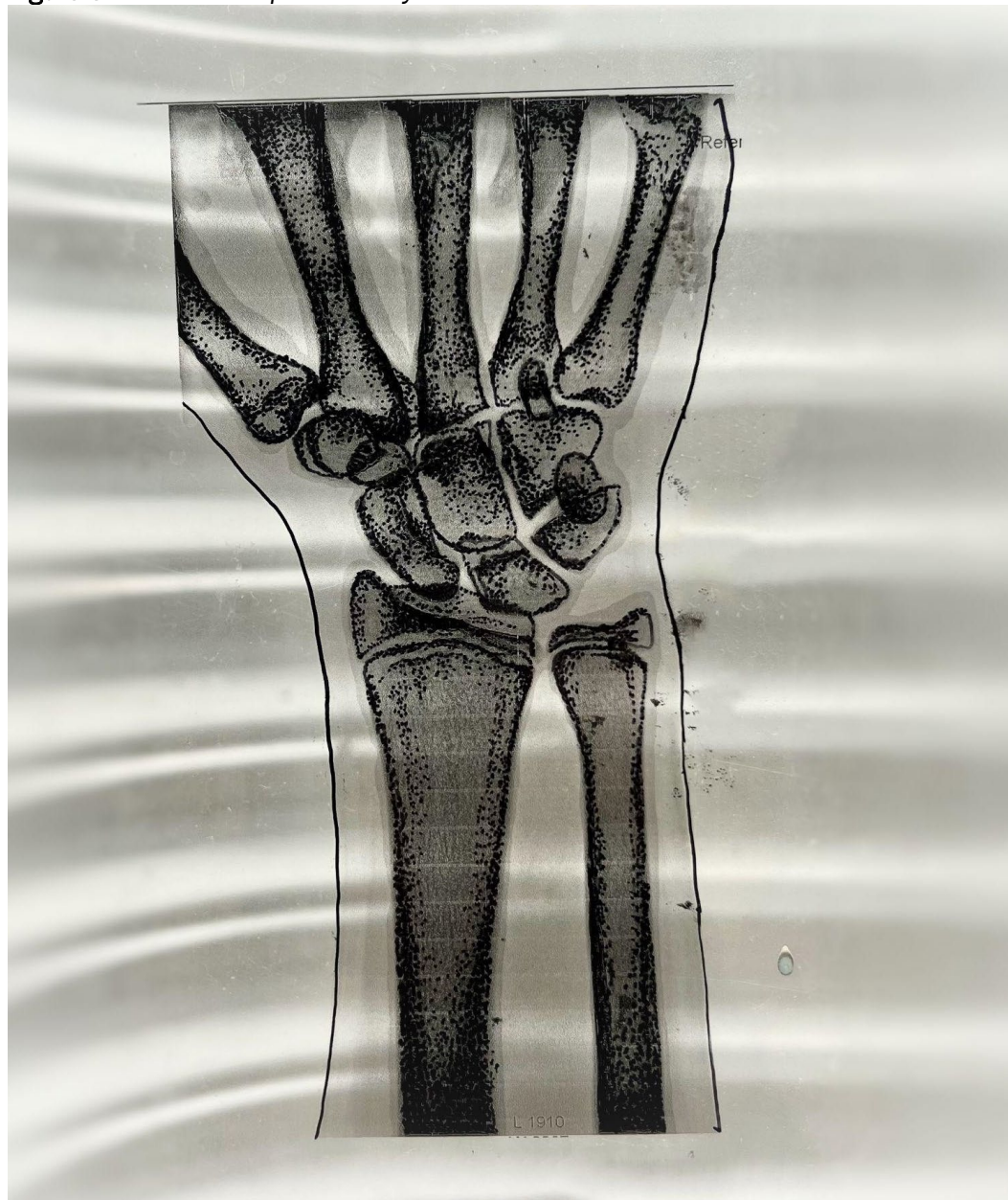
**Media**  
Cyanotype on fabric.

**Caption**  
Distal radial epiphysis is more commonly referred to as “gymnast’s wrist” because it is found in nearly 40% of gymnasts.<sup>2</sup> This solar print is a re-creation of radiographs of my own wrist from 2015. Radiograph images are produced by transmitting ionized radiation (X-rays) through body parts that absorb different amounts of the X-rays, depending on tissues’ densities. Solar prints, or cyanotypes, are similarly made using ultraviolet (UV) light. (Chemicals present in cyanotypes are light sensitive, turning cyan blue when hit with UV rays. Images are created by blocking UV light from hitting light-sensitive material.) I created an inverse copy of my original radiographs in black ink on



transparent acetate to control light exposure on cyanotype-coated fabric. The iterative quality of the printing process parallels the repetitive nature of gymnasts' **stress injuries**. While many members of the public can't relate to gymnastics injuries, the pain of repeating specific movements as part of one's work or craft is known to many.

**Figure 5.** *Chronic Compartment Syndrome in Ink*



**Media**

Black ink on transparent acetate.



**Caption**

Pain in my wrists from distal radial epiphysis led to chronic compartment syndrome in my forearms, threatening to compromise my capacity to draw. As an artist at heart, I stopped gymnastics. Shading and detail work became painful to do. Even for this project, I had to take multiple breaks from stippling the X-rays due to pain in my arms, so I started experimenting with softer media and digital art. I eventually transitioned to forging creative detail in embroidery.

**Figure 6.** *Cross Section*

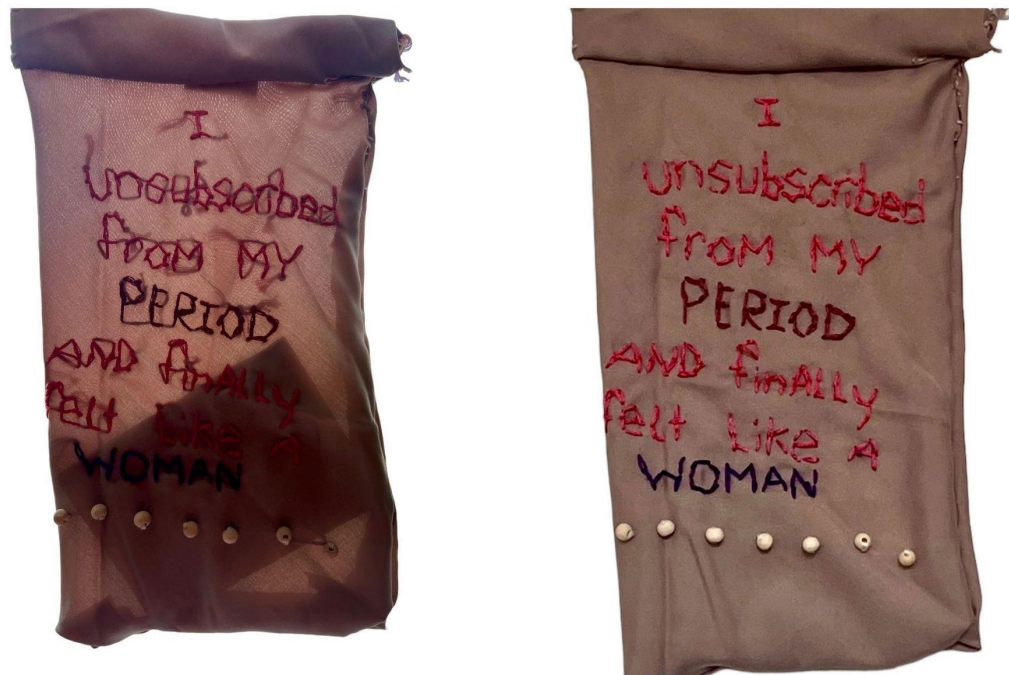
**Media**

Embroidery with beads on muslin.

**Caption**

This piece reveals musculature in a cross section of the forearm, with beads in place of the nerves and blood vessels that are harmed in compartment syndrome. Embroidery work allows me to indulge in detail work without causing pain in my arms, so I've begun working in more sculptural forms.

**Figure 7.** *Unsubscribe, Please*



**Media**

Embroidery, 7 beads, found object (old birth control pill container) in sewn brown fabric.

**Caption**

In many cases, conditions like polycystic ovarian syndrome, endometriosis, uterine fibroids, and premenstrual dysphoric disorder can be **left undiagnosed** and untreated for years.<sup>3</sup> I draw here on the idea that many women hate menstruation; menstrual pain has been normalized such that it can be difficult for many young women to recognize when their pain indicates a pathology that needs clinical attention. My endometriosis, for example, was so painful that I desperately wanted to remove my reproductive organs each month, and dysphoric symptoms generated the recurrence of suicidal thoughts with each menstrual cycle. This artwork, mimicking paper pharmacy bags, expresses how reproductive disorders shaped my own relationship to gender. It took 3 versions of contraceptive medications before I found relief from pain. It's frustrating to explore different approaches to women's reproductive health care because it takes 6 weeks before you can tell if the new method is working or not, and our bodies continue to change over time. Women suffer a disadvantage in health care due to a long history of clinical misogyny that prioritizes male bodies in research and care,<sup>4</sup> leading some women to distrust that their pain is taken as seriously as men's pain.<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 8.** *Floor Work*



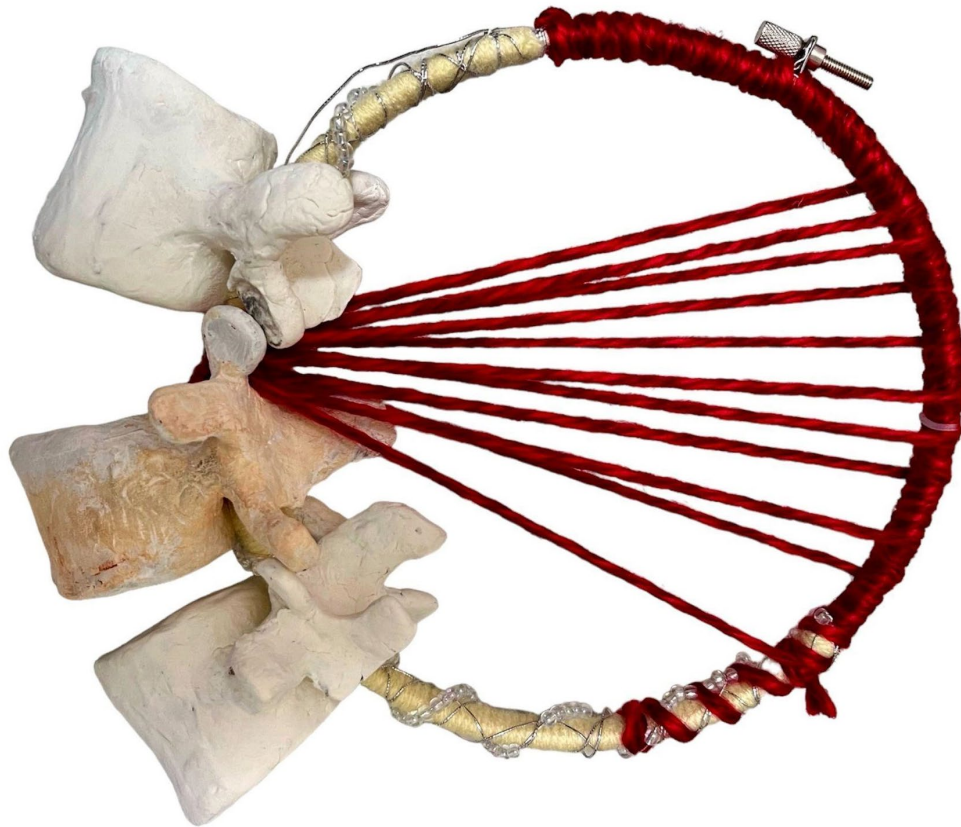
**Media**

Embroidery on fabric.

**Caption**

Learning pelvic floor therapy techniques has been some of the hardest therapeutic work I have ever done. The physical discomfort of releasing stored trauma was also emotionally exhausting. This embroidery replicates clinical diagrams<sup>6</sup> on the walls of the room where I'm treated. Thread directionality and shape correspond to deeper muscle tissues of the pelvic floor. Most people rarely, if ever, learn about their pelvic floor, which is critical for core stability, sexual satisfaction, and healthy continence.<sup>7</sup> Again, a lack of education regarding our own bodies can lead to late diagnosis of pathologies.

**Figure 9. Vertebrae**



**Media**

Modeling clay and yarn on embroidery hoop.

**Caption**

I was about 12 years old when gymnastics brought on my back problems. I sculpted L3, L4, and L5 of my vertebrae<sup>8</sup> where the pain is centered. Yellow sections of the hoop follow where the spinal cord fits into the skeleton and holds the sculptures in a strained arch shape. Bodies, especially developing ones, struggle to hold contradictions gracefully.



**Figure 10. Culprit Muscles**



**Media**

Embroidery on fabric.

**Caption**

I was extremely flexible as a child, and having to develop strength in loose muscles caused a discoordination in my body that requires intensive physical therapy to unlearn. I embroidered culprit muscles that require retraining and dry needling.

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**Julia O'Brien** is a comic artist and illustrator who explores identity as a matrix of biology and experience. She enjoys learning new mediums and incorporating her history as a gymnast to tell authentic and thoughtful stories. She was an Art of Medicine intern with the *AMA Journal of Ethics* in 2022 in a joint program with the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, from which she graduated in 2023.

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#### Conflict of Interest Disclosure

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