

The courage to look at my brain

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Linda Alterwitz's ghostly photos explore the intersection where science and soul meet — and sometimes clash

It was 14 years ago that Linda Alterwitz began suffering from the excruciating headaches. These lasted for three years, during which time doctors discovered a small tumor on her pituitary gland. They told her not to be alarmed. They told the aspiring painter that 95 percent of pituitary adenomas (the medical term) are benign, and that the tiny one she had — the size of pea — couldn't possibly be the source of her terrible pain. The doctors prescribed Alterwitz medication meant to shrivel the tumor into oblivion, and they monitored her progress with regular MRIs.



Only the tumor didn't shrink, and the headaches persisted. Alterwitz sought another opinion from specialists at Mount Sinai Hospital, who assured her that, yes, even a pea-sized tumor could wreak havoc and cause severe headaches. She had it removed.



“The morning I woke up from that surgery, the headache was gone,” says Alterwitz, who is now 53. “Thank God it was benign.”

Although the artist is quick to point out that others suffer far more seriously, the experience would forever change the course of her life and, perhaps even more profoundly, her art.

Alterwitz moved to Las Vegas from Gary, Ind., at age 13, when her parents Oscar and Deanne Alterwitz purchased Walker Furniture in 1973. “I’m as local as they come,” she says. In 1986, she earned a Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Denver with concentrations in painting and drawing. After a stint in Peterborough, England, where she met and shared a studio with another artist, Ruth Thomas, Alterwitz returned home to raise her family and work full-time at the furniture store. There wasn’t a lot of time left for art, but she painted when she could: large-scale, abstract works, a few of which still hang in her living room.

The tumor influenced the theme of her art, but something much simpler influenced its form: light. It was a few years after the tumor was removed that she was particularly struggling with her work. “I must have been six months on the (same) painting. It had like 20 layers to it.”

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“The light was coming through the shutters, and it was windy, and the trees were passing through it, and it was making this triangular thing ... these lines from the shutters and the fan. And I was sitting there watching it and I’m going, ‘This is cooler than the painting! This layer of light is cooler than the painting itself! How can I do this?’”

So began Alterwitz’s exploration with light and photography. She enrolled in classes at the College of Southern Nevada; she learned digital photography and Photoshop; and she upgraded her computer and technology skills. Then, once she felt she’d finally mastered the medium, she began creating. And in creating, she began to heal.



This is your brain on art

“There’s my brain,” she says, pointing to a beautiful yet disturbing photo of an autumn field. The trees are almost bare and the leaves on the bushes are a deep red. The grass is still green in parts, straw-yellow in others. The sky is a complex fusion of grays and blues and pinks. But superimposed on all of this, at the forefront of the scene, is an MRI scan of Alterwitz’s brain — and the tumor. The juxtaposition of the landscape and the medical imagery is unsettling.



Take these home. These don’t count, her doctor had told her, years earlier, handing her the MRI scans because they were taken with a different machine than her previous ones had been and, hence, weren’t suitable to use for comparison purposes.

“It wasn’t for a couple of years or so that I got the courage to look at my brain,” says Alterwitz, who eventually set the images on her light box. “And it was amazing. That’s what really started this whole medical thing — my own brain.”

That photo of the field and her brain became the first of many works she would create incorporating medical imagery and science. “This was definitely the start of healing, but it grew to be more than that. It grew to be not just about me. It was more all-encompassing. It was about anybody.”

Since then, Alterwitz has completed several photographic projects using MRI scans, PET scans, X-rays (of both dogs and humans) mammograms, ultrasounds and even pictures of microscopic algae. She frequently juxtaposes medical imagery against the Western American landscape she’s familiar with. She often incorporates numbers, which she views as a metaphor for technology. The scientific element in her work is important to Alterwitz.

“To me it had to be scientific to give it that contradiction of beauty, something that is recognizable, familiar and comforting, and then the technology, science, microscopic, medical, it gives a bit of discomfort to that. So it’s that dichotomy between that comfort and discomfort. That’s what I’m reaching for.”

“I do find that aspect (the layering) very interesting,” says artist and friend Ruth Thomas. “The different kinds of imagery that are combined, that combination leads to a very interesting atmosphere in the work. It’s not just a straightforward representation of the external world.”

Diagnosis: success

Recently, since all three of her children have left for college, Alterwitz has reduced her hours with the family business to pursue her art full-time.

“It’s a different pace, now that I have more time to do my art. I can focus in,” she says. And it’s paying off: Alterwitz recently won the Nevada Arts Council’s 2014 Visual Arts Fellowship award, and in October her work — portraits she shot with a thermal camera — was featured at Smithsonian.com.

Meanwhile, in her studio, Alterwitz is embarking on the third series of her *While I’m Still* project that she began in 2010. The title refers to the very literal — and claustrophobia-inducing — stillness required for MRI scans.

“They always wanted to give me earbuds,” she says of the medical staff that performed her MRIs, “because it’s loud. It’s really loud. And you have to sit there for 40 minutes. And I’m like, ‘No, I don’t want the earbuds. Just let me go where I want to go.’ Your mind wanders while your body is subjugated to medical testing. Being trapped and escaping — there’s another dichotomy.”

The first series in *While I’m Still*, “*In-Sight*” (2010-2011) challenges viewers to explore this “disquieting escape of the mind” while the body undergoes a scientific process. The pictures, similar to the first of her brain and the autumn scene, meld medical images with lonely places of escape to evoke feelings of sadness, fear, isolation, but also an ethereal beauty and ghostly peace. The second series in the project, “*Portrait*” (2011-2012) is even more thought-provoking in the discomfort it projects. Here, the focus is on the individuals — there are no landscapes in these — and Alterwitz has woven fabrics into the medical images to lend them depth and strength and, somehow, a deeper isolation. The result is haunting.

“Remnant” is the title Alterwitz has given her third series in the project — her current work — with which she means to explore what remains after the healing. Certainly, it will also be haunting, disquieting and whispered, still reflecting the medical experiences — the fear, the discomfort, the anxiety — that came to define Alterwitz as an artist.

“There’s the calm, there’s the fear. I can live with both. Life’s not perfect,” she says.

“You’ve got to be able to tackle it all, don’t you?”