



LYNN HERSHMAN LEESON, *X-Ray Woman in Bathing Cap*, 1966, acrylic, graphite, and spray paint on plywood, 29 x 23 inches.

X-Ray Woman is one of a series of artworks that emerged from the artist's experience of cardiomyopathy during her 1965 pregnancy. After experiencing shortness of breath, she went into heart failure and spent many weeks of her pregnancy hospitalized, where she breathed with the help of an oxygen tent.

For

Dear

Life

*Art,
Medicine and
Disability*





For Dear Life: Art, Medicine, and Disability at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego provides a fresh perspective on wellness, illness, and disability. The exhibition explores how artists with disabilities and chronic illnesses have navigated their challenges and used their experiences to confront societal norms surrounding health and the body.

Tracing how disability and illness themes have been portrayed in art since the 1960s, *For Dear Life* takes an inclusive approach to disability, reflecting not only individuals with clear diagnoses, but also those dealing with chronic conditions, mental health challenges, and mobility impairments. Many of the featured artists use their personal experiences with illness or disability as a means of artistic empowerment, confronting medical narratives, and offering new ways of understanding the body, vulnerability, and healing.

One of the most compelling aspects of the exhibition is its focus on the sickbed as a site of creative production. For many artists coping with illness or disability, their homes, beds, and even hospital rooms became spaces for artistic expression. These environments, typically seen as passive backdrops, were reimaged as sites of innovation and transformation.

At its core, *For Dear Life* emphasizes the importance of collaboration and mutual care in navigating illness and disability. Many of the artists in the exhibition have worked closely with medical professionals, fellow artists, and community activists, creating new relationships of support and solidarity. The exhibition also draws on the powerful histories of collective support during the HIV/AIDS epidemic when artists in cities like New York and Los Angeles not only created art but also supported each other through the crisis.

More than a survey of artistic responses to health, *For Dear Life* is a call to rethink our relationships with our bodies, illnesses, and each other. By portraying illness and disability as generative experiences, the exhibition reminds viewers that vulnerability, care, and collaboration are central to the human experience, and that art can heal, challenge, and help build a more compassionate and inclusive world.

Curated by Jill Dawsey and Isabel Casso and part of the Getty Foundation's PST ART: *Art & Science Collide* initiative, *For Dear Life: Art, Medicine, and Disability* is on view September 19, 2024, through February 2, 2025.



JOEY TERRILL, *Still-Life with Zerit*, 2000, mixed media on canvas, 36 x 48 inches.

Joey Terrill's artwork *Still-Life with Zerit* combines elements of activism and personal experience as an HIV-positive queer Chicano artist, significantly intertwining his creative practice with his advocacy for the LGBTQ+ community and HIV awareness. The piece features a vibrant montage that juxtaposes traditional Mexican objects with a bottle of Zerit, an HIV medication, framed against a backdrop recalling the tragic yet reimagined story of the Aztec lovers. By employing a Pop aesthetic, Terrill critiques the commodification of life-saving medications, placing them alongside everyday consumer goods and urging viewers to reflect on the impact of chronic illness within a domestic, culturally relevant context.

Previous spread: JAMES LUNA, *AA Meeting/Art History*, 1990–91, six photographs by Richard A. Lou, television monitor with video loop, chairs, stool, ashtrays, cups, bottles, cigarettes, and books.

James Luna was known for using installations and performances to challenge established historical narratives and cultural stereotypes about Indigenous identity. His work, particularly the piece *AA Meeting/Art History*, blends personal experiences with themes of addiction, Indigenous oral traditions, and art history, while humorously confronting societal perceptions and asserting the modern relevance of Native culture.

RIVA LEHRER, *Riva and Zora in Middle Age*, 2006, gouache on paper, 36 x 24 inches.

Riva Lehrer is celebrated for her poignant portraits depicting individuals with disabilities, which challenge traditional notions of portraiture by presenting disabled bodies as worthy subjects and emphasizing their nonnormative beauty. Her work, characterized by realistic renderings and deep emotional connections with her subjects—many of whom are influential figures in disability studies and social justice—articulates a vibrant aesthetic of disability that highlights the profound presence and beauty found in those who navigate social stigma.



YVONNE RAINER, Still from *Hand Movie*, 1966, 8mm film transferred to video; black-and-white, silent; 8 minutes.

"I was very ill, but I could move my hand," recalls the dancer, choreographer, and filmmaker Yvonne Rainer about the circumstances of her first cinematic foray, a short film entitled *Hand Movie*, recorded in 1966 as the choreographer recovered from major surgery.

Next page: MILFORD GRAVES, *Untitled*, 1977, paint, pencil, and collage on paper, 36 x 24 inches.

Fascinated by the material aspects of sound and its effects on the human body and mind, Milford Graves devoted himself to the study of rhythm and vibration. Graves was a leading percussionist in the Free Jazz movement and a polymath innovator in the fields of music, sound studies, visual and martial arts, herbology, gardening, and acupuncture.

