



Combating Burnout with Art

On the 8th floor of the Jimmy Fund building sits an art installation that's bound to catch your attention. Displayed in front of one of the large windows in conference room 824, a three-tiered structure has been painted a distinct mint green and decorated with 19 succulents of various shapes and sizes. The arrangement is designed to draw your eye to the skyline, and if you catch it at just the right moment, you'll be treated to a remarkable pattern of shadows that stretch across the conference room table and touch the other side of the room.

The artist behind the installation is Elise Adibi, who creates all of her work using living matter. Her decision comes from her belief that her paintings and installations are not inert objects, but should share the life process with us. Recently, Adibi came to Dana-Farber for a two-week artist-in-residence program designed by William F. Pirl, MD, MPH, vice chair, Psychosocial Oncology. The goal of the residency was to use Adibi's art as a launch pad to explore and address the causes of burnout among the Psychosocial Oncology and Palliative Care (POPC) team.

"I have always been drawn to her art and the amount of thought she puts behind it," explains Pirl, who first met Adibi at the Radcliffe Institute Fellowship Program. The program is an extension of Harvard University that supports leading artists and scholars who have both exceptional promise and demonstrated accomplishments. "A lot of her work focuses on life and time, change and transformation. It's a message I thought would be excellent for our team to explore."

An Open Dialogue

During her stay, Adibi connected with various POPC staff to understand their unique challenges and examine how her work and process could help them address their own feelings of burnout. A self-proclaimed conversation enthusiast, Adibi prioritized group activities (such as leading a painting of a live model) and thought-provoking discussions with the POPC team.

While the artist always hoped her message would resonate, she noted she was blown away by the positive responses she received.

"I'm impressed with how open and connecting everyone has been," she explained while grabbing for her iPhone to show an email in which a member of POPC referenced one of her concepts in trying to better define the feeling of distress. "The time and energy this person used to dissect this concept was intense and remarkable."



Artist-in-residence Elise Adibi reflects on her installation on the 8th floor of the Jimmy Fund Building. The goal of Adibi's residency was to explore the causes of burnout in Psychosocial Oncology and Palliative Care.

Trust the Process

A reoccurring theme in Adibi's work is sticking to and trusting a process even when you can't see the end result. Sitting in front of her completed installation, Adibi laughed as she recalled she had to remind herself to follow her own message in constructing the piece.

From the start, Adibi knew she wanted to create something with plants. She initially planned to use leafy, aromatic ones as she loves to work with smells. However, as she began to consider her environment, and how people in a hospital may be sensitive to smells, she made her first pivot. Her decision to nix leafier plants came next when she surveyed the window in which it would sit. The large, west-facing window would expose the plants to plenty of light; and the greenery where she purchased them from informed her leafier plants would not do well there. So, she moved to succulents.

Next came their arrangement. Adibi worked with Jacqueline Ritchie, Dana-Farber facilities, positioning and moving the plants until they landed on a design they liked.

"This piece accomplished what I wanted to do in a way I couldn't even imagine," says Adibi. "This whole thing was a process, and it turned out better than I could have planned."

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Adibi's installation is intended to draw the viewers eye to the skyline.

Lasting Impressions

While Adibi was the first artist-in-residence, Pirl hopes she won't be the last. Impressed with his team's openness to the experience, Pirl says he is thankful for the way Adibi was able to get them to think about their job in a different way.

"Her time here helped us learn more about what we truly love concerning our work," adds Pirl. "By having open conversations, we were able to explore the topic of burnout with genuine authenticity."

As a first-time artist-in-residence Adibi reveals her time here was amazing, though admittedly difficult because she had never done anything like this before. While parts of her experience were challenging, she explains she is thankful for the opportunity, and would be honored to do something like this again.

"Any time you can give people a chance to connect with art and perhaps help them view something in a new light, you have to sign up for that. How can you not?"

— by Austin Fontanella