

## Alexandra Hatfield Artist Statement

My own experience of a cervical cancer diagnosis inspired me to create artwork discussing women's health and gynaecological (gynae) conditions.

My hope is to create the opportunities for discussion which will raise awareness and enhance understanding of gynae cancers and conditions. There are a lot of taboos surrounding gynae health which will only be dispelled with open conversations.

A major issue surrounding gynae health is that symptoms often exist *within* the body, which can remain unseen. Women may not see the full extent of their symptoms. They can easily be perceived as 'normal' and 'fine', when in fact there is something sinister beneath the surface.

Sinister and unseen issues beneath the surface really drove the project, especially after taking part in two open studio events at Gynae Outpatients (D18) at New Cross Hospital. I spent this time gathering ideas, information and images to use during the project. I also had thought-provoking conversations which would shape the project going forward.

It became evident that a link to nature, and flowers in particular, was symbolic for staff working in gynaecology. Research led me to find that medicine had a naturalistic beginning, with herbalists and apothecaries not being so dissimilar to early pharmacists and physicians. Modern medicine has links to the ancient past of using plants medicinally.

Another interesting point was that many poisonous plants were discovered due to trial and error. However, during those trials it was realised that poisons can at times be used to treat illnesses. I decided to use this link to help represent the hidden symptoms and illnesses within women's health.

Throughout both artworks there are a range of colourful flowers and plants. On the surface these plants look 'fine' and 'normal' – beautiful in fact. Some of the plants are medicinal with links to treating women's health and gynae conditions such as yarrow, willow, St John's wort, lady's mantle, dandelions, poppies and nettles. Similar to women's health and gynae conditions, all is not as it seems.

Some of the flowers across the artworks are highly poisonous and can even cause death, such as hellebore, hemlock, deadly nightshade, monkshood, and the lords-and-ladies plant. The mix of medicinal and poisonous plants, with little to tell them apart, represents the invisible nature of many gynae illnesses and conditions.

Menstrual bleeding is the inspiration for the artworks' backgrounds. This still carries a great embarrassment and taboo for many women. I have added a gold shimmer to one of the paintings, to show the 'life blood' that is a menstrual cycle. It is part of nature, and without the full menstrual cycle there would be no more new life. Changes in menstrual bleeding can also be symptomatic of many gynae illnesses and conditions, so it is important we open up the discussion and leave behind the embarrassment.

Providing structure to the paintings are two common but indispensable pieces of medical equipment. The first is a speculum: used for so many procedures every day, and dating back

to the mid-19th century. Most women will endure the use of them for many procedures such as smear tests and gynae examinations.

A colposcope is the second object featured in the paintings. Used during a colposcopy, this advanced magnifying glass enables colposcopists to view a cervix in more detail. They are vital in diagnosing and treating gynae conditions. It is interesting to think how many lives a common speculum or colposcope has saved, without them it would make diagnosing and treating gynae conditions incredibly difficult.

I wanted to celebrate these pieces of vital equipment by gilding them in gold, often seen as a colour for precious items. Choosing to paint the items using only lines means they aren't obvious straight away. This requires the viewer to observe the painting more closely, and to think about why these objects have been given an audience.

I hope that you have found the paintings thought-provoking, and have been inspired to have open discussions around women's health. If you would like to see and engage with more of my work, you can find me on socials by searching @whereartblooms.

*Alexandra's residency with The Royal Wolverhampton NHS Trust Charity took place in April to November 2024. It was a part of the Arts and Heritage Group's project Care, Create, Conserve, generously funded by The National Lottery Heritage Fund.*