



The Arts

Brushes with Cancer goes digital

More on **Twist Out Cancer** available at <https://twistoutcancer.org/>
For more on **Brushes with Cancer** see <https://twistoutcancer.org/brushes/>

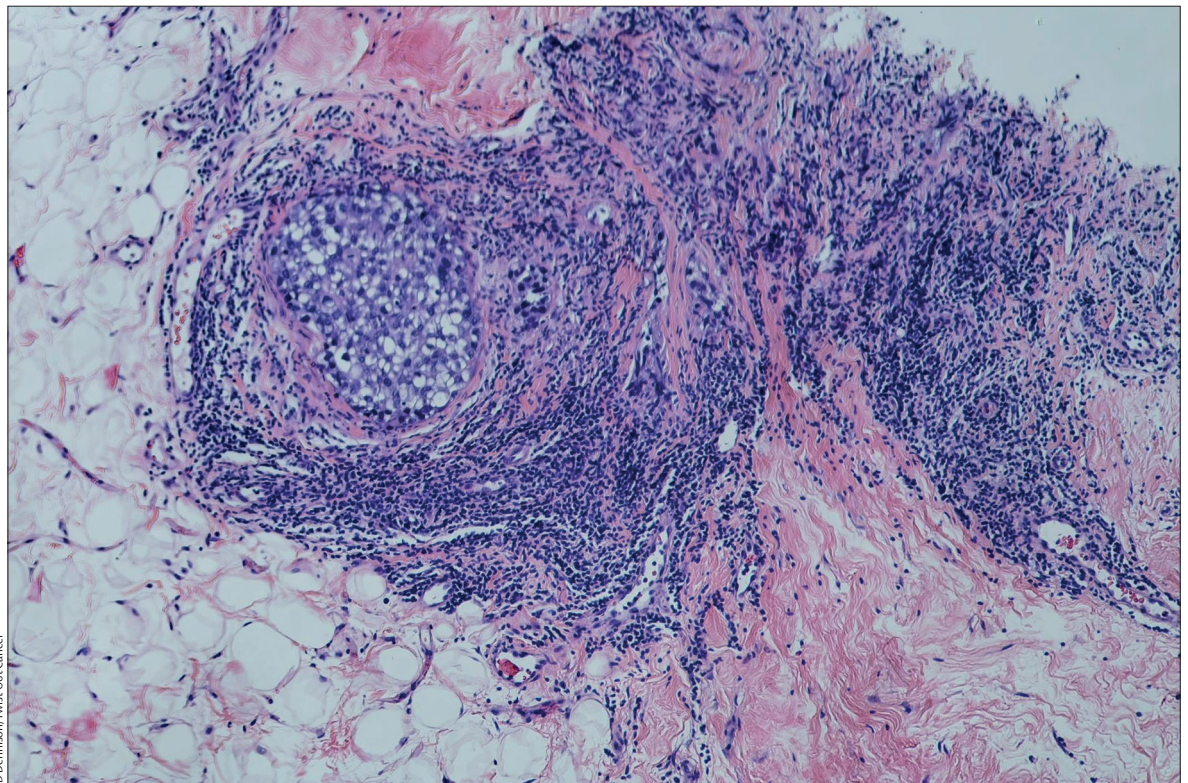
"I'm alone in my studio apartment, I can't go outside. I can't see anyone. I'm really bored." Sound familiar? This has been the norm for many over the past several months of the COVID-19 pandemic. But cancer activist and founder of not-for-profit Twist Out Cancer Jenna Benn Shersher is not describing her experience during lockdown—she is talking about what it was like to be severely immunocompromised while receiving treatment for grey-zone lymphoma in 2010. We discuss all of this on a Zoom call, one of several for both of us that day. "It's been a really interesting time, being back in that space but also not in that space", she says.

Back then, Shersher did what many of us are doing more than ever today: she went online to connect with the outside world. Her blog began as candid updates for friends and family, but soon attracted a much wider audience. When she shared a video of herself doing Chubby Checker's The Twist, 2000 people responded with their own dance videos. Struck by the mental health benefits of connecting online for patients who might otherwise be isolated, she set up a site where anyone could put out a call to action asking strangers to send art, videos, or other gestures of solidarity. Calls and responses began flying in from all over the world.

10 years on, Shersher has developed the web platform into Twist Out Cancer, a creative arts not-for-profit project for people affected by cancer. Its main project, Brushes with Cancer, pairs artists with what Shersher calls "inspirations"—survivors and others touched by cancer. The pairs spend several months getting to know each other and their conversations become a springboard for a personalised work of art.

As part of 2020's Chicago-based programme, photographer JD Dennison was paired with Jamie Schmidt, a breast cancer survivor with a *BRCA1* gene mutation. "When Jamie and I met, we bonded instantly over discussing the science of *BRCA1*", Dennison writes in his artist statement. For the final piece, he blew one of Schmidt's biopsy slides into a 20"×16" photograph that shows a sea of deep purple particles among delicate pink tendrils. "I focused on the clearest example of what cancer does to your cells."

At the programme in Detroit, cancer survivor and poet David Brigolin was paired with sculptor Dick Cruger. Cruger used two of Brigolin's poems to create hand-crafted books using found objects such as pebbles, tar paper, porcupine quills, and breakfast cereal.

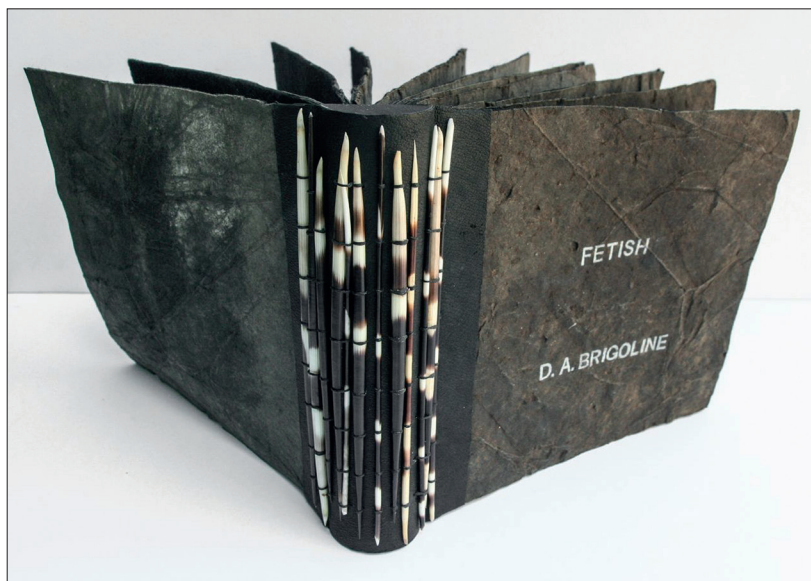


JD Dennison/Twist Out Cancer

Brushes with Cancer has always been organised regionally. Past and present locations include Chicago, Philadelphia, Austin, and Detroit in the USA, as well as Tel Aviv (Israel) and Montreal (Canada). When possible, artists and inspirations have been encouraged to meet face-to-face, and each scheme culminates in a gala and auction to celebrate the connections made and raise the funds needed to keep the programme going.

This year all that has changed. “We made a decision March 15th”, says Shersher. “Within a day I just said forget it.” From there, the Brushes team took steps to move the entire operation online. All interactions became remote, and this year’s programmes—Chicago, Austin, and a corporate collaboration—can be viewed in digital galleries alongside statements from the artists and inspirations. Works were auctioned online and guests were invited to attend a virtual gala.

Shersher sees the move to online as a boon for the cancer community: remote interactions are better adapted to the needs of her most vulnerable and isolated participants. “I’m very excited about it”, says Shersher. “It has allowed us to get back to our roots. When I designed all of this, I really wanted to impact people that had been touched by cancer and that were stuck and that were feeling isolated and lonely. So, who are those people? They’re often people that are going through treatment—that are not able to be around others.” The conversation



Dick Cruger/Twist Out Cancer

Shersher is having with her colleagues now is how to integrate the online element into their future activities. “Even if we’re able to gather in the physical space in 2021, or in the future”, she says, “I think the virtual space for us is here to stay.”

Catherine Lucas