



Together
2023
8 ½ inches x 15 inches
Colored pencil and graphite on smooth Bristol Paper

Artist Statement

Cai's walk with cancer is a story of accompaniment. Despite being the focus of this experience, the one who fights is actually another. On the day after Christmas 2017, Cai's partner, Bryan, was rushed to the hospital after having a seizure. He would soon be diagnosed with a rare form of brain cancer, and thereafter a complicated and often traumatic journey would commence for this pair that continues to the present day. While stable, Bryan's cancer is a form that is never really in remission, making it a constant source of tension that the two must embrace one day at a time. What this conflict has necessitated, however, is an opportunity for triumph.

Given the unique vantage point of my inspiration, *Together* carries the perspective of one who shoulders the weight of a diagnosis from the outside. My primary reference photo and the impetus for the figure of this piece is an image of Bryan as he awaits an EEG test, adorned with contact points glued to his scalp. The image was one Cai took, and viewing it seemed to capture the essence of their experience. This was the one Cai loved—the one who chose to share life with Cai and bear all of the burdens and challenges that may arise, and simultaneously the one whose diagnosis was the source of profound anxiety and stress. It is a precarious story from the eyes of an individual who feels like a helpless bystander at times, and yet Cai's presence demonstrates how critical the role of caregiver and partner is in the midst of a cancer sufferer's life.

The title of this piece, *Together*, embodies two unique realities. One beautiful victory of Bryan's story so far is the preservation of his identity. Having undergone countless tests and treatments that have had the potential to wreak havoc on his well-being and psyche, he is still him, which is something Cai gratefully acknowledged in our conversations. Bryan's constitution has held together in one piece despite everything, which stems from the other reality to which this title alludes. What cannot be forgotten is the perspective. The viewer is peering into Cai's vantage point—one fraught with fear, uncertainty, and trauma, but also one whose gaze meets that of another. Bryan does not fight alone, and it is the love of his partner, Cai, that remains a steady anchor through his battle. *Together* sees the figure gazing back steadily at the viewer because not only is Cai able to find that place of true solace and refuge in their love, but Bryan too has someone for whom to continue struggling no matter how severe or damaging the war with cancer may be. He has held together because they walk together.

In order to place the gravity of Cai's experience upon the viewers' mind, the piece was composed across an elongated picture plane, emphasizing the torturous passage of time. For Cai, it has become an aggregate of hospital stays, appointments, and medication regimens along with isolated seizure episodes that would arise unexpectedly. Cai embraced the role of a caretaker in earnest, but this only served to more severely impress the traumatic memories upon their mind, nearly making the calendar an adversary. In our conversations, Cai is able to recount with little effort precise months and years—sometimes the very day—when events unfolded, and *Together* is meant to capture this ugly burden. Jade green has an ethereal quality evoking mystery and uncertainty, thus making it a particularly important hue within my practice that I revisit often. When the reflection upon past events seems both fading and too intense to

have really been true, this hue leaves one pondering whether they even came to pass. Christmas will never be the same for Cai and remains indelibly marked with the tragic memory that changed their life and relationship forever. Marine green asserts a bitter and uncomfortable tang over jade green's calm wistfulness, reminding us of the ugly realities inherent to this fight and arresting the view of an approaching emergency room entrance and hospital gown, always ready to force the figure back downward into another episode.

As the lower portion of the picture plane laboriously heaves the figure in a downward grip, the upper portion hangs in maniacal suspension. The most harrowing detail about Bryan's condition is its ability to recur. From the outside, Cai is left to constantly wonder whether the dormancy will erupt anew, thrusting the pair back into the battlefield. This persistent threat looms over the composition like a playful monster and entangles the figure in a mess of machinery. These forms are the endless array of test equipment and hospital tools employed again and again to understand the patient's issue and attempt to heal it. As they continue to prod, however, they risk causing more harm than healing. Graphite in this piece carries a bruising sentiment that tears at the figure's form to recall how even one's complexion is often marred from years of medical procedures. A collision occurs between these devices and imagery akin to a construction site to highlight the constant flux of always seeking to fix and resolve the trauma but to little avail. The graphite works in tandem with a warm gray at its base to create an abyss that is ready to swallow the figure and this entire story in one foul swoop. Again, Bryan's cancer is one that cannot be fully eradicated, thus leaving only stability as the main goal of treatment and suspending his and Cai's walk over a chasm of uncertainty day after day.

Twisting and tangling their way through these forms is a cacophony of phrases. Memory amidst time's passage surges through this piece, becoming a sort of tome—a narrative spun from its course that finds itself fashioned into a different yet no less dramatic tale. A bevy of intrusive thoughts, real-life concerns, and actual memories of things spoken by doctors or loved ones incessantly floods Cai's mind, which in turn instinctually seeks to discuss and reason with these challenges in an attempt to bring healing. They clutter the view of Bryan and haunt Cai's well-being time and time again. Cai's view is justifiably fraught, and I wanted to elucidate this through a darkness that verges on a maniacal cheekiness. Despite all of the severity, however, is a constant truth that endures.

What perseveres at the core of Cai's uncertain and traumatic walk is the one they love. Clay rose adorns the figure's right eye to elucidate the fact that while Bryan's condition is the cause of so much pain for Cai, Bryan himself is still Cai's refuge and closest confidant. One of the greatest gifts amidst this entire ordeal—as mentioned earlier—is Bryan's person remaining intact. All of the trauma and brutality experienced by Cai and Bryan throughout this journey has not broken them. The monster looming over their relationship and all of past memories Cai will forever hold gradually crumble against the love they have for Bryan. No amount of lacerations from this opponent can extinguish the beautiful connection that continues flowing between these two individuals. This love even extends further, however. Through our conversations, Cai described the unabated support of their in-laws throughout this whole journey. Compelled by a love for their son, Bryan's parents are another peaceful refuge amidst this walk with cancer, and

a simple photo of Bryan and his father together a year after his diagnosis touched my heart. It reiterated a need to express a home-like solidity in this piece amidst the dark and mechanical. Seeking to return to a semblance of reality is something Cai and Bryan constantly sought through this journey, but the beauty is that Bryan's character—again, the core of his person—has persevered serenely to this day, which Cai never takes for granted. While the memories may remain painful and difficult to process, they are still a reminder of how outward defeat can actually become true, enduring victory.

I want to express my deepest gratitude to Cai for allowing me into their very personal and difficult walk with cancer. Your willingness to share the intimate aspects of the experience you have had as Bryan's partner was a gift to me and allowed me an opportunity to produce what I hope is a piece that is both faithful to your journey and somehow a means of healing. Thank you as well to Bryan who allowed me to express through his likeness and give life to *Together*. I hope this work can likewise bear fruit in your life as you continue this journey one day at a time. I deeply admire the relationship you both share and commend you for making the hurdles you have faced opportunities to grow closer and stronger. May peace and blessing follow each of you no matter where the road leads.

Chrily