

HOW I DID IT USES ART TO HELP FIGHT ANOREXIA



Judith Shaw was inspired to create art after recovering from anorexia. A gallery show of her work is at the Mad Art Gallery. Christian Gooden | Post-Dispatch

By Harry Jackson Jr.
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Women who develop anorexia nervosa after age 40 can often point to an emotionally trying event.

Judith Shaw can't.

She can't separate a time when she didn't struggle with the symptoms. Maybe it was the stress of leaving a fast-lane, Madison Avenue career to raise children that made her feel she'd lost her identity. Maybe it was an emotionally stressful childhood. Or maybe she was born that way.

'MY BODY WAS CRUMBLING'

When she was 39, Shaw, a wife and mother living in New York, fed off compliments on her appearance.

"Losing weight was a form of accomplishment," she said.

But the price tag was starvation and obsessive exercise. About four years ago, compliments became sympathetic facial expressions as they watched her shrivel to 85 pounds, break bones and suffer from anemia.

"My body was crumbling," she said.

Then her yoga instructor warned her to end the denial.

'STARVED SOUL, STARVED HEART'

Anorexia nervosa is an eating disorder. The person starves herself to the point of emaciation, sometimes to death. Most are women, although the number of men is increasing.

Experts believe one in 10 eating disorder patients is over age 40, says the National Eating Disorders Association.

Dr. Kimberli McCallum, a psychiatrist and founder of McCallum Place Eating Disorders Treatment Center in Webster Groves, has accepted more women and men over 40 for treatment with Ameri-

JUDITH SHAW



Age: 55
Home: St. Louis
Occupation: Sculptor, yoga instructor
What she did: Used her art to

help fight anorexia nervosa, which peaked after she was 50.

ca's preoccupation with fitness.

A spokeswoman for McCallum said among older clients, treatment uncovers years of symptoms before a crash.

That was Shaw's case. "I had struggled with (the condition) for years."

More importantly, she said, the soul she saw in the mirror was more emaciated than the body.

"That we see a starved, emaciated body is not as important as the starved soul, the starved heart," she said. "I tried to replace in outer strength what I didn't have in inner strength."

She looked at three top treatment centers and selected McCallum Place. She left New York and entered treatment a little more than three years ago. Divorced and the mother of two adult children, she now lives on her savings, practices her art and continues therapy.

ORIGINS OF ART

Her art grew from her incorporating trying times as teaching moments.

One of her assignments in treatment was to create a timeline of things that may have predisposed her to anorexia. But there was no aha moment.

"I couldn't separate dates and events," she said. "An eating disorder had been

so much a part of my life."

Instead, she had a friend draw an outline of her body on a piece of corrugated cardboard. She cut out the figure, then glued words and phrases from publications to it. The piece, "Running on Empty," became her first sculpture, a giant, ransom note — as if anorexia were holding her hostage, the notes, a demand letter to herself.

She used her art to combat setbacks, such as the time out of nowhere that she looked in the mirror and saw a chubby, overweight person.

She stood her ground. She removed her clothes, rubbed her midsection and legs with petroleum jelly, then wrapped herself stomach to knees in wet plaster cloth. When it dried, she faced it.

The mirror had lied.

"When I pulled those thighs off of me ... how could I feel so huge?"

She named the mold, "Know Thigh Self."

The work, "Damn-age," is a framed X-ray of her injured pelvis, representing her fear of aging.

THE EXHIBIT

Shaw's work, culled from 150 pieces, went on exhibit Friday at the Mad Art Gallery, 2727 South 12th Street in Soulard. The exhibit runs through March 2.

"Body of Work, The Art of Eating Disorder Recovery" coincides with National Eating Disorders Awareness Week, Feb. 22 to 28. She calls the show her "sculpture diary."

THE FUTURE

"All I'm concerned with right now is the moment," she said.

She's only certain that she'll stay in St. Louis.

"I've discovered myself here," she said. "I've come home to myself here."

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