

news & views

JULY/AUGUST 2011 A PUBLICATION FOR THE NYU LANGONE MEDICAL CENTER COMMUNITY



Langone Medical Center

Now You See Her—Now You Don't

A Woman Suffering from Anorexia Turns Her Agony into Art

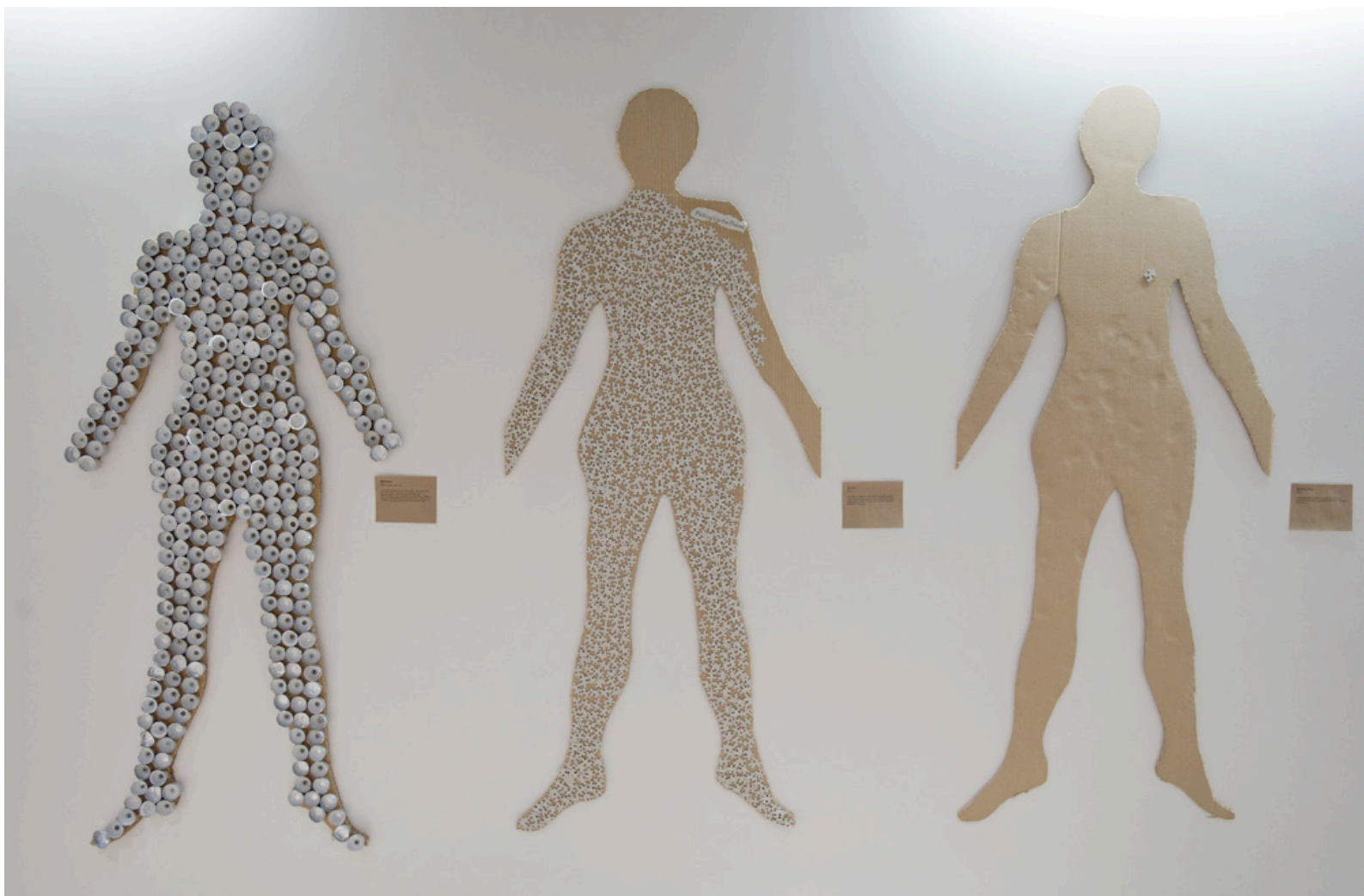
"I had lived with anorexia for 15 years and could no longer keep it up," explains Judith Shaw. "My body and life were disintegrating." After checking herself into an eating disorders program at age 53, she began the therapeutic exercise of creating sculptures to chronicle her struggle with anorexia and trace her path to recovery. She slowly came to understand that "restricting food and trying to make myself invisible was a way to numb myself. It helped avoid feeling the pain and fear of loneliness, and concealed a deep-rooted senses of worthlessness.

"Sculpture," says Shaw, "became a way to express the emotional and mental bondage of my illness. More precise than words, the sculptures have become a way to record my progress and keep me engaged in recovery."

An exhibition of Shaw's creations, "Body of Work: The Art of the Eating Disorder," was recently on display in the MSB Gallery of the NYU Health Sciences Libraries (see link to slideshow of selected works from the exhibition). A haunting glimpse into the secretive world of eating disorders—a group of illnesses that afflict some 10 million American women and 1 million men—these works reveal how the act of avoiding food paradoxically consumed Shaw with incessant images of food, as she fought and overruled her body's desperate, primal need for nutrition. "Daily plans revolved around food and schemes to distract myself from feeling hungry," explains the artist. "It takes immense mental discipline to restrict. It is impossible for a starved mind to focus on anything other than survival."

On one wall hangs a series of crudely stitched burlap torsos depicting how Shaw perceived her body's healthy and emaciated phases. The more voluptuous figures are crudely overstuffed, bloated, and lumpy. By contrast, there is a delicacy to the leanest, most emaciated burlap torso, which conveys a respect for the lean, taut body, with its rib cage gently defined and adorned with seemingly unnecessary breasts.

"I never understood the depth of this disorder," says Deborah Peters, the interim department administrator who mounted the exhibition. "It never goes away. It's worse than addiction." Now, Peters says she thinks twice when she sees women in a similarly fragile state. "It makes me wonder about my daughter," she admits. "When she doesn't want to eat her dinner, could it be the beginning of something like this?"



Meltdown 2008 (Cardboard, tea light candle holders)

"I think of my heart as my pilot light. The source of my inner spirit. Growing up, the light was extinguished. It was reignited in treatment. Today, food and self-acceptance provide much-needed fuel to keep the flame growing brighter and stronger."

Photos by Joshua Bright

MORE IMAGES ON FOLLOWING PAGES.

Now You See Her—Now You Don't

A Woman Suffering from Anorexia Turns Her Agony into Art



Running on Empty 2006 (Mixed media)

"This life-size paper cut out was the first piece in the "Body of Work" series. I had no idea that artwork would become a significant part of my healing journey. The figure was created in treatment in response to a "writing" assignment. The task was to prepare a written timeline, identifying significant dates and events that may have led to an eating disorder. I could not separate myself from the disease or isolate external factors as a possible cause. It was who I was at the core. The illness and I were fused as depicted in this work."

Now You See Her—Now You Don't

A Woman Suffering from Anorexia Turns Her Agony into Art



Mindset 2008 (Plaster, decoupage)

"Living with anorexia is like being gripped in a physical, emotional and mental vice. One that is constantly being tightened. There is no way out. No matter how little I ate, all I thought about was food. I obsessed about foods I considered "safe" and fixated on avoiding foods I considered "unsafe." My day revolved around food and schemes to distract myself from feeling hungry. It takes immense mental discipline to restrict. It is impossible for a starved mind to focus on anything other than survival. Little time or energy was left to pursue work, outside interests and relationships. In treatment, my mind set began to change. The vise began to loosen."

Now You See Her—Now You Don't

A Woman Suffering from Anorexia Turns Her Agony into Art



Fitting In to My Genes 2007 (Denim, old clothes, wire)

"Putting on a favorite pair of jeans can be a source of comfort, like revisiting a childhood home and the bosom of family. Unless you feel unwelcome there. For me, home was toxic. I wanted to get so thin that it was impossible to bear any physical resemblance to family members. By abandoning myself, I could escape the pain of feeling emotionally abandoned by them. Fitting into a size 0 jean served to legitimize my experience of being nothing. What makes these jeans, which no longer fit me, hold their shape is that they are stuffed with clothes I wore at my thinnest. Part of me hates to part with these clothes, even though I love shedding remnants of my sickness."

Now You See Her—Now You Don't

A Woman Suffering from Anorexia Turns Her Agony into Art



Self Reflection 2010 (Mirror, wood)

"Being overly sensitive, self-critical and self-reflective come with the turf of an eating disorder. Self-acceptance comes gradually with recovery. I still find it hard to accept what I see when I look at myself in the mirror."

Now You See Her—Now You Don't

A Woman Suffering from Anorexia Turns Her Agony into Art



Missing Link 2007 (Metal)

"This piece explores the link between genetics and the forces underlying eating disorders. It is a relief to know that there may be some scientific basis for the cause of these illnesses, and, through greater understanding, medical research may uncover new ways to treat those who are susceptible. Finding the genetic component may also help erase the stigma of eating disorders as the public gains more awareness and insight into diagnosis and recovery."

Now You See Her—Now You Don't

A Woman Suffering from Anorexia Turns Her Agony into Art



Know Thigh(self) 2006 (Cast plaster)

"I hate feeling my thighs touch one another. They did not touch when I was at my thinnest, yet my legs could barely support me then. This sculpture arose from that self-loathing. When I peeled the plaster off my thighs, I had to admit that they were not all that big. The process reminded me how anorexia distorts thinking."

Now You See Her—Now You Don't

A Woman Suffering from Anorexia Turns Her Agony into Art



Measure Up 2007 (Wood, plastic, cardboard)

"I was always comparing, measuring and competing to feel self-assured and earn recognition. Relying on what others thought to gauge my self-worth helped set the stage for my eating disorder. Feeling unaccomplished, I was determined to perfect anorexia."

Now You See Her—Now You Don't

A Woman Suffering from Anorexia Turns Her Agony into Art



Puzzled 2009 (Cardboard)

"It is hard to trace my anorexia to a single cause. Interlocking factors were at play. Recovery is the ongoing process of sorting out how the pieces fit together. Puzzling."

Now You See Her—Now You Don't

A Woman Suffering from Anorexia Turns Her Agony into Art



Re(form) 2007 (Plaster, wire)

"As my eating disorder escalated over a fifteen-year span, I marveled at my ability to reform and reshape my body through diet and excessive exercise. While whittling myself down, I was never satisfied that I was thin enough, light enough, small enough, firm enough or good enough. I was never good enough. The therapeutic process of recovery enabled me to reform my thinking and behavior around food and myself. My body also took on a new form."

Now You See Her—Now You Don't

A Woman Suffering from Anorexia Turns Her Agony into Art



Die-eating 2008 (Paper, metal, vinyl)

"I did not believe I could die from disordered eating. Nor did I think I was actively killing myself. Now I know it was a slow, painful suicide during which time my body was eroding on every level. The effect was cumulative over many years. I regret the damage caused."

Now You See Her—Now You Don't

A Woman Suffering from Anorexia Turns Her Agony into Art



(In)visible 2007 (Packing tape)

"In the clutch of anorexia, my unoccupied inner space was invisible, concealed yet transparent. My brittle body became a shell until I stopped restricting food and denying feelings. Recovery allowed me to step out of that mold."