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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

The Development of Personal Style Through Life Experiences

By

Cynthia Ann Clarke

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Approvals

Adviser: Glen Hintz, M.S.

Date: 11/21/97

Associate Adviser: Robert Wabnitz, M.S.

Date: _____

Associate Adviser: Robert Heishman, M.F.A

Date: Dec 9 1997

Department Chairman: Tom Lightfoot, Ph.D.

Date: 11/15/97

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AWAKENINGS

As long as I can remember, my love of drawing and my fascination with the human body has been intertwined. As a child I was both fascinated and repulsed by the pictures in my father's Medical School text books. I would spend hours staring in disbelief at color images of deformities, infections, radical amputations, and ulcers. It was a buffet of grotesque entertainment, a feast for the brain of a five year old with nothing better to do on a Saturday afternoon. Aside from terrifying myself with text book images, I also liked to draw or watch other people draw pictures for me. Once I asked my father to draw a flower for me and he made a small black circle surrounded by big bunny-ear shaped purple petals. I was amazed at his talent; that he could draw recognizable forms. After that I began to look at everything in terms of how more complex objects could be created by combining simple shapes. My attention to the concept of depth and dimension awakened similarly. I showed my mother once that I could draw a square and she, in turn, showed me how to make the square become a cube.

Throughout childhood, my love of drawing was generally dominate over all other interests. One particular remembrance from pre-school was drawing a face using a purple crayon during the time we were suppose to be learning to write our names. (Fig 1) It had a circle for the head, two smaller circles for the eyes and a line that curved upward on the ends for the mouth. I added two smaller circles inside the eyes, close together, so that they appeared to be crossed. The final touch was adding a tongue stuck at an angle in the corner of the mouth. This drawing was a huge success with the other children ,

making them laugh uproariously and divert attention away from the lesson. My teacher, at the time, was trying to teach all of us to print our names. She used this opportunity to coax me into it. Although not particularly interested in learning to write, I was eager to sign my self-declared masterpiece.

Although my mother wasn't an artist herself, she recognized early that I had ability and worked hard to allow me the opportunity to develop those talents. Unfortunately she didn't know where to begin to get training for me. Public school art for elementary students was sketchy at best. So she bought me a complete Jon Gnagy "Every thing you need to be an artist" set. It had everything: brushes, pencils, erasers, water colors, oil paints, a ruler and a little bit of paper to get me started. There was also an instruction book demonstrating how to draw a great Dane starting with two blocks for the head and snout as well as a landscape complete with a snow covered house on a hilltop with a winding road leading to a mailbox. I still love a good landscape.

My parents divorced when I was six and my father moved away. My mother began working toward her Master's degree in Virology a couple of years later. During this time she spent a great deal of time at the Medical school on weekends. Because I was too young to stay at home alone, I had to go with her. Children were not allowed in the laboratory so I had to sit locked in the conference room, four doors down the hall. To kill time, I would flip through the medical books on the shelves. Over time, I had the order of the medical books memorized according to levels of grotesqueness. Usually I would draw but sometimes neither was a satisfying occupation, so I would sit in the

window and watch the people outside, five stories below. I would see delivery trucks bringing flowers, patients being wheeled out to cars for the return trip home, visitors with get well presents. My mother would come to check on me every hour and take me with her when she needed to go to a different part of the building. I enjoyed going with her because I could stretch my legs and get a break away from the conference room. Once she took me to the eighth floor where the cadaver lab was. I had to wait in the hall while she went inside the room. Both sides of the hallway were lined with glass specimen cases. I saw preserved organs, an amputated foot, brains in glass jars, a collection of organs with tumors. There were hundreds of specimens, too many to see in the short amount of time we were there. I wanted to spend the rest of the day there, but of course that wasn't possible.

Alone in the conference room once again, I thought about my experience and couldn't wait to return to the specimen display. I devised a plan. First of all, I needed a watch. I had an approximate idea of when my mother would come to check on me, roughly every hour, so I always needed a watch to keep up with the time. Second, I had to figure out how I would get back into the conference room. Getting out was easy, but getting back in was more of a problem, because the door would lock behind me. The solution was to stuff wads of paper into the door catch, thus keeping the doorknob from releasing back into the locked position. Additionally, I required an alibi. A note left for Mom stating that I had deemed it necessary to make a trip to the ladies room, would suffice.

The next weekend I was ready. Mom walked me to the conference room, "I'll be back to check on you in a little while," then she left. I checked my Holly Hobby watch and ripped up small pieces of paper to stuff in the door catch. I wrote my note and double checked the door to make sure I could get back in. I was all set. My heart was pounding so loud I could feel it between my ears, but it was worth it. I was amazed at everything I saw. It was better than any picture in a book. I took a particular interest in the human fetus section which displayed hydrocephalic and anencephalic birth defects. There were Cyclopes infants, babies with fins or gills and mermaid babies whose feet and legs are fused resembling the mermaids of mythology. The one that impressed me most was the set of conjoined twins with one body and two heads. Aside from seeming grotesque, they each possessed a human quality that touched me deeply. Perhaps it was their eyes that seemed to stare far and beyond anything I could comprehend or the way their little bodies rested inside their glass cages, waiting patiently to be rescued. I knew that feeling well after spending hours watching the people from a window, five stories below. I wondered what or if they could have been feeling. From that moment on I carried their faces in my head and heart. Later in life I came to realize the impact that these childhood experiences would have on my art work.

High School was a troubling time for me. During those years I was rebellious, a poor student and consequently a source of frustration for both parents and teachers. One instructor found me to be particularly disagreeable. She liked stenciling pineapples and hearts on sweat shirts while I liked drawing fish sipping martinis and smoking cigarettes.

I lacked direction and even though I attempted on occasion to pull myself up by the bootstraps and behave, I usually viewed myself as a failure.

NEW BEGINNINGS

“And the winner of the Memphis College of Art Scholarship is Cynthia Clarke from Parkview High School.” Those were the words I heard at the award ceremony for the Arkansas Young Artist association. Those were the words that changed my life from that point on. I had never really considered going to college. I had not been a serious student and at that time I seldom planned much farther than the next weekend. But this was a new beginning with a clean slate. My mind had been made up for me and I accepted the challenge.

After winning the scholarship, I was pretty cocky for a time, thinking that I would go to Memphis and show everyone what art was all about. Once again I was to experience one of life's little lessons in humility.

I was lost for the first year and a half, taking classes that I didn't understand and trying to relate to the other students. Critiques were a brand new experience, allowing me to learn about horror and humiliation. I typically tried to remain silent and create a very small target. The competition was overwhelming.

I struggled to find a particular area that I could call my own . Graphic design wasn't really my thing, nor was painting, sculpture, or pottery. Illustration was okay, because it allowed me to be as tight and technical as I liked. However, I still didn't know what direction to take.

My friend Dave, an illustrator a couple of years ahead of me, introduced me to a medical illustration class he was taking. It was an elective class for third and fourth year illustration students. I sat in on a couple of classes and liked it so much that I signed up as an audit for the next semester. By the time I was able to register for full credit the class was no longer offered. Once again I was lost. I'd finally found something I was really interested in and had no idea how to pursue it. I began researching the field and found that I could continue this interest in graduate school as long as I had a decent background in figure drawing. Before I could proceed much further, I had to overcome some psychological obstacles. There were certain parts of the human body that I didn't feel particularly skilled at drawing, such as hands and the head. Furthermore, I was still somewhat squeamish about parts of the body that had a sexual connotation. My figure drawing instructor, Fred Burton suggested that I keep a figure drawing sketchbook and carry it with me at all times. I was to sketch people in all types of situations: sitting, standing, walking, posed and candid. He insisted that I focus my attention on those body parts that I felt less confident about drawing such as the hands or head. (I hadn't told him about my reluctance to draw body parts associated with sex.) This kind of concentrated effort eventually paid off, but only after many frustrated attempts. One evening in particular, stands out. I had been working on a nude figure facing forward but as usual

the parts of the body that I was trying to perfect were still substandard. At that point I decided to have some fun with it. I covered the breast with pasties, put a brick wall in front of the hands and genital area and drew a perfect roosters head on the figure. It still didn't seem to have balance, so the only solution was to add a "Jon Gnagy" tree in the background. (Fig 2) Eventually this work became a pivotal piece in my senior showing. It also reinforced for me the importance of humor in putting a serious subject into perspective. I spent the rest of my college career concentrating my efforts on building a figure drawing portfolio for graduate school and learning as much as I could about medical illustration by entering a student internship at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS).

REAL LIFE

After graduating from Memphis College of Art, I began working full time at UAMS as a medical graphic artist. In other words, I made a lot of business cards and stationary for physicians and professors. I knew I had to expect to do this type of work in a starting position, but I had hoped that after a while they would entrust me with some of their illustration jobs. And once in a blue moon, they would get a job in at closing time that had to be done "yesterday". Because the staff illustrators would not take on a job like this at short notice I would get my chance. "Hey Cynthia, We have one of those illustration jobs for ya, and it's due at eight a.m. tomorrow". I would work all night to produce the best job I could in the short time allowed. My hope was that they would finally realize my talents and dedication. But they never did. I began to seriously

reconsider the profession I had chosen in life and wondered if that was all it would ever offer. I didn't want to stay there for twenty or thirty years and become bitter. It was also clear to me that even if I were given more illustration jobs, I would never be able to take license in executing them with my own creative style. Sometime I would take a break and wander up to the specimen display and look at the glass jars containing the babies that had fascinated me years before. In time, it occurred to me that I wanted to do a series of drawings from them, a personal body of work that would reveal a human and dignifying view of these babies. I wanted to draw them being rescued and nurtured by beautiful angels that could not see these creatures as grotesque. It was then I decided to rescue and nurture myself as well, from a job that I hated. It was time to believe in myself and create my own style as a medical illustrator.

ON THE ROAD TO ACCOMPLISHMENT

I knew that entering the graduate program at Rochester Institute of Technology was the right thing to do. I never had a second thought about my decision. This was where I was going to have the opportunity not only to learn how to be a medical illustrator, but also to discover my own style. I also knew immediately that professors Glen Hintz and Robert Wabnitz would not only be open to but also encourage my ideas.

I was pretty optimistic, but winter hadn't hit yet. Needless to say, it took a while to adjust to my new surroundings, the way people talked, the scenery, the food, the climate and to heal my homesickness. The cold winters kept me pretty much confined to

the indoors, however that worked to my benefit in many ways because I was able to accomplish a great deal of work and begin my personal series of the babies in the glass jars.

These drawings came into existence in Luvon Shepard's personal focus class, one that Glen had encouraged me to take. I was pleased with how these drawings had turned out but very apprehensive about showing them in class, for fear that the students wouldn't understand what they meant to me. Luvon convinced me to show them. He had total confidence that the right words would come to me once I started getting feedback. He was right. Talking about my work even helped me to understand it better than I did before. There were four drawings entitled: Waiting, (Fig 3) Hope (Fig 4), and two titled Rescue (Fig 5 and 6). They are all done in carbon dust on color aid paper and none of them larger than 8 X 8.

After completing Luvon's class, I seriously considered focusing on this series for my thesis, but these drawings were too personal. Later I decided to do something more upbeat for my thesis show, and keep these drawing for a more intimate audience.

When classes began we focused mainly on the techniques demonstrated by Glen and Robert: carbon dust, pen and ink, water color and computer generated illustrations. Later we focused on anatomical accuracy when drawing from the human form and cadaver. This established the foundation for the next year, when we would have the opportunity to draw from real life surgery. Almost from the beginning of graduate

school, I tossed around ideas for my thesis but didn't become truly serious about them until the final year. At that point I developed a sense of urgency, however, Glen and Robert encouraged me to take my time with the whole process. Even with their encouragement I was afraid that when the time came for me to make a final decision, I wouldn't have any good ideas. Glen suggested that I take some elective courses that had nothing to do with my major, but that I might enjoy. He maintained that everyone needs a creative outlet. I felt good about the rapport I had with both Glen and Robert. It was nice to be able to relate to them as friends as well as professors. This relationship allowed for a more relaxed atmosphere and environment where creativity could flow more freely. I appreciated their honesty and dedication to me as well as the students and also their integrity as true artists.

Glen and Robert were always open to my ideas and encouraged me to reflect elements of my own personality in my thesis show. I felt that showing humor in my work would make the process more fun for me and also reveal a side of medical illustration that most people haven't seen. When the time came to buckle down on my thesis I had narrowed my ideas down to the five drawings that Glen and I felt were developed enough to execute in the short time left. We had discussed the pieces down to the last details of technique and size. At first I planned to do everything in black and white carbon dust, mainly because it was a process that I worked with quickly. But, Glen suggested that I do a couple of color pieces to give my series more visual variety. He was right. It would make my show more interesting to look at, even though I wasn't very confident about my ability to use color. It seemed to me that my color pieces were always flat and boring

whereas those executed in black and white were stronger because they were more believable in terms of depth and volume. It was easy to achieve an overall smooth transition between lights and darks.

My first color piece for my thesis was **“Anaerobes having a party in your mouth”** (Fig 7). The perspective is from the from the back of the mouth facing outward, through the front teeth. Inserted is an electron-microscopic blow-up image of tiny anaerobic bacteria having a beach party.

This illustration was first executed in water color, however, that technique looked too flat. Rather than starting over, I began looking at ways to salvage it because of the time I had already invested in it. Then I remembered a method that I had heard about in college, a colored pencil technique, where lighter fluid and a blending stump is used to blend colors together and eliminate pencil marks. Although I had never tried this before, by 2:00 a.m. I was willing to try anything. I first tried it on a scrap of illustration board, then went straight to the water color and the results were more than satisfying. The colors were rich and smooth, the detail was crisp and the process was fast. The realization finally came to me that that working in color was not the problem for me but rather it was working with wet media. I liked to work in black and white because it was dry and involved working with pencils, thus affording more control. I never really considered color pencils to be in the same category as dry media, because of their waxiness. The addition of lighter fluid, however, changes the texture and allows you to

manipulate the smoothness of color and also blend colors together for more believable reflective lights.

My interest in connecting images that are ordinary and familiar with those that seem completely unrelated was what inspired **“Little Dutch Platelets”** (Fig 8). Most people have heard the story about the little Dutch boy who saved his village from flooding by using his finger to plug a hole in a dam. Analogous to that in the human body are elements called platelets that perform in the same way as the little Dutch boy. Basically, platelets plug holes in vessels where blood is being lost. Additionally, they are instrumental in mending those holes by forming scabs. In my second color piece I illustrated this concept by showing the interior view of an artery being repaired by two little Dutch children who symbolize platelet function.

One would not typically associate literature’s great father, William Shakespeare with urinary catheters. I, however, was inspired after discovering that a product recently introduced by a medical devices company, called “the Bard”. The caption I gave it seemed irresistible **“When it’s not an option to pee or not to pee”** (Fig 9). This particular piece is approximately 16 X 20 and consists of a black and white carbon dust portrait of Shakespeare overlooking a bard catheter in a stage spotlight below.

A popular advertisement for absolute vodka where the bottle is cleverly disguised in a landscape, famous painting, woman’s hairdo, etc. is recognizable for many people. The obvious message that came to my mind was, “what about the potential for

cirrhosis?”. This concept then became the inspiration for my fourth piece, entitled **“Absolut Cirrhosis”** (Fig 10). Although it appears to be a simple concept, most of my brainstorming efforts went into the creation of this piece. There were a number of possible formats that I considered: a cirrhotic liver on a tray of surgical instruments in the background of an Absolut bottle, or something as subliminal as an absolute bottle sitting near an entree of liver with the caption “An Absolut hit with liver!”. The idea that I finally settled on was simple and to the point and in my opinion closer to the idea of the actual advertisements. It is presented as a 16 X 20 carbon dust of a floating liver with an Absolut bottle disguised as a cirrhosis mark.

My final piece, **“Hey there, my sign’s cancer. What’s yours?”** (Fig 11) the connection between the social acceptability of smoking and the potential for disease. Most cigarette ads try to convey the idea that smokers are sexy, rich and glamorous. This drawing attempts to convey a more realistic view of the situation. The male character is shown from the waist down to be a middle class male dressed for a night on the town. Above the waist, the head and torso is a set of tar-coated lungs, with a cigarette dangling between the lobes. He is offering the sleazy one-liner to a female long with long beautiful legs beneath a short skirt. Above the waist this female character also has a set of lungs for the torso and head, but they are the pink and clean lungs of a non-smoker.

CONCLUSION

Deciding to take an editorial approach for my thesis allowed me to take license in presenting Medical Illustration in a humorous light. This approach has also allowed me to reveal aspects of my own personality and reflections of experiences from earlier in life and describe the ways in which they affect my personal style. As each phase of my life has been a stepping stone to the next phase, I now anticipate that my graduate school experience will be the ultimate stepping stone for my desired career.

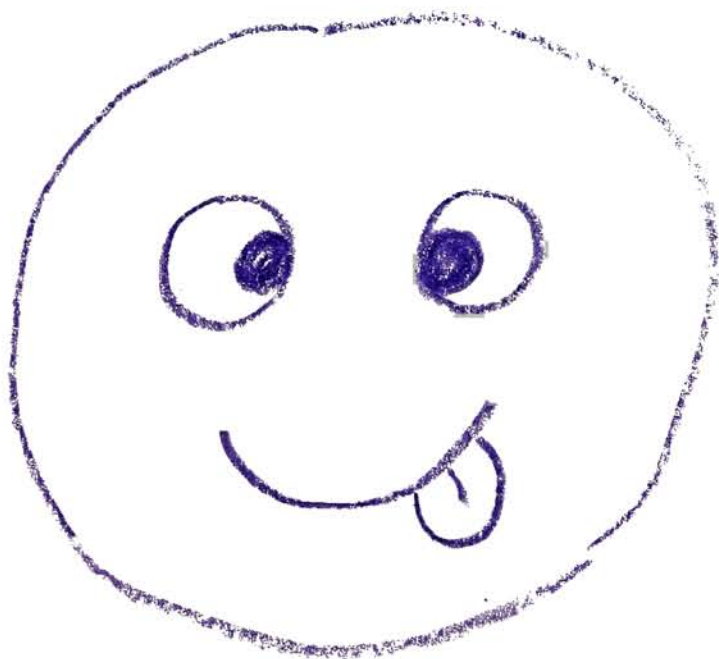


Fig.1



Fig.2



Fig.3



Fig.4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

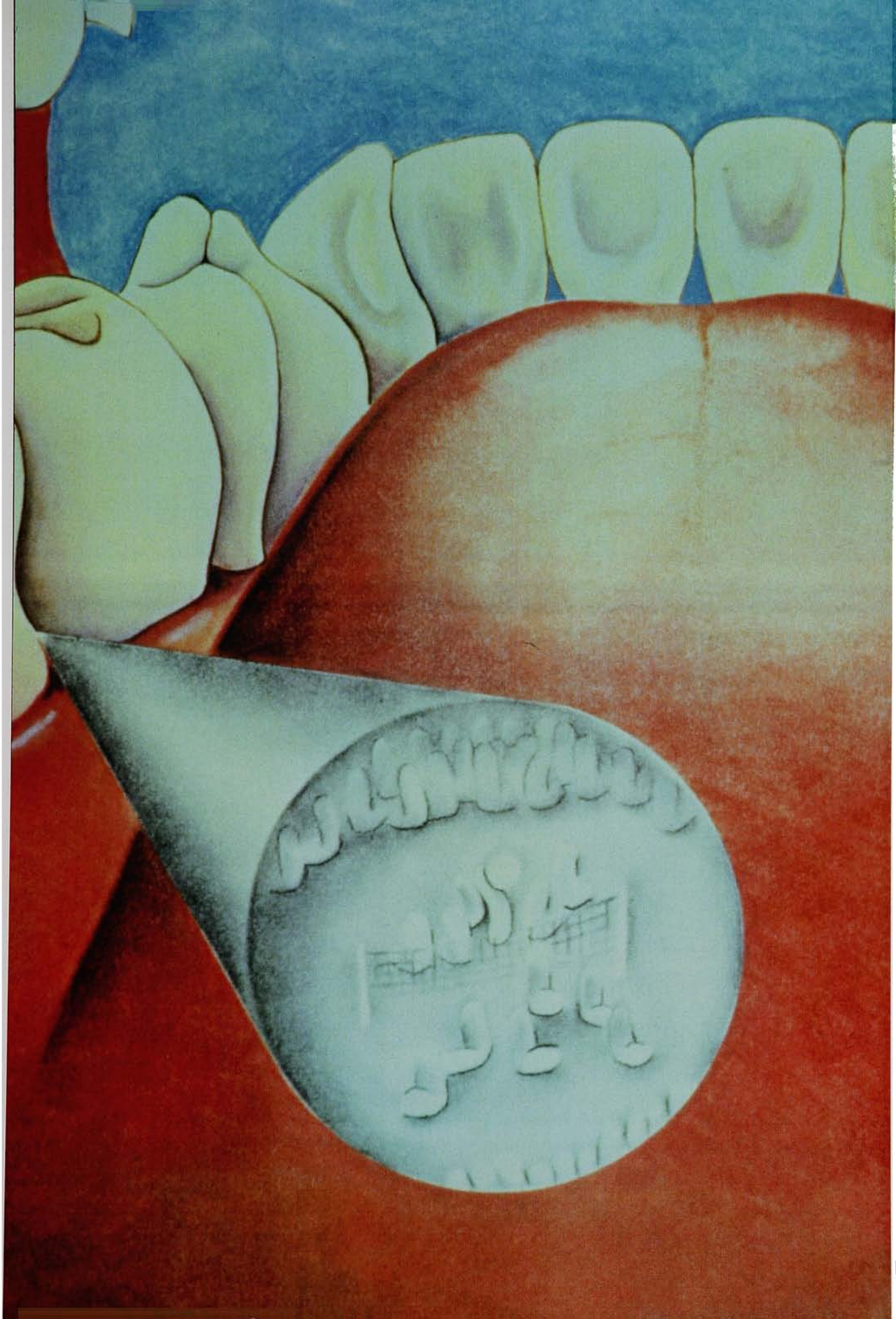


Fig.7

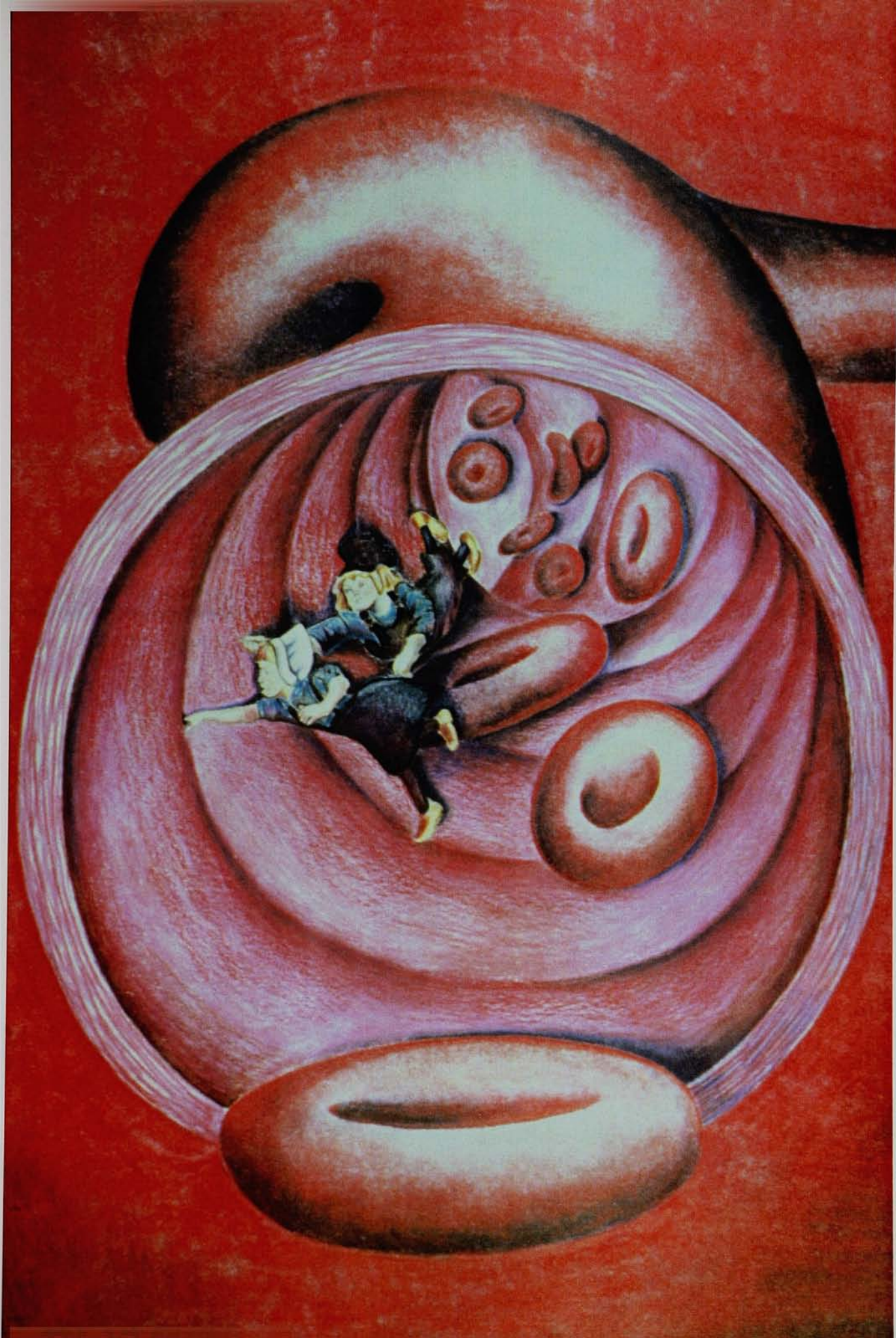


Fig.8



Fig.9



Fig.10



Fig.11