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STITCHING CONNECTION:
A PRACTICE-BASED REFLECTION ON
CREATIVE COLLABORATION DURING CANCER RECOVERY

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STITCHING CONNECTION: A PRACTICE-BASED REFLECTION ON CREATIVE COLLABORATION DURING CANCER RECOVERY

Hannah Joynt

This article reflects on a year-long, long-distance creative collaboration between myself, a visual artist and educator, and my sister Allie, during her treatment and recovery from metastatic melanoma.¹ Combining cross-stitch, caricature illustration and virtual studio practice, our project emerged as a meaningful response to illness, geographic separation and the emotional demands of chronic care. Grounded in a feminist and relational approach to art-making, this collaboration sits at the intersection of contemporary craft, digital design and health narratives.

Drawing from a personal and practice-led perspective, the article explores how we transformed clinical time into creative time by co-creating a series of stitched portraits that used humour, shared memory and iterative processes to make space for reflection, connection and advocacy. While our work resonates with understandings of creative practice as therapeutic, it moves beyond formal art therapy frameworks, embracing artmaking as an everyday, embodied and adaptive form of care. The project is situated within relevant occupational therapy and health humanities research and points to future directions, including exhibition, public engagement and a long-distance walking art project. Ultimately, it proposes creative collaboration as a form of care capable of holding complexity, grief and joy.

Allie's diagnosis in late 2023 set in motion a year of intensive treatment – surgery, immunotherapy and the onset of lymphoedema requiring ongoing management. As her world became shaped by hospital appointments, fatigue and long hours in a bio-compression suit,² we found ourselves looking for



Figure 1. Hannah Joynt and Allie Joynt, *Big Sis Little Sus*, 2024, embroidery thread on ada cloth, 160x120mm.

ways to reconnect – to occupy the time and emotional space cancer demanded. Allie returned to cross-stitch, a craft learned from our grandmother, while I began sketching caricature portraits of our family. What started as a small act of care became a structured, humorous and imaginative collaboration.

Each month, I designed a new cross-stitch pattern using a tablet-based app, transforming my hand-drawn caricatures into stitchable templates. Allie ordered materials online and stitched them during treatment sessions in Queensland, while I worked on my own visual practice in Dunedin. Through weekly video calls, we developed what we called our “virtual studio” – a shared space for making and being, without the need for constant conversation.

From the outset, this project was about more than distraction. The repetitive nature of cross-stitching and the format of working methodically through each family member offered small, achievable goals that countered the passive routines of illness and set the course of creative activity for the duration of treatment. We also used humour to frame the portraits – “Chainsaw Jenny (aka Grandma)” proudly presents her beloved battery powered pruning tools amongst a carnage of branches and “Big Wheel Benjamin” astride his first bike breaks through the stitched frame with a perturbed pixel-style expression. Each character celebrates a moment, memory or person from our shared history; laughter is the best medicine. The humorous nature of the images was itself part of the therapeutic efficacy of the work. We reasserted our creative agency in the face of medical structures that often render patients as passive recipients.

These stitched works became personal artifacts of resilience, grief, laughter and time. Like the participants in Marie-Christine Ranger et al.’s 2023 study of art-based workshops for women with cancer, we found the creative process to be both grounding and revelatory.³ The act of stitching served as a meditative space for Allie, while designing the portraits allowed me to channel anxiety into imagery. The work helped us both process change.

Although not framed as a formal study, our collaboration echoes Bodil Winther Hansen et al. of 2021 and their articulation of “Creative Activities as Intervention (CaI) in Occupational Therapy”: activities involving mind and body, experienced as meaningful and adaptable to context.⁴ However, our approach was grounded in artistic practice rather than clinical intervention. The work was iterative, responsive and dialogic. Our tools ranged from illustration software and digital embroidery design apps to thread, cloth and video call – material and immaterial alike.

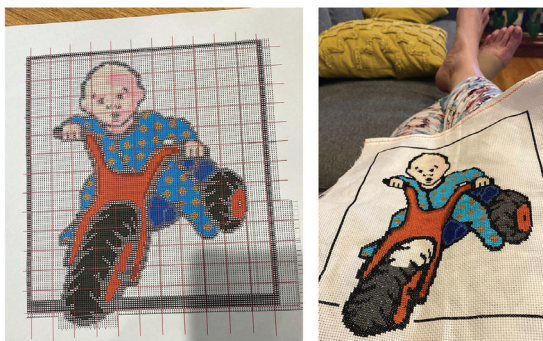


Figure 2. Hannah Joynt and Allie Joynt, Work in progress: *Big Wheel Benjamin*, 2024, embroidery thread on ada cloth, 250x200mm.

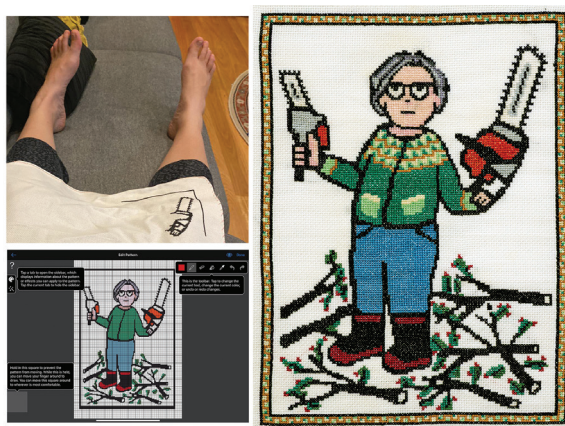


Figure 3. Hannah Joynt and Allie Joynt, Work in progress: *Chainsaw Jenny (aka Grandma)*, 2024, embroidery thread on ada cloth, 270x220mm.



Figure 4. Hannah Joynt and Allie Joynt, *Family Portrait Collection*, 2024, embroidery thread on ada cloth, various sizes between 140x140mm to 250x200mm.

The flexibility of the medium enabled us to adapt across time and geography. Our studio was wherever we were, stitched together by routine, intention and care. As with Ranger et al.'s community art workshops, we found the process of creative engagement – particularly its openness to vulnerability and imperfection – to be inherently transformational.

With the completion of treatment and Allie's NED (No Evidence of Disease) status, our creative focus is shifting. We are currently preparing for an exhibition and advocacy project with the Hope Horizons: Jenny Black Cancer Wellness Centre in Toowoomba. The exhibition will share our stitched portraits and story, aiming to raise awareness of lymphoedema and the lived realities of long-term cancer recovery.

We are also planning our next chapter: The Heysen Stitchpedition, a 1200km walk across South Australia's Heysen Trail, combining drawing, stitching and walking as artistic practice. This builds on my previous work (The Te Araroa Drawing Expedition, 2013) and continues our commitment to collaborative creativity as a form of public engagement and advocacy.⁵

This collaboration reminded us that creative practice can be a site of both healing and disruption – a place to hold space for grief, connection, boredom and joy. It allowed us to be present with each other, even across time zones and health systems. It blurred the boundaries between art and care, craft and ritual, family and collaboration.

As artists, sisters and co-creators, this work has expanded our understanding of what it means to make together – and how creative occupations can be not just a response to crisis but a form of resistance and reimagining.

Hannah Joynt is a senior lecturer in the College of Creative Practice and Enterprise at Otago Polytechnic where she has taught art and design since 2007. In 2021 she was recipient of the Ako Aotearoa Award for Sustained Excellence in Tertiary Teaching. In 2009 she won the COCA Anthony Harper award for Contemporary Art, 2010 winner of the Edinburgh Realty Art Awards, Dunedin. Hannah is a contemporary visual artist and educator who works in a range of media, processes, and scales. From digital illustration to oil painting, pastel drawing to laser cutting her practice is informed by notions of the absurd and our ever-changing relationship with landscape and the natural world. As a solo practitioner she has exhibited both nationally and internationally and to date has had 19 solo shows. Hannah also works collaboratively in projects across art and design disciplines but of particular significance is her ongoing collaborative artist duo with multimedia artist and musician Dr Jane Venis. Their collaboration includes live performances of drawing and music created in dual improvisation and performance art video works under the collective name *Small Measures*. In 2019 they undertook the Buinho Creative Art residency in Portugal and recent solo shows include: *Drawn to Sound* at Ashburton Art Gallery in 2019, *Dual* at CICA (Czong Institute of Contemporary Art) Museum in Seoul, South Korea in 2020 and in June 2021 their five-minute film *Flag Plant* was recently screen as a part of the Bomb Factory Artist Film Festival in London. In 2023 they exhibited at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery with their show *Precious and Pathetic*, a series of satiric video works, paintings and sculptures that engage with humour to examine power dynamics and offer absurd solutions to first world problems.

- 1 Metastatic melanoma is melanoma (skin cancer) that has spread to other sites of the body. The spread occurs through the lymphatic system and/or the blood vessels. "Metastatic Melanoma," accessed 25 May 2025, <https://dermnetnz.org/topics/metastatic-melanoma>.
- 2 A Bio Compression Suit is an inflatable garment designed to mimic the body's own lymphatic system to help fluid get circulated back into the body, resulting in a reduction of edema. "Bio Compression Pneumatic Compression Devices," accessed 25 May 2025, <https://biocompression.com/our-devices/>.
- 3 Marie-Christine Ranger, Sandra Houle, Alysson Rheault and Roanne Thomas, "Art-Based Workshops for Women: An Opportunity for Reflection on Identity and Transformation following Cancer Treatment," *Occupational Therapy International* (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1155/2023/1828314>.
- 4 Bodil Winther Hansen, Lena-Karin Erlandsson and Christel Leufstadius, "A Concept Analysis of Creative Activities as Intervention in Occupational Therapy," *Scandinavian Journal of Occupational Therapy* 28, no. 1 (2021): 63–77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/11038128.2020.1775884>.
- 5 Hannah Joynt, "Te Araroa Drawing Expedition," *Scope: Art and Design* 11 (2015): 134–138. <https://thescope.org/journal/art-and-design/art-and-design-11/te-araroa-drawing-expedition>.