Introduction

I chose to base the theme of my photography on a life changing medical event that happened to me four years ago. During the July school holidays in 2016 I started to experience symptoms of weakness down the entire left side of my body. These symptoms persisted for about a week before I decided to go to hospital to find out what was going on. Not long after I arrived the doctors said that I needed to go straight to Tauranga to get an MRI and then drive up to Starship Children's Hospital in Auckland. When I was admitted to Starship a doctor visited my room and said that the MRI results showed that the symptoms I was experiencing were being caused by an abnormal cluster of blood vessels that had randomly burst and bled into my brainstem. I was 13 at the time and had no understanding of how serious this was. My initial thoughts were that when you, for example, cut your hand and your hand starts bleeding, you simply wash off the blood and put a plaster over the cut. So it was very confusing to me that this bleed was causing such significant symptoms. The doctors knew that it was likely that I would have another bleed in the near future, but at that time the only thing that they could do to prevent another bleed was to perform brain surgery. However, surgery in the brainstem is extremely risky and the chances of dying from that type of operation were about 50/50. After a week of lying in hospital having my blood pressure taken and my pulse examined every hour or so, it was decided that I should be discharged and sent back home. But it turned out that the doctors were correct and after five days I was in a helicopter being flown back to Starship with worsened symptoms. After two weeks of the same old tests and examinations the doctors again decided to discharge me. But this time they sent me to a physical rehabilitation centre on Auckland's North Shore to try and decrease the weakness I was experiencing. I lasted less than two days before I was taken back to Starship in an ambulance, having had a third bleed. This time I was completely paralysed down the left side of my body. My eyes were also permanently stuck in a leftward gaze and my right ear was almost completely deaf. At this point the damage to my brainstem was so severe that if I did not undergo brain surgery I would definitely die. So the doctors made the decision to go through with the nine hour surgery. During my time in hospital I was very oblivious to how much of an impact the bleed would have on my life. I actually bought a surfboard during my second stint in Starship and expected to be surfing that summer, three months after having brain surgery. My naive understanding was that the surgery would completely fix everything and take away all the symptoms I was experiencing. The surgery was extremely successful and almost instantly after I woke up my eyes were back to normal and my hearing in my right ear came back. I only had a little bit less paralysis down the left side of my body, but that was the expectation as the surgery was not so much to repair the damage but rather to prevent any further damage. Two weeks after the surgery I was sent back to the rehabilitation centre on the North Shore where I stayed for about three months, doing physical therapy, learning to walk again and trying to get my strength back. I made huge improvements while I was there and I went from barely being able to stand for five minutes while holding a frame to being able to walk with a splint on my left ankle. After my time in Auckland I came home and gradually started getting back into a new "'normal' life with a disability. I was still very weak down my entire left side and had no fine motor movement in my left hand.

My goal

The reason I chose to make my brain bleed the theme of my photography was because since it happened I have never felt very comfortable talking about it with other people and tried to avoid those conversations as much as possible. Before the bleed, I was very sporty and spent the majority of my freetime on a skateboard. My friends were all sporty as well, and for the first few years after becoming disabled I found it very difficult to hang out with them because of my inability to do sports. As a result, I had never had a proper conversation with them about what happened to me and all they knew was that I'd had a brain bleed.Because of this, I saw my photography board as the perfect opportunity to tell others what actually happened through a medium that I love.
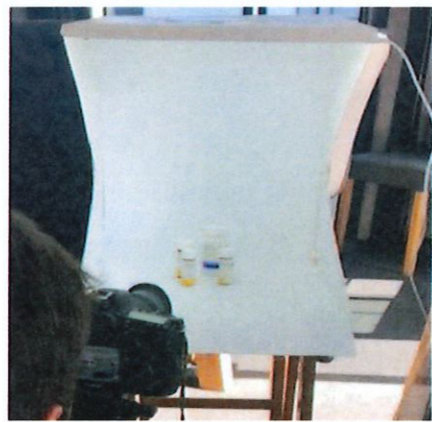
Martin Schoeller

Martin Schoeller is a German portrait photographer based in New York. He is best known for his close-up style portraits of celebrities, which are very simple composition-wise and draw focus to the detail of his subject's faces. The photos (see below left) are a stark contrast to the typical celebrity photos that society is used to seeing in magazines and advertisements, which are often heavily edited and staged to make the celebrity look as good as possible. Martin's images, in stark contrast, have extreme detail and show every imperfection in the celebrities faces.

There were several conventions in Martin's photos that I thought suited my theme really well, including the white/grey background, shallow depth of field, studio lighting and the intricate detail that he captured in his subjects. These conventions work together to give the images the very 'raw' and honest feel that I described above. I wanted my photos to have that same feel, and I also really liked how the conventions made the photos look very clinical and crisp. The white background and lighting are very clean and simple, which give off a hospital feeling as nearly all of the walls and lights in a hospital are plain white. The close up perspective and shallow depth of field make the photos extremely crisp, and show a huge amount of detail. It makes you feel as though you are looking at a photo that has been taken for medical research.

I actually took the photos for this shoot over a month or so because I kept thinking of different medical objects to photograph. I initially used a lamp to light the objects but then decided to use natural lighting for the next set of photos about a week later. The two different lighting sources resulted in varied lighting between photos and the darkness of the background also ended up being inconsistent. Eventually I realised that I should buy a light box and take the photos in that. Once I bought that (see photo below left) I was able to get photos that were much closer to Martin's convention-wise, because the objects were properly lit. Because I now had good lighting I was also able to capture a lot more detail and get a more clinical, white background.

It was also hard to get the lighting right when photographing transparent objects like the saline bottle, because if the background was too white you couldn't see the object. Because of that I had to underexpose the photo slightly to get a darker background. That compromise meant that, even with a lightbox, there was still a little bit of inconsistency between the lighting and background of some of the photos.

My images

The lightbox I bought to get a more consistent lighting setup

I decided to take the conventions from Martin's work and use them in a series of still life photos, rather than portraiture. I wanted to start my board with a series of photos of medical objects, to clearly show the audience that my theme was medically based. I also thought that the simplicity of the photos meant they worked nicely as the 'intro' to my board, and left plenty of room for development later in the board.

The photo on the left was lit using a lamp, while the photo on the right was taken using a proper lightbox. You can really see how much the photo improved by simply changing the light source

As these two photos show, I had to make the background darker when photographing transparent objects in order to stop the object from blending in with the background

Aisha Zeijpveld

Aisha Zeijpveld is a Polish photographer based in Amsterdam. She has a very distinct style of blending reality with surrealism to create very unique and creative photos. Her images (see below left) communicate their meaning in a very implicit way that forces the viewer to really stop and think about what the photo is saying.

Aisha Zeijpveld →

I really liked the three photos on the left and decided to use them as inspiration for a photoshoot. There were three conventions in particular that I wanted to use - monocolour background, front-on perspective (centred composition) and lack of emotion in the subject's faces. In all 3 images I straight away saw how I could use the same ideas and props to show the hemiparesis (weakness down one side of the body) that I have as a result of the brain bleed in an interesting and creative way. I also decided to take the photo below on the right using an anatomical model to more explicitly show that my sickness was related to my brain. I also thought the simplicity of the composition, lighting and colour scheme was really effective at making the viewer think about what message the photo is actually trying to convey, rather than telling the message in an explicit and obvious way. The plain facial expressions add a clinical feel to the image, and also remove any emotion from the images, leaving the viewer to interpret the overall feel of the image themselves (e.g happy, sad etc.).

My images
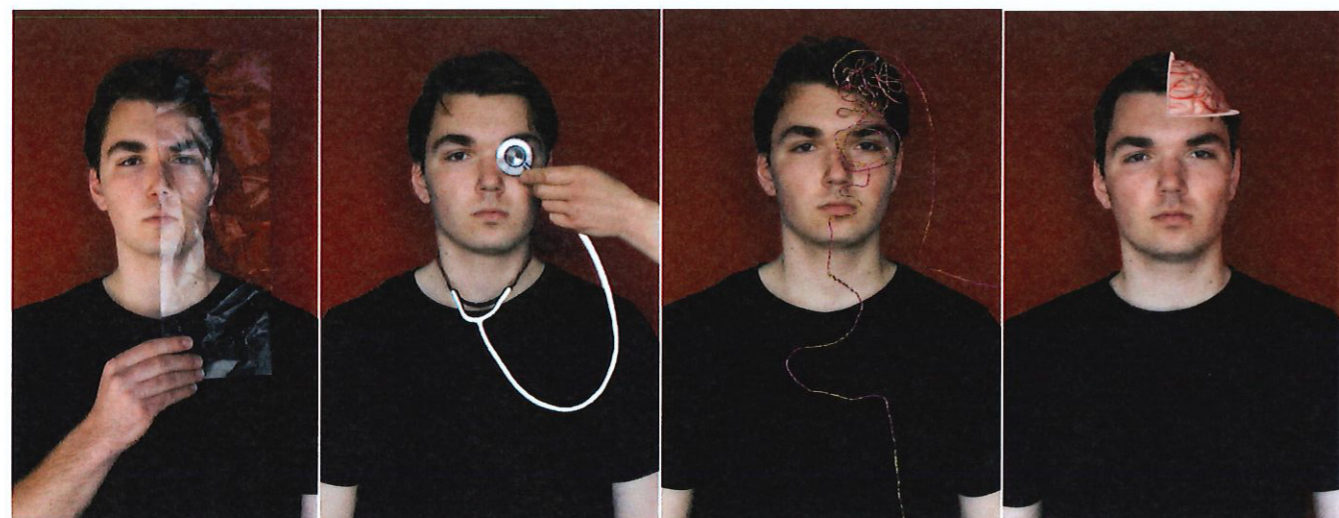
Instead of using the props across the whole photo like Aisha has done, I only positioned them on the left side of me. I did this to show (implicitly) that the brain bleed affected the left side of my body. I originally took the photos with a blue background but realised that it would be better to use red to symbolise blood so I changed the colour in photoshop.

I thought that using a plain colour for the background worked great because it is not distracting and allows the viewers eye to be drawn to the subject. If I had used a textured background (like the example below), it would have been far too distracting. The lack of expression in my face also meant that the viewer was drawn to the props (stethoscope, wire etc.), which convey the meaning of the photos. I used natural lighting for this photoshoot, making sure to take the photos at the same time to increase consistency, which lit up my subject nicely and didn't cast harsh shadows on the background. The crumpled paper photo turned out much better than I thought it would. I had a bit of difficulty trying to make the original photo (on the crumpled paper) to scale but I managed to work it out eventually and it actually lined up almost perfectly with my face. Another challenge was that these photos are self-portraits so I had to wirelessly connect my phone to my camera (which was on a tripod) and trigger the shutter with my phone, which I was holding just out of the frame. The stethoscope I was using was black and was getting a bit lost with my t-shirt behind it, so I decided to change the colour of it later in photoshop. Changing the stethoscope colour actually ended up having another benefit, as the next photoshoot I did involved making some of the medical objects on the previous page out of white clay. So the two photoshoots linked together much better than they would've had I kept the stethoscope black.
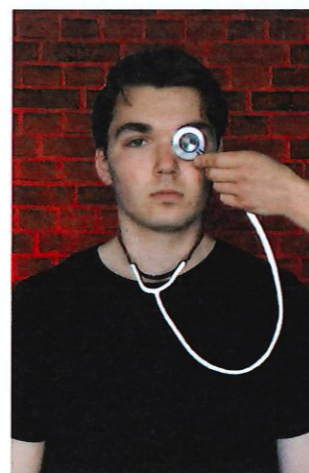
This photo shows how distracting a textured background would have been. The photo becomes too cluttered and the viewer's eye is not drawn to the subject
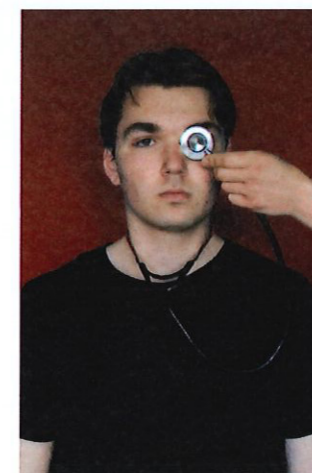
As you can see in the first photo, if I had left the stethoscope black it would've been very hard to see. Changing the colour turned out to be a great decision, as a later photoshoot involved a white clay stethoscope (second photo)

Rowan Fee

Rowan Fee

Rowan Fee is a still life photographer based in London. Within the still life genre, his work focuses particularly on technology and conceptual food photography. His images (see below and to the right) contain striking visuals and lighting that is often quite basic yet very flattering to the subject.


Below and to the right are some examples of Rowan's work. I was particularly struck by the photo above of the exercise equipment on pedestals and decided to use that photo as inspiration for a photoshoot. I really liked that he had made the equipment out of clay and sticks which made them look more like sculptures than gym equipment. The clay medium, combined with the pedestals, gave the photo strong gallery-like feel, almost as if you're looking at a tribute to ancient methods of staying healthy in a museum. Like the previous two artist models, Rowan's use of simple colours, composition and seemingly basic lighting drew focus to the objects and compelled the viewer to ponder the photos meaning. While most of Rowan's work is created with the intent of showing off a product, this particular photo is quite the opposite, and is clearly trying to convey a message. I love how Rowan has created the image in such a way that the meaning could be interpreted in so many different ways. For example, while I interpreted the image to be a tribute, my teacher interpreted it as showing that modern society chases after the latest technology, especially in the fitness industry, even though equipment like dumbells has been around for centuries and has never faulted in producing results. My teachers interpretation was basically that the photo is a visual representation of the phrase, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

My images
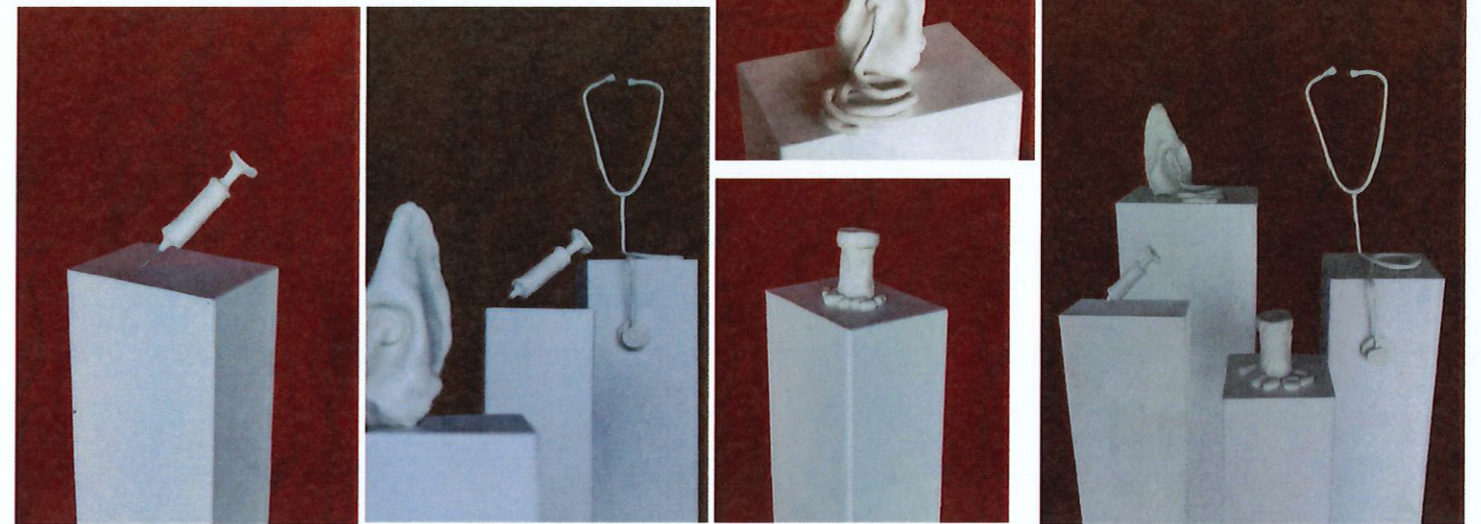
While this photoshoot was a good development from the simple photos I took of the medical objects in the Martin Schoeller-inspired shoot, I mainly did this photoshoot because I liked how it felt like a tribute. It feels almost as though I am saying thank you to the medical equipment that helped to keep me alive. A lot of people would probably look at medical objects like a syringe or oxygen mask and get a feeling of fear or sadness, so I also liked how these photos showed those normally negatively connotated objects in a more playful and enjoyable way.

Originally I wanted to use smoke in my images, as Rowan has used some in his and I thought that it looked really cool. I wasn't sure how to get controlled and 'clean' looking smoke so I added it in photoshop (see example below left). However, after editing the photos and seeing what they looked like with the smoke effect, I realised that the effect (in my images) probably did more harm than good and was actually just a distraction. So I decided to leave the photos with a plain red background (see example in the centre below). But then I decided to make another change. I remembered that I had taken a photo in the Aisha Zeijpveld-inspired shoot that had a crumpled piece of paper in it. I realised that if I made the background of these images look like crumpled paper, it would tie the two photoshoots together and provide more board continuity. So I came up with the photo below (to the right).

Cinematic influences

Two of my photoshoots were influenced by movies, particularly *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace (Episode I)*.

Avengers: Infinity War

There was a specific scene in this movie that I drew inspiration from. In the scene, the villain, Thanos, gets hold of a catastrophic weapon and uses it to make some of the Avengers disappear. The way that they disappear is by disintegrating into ashes (as shown in the photos above). I really loved this effect and how it was so effective at showing a character morph from one form into another (in the case of the movie, from being existent to non-existent). I thought it could be a great effect to use to show my progression from full health to sickness to rehabilitation to having a sense of normality. I chose four specific photos (shown below) to represent those four stages and morphed them together to show the transition between each stage (see images below). To take the four individual photos (I initially took them with a white background and then cut and pasted them onto the red one), I had to position the camera on a tripod and get the shot all set up, then my Mum pushed the shutter button. Ideally I would have triggered the shutter wirelessly on my phone, but to do that I would have had the phone in the photo.
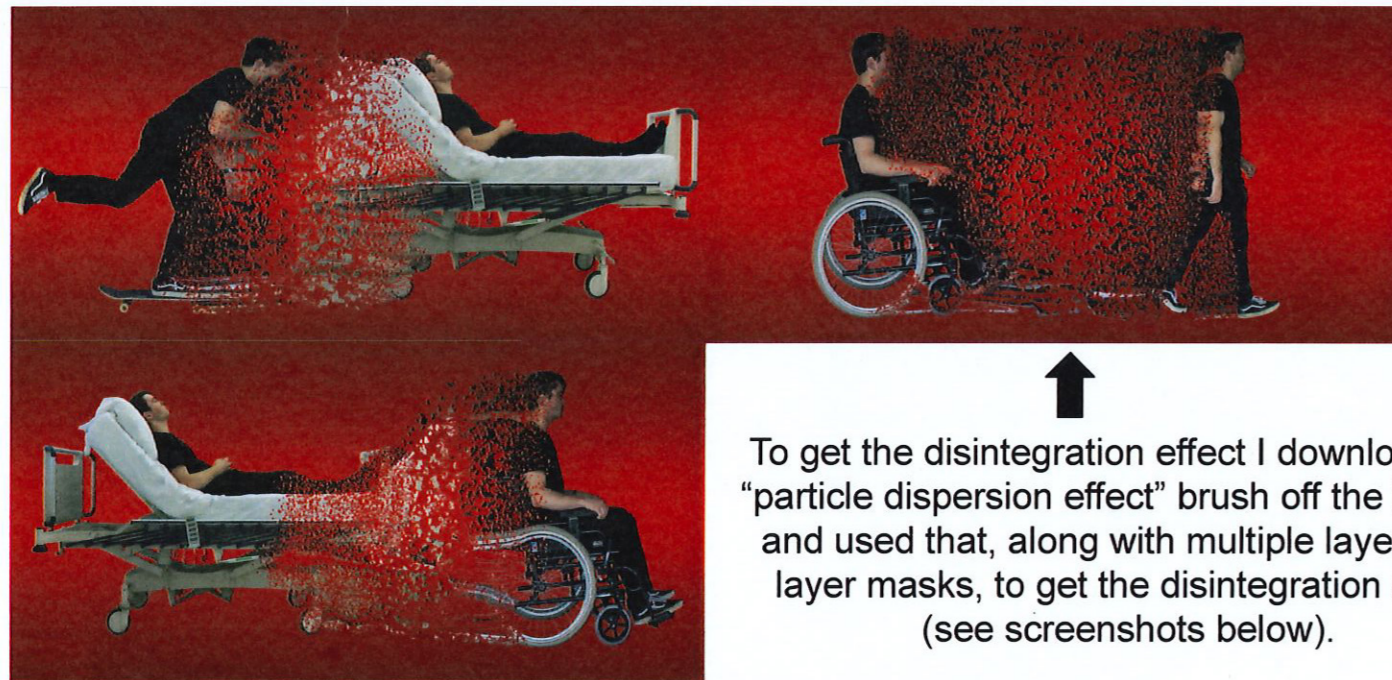
To get the disintegration effect I downloaded a "particle dispersion effect" brush off the internet and used that, along with multiple layers and layer masks, to get the disintegration effect (see screenshots below).

Star Wars: The Phantom Menace (Episode I)

The inspiration I got from *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* wasn't actually from any particular scene or shot in the movie, but from one of the promotional posters (shown to the left). I love the way that the artist has cleverly used young Anakin's shadow to show what he is going to become. The type of shadow in the image is the kind of shadow described in Jungian psychology.

Carl Jung & Jungian psychology

Carl Jung was a Swiss psychiatrist who founded analytical psychology, which focuses on the unconscious mind. A big part of analytical psychology is the idea of a 'shadow's self'. We typically think of a shadow as a dark shape that forms on the ground when light becomes blocked by something. However, Carl Jung described a shadow as being the part of an individual's personality that they want to repress and hide. It is the part of us that we don't like, or think that other people won't like, so we try to suppress it and push it away into our unconscious mind. We don't want to, or feel that we can't, deal with those aspects of ourselves so we convince ourselves that they are non-existent.   The shadow in the poster is the perfect example of this psychological idea, as Darth Vader was essentially the dark side of Anakin. He tried to suppress and push that part of himself away, but as we all know, that side of him took over and become his entire identity. When I became disabled, my disability became my 'shadow'. It was a part of me that I did not like, and that I was convinced others around me disliked as well. Although I needed a wheelchair to travel long distances on foot for the first three years after my brain bleed, the part of my disability that bothered me the most was how I looked when I walked. I had a severe limp and had to wear a large splint around my ankle. The reason I decided to use the wheelchair in my *Star Wars*-inspired photoshoot was because I knew that it would be far more effective at communicating the disability. When you see someone in a wheelchair, you instantly know that that person has some sort of disability. I also realised that there wasn't really a way to show the limp in a still photograph, and the ankle splint would be lost in the monotonous shadow. I used the second series of photos, with my shadow simply being me standing there (a real shadow), to show what my 'shadow' has now become. I still have a limp, but I have learnt to become confident in myself and how I look when I walk, so it does not really bother me anymore. In contrast to the *Star Wars* poster, in which Anakin's shadow is a display of his future self, the wheelchair shadow in my images shows my past self.

Carl Jung


← My past self

My present self →
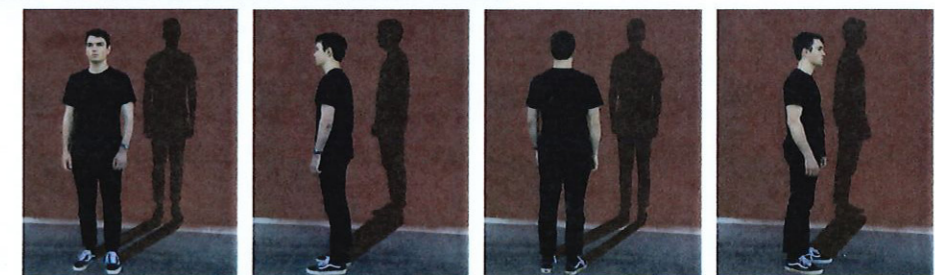
Neil Pardington
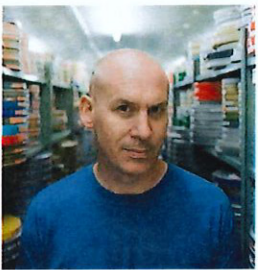
Neil Pardington

Neil Pardington is a photographer and artist based in Wellington. There was a particular series of photos that he has done that I knew would work great as inspiration for one of my boards. The series is called "The Clinic" and focuses on a range of medical contexts (Surgical theatre, anatomical museum etc.) and equipment.
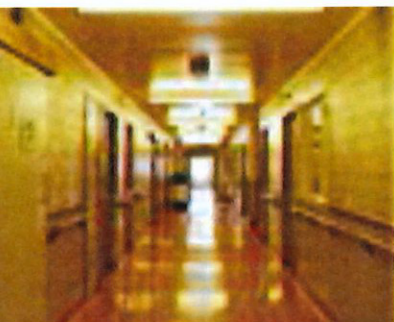
I really liked the images on the left and the way that they showed the spaces in a very emotionless and documentary-like way. They do not contain any of the normal negative emotions that can be associated with hospitals and are very clinical in their approach. The style of the photos is akin to the way in which the people who typically work in those spaces operate; emotionally detached and very professional. I loved the look of the wide angle shot and the way that it showed the whole room and each little bit of equipment in it. The deep depth of field works really well because your eye is not drawn anywhere in particular and you naturally want to look at each thing in the frame, taking in all the equipment and machinery. You gain a much greater appreciation of the complexity and intricacy of these spaces as you scan over each detail.

My images

I decided to add zoom blur to these photos, because I wanted to show how quickly it all happened and how I felt like I was being rushed into hospital with not much idea of what was going on. The zoom blur is quite effective at showing the disorientation and confusion that I felt. Because I'm not in the photos, they feel more like a first-person perspective, like you are seeing what I saw when I went into the hospital. That perspective further conveys the meaning of the blur, and that it represents my feelings at the time.

Staged Hospital photos
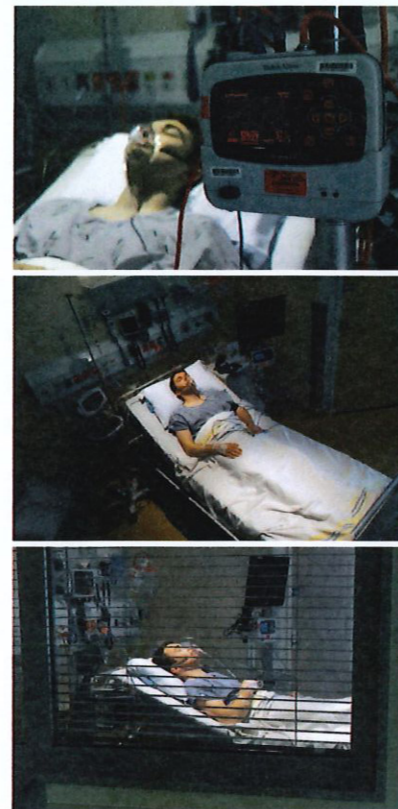
I really wanted to do a series of photos of me in a hospital bed to show what my life was like for about two months. Without the photos a big chunk of the story would have been completely left off my board as it would not have shown what my time in hospital was like. The lack of movement, or any sign of entertainment, conveys the sense of boredom that I often felt as I lay in the bed day after day. Other than the "Get well soon" cards on the bedside table, everything in the room is there for medical purposes. This overwhelming sense of 'Hospital' shows how I felt like the subject of an experiment, surrounded by weird machinery and constantly undergoing various tests and scans. The angles that I used in the photos, especially in the two bottom photos (on the left and right), make you feel like an observer, watching me lie there in the bed. The angles give you the feeling that you are visiting me in hospital, which make the photos feel more intimate and personal. For lighting, I used the bed light that was already in the room, and it worked really well at spotlighting the bed, drawing the viewers attention. The lighting highlights myself as being the focus of the image, and saves what could have been an over cluttered image. In order to take these photos I first of all had to teach my mum how to use my camera. I then took test shots around the room to determine the compositions I wanted and then directed my mum through taking each photo while I lay in the bed.
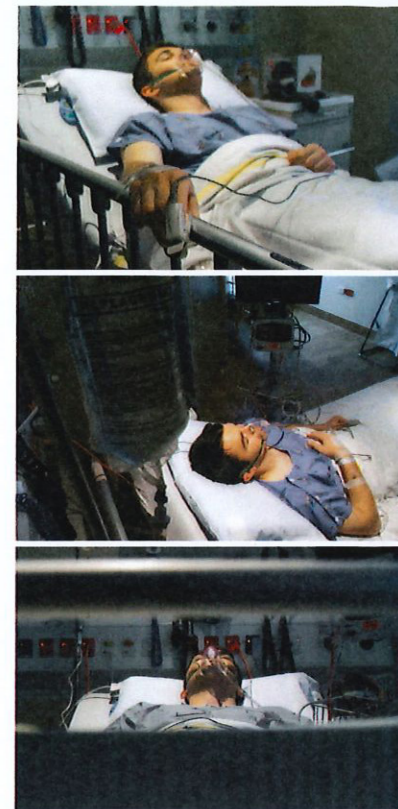
Medical photography & it's Importance

Medical photography is a very unique and broad genre of photography, and is perhaps one of photography's most important genres. The first use of photography in the world of medicine was by a French physician and cytologist, Alfred François Donné, in 1839 when he took the first photomicrograph, a photo taken with the aid of a microscope to show a magnified image of an object. Since then medical photography has been used in almost every aspect of the medical world and for many different purposes. Although it is most commonly used for medical documentation, It is also used to educate students studying medicine, as well as patients and their families. The term 'Medical photography' actually encompasses mediums like CT and MRI scans, as well as images captured by a typical camera. Thus, medical photography was actually crucial for me to survive. I had lots of MRI scans during my time in hospital, to first locate, and then monitor, the bleeding. Without those scans the specialists looking after me would not have been able to do anything to help me. They would not have known where the bleed was, what had caused it, how much blood there actually was, whether or not it was continuing to bleed, and much more crucial information. The scans enabled the surgeons to operate on me because they already had a good understanding pre-op what they were dealing with. It was because of this that I felt it was very important to include some of my MRI scans on my board. So I integrated the photos below into a photoshoot on the second board. The white patch in the brainstem, shows the bleed very clearly.


The brainstem bleed

Board layout

At the start of the year, once I decided my theme, I went on pinterest and found a whole lot of photos and artist models that I liked. I compiled a list from what I found, picked my favourites, and then started making photoshoots based off those artist models. I gave very little thought to the actual layout of the board and how the photoshoots would all tie together. I barely thought about what I wanted the board to communicate either, other than 'medical'. I was just picking artist models based on what I thought looked good, and using those models as inspiration for photoshoots. It was not until about the fifth photoshoot that I actually started thinking about what I wanted my board to say. But even then, I still was not giving much thought to the overall layout of the board and the flow between each photoshoot. As a result, less than a month out from the due date, my board was very disorganized and its story was very weak (see photos below).

After giving more thought to what I wanted the board to communicate and reflecting on the work I had already done, I realised I needed photos taken in a hospital and photos that did not have a front on perspective (centred composition). I also realised that while I wanted to use a significant amount of red on my board to symbolise the blood, my board did not have any other colour and was becoming oversaturated with red. So I did two photo shoots at the local hospital (see Page 6). One of those photos shoots was inspired by Neil Pardington, while the other contained staged photos in a hospital room inspired by the photos my mother took documenting my time in hospital (see photos to the right). These photo shoots gave me more than I anticipated as not only did they fulfill the need for hospital photos, they also added new photographic compositions to the board and a new colour (hospital green).

When I looked at those two photo shoots, I realised that they worked much better at the start of the board than the Martin Schoeller inspired photo shoot I previously had at the top of board one. As I thought about the story my board was telling I realised that I wanted it to start from the moment I entered the hospital and end with me leaving those years of sickness behind. For this reason I decided to fill board one with these two photo shots and move the photo shoots that were on board one, at the time, to board two.

I realised that I had a few photos that contained the same black monitor in them. In a hospital this monitor is used to display a patient's heart rate, blood pressure, breathing rate and oxygen saturation - those things that are important in monitoring the physical state of the patient. I liked the close up shot of the red heart tracing in one of the staged hospital photos and I saw the black monitors as a great opportunity to reuse this. I decided to have a red line going across the three photos and only show the heart rate when the line passed through the black monitor. Using the heartbeat in this way symbolised the three brain bleeds that I had with the straight line between symbolising the waiting time between each one. In the middle of these three photos is a real photo of me in ICU following my surgery. I used this photo to convey how seriously ill I was and to add a sense of realism to the board.
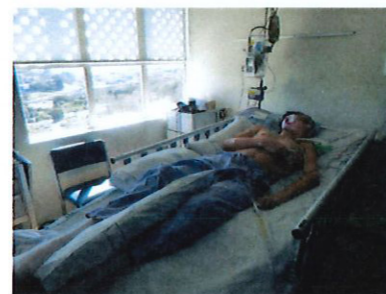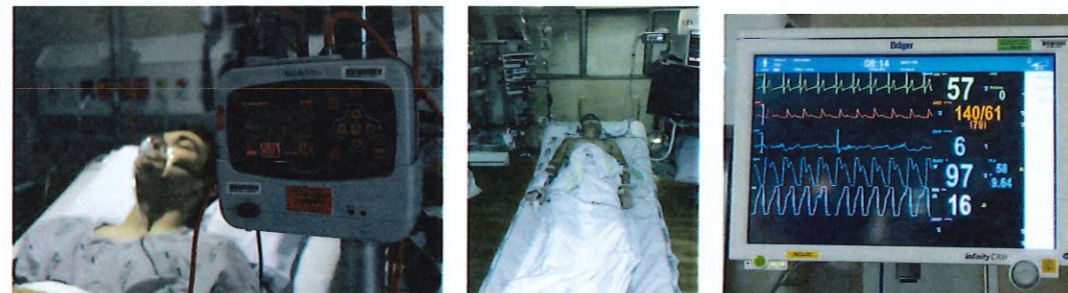
Colour

As I said previously, one of the ways that I fixed the problem of having too much red on my board was by taking two photoshoots in a Hospital, and introducing a hospital green colour. I also decided to take the photoshoot involving the MRI scans in black and white, to add another colour scheme onto the board. One of the things I had originally done to add more red to the board was to add a red colour tint to the Martin Schoeller inspired photos.

But now that I needed less red on the board I removed the tint so that they had a white background again. I also decided to use the white background from that photoshoot, as well as the black and white background from the MRI photoshoot, in some of the self portraiture from the Aisha Zeijpveld inspired shoot (see photos below).
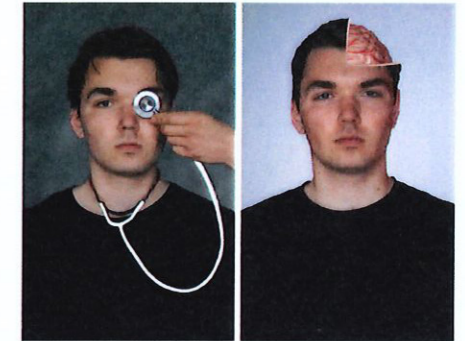
Changing the background colour got rid of more red, while also tying the second board together. Another decision I made with regards to colour was to use some of the hospital green colour from board one on my final board, in the two cinematically inspired photoshoots. I decided to use the colour in two particular photos that both showed me transitioning to a point of feeling like the bleed is behind me. One showed my shadow becoming 'my own', while the other showed me going from being in a wheelchair to walking again. (see photos below).

The colour contrasted the red in the rest of the photoshoots, highlighting them and drawing attention to the idea of me triumphing over the sickness, which is what the last board is about. For the final photo on the board, which uses the disintegration effect, combined with the shadow, to convey the message that the sickness is behind me, I brought the reds and greens together into one photo, as a way to 'wrap it up'.

Photoshoots I decided not to use

There were several photoshoots that I did not use in the end, for various reasons. One was a series of five photos taken in an operating theatre. The photos (shown below) were of the main theatre light, with some medical equipment towering over the side. The light started off really bright, and the equipment warped to look like it was curling over, and then both effects got gradually less in each subsequent photo.

The photos were initially created to show the light that you supposedly see when you're dying, and the gradual fade of that light is representative of me surviving. However, I was not very happy with the photos once I took them and did not really think they communicated what I wanted them to. Instead I decided to crop the lights from some other photos I took in the theatre (see photos below). The lights in these photos were facing all different ways and I thought the randomness of the three photos conveyed the disorientation I felt when I first got to hospital. However, I am not convinced that swapping out this photo shoot was the right decision as I have realised that the first photo shoot could have conveyed how I was initially disorientated but slowly got used to my surroundings.

There were two additional series of photos I decided to leave off the board that played with scale. My intention with these photo series was to show the medical surroundings dwarfing me, communicating the idea that life for me had become all about medical stuff rather than my usual daily activities like skating and basketball. However, the first series (shown below) was quite bland and I felt that the way I had shot it failed to communicate my idea.

I actually liked the second series (shown above) and felt it told the story well but it did not seem to tie in with anything else on the board because no other photo shoot played with scale. For this reason I decided to leave it out.

What would I do next?

If I were to continue my board I would add another panel in between the second and third panels that focussed on my rehabilitation. As I wanted to keep the board reasonably positive, I finished the board on a high note with me leaving the sickness behind me. Because of the limit on the size of the portfolio and the end already determined, I did not have enough space to show the rehabilitation process. This photography would be focussed on the extensive physiotherapy I went through. If I were to go beyond the last panel I would depict more of what my life is like now and the things I have achieved since becoming disabled, like snowboarding and getting my drivers licence.

Reflections after finishing

Throughout this year I have learnt a lot about how I can use art to tell a story in an engaging and compelling way. Photography has been a passionate hobby of mine for four years but I have been heavily focused on the technical side of it (editing, composition etc.). Photography this year has taught me that story is fundamental to photography and that the technical side of it is simply a tool to enhance the story. As I said in my introduction, telling other people about what has happened to me and explaining why I have a disability has always made me feel uncomfortable. Using a creative medium made me feel totally at ease with sharing my story and this has given me a lot of satisfaction. I have also learnt a wide range of photoshop skills this year and now feel I have an additional set of skills to enhance the story telling in my photography. For example the two photo shoots that I did, that were influenced by cinema, required a significant amount of photoshop work which allowed me to communicate an idea or a message that would be near impossible to tell in-camera.

Throughout my sickness I recognised that I needed to keep things in perspective and stay focussed on the positive rather than dwell on what happened to me or why. I tried to accept that what happened was unchangeable and chose to focus on what I could do to make my situation better. Because of this attitude I felt that it was important that my board was not focussed on the negative aspect of becoming disabled. To help with this I approached my photography in a clinical manner with a degree of emotional detachment.

Overall I am very pleased with my board and it turned out a lot better than I originally thought it would. The story I was telling is very personal and it was crucial to me that I told it in the right way, with authenticity. My board was displayed in my schools end of year art exhibition and I received a huge amount of very positive feedback which made me realise that my photography had told the story exactly how I wanted it to. Many people commented that it had impacted them in a very powerful way. I felt as though my board gave people a much better understanding of the story behind my disability.