

## Dylan Mortimer

When Dylan Mortimer was being rushed out of town in the back of an ambulance en route to a life-saving surgery, he snapped a photo. The view of Kansas City in the background was visible; his thoughts if he would ever return to his home and family were not. Navigating between life and death has been both his life story and his art story.

Born with cystic fibrosis, a genetic disorder that mostly affects the lungs, Mortimer has already beaten the odds. The average life span of those affected is about thirty-seven years old; Dylan is thirty-eight. A double lung transplant in January 2017 gave him a literal new life and a transformation that he pours into his work.

Prior to his transplant he resisted revealing his health struggles overtly in his work. Instead he focused on spirituality and faith, an aspect of his life influenced by the death sentence that he was born with. Never seeking to convert anyone, and certainly not intending to mock faith, his installation of *Prayer Booth* is an example of bringing the idea of faith into the public space. He views his art as a prayerful act.

The image of a high top sneaker shows up frequently in his pre-transplant work in the form of Air Jordans, representing the air that his lungs so desperately struggled for. Growing up in Ferguson, Missouri he longed for the coveted shoes that pushed everyone to run faster and jump higher when his goal to simply breathe was so difficult.

Although Mortimer still works predominately with paint and glitter on cut paper, post-surgery work now features anatomical or medical images, like cells and lungs. But instead of appearing clinical or sterile, they embody movement and evoke the spiritual. Prior to receiving his new lungs, he admits that glitter served as a cover, distracting the viewer from seeing the artist as a person with a life-threatening illness. Post-surgery, he uses the glitter as a celebration.

In *Tree of Life* lungs bloom with vivid colors, reminiscent of a stained glass church window bursting from its frame towards the sky. Now that he has healed, the power of his new breath screams of creative life.

In introducing himself as a patient in his work, he has connected with his audience through their mutual health issues. It's been a profound experience to share the message of hope that his new health has given him, and it's not a message that he takes lightly.

In *The Inevitable Healing* a crowd of doctors work on his outstretched body. Pinks, reds and blues form cells that seem to float into heaven against the black background. Or are they halos that reveal the reverence held for the health care providers? Either way, the viewer can't help but feel optimistic, even with the glittery darkness that envelopes the scene.

For Mortimer, to behold the power of healing against the backdrop of pain can be a spiritual experience. A former pastor of ten years, he is influenced by the stories in scripture that tell of being both overwhelmed by the beauty and feeling terrified when experiencing the divine. These are conversations he wants to help create and to be a part of.

His large recent work, *In My Feelings*, maps buoyant cell-like spheres of glitter that appear interconnected yet distant. His feelings, like his life, are a celebration amidst the struggle. What does Dillon Mortimer celebrate in his work? Being the father to two boys when he never believed he could have, being able to breathe fully at age thirty-eight, and being able to receive a new life.

- Molly Krause