

Culture and Health Forum

Turku, Finland

Showcasing Artist Practices

CREATING AND EXPERIENCING ART IN AN END-OF-LIFE UNIT

Monday, 29 September 13: 00 – 14: 15

Paul Peinture – Painter (France)

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WHO I AM

I am Paul. I am a French artist. It's important for me to remember my background because without this background, I wouldn't be who I am.

I'm forty! It's my birthday today! This story started twenty years ago. I have been my own boss since then.

I was an interior landscaper which allows me to see the importance of the environment in which we are, adapt it to have a feeling of wellbeing, thanks to a room, plants, furniture and art.

I did a lot of graffiti which brought a lot of spontaneity and flexibility into my work and also led to my career as a muralist. Being a muralist is hard work, but it's allowed me to travel around the world and meet people from different backgrounds and social class.

Over the years, I realised that I preferred meeting people and improvising workshops rather than creating a big mural that would be forgotten in a few days.

Since 2021, my artistic approach reflects my human and social values. I take the time to listen to everyone I encounter. I use my experience to create simple things, to make art accessible to everyone. Today, I host workshops in my local area as much as possible, to create lasting relationships.

I WORK WITH

Elementary schools, high schools, universities, nursing homes, hospitals, retirement homes, welcome centres and immigrant welcome centres, prisons, events...

Today my studio is in a school.

I work with people aged three to one hundred and more.

Even though it will be difficult, I am convinced that we need to build bridges between these audiences for a greater impact.

I also believe that art is not just for the participants, like the students or patients. It is also for us: culture professionals, teachers, educators, hospital staff, social workers and researchers.

As an artist, I do not want to specialise in one area but continue working with everyone.

Now that you know a bit about me, I'm going to tell you about a specific project which holds a special place in my heart, in an end-of-life unit.

CHAMBRE N°3

IT ALL STARTED WITH ROOM THREE

The first time I went to Marie Galene hospital was to paint a mural. Nobody knew my work so we collaborated to create the design. It's not easy to please everyone but everything is possible. I showed them five themes to start the discussion. This is where the journey started: my contract said three days but I never left.

The nursing staff joined in. They painted canvases, they painted the wall, we discussed the meaning of the mural. After two weeks, a nurse, Lucile, and I started to talk about me going into a hospital room to meet a patient.

I built a mobile studio to make these encounters easier and tried it out on the staff. It was an amazing experience so I carried on. The mobile studio is still my main work tool in the hospital just like my outfit and smile. I don't know why but I continued going to the hospital after the mural was finished, to continue the experience on my own time.

Then came the day I met the patient in room 3. Out of the blue, Lucile told me that it might be a good time to create art with a patient. After a long day waiting and just when I was packing up, Lucile said it was time! Even though I wasn't ready, I grabbed some supplies, brushes and blue and yellow paint and went to room 3.

It was the first time I had been in a room in an end-of-life care unit.

I discovered a very weak woman with her husband. She seemed intrigued by the mobile studio. I didn't know how to start so I asked: *What is your favourite colour?* I hoped she wouldn't say red. Luckily, she said green.

We mixed the paints, chose the best brush and started painting. Her face lit up and she seemed to dance and play with the brush on the canvas like a musician playing an instrument. It was a wonderful moment for everyone. A minute or so away from reality. I suggested that we sign this master piece. I thanked her and left. Lucile likes to say that for the next hour I was like a child.

I went back to the hospital the next day, and while I was talking to the director I found out that the lady in room 3 had died 30 minutes after she had made her painting. I knew in that moment that this was the direction I wanted my art to take.

INES

Lucile and I were convinced that we needed to repeat this experience with other patients but we needed to convince the rest of the staff and the directors. We decided that I would come to the hospital every Tuesday as a volunteer.

My second experience was with Ines, the twelve-year-old daughter of a patient. A psychologist came to see me to explain the situation. Ines hadn't spoken to anyone or smiled for several weeks and she wanted to know if I would talk or work with her. I said yes but we needed to see if Ines wanted to.

She said OK but didn't know anything about art. I told her to trust me and that we could just spend time together. In the end, we created an abstract painting to let off steam and a landscape to focus on her thoughts.

We made mistakes, we laughed, a lot, we had a good time, a really good time. Memories were created. Even though Ines's mum was asleep, I'm sure she witnessed this moment.

A few weeks later the hospital received a letter from Ines's grandfather. I am going to read it to you.

This shows the importance of this project in hospital rooms and outside, within the family and maybe society!

PASCAL, NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE

It's impossible to know how each encounter will go, I like to improvise and adapt to each person. The next story about Pascal is proof of this.

The first time I went into his room to suggest a workshop he said he would love to but he can't move his hands and arms because of his disease.

For me nothing is impossible and even if we had to roll his chair over the canvas to create a painting, we were going to paint. He chose to put the brush in his mouth to create this painting. We spent a long time discussing the meaning and we concluded that it represented a conversation at the end of a summer's day.

More than a year later, we repeated the experience, with the same energy and outcome. A few weeks later, he called me into his room. His whole family was there with a McDonald's and Pascal's favourite burger. It was a special day: they were there to say goodbye!

He told me that if I ever had doubts about my job, I should remember that for him, it was one of the best experiences of his life and he said thank you.

It's important for me to show you some pictures of Pascal before he became ill.

Before being patients, these people are people.

FODE CAMARA, FIRST PAINTING

As we have seen, these sessions can comfort patients and their family but they can also help distract from unexpected medical procedures.

I met Madame Camara, we talked for a long time, she told me about her big family and her country. She was curious about my project and my life. Her son Fodé joined us. It was a good atmosphere. But before we could start painting, Mme Camara had a medical emergency so all the medical staff rushed into the room to help her. We were still there. I quickly decided to distract Fodé.

First, I showed him around the unit and the mural then I made him some tea. After an hour, I suggested we paint together. He thought painting wasn't for him but it could be a good way to spend time. After two hours, he had created a painting and when he went back to this mother's room, she was fine.

He was very proud to show her his first ever painting. I loved the painting so much I wanted to buy it from him.

NILS AND HIS MOTHER

Every year on the first sunny day of spring after months of rain, all of Marie Galene's patients like to go outside to feel the sun on their faces. And if they can spend this time with their family, it's even better.

On this day when I went to room nine, it was empty. I concluded they were in the garden. Even though my mobile studio isn't an all-terrain vehicle, I joined Isabelle and her son Nils. They quickly accepted to do some painting, and we had a lovely time in our bubble.

When they were finished, I naturally offered to take the paintings to her room. As I was leaving, I saw Nils hug his mum and I heard him say: "You see mum, there are still many things we can do together that we have never done before."

When I got to the room, I noticed a photo of Nils and his brother, and I felt through the movement and colours that their painting represented the soul of this photo.

I learned of Isabelle's death in this email from Nils:

NILS – A patient's son

Hello Paul!

Most of all, thank you for this moment that you allowed us to experience with my mum.

Isabelle passed away yesterday, but we had this wonderful time together that you created. For that, a big thank you. A moment out of time, away from constraints and doubts.

Thank you, Paul. I encourage you to continue with your art. You bring peace and consolation at a difficult time. With your delicate approach and your kindness. I salute your humanity. Best wishes

BERTRAND AND CHRISTIANE

Like most patients, Bertrand had never painted before meeting me and his wife was very surprised that he accepted to do so. She watched us carefully and was very moved to see him enjoying this moment. We painted a blue painting: a nod to his love of the sea. A few months after his death, when I spent time with his wife, I discovered his passion for sailing. She showed me a lot of old photos of their family on their boat. For her, he told his story in his painting.

His son was very amused to tell me that his dad is buried in Artists' Row.

Dear Sir,

As my son promised, I'm sending you a photo of my husband proudly displaying the only painting of his life.

He loved the sea so much. That day, with you, he remembered our great sailing moment. This moment really surprised me.

I thank you from the bottom of my heart for making this possible for him two days before his death. Here is a photo of him and his granddaughter.

Thanks again.

Christiane D.

THANK YOU

Warm thoughts to all the people I met in end-of-life care over the last four years.

Thank you to Catherine Dean for your help, and for a lot,
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Thank you also to Maria for your time - the story goes on.