

Pigeonhole Episode 52

[bright ambient music]

Introduction

CHORUS OF VOICES: Pigeonholed, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole.

[soft, jazzy piano plays a mellow tune]

CHERYL NARRATING: This is part one of a two-parter called *Infusion Photos. Part one: I Walk In.*

It's May 3rd. I walk into Blue Sky, Oregon Center for the Photographic Arts in the Northwest Park Blocks in Portland, past the front desk, past the first exhibition, *Resemblance*, by Leah DeVun, and into a room with rows of folding chairs set up. I'm greeted by Sara J. Winston's very large photos printed on 75-gram paper. The exhibition is called *Our body is a clock*, all self-portraits of a white woman with brown hair of varying lengths, receiving her infusions. [jazzy piano fades out]

These very large photo-printed papers are held to the wall with tiny metal pins, no frames. The paper seems stiff, each piece slightly wavy in ways different from the others. Even though they're huge—about two feet by three feet each—I'm not upset seeing photo after photo of her with an IV in her arm, delivering infusion medication. I feel like I could crawl right into one. I'd like very much to. The overstuffed chairs in her pictures look so much like they're from the infusion center where I go. Maybe where she goes in New York and where I go in Oregon get their chairs from the same distributor. But I'm here in the middle gallery, and the seats are filling up.

SARA: Thanks for coming out today. Thank you, Blue Sky, for having me and my work here at your amazing space. So this is my first time ever showing the infusion pictures that I've been making for the last ten years, 11 years. I started making these pictures in 2014 after I was diagnosed with MS.

CHERYL NARRATING: She's having two first times. A solo exhibition opened at Candela Gallery in Richmond, Virginia on May 2nd, 2025, and this one in Portland opened on the 1st. But the Virginia one, *Sugar Honey Iced Tea*, is not only the infusion photos like this one. Here in Portland, we're surrounded by her self-portraits, some where she looks at the camera straight on and others where her body faces a different direction, but she turns her head to face the lens. Today she's giving a talk and reading some things she's written.

Chronic illness and community

SARA: Chronic illness is often perceived as a personal misfortune and private matter, making it a taboo to speak publicly about medical diagnoses, symptoms, treatments, and the financial burden of ongoing care. The exhibition *Our body is a clock*, which is this exhibition, is rooted in the rhythm of monthly intravenous immunosuppressive treatments in the infusion center.

By capturing these moments, I challenge societal ideals of constant productivity and independence, presenting survival as an ongoing lived experience rather than a triumph over illness. I explore the power dynamics of medical spaces where authority often reinforces patient vulnerability. Yet my photographs also reveal moments of solidarity, quiet glances, shared gestures that create unspoken networks of empathy and support. And so, I transform infusions themselves into fueling resistance and resilience.

Some days, [sighs] I make hundreds of pictures until I feel like maybe I've got something, and some days I make four. It really depends on the level of energy that day.

So the first time I showed it beyond my Instagram, I had the opportunity to publish an op-ed in the *New York Times*, and I received such a volume of responses that I was very overwhelmed: people looking for community, people looking for help, people looking for someone to hear about their stories. I got some prayer, some handwritten prayers. That felt like something where there was just such a need for more.

A painter wrote to me and said they found my work. Then they told me why it resonated with them. And I asked what they were working on, and they told me about these paintings that they've been making of clinical settings because of their experience. And so, I think that the community comes in different ways. And I think 11 years is a long time, but hopefully there's a lot more time to figure out how that community kind of forms and how we find each other.

[soft, jazzy piano tune returns]

Noise and soothing

CHERYL NARRATING: We're in the Q and A. People have questions about dynamic range and lighting, equipment, what the responses are from other patients and medical staff when she sets up her camera on a tripod, have the nurses seen the pictures they're in. There were other questions I can't remember. I got nervous. I lost track. I want her to know that like the strangers who showed up in her mailbox and email inbox after the *New York Times* published her piece, there's another grateful stranger in the room right here, another infusion patient.

I tell Sara what her pictures feel like to me. They feel soothing because they look quiet. I comment about how frustrating it is to go to my infusion center, this space of healing, and everyone's talking. It's hard to relax and focus. I tell her that I can put myself into her pictures, and I feel better. I really think I can rewrite my memories of my own infusions by putting myself into her giant photos, and I appreciate the relief that brings, the endless quiet. [jazzy piano fades out] She points to one of the pictures.

SARA: I think I was that one where there was a woman who's Russian, and she had a Russian TV channel on. She was on the phone on speaker talking to someone in Russian, and then I think there was a radio somewhere, also Russian. But now I go to a place where it's like they play smooth jazz. [laughter] The snacks are better.

CHERYL NARRATING: Month after month after month, I'm still shocked by how loud my center is. I ogle the big, soft chairs. I marvel at how relaxed patients look under their heated blankets, each with an arm resting on a pillow, a thin, shiny plastic tube winding its way down from a bag on a pole and into their arm or hand. But it lasts a second or less because the banter is everywhere. The machines are beeping. The sneakered footsteps and plopping down of gear on trays, the ripping open of sterile packages, the laughter, the coughing. There's almost always someone coughing. And the nurses are absolute heroes of friendly small talk, keeping the atmosphere light and friendly. Still, I sometimes shut out due to the noise. Listening to Sara at her talk, I have a new sense of gratitude that my infusion center doesn't have TVs.

SARA: I think while I'm working, I'm able to kind of silence all of that other stuff. It feels like I'm taking back some of the time. I'm in a really good place physically with my care and stuff. I wanna try photographing other people and making work the way that I had been before all of this began. You know, it kind of made me become a different person, and that's been great. [laughs] But I want to try doing other things while I'm also doing this.

[soft, jazzy piano tune returns]

Wrap-up

CHERYL NARRATING: Please check out the full [hour-long artist talk on Blue Sky's YouTube channel](#). (At the time of publishing this podcast, the video has auto-captions.) I'm absolutely captivated by Sara and her work. And I want you to feel that way too. I was too shy to say hello in person after the talk, so I emailed her after I got home. She has a job and a family and a trip across the country to get back home, but she writes back pretty quickly. And next episode is me and Sara sitting down to talk more about these photos. That's part two of *Infusion Photos*, called *Sara J. Winston's Our body is a clock*.

[jazzy piano tune fades into bright ambient music]

CHERYL: Every episode is transcribed. Links, guest info, and transcripts are all at WhoAmIToStopIt.com, my disability arts blog. I'm Cheryl, and...

TWO VOICES: this is Pigeonhole.

CHERYL: Pigeonhole: Don't sit where society puts you.

Music in the episode:

Music track: Bread by Lukrembo. Source: <https://FreeToUse.com/music>. Copyright Free
Background Music