

Surgical lifestyles:

# Using a critical eye in surgery and art

by Karen Sandrick, Chicago, IL

**F**ine art painters historically have studied anatomy so they could penetrate the exterior of the skin and find the bony and muscular details that would transform flat, two-dimensional depictions of the human form into visual symphonies of power and movement at the easel.

Already familiar with the underlying structural anatomy that forms the contours of the breast and the forces that end up distorting and distending the abdomen, plastic surgeon and fine artist Katherine Branch Young, MD, FACS, applies the same attention she extends to delving into the surgical subterranean to look for the subtexts lying beneath the surface of objects in nature. She strives to understand the currents that propel undulations in the height and speed of waves, the crevices and outcroppings that cause flickers of shadow and light on rock formations, and the trajectories of sunlight that alter the spectrum and intensity of color in a mass of flowers.



Dr. Young has been a surgeon since 1991, when she interned in general surgery, and a plastic surgeon since 1994, when she completed her residency at Stanford University School of Medicine, Palo Alto, California. For the last 10 years, she has been in private practice as a plastic and reconstructive surgeon in the Pacific Heights area of San Francisco, concentrating primarily on breast reduction;

Inset: Dr. Young. Background: Dr. Young's painting entitled *From Willow Flat*.

breast reconstruction after mastectomy; body contouring after pregnancy; and surgical options after massive weight loss, particularly following gastric bypass surgery. She has lectured on the vertical mammoplasty, immediate breast reconstruction after mastectomy, and safety in large-volume liposuction.

Dr. Young has been a painter longer than she has been a physician. A perennial doodler at a young age, she began training in drawing and painting technique in grade school with a representational painter at the Clifton School of Art in Hampton, VA. She later took art instruction at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, DC, which has offered accredited fine arts programs since 1977.

Except for a brief hiatus during her general and plastic surgery residencies, when she essentially packed up and stored away her brushes and paints, Dr. Young has continued to pursue her art. But after having only enough time to dabble in art over the last 10 years, a year and a half ago she decided to make more of a commitment to painting. She began taking workshops and art classes at a local community college to reacquaint herself with the painting process. She and her husband, orthopaedic surgeon Christopher Cox, MD, FACS, then converted a spare bedroom in their San Francisco condominium into a formal studio, where Dr. Young now devotes most of her free time on weekends to painting landscapes in oil and watercolor that capture scenes from trips to Arizona, British Columbia, California, and Wyoming, as well as Greece and the Caribbean.

An end-of-residency celebration trip to hike in the Greek Isles produced paintings of Santorini that highlight the stark white, rounded domes of orthodox churches as well as sweeping balustrades and staircases in contrast to the azure sea.

A three-week sailing trip from Virginia to the Bahamas on a 36-foot sailing craft led to a series of works tracing the changeability of the ocean. One of Dr. Young's works depicts gently rolling waves on dappled blue water, while another displays a threatening gray and heaving sea. *Atlantic Sunset* presents a hazy sun on the horizon as it projects a slim trail of yellow dancing across whitecaps.

Dr. Young draws parallels between surgery and painting. To her, a plastic surgery procedure is like an art project because they both involve artistic



*A Small Offering* (top) and *Winter Wave* by Dr. Young.

judgment and a critical eye. "When I'm doing a breast reduction on a woman with large, pendulous breasts, I have to constantly step back in the operating room and look at what I'm doing to see if it's right for the patient," she says. The same is true of her painting. She has to stand back and scrutinize an artwork to see if it is true to the subject and her inner vision.

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Both endeavors and their results produce a great deal of satisfaction for Dr. Young. “I get a lot of joy out of completing a painting,” she says. “It’s the same feeling when you complete an operation that you think hits the mark and looks great. It’s a similar sense of accomplishment.” She also enjoys recognition from the Pacific Art League in Palo Alto and an art gallery in Truckee, CA (near Lake Tahoe), which regularly display her works, and the American Physicians Art Association, which awarded her a first prize for a moody oceanscape.

Dr. Young has, on occasion, painted on location, but plain air painting is challenging because light and colors change so quickly. She consequently uses a camera to take scores of photographs of interesting subjects and to find the best composition and lighting. She follows with sketches to carefully map out tonal values, outline areas of shadow and light, and plot the color patterns that form the main shapes; then, finally, she fills in the sketches with paints or watercolors.

Surgery and art involve some of the same sets of skills. Both operating and painting hone eye-hand coordination, and they prime the mind to seek out hidden characteristics and subtle shifts in substance, tone, and texture.

But the paths of plastic surgery and art also diverge. Surgery is unforgiving in its insistence on perfection. “There is no tolerance for mistakes, so as a surgeon, you have a strong sense of discipline and focus,” Dr. Young says. “There is much less pressure on the art, because it’s okay to make a mistake when painting and you can throw a painting away.”

Dr. Young observes, “Surgery is somewhat inventive. Surgeons need to be able to develop new techniques and new ways of looking at procedures to figure out how to close a wound or respond when something unusual pops up. But they don’t want to be too creative.” Surgeons, as a result, perform the same steps over and over within well-defined parameters until their actions are highly practiced. “There is a fine structure and education behind everything we do in the OR,” she notes. Painters can experiment with technique, choosing to make fine or broad brush strokes or add daubs or slivers of paint on a canvas. Painters also can alter perspective.

When painting an actual subject, such as the Grand Tetons, Dr. Young must be true to topogra-

phy. “I have to get the shapes of the mountains right because they are so recognizable,” she says. The same adherence to form can be true for painting figures. In *A Small Offering*, Dr. Young faithfully reproduces a photograph taken by her husband while he was on a mission to Nepal that shows a girl about to enter a Buddhist shrine with a small donation.

But given the artistic license, Dr. Young might choose to show the mountains at different times: in the waning hours of the day, when blues deepen and soften rough edges, or at midday, when yellows and browns bleach and etch them. She might show the heights of the mountain range as it hugs a plain at a distance or the depths of the valley floor as it meanders below.

Surgery is, by necessity, confined to the reality of a patient’s situation, and it can proceed only as far as a patient’s condition will allow. Surgeons do not create as much as refashion existing elements, whereas art creates an image that is completely new. Artists begin with a blank canvas and add colors and embellishments and often change reality. Dr. Young’s seascapes do not represent a single moment in time but take shapes from many different periods to add depth and interest, mood and motion. “With a painting, you can move things around, change things, and make the composition better. Art is more complicated than surgery because there are so many more variables,” Dr. Young says.

Dr. Young is currently working on a painting of a lighthouse located in the San Francisco area and soon will start a work detailing the ice formations she and her husband saw while taking a helicopter ride over a glacier in Canada. She is also preparing research papers on the long-term effects of large-volume liposuction on body weight and metabolism and a review of the 1,200 large-volume liposuction cases at California Pacific Medical Center and St. Mary’s Medical Center in San Francisco and the Plastic Surgery Center in Palo Alto, where she carries a full plastic surgery load.

Dr. Young continues to find that surgery and art feed one another: “Being an artist is making me a better surgeon, and being a surgeon has made me a better artist.” □

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