San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Features the Works of Bay Area Cancer Patients [SLIDESHOW]

UCSF's Art for Recovery gives cancer patients a creative outlet for their hope and grief. Now their artworks hang in a famous museum.

February 25, 2026 By Eva Lorenz

The Art for Recovery program at University of California San Francisco (UCSF) gives cancer patients and survivors a safe place to express the intense, complicated emotions that accompany a life-threatening illness. The program serves 200 patients a week via online and in-person art, music and writing workshops led by artists-in-residence, according to the San Francisco Chronicle. And now the creations of 30 UCSF cancer patients are hanging in an esteemed space known for its world-famous art—the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA).

Specifically, they're part of the exhibit Art for Recovery, which is housed on the second floor of SFMOMA on the walls of the cafe Steps, where they will remain on display through the spring. A mini profile of each artist and their cancer journey accompanies each piece.

Susanna Gershuny, a breast cancer survivor featured in the SFMOMA exhibit, created a piece out of the hair she lost during chemotherapy. She also wrote a book for her daughter explaining why she couldn't carry or bathe her.

View this post on Instagram

A post shared by Art for Recovery (@ucsf.artforrecovery)

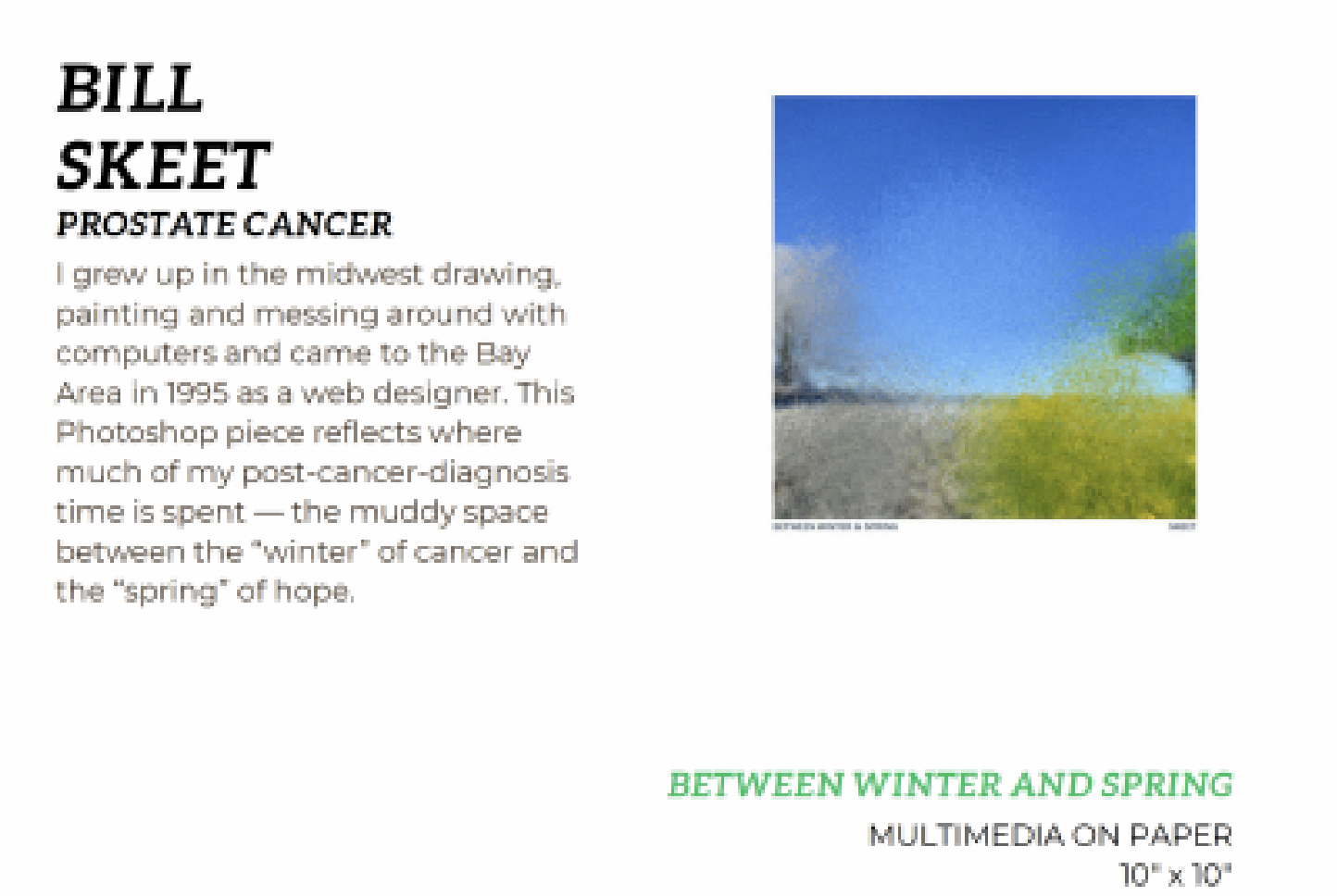
An Instagram post about her work mirrors the placard on display alongside her work; it reads:

“Susana’s art explores femininity, identity, and the quiet devastation of loss during her breast cancer treatment in her 30s. Using her own hair and traditional techniques like spinning and cross-stitch, Susana transforms grief into tactile memory — reclaiming what was lost.”

“Art allows you to take these complex emotions that you have inside and put them on paper,” Gershuny told ABC7 News. “When you look at what it is you created, the thing that you feel inside feels a little bit less scary to you.”

Similarly, the placard about Bill Skeet, who has prostate cancer and created a multimedia piece titled Between Winter and Spring, explains:

“I grew up in the Midwest drawing, painting and messing around with computers and came to the Bay Area in 1995 as a web designer. This Photoshop piece reflects where much of my post-cancer-diagnosis time is spent—the muddy space between the ‘winter’ of cancer and the ‘spring’ of hope.”



Sample of works from "Art for Recovery" at the San Francisco Museum of Modern ArtCourtesy of the UCSF Art for Recovery program and SFMOMA

"Typical talk therapy doesn't always work for people when they're in treatment because when you're processing the emotions of an illness, you're really processing grief," said program director Amy Van Cleve in an interview with ABC7 News. "People need a space that they can get back into their skin, that they can feel what's going on and let it move through them."

Artist, author and advocate Cindy Perlis launched Art for Recovery in 1988 in the HIV unit at Mount Zion Hospital to help patients express their innermost feelings. Mount Zion merged with UCSF in 1990, and Perlis expanded the program to include cancer patients, their families and health care workers.

"There aren't many places where patients can be supported through their initial diagnosis, through treatment and sometimes toward the end of their lives," said Perlis in her 2020 retirement letter. "Art for Recovery is a place where everyone will be seen and heard and where they will continue to find a community."

In related news, check out our Can Heal profile with artist Pauline Decarmo, who transforms

several bouts of cancer—and debilitating side effects—into paintings and a lifestyle that inspire.

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