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HUM 104

Dr. Wills

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Fooled by Familiarity

Following my viewing of the Van Every Gallery's most recent exhibition, *Alternative Medicine: Healing Remedies for Harmful Times*, I attended co-curator John Corso-Esquivel's subsequent lecture on pharmaceuticals and pill culture in contemporary art. In attending the lecture, I was provided with an in-depth analysis of the histories and cultural phenomena that served as subjects for many of the pieces in the gallery, as well as additional works with which to compare them. Corso-Esquivel's commentary was particularly helpful in understanding more about the origin of the exhibition and in elaborating on my previous analysis made in Campus Commentary #3. The sheer amount of information covered in the hour-long lecture was enough to write a book on, but here I will cover two sections of the presentation that really stood out to me: indicators of medical credibility and the reintegration of West African forms of healing with conventional medicine.

In his discussion of medical credibility, Course-Esquivel pointed to the medical cabinets featured in Damien Hirst's room-sized installation *Pharmacy* (1992) to demonstrate how the aesthetic of a practice communicates its validity. The medical cabinets included in the installation are supposed to emulate those of an operating pharmacy—simple white shelves supporting formations of prescription drugs (Tate). Except Hirst's arrangements of these prescription pill bottles follow no specific order; instead shelf contents are randomly distributed. Still, though, the simplicity and familiarity of the arrangements indicate credibility to viewers.

Hirst's mimicry fooled several viewers who had formerly worked in healthcare who had experience navigating pharmaceutical displays (Tate). They spent a significant amount of time trying to understand Hirst's organization of the shelves, when in actuality there was no organization (Tate). This speaks to society's reliance on familiarity as a way of determining credibility. Simplicity, cleanliness, and order—three key characteristics of conventional, or allopathic, medicine—are perceived as indicators of reliability and safety.

In the past century, the aesthetic of western medicine has changed, and with it our understanding of what proper medical care looks like. In his discussion of its evolution, Courso-Esquivel compared two styles of medicine—homeopathic and allopathic medicine. Allopathic medicine includes conventional, science-based standards of medicine practiced by doctors in the US and most other Western countries. Allopathic medicine calls for the diagnosis and treatment of diseases using evidence-based methods approved by the FDA. Homeopathic medicine, on the other hand, consists of an alternative, holistic system of medicine that was developed in the late 1700s in Germany where it is still prevalent. It has also spread to other parts of the world, including France, India, and Switzerland. Homeopathy uses highly diluted substances to stimulate the body's healing response; however, there is no evidence that this type of treatment actually works, which is why the FDA does not consider homeopathy to be a legitimate form of medicine.

These two approaches to medicine provide for entirely different aesthetics. Allopathic medicine stresses simplicity and cleanliness in the medical setting, clearly presented in Hirst's visualization of *Pharmacy* (1992), whereas homeopathic medicine is a bit more diverse in its curation of medical spaces, incorporating warmth and naturalness to provide comfort to the patient. In comparing the aesthetics of these two styles of medicine, Courso-Esquivel commented

on their corresponding propensity for empathy. Clinical veracity—an ethical principle in healthcare requiring clinicians to provide accurate, comprehensive, and honest information regarding diagnoses, treatments, and prognosis—manifests very differently in allopathic and homeopathic medicine’s respective spaces. There is a level of formality between allopathic doctors and patients that is not present in holistic medicine. For this reason, many feel that conventional medicine is not as conducive to true clinical veracity as homeopathic medicine where practitioners position the patient as a partner in their medical treatment rather than a subject. This same sense of superficiality, often disguised as efficiency, is resembled by the structures of allopathic medicine that we know to be familiar.

To reconcile this difference, Curso-Esquivel proposed integrating aesthetics of traditional medicine into the conventional medical space to improve patient comfort. He specifically promoted the incorporation of certain aspects of West African medicine, including the blending of physical, spiritual, and communal approaches to healing and the supplementation of natural remedies when available. Although the West African medical aesthetic might be unfamiliar to Western medical society, their implementation would likely foster a higher degree of empathy between providers and patients than the antiseptic feel of most Western practices. The West African emphasis on healing over short-term treatment would also benefit patients seeking more sustainable solutions. Ultimately, a change in the visual appearance and ambiance of Western medical facilities could lead to a change in patient satisfaction.

Works Cited

- Curso-Esquivel, John. "Pharmaceuticals and Pill Culture in Contemporary Art: Pharmaesthetics." Book talk, 30 March 2026, Davidson College, Semans Lecture Hall.
- Tate. (n.d.). *Explore Damien Hirst's Pharmacy*. Tate. Retrieved April 26, 2026, from <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hirst-pharmacy-t07187/explore-damien-hirsts-pharmacy>