

# ComfortZone

## ART

## Cancer patients draw on hope for 'We Heal'

By Diti Kohli

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

In a year of pandemic-induced trauma and isolation, Nora Valdez wanted to create a physical representation of healing. The Boston-based Argentinian artist is the brains behind "We Heal," a project that encouraged local cancer patients — many of whom are immigrants — to answer two questions: What images, words, people, and foods bring comfort? And what inspires and brings hope?

She started collecting the answers in workshops and video interviews in April. Most of the 61 total participants attended virtual meetings where they crafted collages, mandalas, poems, and personal prayer flags in response to Valdez's prompts. Seven patients sat down for in-depth conversations with Valdez and an accompanying video artist to talk about their individual healing journeys. In the end, Valdez integrated their responses with family photos, favorite landscapes, and other meaningful images.

The result? A 22-page picture book and 25-minute video presentation that debuts Friday.

"The most important part of the project was the time we got together, even if it was through the computer," Valdez said.

"We Heal" is a collaboration with patients from the Cancer & Sickle Cell Support Programs at Boston Medical Center, patients from the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, and the Urbano Project arts and education nonprofit in Jamaica Plain. Urbano Project youth participated in much the same way as the patients, offering up stories and collages inspired by their own lives. The project was funded by a New England Foundation for the Arts (NEFA) Creative City Boston grant, as well as the Barr and Boston foundations.

A pre-pandemic version would have worked with these same participants, but looked significantly different. Valdez, who typically focuses on 3-D and sculptural art, initially set out to create three home-like installations for a Boston Medical Center waiting room. The "walls" of these houses would have been plastered with collages and drawings patients assembled in-person with Valdez.

Instead, the final product landed far beyond Valdez's comfort zone. It's unlike any of the work she has shown at the Boston Sculptors Gallery or Fitchburg Art Museum.

"We had to transform this project the way we had to transform our lives," she said in a phone interview last week.

Still, Valdez said "We Heal" was a source of light in the darkest parts of this year. "Usually, I like to have my projects look very professional. For this, many people were on their own, and I could not control anything," she said. "But many of the workshops were just an hour and a half of laughter. And that proves how art can be an amazing therapy."

Valdez will present the book and video components and also answer questions in a Zoom event Friday at 6:30 p.m. Register in advance via eventbrite.com. The book and video will be available a short time later via [www.urbanoproject.org](http://www.urbanoproject.org).

Diti Kohli can be reached at [diti.kohli@globe.com](mailto:diti.kohli@globe.com). Follow her on Twitter at [@ditikohli](https://twitter.com/ditikohli).



Four patients recounted their healing journeys for the video portion of "We Heal."



## This artist wants everyone to 'look up'

Cicely Carew's Pru installation fills viewers with wonder and light

By Natachi Onwuamaegbu

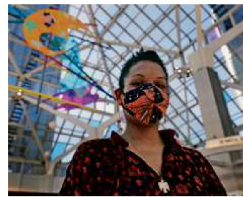
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

For her new art installation at the Prudential Center, Cambridge artist Cicely Carew hopes visitors will "look up" — to both her colorful new sculptures and a future of possibility beyond the pandemic.

"During the winter months, we're used to

looking down and walking very quickly just to one point to another," said Carew, who unveiled "Ambrosia" Monday at the Pru. "I'm hoping [this] reminds people just to look up, look to the light and remember that we're underneath this giant blanket of possibility."

The installation, on view through June 30, is the result of a collaboration between Boston Properties, the real estate company that owns the Pru, and public art curators from the nonprofit Now + There. "Ambrosia" consists of eight sculptures suspended over different corners of the space, from Boylston Street to Center Court and over by Huntington Avenue. Each element was constructed from a mix of materials including spray-painted mesh, tulle, and screens. When visitors stand under one of the pieces, they're meant to be bathed in light — it might be turquoise, magenta, or green depending on time of day. "As the light changes, you can see that transformation," Carew said in a phone interview Monday. "You're staying in that space of wonder. The inspiration behind the piece was togetherness and center-



PHOTOS BY DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Cambridge artist Cicely Carew unveiled her "Ambrosia" installation Monday at the Prudential Center. Her eight colorful sculptures are suspended over different corners of the space.

ing joy in a time of separation, anxiety, and uncertainty."

Carew began work on the site-specific commission in July, amid the loneliness and heartbreak surrounding COVID-19 and grief over the killing of George Floyd. Creating a space where people could meditate on loss was important, she said.

The name "Ambrosia" has little to do with the original Greek "food of the gods" definition, Carew added. "It's an offering to life. It's an offering to the creative spirit. It's an offering and a celebration."

The commission has been a blessing for Carew, both personally and professionally. Most of her work had been two-dimensional until now, with her largest project weighing a

couple hundred pounds. "Ambrosia" features 3.5 tons of material and spans 2,000 square feet of space. "This thing, which was a wonderful challenge, also kept changing throughout," Carew said. "The process is very much like trial and error. When things changed I learned to just roll with it."

And when visitors walk into the Pru and find themselves bathed in colorful light, Carew hopes they feel the same joy she felt while creating these sculptures. "Ambrosia" is simultaneously a constant play in the air and a moment to pause — just to be with what is and have a moment of meditation," she said.

Natachi Onwuamaegbu can be reached at [natachi.onwuamaegbu@globe.com](mailto:natachi.onwuamaegbu@globe.com).

## BOOKS

## In her latest book, Lois Lowry finds 'something human and personal' in mass tragedy

By Betsy Groban

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

While isolating at home this pandemic year, author Lois Lowry published her 47th book, "On the Horizon: World War II Reflections" is an extraordinary work in verse for kids and adults about the bombings of Pearl Harbor and Hiroshima, and Lowry's connection to these historic events. We caught up with Lowry, 83, at her home in Maine to ask about the book and its timely reminders about empathy and the ties that bind us.

**Q.** I believe this is your first book in verse. How did you decide to use verse this time?

**A.** I've come to realize that books seem to tell you how they want to be written. This one came to me in vignettes, in images, not as a narrative with a "plot." I have a shelf of poetry collections and almost every day I open a book at random. ... So poetry as a form was there waiting for me, when the topic beckoned me to it.

**Q.** How did you first discover your personal intersection with these historic events?

**A.** As a child growing up in the pre-television days,

getting out the projector and showing home movies was always a treat. There was my sister in her Halloween clown costume one again; there I was, on the beach with my visiting grandmother, laughing because the breeze was tugging at my hat. Such inconsequential scenes. But they were our lives, played out again and again.

At one point, I had the old films transferred to videotape and showed some of the scenes to friends. One of them — an Annapolis graduate, a retired submarine commander — pointed out what I had never seen before: that there, on the horizon, behind me as I played on the beach in 1940, was the outline of a ship, shrouded in mist. Recognizing the silhouette, my friend said, "That's the Arizona" [the ship sunk by the Japanese at Pearl Harbor].

The room fell silent. All of us knew what that represented. And I became haunted by the juxtaposition of the laughing child, unaware of the tragedy unfolding behind me. But it was a long time before I figured out, some years later, what to do with it.



MATTHEW MCKER

**Q.** The way you humanize several of the people who died during this awful time feels especially relevant to the pandemic. It demonstrates the difficulty in mourning so many people. But "On the Horizon" helps do just that. Was that your intention?

**A.** I think it was my intention without my formally recognizing it. I'm aware of it now, so often, when I see a montage of "those we've lost" on the news. And there they are: the individuals, their smiles, their stories; and we feel

a desperate sadness, a sense of loss that we don't muster when we simply read the horrific numbers. When I found that there was an actual list of the names of those 1,100-plus young men on the Arizona, and ways to dig into their backgrounds — and then, as I expanded the book to include the Hiroshima victims and read their individual stories — it made something human and personal out of the vast impersonal concept of war.

**Q.** I know you get a lot of mail from readers. Can you single out a specific response to "On the Horizon"?

**A.** In the book, there is an account of a sailor

named James Myers who died at Pearl Harbor and left two little boys, Jimmy and Gordon. I came across a newspaper interview with [James's] mother in Missouri. She had already lost her two other sons: one in the military, the other struck by lightning as he brought the cows in from pasture. To the interviewer, Mary Meyers said, "I had bad luck with all my sons." The heartbreaking stoicism of that woman's statement stayed with me and I used it in the book. Then one day I got an e-mail from a man in his 80s who told me, "I am Gordon." I was stunned. Across those vast distances of time and geography, the little fatherless boy and the laughing child on the beach had found each other.

Interview was condensed and edited. Betsy Groban is a columnist for Publishers Weekly Children's Bookshelf and has worked in book publishing, public broadcasting, and arts advocacy.



HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS