***PARSONS******JOURNALISM PIECE***

***PERSONAL INTERVIEW WITH NICKI MULLER CONDUCTED BY MUSICIAN***

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***November 28 2011  Nicki Muller: Bone to Brain***

*On November 9th, the walls of a first floor corridor in the NYU Langone Medical Center were lined with images of symmetrically smudged paint, resembling the right and left lobe of the brain. The corridor led to an open room, decorated with dark stretching canvasses, black sculptures of the human head and glass cases displaying an open handwritten diary. In the center of the room stood Nicki Muller, a twenty-year-old fine art student at Parsons, the artist behind the exhibition. Wide-eyed and smiling, Nicki spent the evening welcoming friends and family to her Bone to Brain art exhibition.*

*The human brain is central to the artwork on show and reflects Nicki’s fascination with the organ during the time that this artwork created. All of the artwork on show was created by Nicki in the months before she was given a diagnosis that would halt her propelling path to success; a road block in the form of a high grade glioma; a malignant tumor; stage four brain cancer.*

*Both Nicki and the artwork are a representation of this recent health struggle; her slight frame, her thinning hair, the curved line behind her left ear from the surgeon’s knife. At the launch of the exhibition, Nicki beamed with demure and delicate poise, but delicate is no word to describe Ms. Muller.*

*Seven months since her diagnosis, Nicki believes the artwork she made in the months before being diagnosed was a message from her subconscious-self of her then unannounced illness.*

*“One day I got up and printed out brain scans off the computer,” she says, sitting in the Lang Café, a wooly hat concealing the traces of hair loss and medical utensils. “I printed them out and never went back to them".*

*Despite not knowing of her brain tumor, Nicki did notice a growing dissonance in herself and her life. Her friendships were under strain and she felt increasing tension between herself and her long-term boyfriend.*

*“Everything was going wrong” she says, “and that’s not normal for me! Things always work out for me.”*

*This was reflected in her artwork.*

*“I’m usually a happy person” she insists, laughing, “I love color, so why would I all of a sudden start creating art with no color in it? It has to have some meaning.”*

*In the two weeks before her diagnosis Nicki went into a state of artistic overdrive.*

*“They were two of the most interesting weeks of my life,” she says.*

*One week before her diagnosis, she created a performance video. In the video Nicki lies on the ground of an almost empty room, dressed in a hospital gown. Medical documents line the walls and the camera zooms in on the word “chemotherapy”. The entirety of the video is accompanied by a haunting silence. It is perhaps the most overt expression of Nicki’s obsession with the medical world, and her vision of herself at its epicenter.*

*The performance piece proved to be a premonition. A week later, Nicki logged onto her computer and found that she could not read the symbols on the screen. These symbols were in fact the letters of the alphabetic. Her mother took her to the hospital immediately and a series of tests revealed the brain tumor. “I came back from the MRI scan and the whole room was just silent,” Nicki remembers, shaking her head softly.*

*Nicki is currently taking a course of chemotherapy to kill any cells left behind when the tumor was removed.*

*“I have to take these big horse pills” she says “but I can’t complain. This treatment has been much easier than last time.”*

*Last time refers to eight years ago. Last time is the Bone of “Bone to Brain.” It is the medical documents on the wall of the performance video. At age thirteen, Nicki was diagnosed with bone cancer, and spent the best part of a year bedridden with the sickening side effects of intravenous chemotherapy.*

*Cancer was a battle that Nicki had fought and won, a victory that propelled her into the fiercely creative young women that she is today.*

*Her recent brain tumor anchored itself at the start of what Nicki had hoped would be an exciting summer. An internship at the MOMA, a new apartment, a part-time job at Prohibit as well as work at Milk Photography Studios lay in the months ahead. But with her diagnosis came an immediate shift in priorities and her summer plans were scrapped.*

*However, Nicki is no self-indulgent “sick girl”. Since her diagnosis less than seven months ago, she has undergone brain surgery, returned to college and her BAFA degree of fine art and psychology, launched an art exhibition, participated in the Sisters on the Runway fashion show, and continues to update both her won website, (*[*nickimuller.com*](http://nickimuller.com/)*) as well as an online blog for fashion photographer Nigel Barker (*[*beatyequation.com*](http://beatyequation.com/)*) with artwork and writing.*

*Nicki’s ambition, she admits, is a result of her teenage battle with cancer.*

*“I spent a year in bed,” she says, “Why would I relax?”*

*During this year Nicki grew close to a group of girls her age who were also battling cancer. Of that group of girls, Nicki is the only one alive today.*

*“I always asked myself “why?” she says. “Why did I survive? I have all this guilt about that. Being the only one.” she pauses. “But I carry them around with me. I think of them a lot.”    Nicki leaves her hat off and shakes out her hair.*

*According to the National Cancer Institute, one in every two men was diagnosed with cancer between 2004 and 2008 while two in every five women were diagnosed with cancer.*

*“Cancer is such a taboo word” she says, “but it shouldn’t be! Everyone has it!”*

*This is why Nicki has chosen to share the artwork in her Bone to Brain exhibition; why she keeps a public online diary of her ongoing battle with cancer for the second time, why she was filled with a sense of achievement when a young medical student stopped to ask her about her art and her cancer when he stumbled upon her exhibition.*

*“That’s what I want,” she says, “for people to ask me questions.”*

*Admiration for Nicki is widespread amongst the people in her life.*

*“Nicki is one of those people who takes a bad situation and creates something positive out of it,” said Dan Zolot, a friend from college.*

*Putting her hat back on, Nicki leaves the café and begins her journey back to her parents’ Long Island home where she has been commuting from for the semester.*

*“I told my mum that I had to return to school otherwise my brain would have turned to mush” she says.*

*While she stands by her decision, she admits it’s been a struggle. She mentions more than once her frustration at scoring 23% on a recent psychology exam. She hopes to do better in her final, but she is still struggling with memory; she found it difficult to remember peoples’ names for a period of a time. And while she probably wouldn’t allow herself the liberty, given all she has achieved, and all she has her sights on, surely this 23% can be overlooked.*

***Written by: Sorcha Richardson***