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HUM 104

2 March 2026

Remedying Invisibility in *Alternative Medicine*

Too much of one thing can often render it invisible. Matthew Salesses, author of *Craft in the Real World*, argues that an object's visibility varies from culture to culture. The dialogue tags "say" and "ask," for example, are typically only invisible to American readers, who have learned to ignore them because of their frequent appearance in literature. This concept of cultural invisibility is applicable not only to the English language, but also to the pharmaceutical industry in the United States. In *Alternative Medicine: Healing Remedies for Harmful Times*, co-curators John Corso-Esquivel and Lia Rose Newman explain that in American culture, "pills are so routine they barely register." However, they refuse to stop at this acknowledgement. If invisibility is confined to the boundaries of a certain culture, then highlighting diverse and marginalized voices may be an optimal solution for bringing a topic back into focus. In *Alternative Medicine*, Corso-Esquivel and Newman display the work of three artists who have a strong focus on personal, individual, and community cultures, allowing diverse perspectives to illuminate the effects of pharmaceuticals in the US. By attempting to eliminate pills' invisibility, the curators encourage a thoughtful and grounded approach to medicine in their artists and visitors.

In his artwork *Force Field*, Texas-born Hugh Hayden counters the pharmaceutical industry's impersonality by exploring the overlap between his own identity and his prescriptions. On a sheet of lined paper, he arranges a collection of his daily pills—"an antihistamine, hair-loss

treatment, and HIV preventative”—into the Texas state flag. With pills as his medium, Hayden asks what role his medications play in forming his identity. At the same time, he reminds viewers and himself that he is more than a collection of pills. In this way, Hayden manages to personalize an industry that prioritizes prescriptions over clients. As a viewer, I particularly appreciated the addition of the lined paper. It reminded me of past school assignments in which I was instructed to write about myself, causing the artwork to evoke childhood and maturation.

Like Hayden, Susan Chen explores culture and identity in her artwork, but she does so on a larger scale. In *Plan B: A Discussion*, Chen opposes the political marginalization of women by including several of them in a discussion about the Plan B pill. Chen created this large, colorful painting in 2024, just two years after the Supreme Court’s decision to overturn landmark ruling *Roe v. Wade*. During a time of fear and helplessness for women in the United States, Chen interviewed “over a hundred different individuals in the studio” in order to turn the “often stigmatized [Plan B pill] into a catalyst for dialogue.” By first recognizing the experiences of various women through personal interviews and by later representing their perspectives on a canvas, Chen brings out the voices of those at risk of being politically silenced. She reminds viewers that the reversal of *Roe v. Wade* impacts women of all backgrounds. The women’s somber faces and distinct stances clue viewers in to what each of these women might have to say; Chen ensures that no woman in this painting is subjected to invisibility.

In *The Alchemy of Healing* and *The Way We Heal*, Renee Stout further broadens the focus of the exhibit by highlighting the experiences of entire communities with pharmaceuticals. According to the museum label, “[Stout’s] work draws on the experiences of diasporic Black communities across the North Atlantic world.” A creative depiction of a human heart, a list entitled “Historic Uses of Nature’s Herbs,” and a more abstract image on lined paper—not unlike

Hayden's college-ruled sheet—all display the intersection of new and traditional methods of healing. Although Stout's focus is considerably wider than that of Hayden, who makes art about himself, or of Chen, who interviews individuals, she is just as effective at personalizing the clinical culture of healing in the United States. Her artwork reminds viewers that healing is closely linked to cultural practices. By linking diasporic Black communities to contemporary healthcare, Stout brings a marginalized perspective to a conversation dominated by one view of pharmaceuticals.

In its discussion of the invisibility of prescription drugs in the US, *Alternative Medicine's* greatest strength is its variety of perspectives. On differing scales, Hayden, Chen, and Stout demonstrate culture's power to stimulate conversation about issues that are commonly overlooked. From these artists, visitors to the exhibit learn that medicine is not constrained to the solitary act of swallowing a pill; instead, it can mean learning from one's community and building a strong sense of identity.

On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized information regarding this work, I have followed and will continue to observe all regulations regarding it, and I am unaware of any violation of the Honor Code by others.

Works Cited

“Alternative Medicine: Healing Remedies for Harmful Times.” Van Every Gallery, Davidson College, 11 February–13 April 2026.

Chen, Susan. “Plan B.” *Uffner & Liu*, 2024,

<https://uffnerliu.com/exhibitions/144-susan-chen-plan-b/>.

Salesses, Matthew. *Craft in the Real World: Rethinking Fiction Writing and Workshopping*. Catapult, 2021.