


[Home](#)
[About the Artist](#)
[Galleries](#)
[Classes](#)
[Artist Statement](#)
[Biography](#)
[Contact](#)

Articles

Healing Art

By Robert Sberna

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As an artist with Argentinian roots, Mario Kujawski has devoted much of his career to the creation of works that express the rich culture of South America. Now the retired Kent State University art instructor is using his work for a much more personal purpose.

In 2002, Kujawski was diagnosed with male breast cancer – a disease that afflicts about 1,450 men each year. After undergoing surgery on his left pectoral, Kujawski resumed his artwork. "I soon found myself making art with the express purpose of healing myself," he says. "Through my art, I found that I was able to tap into the emotional and spiritual aspect of healing."

A Beachwood resident, Kujawski spends most days at his live/work studio in the renovated Tower Press Building in downtown, Cleveland. For many years, his artistic medium has been paper, which he shapes into abstract conceptual sculptures. Noting that paper is the "most humble material with noble aspirations," Kujawski explains that his fascination with the medium stems from his childhood experiences. "In Argentina, even crowns fit for a king are made of paper, as well as pinatas and flowers."

Over the past two years, his artwork has included a series of what he calls "prayer sticks." In creating the prayer sticks, Kujawski first fashions a sculpture from natural materials such as tree bark, branches, bird's nests, stones, leather and wood. He then writes a prayer on a strip of handmade paper. The paper is rolled and attached to the sculpture, typically on a section of tree branch. Many of the finished pieces are taken to a foundry and cast in bronze.

Explaining the idea behind the prayer sticks, he says, "To me, trees are very special. They are symbolic of life. My wish is always to live, so I attach my hope to branches. In that way, the life force of the tree and my own life force can mingle and help me to transcend my illness."

Kujawski, who earned art degrees from Brown University and Ohio State University, notes that "when you're at school, you don't usually learn about art as a function of healing. But in many cultures, art has a long history of helping to rejuvenate people."

Kujawski credits Dr. Robert Shenk of University Hospitals' Ireland Cancer Center for the skillful surgery that has enabled him to continue his life's work. Despite removing a large portion of Kujawski's left breast, Shenk preserved much of the muscle tissue and nerves. "He knew that I was an artist and that I was left-handed, so he did everything he could to make sure that I could still do my art," Kujawski says.

While Kujawski says he doesn't consider himself vain, he concedes that he was somewhat embarrassed to reveal his chest for about a year after his surgery. "Let's put it this way: I didn't go swimming for a long time."

As an artist, it doesn't matter if I have muscles or not, but when you're missing a part of your anatomy, it's natural to feel ashamed to go out in public."

Kujawski adds that despite the prevalence of breast cancer support organizations, he was reluctant to participate. "If you're a guy, what kind of support group are you going to join? You're probably not going to want to be the only man in the group."

Kujawski eventually found a support network at the Gathering Place, a nonprofit, community-based wellness center in Beachwood. His self-devised

[Back to About the Artist Here >>](#)

[Back to Reviews Here >>](#)

treatment regimen also includes Reiki, acupuncture and yoga. "I use a lot of other sources of healing that are not usually thought of in the Western modality," he adds.

As in many cases of male breast cancer, Kujawski's first symptom was a small growth in his pectoral. And like many males, he ignored it.

"When men discover a lump, it's not uncommon for them to do nothing about it," says Dr. Katherine Lee of the Cleveland Clinic's Breast Center. "They think it's going to go away."

Because the disease often presents itself as a lump, Lee says that any abnormality should be examined immediately. "But there's a problem because a breast lump in men is not talked about. Women are more proactive about getting evaluated, but months will go by before a man comes in to have a lump examined. And we have noticed that lumps have grown in size because men have delayed getting treatment."

According to the American Cancer Society, breast cancer is about 100 times more common in women than in men. The higher rate among women is most likely due to their increased number of breast cells and the constant exposure to the growth-promoting effects of estrogen.

Nevertheless, a man's breast cells can undergo cancerous changes. "There are some conditions that can cause this," Lee says. She explains that Klinefelter's syndrome, a rare genetic condition, can lead to an increased risk of men developing breast cancer.

Obesity is also a risk factor, perhaps because of a link between fat cells and higher levels of estrogen. "And family history is a big issue," Lee says. "Breast cancer genes can be inherited."

Lee says that incidence of male breast cancer seems to be increasing, most likely because of higher rates of obesity in our population. "Men who have more breast tissue should be getting breast exams. It can be embarrassing, but it needs to be done."

According to information from the American Cancer Society, the survival outlook for men and women with breast cancer is about the same. For both male and female breast cancer, one of the keys to successful treatment is early diagnosis.

"I knew I had a lump, but I just didn't pay attention to it," Kujawski recalls. "Eventually I asked my wife, Adina, about it. She had just read an article about male breast cancer, so she suggested that I get it checked, especially because I have a history of skin cancer."

Noting he has not had a recurrence of breast cancer in the past two years, Kujawski says, "When you have cancer, you have tremendous anxiety because you're dealing with unknowns such as 'Will it come back?' and 'What if it comes back?'"

Having lived in various South American countries as well as Europe and several cities in the United States, Kujawski is accustomed to traveling. He says that he views his illness, treatment and recovery as just another journey. "My illness is another chapter in my life. A very short and very recent chapter."