

Mary Frances Ivey:

Good afternoon and thank you very much all of you for coming out to the Nerman today to talk about Elizabeth Layton. What could be a more interesting and meaningful subject for us to get into today? I want to thank the Nerman staff who have been an absolute joy and privilege to work with. This exhibition, not because of my work, but because of theirs has been beautifully organized. It has been beautifully designed and installed and beautifully programmed, so thank you very much. So let's get into Elizabeth Layton. Elizabeth Layton, a native of Wellsville, Kansas began making art in 1977 at the age of 68 when she enrolled in a drawing class, an introductory level class at Ottawa University. And yes, please do let me know if you can't hear me well. I can be a little soft-spoken. So I really do want to know that.

Her instructor directed students to draw themselves according to the blind contour technique. And so these are just a few examples of some of Layton's earliest drawings. The two on the left here, she did that first fall of her one and only drawing class at Ottawa University. In the blind contour technique, blind refers to not looking at the drawing paper or you're drawing utensil, but looking only at the subject you're drawing. So in Layton's case, looking often at a mirror at her own face when she's drawing a self-portrait and contour referring to the perimeter, the borders of a subject, using hard outlines rather than volume and a modeling to give contour to an object. And so even after Layton stopped using the blind aspect of blind contour drawing, that instruction really stuck with her. And she maintained a real interest and I would say, exploration and innovation with line throughout her work. And this small amount of training was the beginning of a 16-year art practice that won her international attention, critical acclaim and a significant place in contemporary American art.

Beginning that semester, she drew nearly every day until the end of her life, producing hundreds of images. And as Layton made art, she found that the manual effort of drawing as well as the mental and emotional labor of processing her subject matter helped her to relieve the pain of mental illness that she'd been enduring and eased the grip of depression. She described drawing as art therapy and she credited with healing and restoring her mental health. That same year, 1977, a reporter for the Ottawa Herald, Mr. Don Lambert, visited the student union of Ottawa University in search of a beat. He saw an exhibition of student drawings there, and immediately was taken with two drawings that he called troubled and troubling. And I want to go back to the previous slide to show you that one of those first drawings that he saw was *On the Death of a Child* in the center of the slide there.

He contacted the artist, who was Layton, and asked to interview her and she eventually agreed with the condition that he write about her art and not her. And that began a very close friendship and professional partnership that continued until Layton's death in 1993. Layton was not interested in publicity, recognition, or profiting from her work, but Mr. Lambert made the case to her that her art would resonate with people and he encouraged her to allow him to share it with the community, arts organizations, and museums.

And that was the beginning of Grandma Layton becoming a cultural phenomenon appearing in national popular media covered by highly respected art critics and collected by institutions such as the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, American Folk Art Museum, as well as nearly every art museum in Kansas and Missouri. I like to say that we live in the capital of Elizabeth Layton studies here. And as her work reached larger and larger audiences, she made underrepresented groups of people such as older adults more visible. She brought humanity and dignity to stigmatized experiences like denouncing the homophobia projected onto HIV and AIDS. And she raised questions about challenging and taboo subjects. For example, how are residents of assisted living facilities treated and what are death and dying like?

I like to say that it would be easier to come up with a handful of things that didn't interest Layton than it would be to name everything that she was curious about. And as you'll see moving through the exhibition, Layton had an astonishing knowledge of current events locally, nationally, and globally, as well as the fantastical imagination. And as much as her reference points and her imagery varies, one of the through lines in her art is her interest in self-portraiture to convey her ideas and imagine unfamiliar experiences. I want to share with you the organization of the exhibition by looking at the front facing wall, that floating wall in the Kansas Focus Gallery downstairs of the museum. And these are the two first images that you might see as you enter the show.

I like to think of Censored and Masks as signposts for the exhibition that indicate to us what Layton was interested in and sum up how she wanted to use her work. I also think that they're a helpful way of kind of helping us to learn, if you will, not just what she looked like, but how she liked to represent herself in self-portraiture. For example, there are a few kind of visual themes that I really enjoy finding in most of her images and help me to kind of think about whether she's thinking of her own likeness very literally or more imaginatively.

So for example, on the left side of her cheek, there are a couple of pretty distinct liver spots that she represents over and over again in herself that are not sort of imaginatively and put in at random. They're at the same spots each time. The furrowed lines in her brow when she presses her brows together become this set of parallel lines in a V that I just love to see as well as particular spots on her hand, just for example. But I'm sure as we go through the exhibition, you'll find your own favorite features.

Censored in particular references both the general censorship of artists that can happen as well as a couple of contemporary news items. In 1989, the same year of Layton's drawing, Congress passed laws that limited the projects that the National Endowment for the Arts could support after they gave funding to a couple of controversial artists work that year. Some of you may be familiar or remember Piss Christ by Andre Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe's exhibition. I'll think of the title in a few minutes. So in the upper left corner of the, so censorship was hot on the cultural conversation at that time, but also really in front of Layton's mind as an artist.

So I want to show you in the top left corner here of the slide, she's referencing a billboard project by Kansas City artist Tilly Woodward that went up in 1989 along I-70. And this particular little vignette looks very much like the billboard that Woodward put up in Concordia, Missouri. And it references a Nazi soldier hanging two Russian resistance fighters. There was so much public outrage about the violence of the image and some folks sort of interpreted it as an inverse event, as an antisemitic image that it was covered over very promptly after it went up.

And then along the left side of the image there, and this reference point has a few layers, so bear with me if you will. This is a ripped up drawing representing a statue of the Goddess Liberty that was erected in a pro-democracy protest in Tiananmen Square by art students. And the Chinese military destroyed it. And so Layton's there thinking about that intimate connection between democracy and freedom of expression. And then in the bottom right she's quoting who was then the director of the American Civil Liberties Union Ira Glasser. And the quote is "The first exception to the First Amendment," which as we know is the freedom of press and speech among other things, "Will not be the last." And these are just a few examples. This image is beautifully packed with all different sorts of reference points about censorship and the political power, the liberatory power of expressing ourselves.

In her house dress, which appears in so many of her drawings and in photos of her as well, which I think in gray scale tends to look a little bit like the type of jumpsuit that you see incarcerated people wear in prison. And I think that's an intentional visual pun. Her hands are tied, her mouth is gagged or taped over, and you can see her pencil between her fingertips there. And she's decked out with buttons expressing all the different values of the drawing that have been X-ed through. They're censored. And so

Layton's thinking not just about current events there, but also her role as an artist and what her work could do.

And then the next drawing that's on the front facing wall of the exhibition Masks, she's taking a much more personal approach. So in the center of the drawing there is her own face, sort of the real Layton if you will. And then she's surrounded by sort of a cloud of other visages that reference her too. So we can see how they're kind of curling at the corners there. We can see the white blank reverse of several of the masks. They're on handles. Some of them have elastic cords around the back. And so in each of these ways, she's making clear to us that these are the masks that we put on to sort of either hide how we're feeling or that is peeking through.

And then in the pocket of her shirt dress there, I don't know if you can see that there are two prescription drug bottles. One of them reads RX up and the other reads Rx down referring to psychoactive drugs known as sometimes uppers and downers. And then in the top left of the drawing, this is my own sort of read, I will tell you that Elizabeth Layton is a chapter of my forthcoming dissertation in which I'm really maybe even obsessed with contemporary artists thinking about age and aging. But so here in the top upper left, I think of her as sort of thinking through beauty conventions that are expected of women. In this mask, she's wearing much more conspicuous makeup. Her skin tone is a little darker, like she's wearing foundation or base makeup. She has on lipstick and a little eyeliner accentuated mole as well as eye makeup.

And then in the top left several of the different sort of beauty ideals for women, impossibly big eyes, long eyelashes, a tight small button nose and big lips. All of these characteristics make Layton's features appear doll like and as if she's a mannequin, no longer even a living person. So all of that is to say that here she's thinking about dispositions, moods, expressions, as well as beauty expectations and relating all of those ideas to her own experience with mental illness and seeking mental health care.

Turning now to the back wall, the reverse side of that floating wall in the Kansas Focus Gallery. If I could nickname this wall, I would call it grandma? Because here she's thinking very deliberately about self-image, particularly as it relates to how people sometimes perceive old women. And so on the left here in Aged to Perfection, which is a double portrait alongside her husband Glenn, they're proudly wearing buttons. And I imagine many of us know Layton was a button collector.

So Glenn's reads, "Aged to perfection," and Layton's reads, "How dare you presume I'd rather be young," which I just love. And so you can see here that maybe not Glenn, but that Layton herself is really gleeful. She has this joyful, maybe even kind of self-satisfied expression. And so with these striking messages on the pins and what I think of with the sort of saturated color of this drawing, really doubling down on all the visible characteristics that people associate with aging, varicose veins, translucent skin, darkened liver spots, wrinkles, all of these things, she's really embracing as much as possible with the color palette here. All of these different things sort of reveling in and having delight and satisfaction in what it looks like and feels like to be older.

And then on the right, maybe some similar issues but from a different perspective in I Am Loved. You can see on the breast of the wedding dress that she's holding up to her body there, there's a pin, a real physical pin stuck into the drawing. So I look forward to your seeing that downstairs that reads, "I Am Loved". And again here really emphasizing her features, her wrinkles, her body, the shapeliness of it all. And then as if you hadn't gotten the message that the dress no longer fits, she's wearing this black slip behind the dress to really emphasize the fact that her body is significantly wider than this tiny wedding dress. And so Layton in her interest in self-image, is very aware of the way that people perceive large women and very, very critical of fat phobia and diet culture in her work. And so all of that combined with her ideas about aging is brought to bear in this drawing.

I want to share with you on the note about Grandma and the idea of Grandma Layton, something that Mr. Lambert shared with me that was so insightful. He said this a few years ago, but it stuck with me and maybe completely reframed how I think about Layton's work. He said, "She came into class at the age of 68 and everybody else was 19 and they started calling her Grandma. So she signed a works Grandma. But here's the thing about that. What she came to understand was that Grandma Layton was the woman in the picture, whereas she was still Elizabeth Layton. And so she would refer to the woman in the drawings, not as herself, but as she." So I want to take you to the back wall of the exhibition in which we're thinking about Layton's interest in, interest is an understatement, tremendous familiarity with current events and history.

So want to hone in on one image in particular, The Sneeze and what I want to talk to you about, I feel like a laugh is an appropriate response to this drawing. What I want to hone in here with The Sneeze is this idea of the several layers, the several points of entry that Layton gives us for thinking about her work. On the one hand we have the delight, the sort of satisfaction and fun and joy of piecing through this image and finding all the delightful visual information. I love the BENGAY cream down here on the foreground, on the coffee table. I don't know if we have any heating pad fans in the room behind Layton, a Lipton tea bag in her pocket, the humidifier in the background. I mean, we could spend this entire gallery talk, finding all of the anecdotal details in this drawing. Also, about the joy or maybe not so joyful, the hum drum of sharing everything with your spouse, including germs and a cold, as well as a much more profound meaning.

I don't know if you're noticing that in the foreground, all of the oranges here, there's an overall citrus theme to the drawing. And these read California, importantly California and not Florida. That same year, former Miss Oklahoma, Anita Bryant was the face of Florida oranges. I don't know if some of you remember that campaign. And she was also the face of the Save Our Children campaign, which really villainized queer communities. And so LGBTQIA organizers of the time called for a boycott of Florida oranges. And so you can see that Layton is making crystal clear to us that she's buying California oranges, not Florida oranges.

Moving to the next back, on the right-hand side back wall of the Kansas Focus Gallery downstairs, more of Layton's interest in current events and history. And I want to focus, oh, excuse me, focus in on one drawing in particular, Carry Nation. Now, Kansans in the room are probably especially familiar with the suffragette and best known as the radical prohibitionist Carry Nation, who was a 19th century figure who famously carried a hatchet to destroy liquor bottles and also maybe for the theater of it all, I hope.

And so Layton was really fascinated with historical women figures who embodied feminist values well before the right to vote, well before the organized feminist movements of the 1960s and onwards. So crediting those women with their work and recognizing that there have always been women like herself long before our society embraced that. So I want to take a pause here so that we can migrate into the second half of the exhibition in the Oppenheimer New Media Gallery.

Thank you everybody for rejoining me in this gallery. So we have a few different themes organized throughout the room. So this wall, these two walls here are Layton's advocacy largely for queer folks. On this wall that I'm pointing to now we have, let's see, these three rightmost works are her advocacy for other causes, literacy, celebrating women's suffrage and the conditions in assisted living facilities. That very large drawing in the corner back in the back with the rainbow over the top, as well as everything on the back wall are Layton's different thoughts about end of life matters, death and dying and what happens to us after that point. And then on this wall here with some of the most brightly colorful works here are all about Layton's interest in art and art history.

So I want to start with this first wall that many of us are facing now. On the left we have a drawing called Remembering NAMES. And here the right most drawing is Eyes of the Law. So Layton, and this is a

theme in many, many, many of her works. Layton was deeply sensitive and compassionate to the plights of queer communities and the many, many kind of reverberations, aftershocks of the ways that queer people can be marginalized in our society. So on the left Remembering NAMES, I don't know if some of you're familiar with the NAMES Quilt. This was a national public art project, started in the 1980s, the National AIDS Memorial, and then ES. And so here in the bottom of the drawing, Layton herself is sewing a square to add onto the quilt, which she's here visualized as sort of the longitudinal and longitudinal squares over a globe. And I really encourage you to come close to this work. It is really, it is wrenching. It is beautiful, it is touching and deeply emotional.

And in Eyes of the Law left here, you can see that Layton's face, which is absolutely petrified. She is ghost white. Her beautiful green eyes are reduced to a pale green color. And we've got sort of a, I like cloud, cloud of state troopers hats filling the image. And so Layton remembered her experience of jury duty in which a man from her hometown was very aggressively prosecuted for a traffic infraction when his only crime had been that he'd had gay pornography in his car. And so the aggressive policing tactics that different people in our society can be surveilled by.

And then on this wall here we've got, Now I Can Read. Women's suffrage and Raggedy Ann and Andy on the shelf. And so here using her work to speak out for other causes and Raggedy Ann and Andy on the shelf, thinking about the ways that older people in assisted living facilities can be infantilized and treated like children and still needing someone in their life to speak out for them, look out for them, and take care in those cases. And this is one of our very early drawings and it can be a bit faint. So I encourage you to come close. Women's suffrage. We've got the miniature kitchen down here and a tiny little frying pan with an egg. This is drawn in the 50th anniversary of women's suffrage. And she remained deeply, deeply grateful and kept front of mind that this was a recently acquired right for women.

Now I Can Read, we've got a self-portrait of Layton on the right, as well as a slightly different self-portrait about the power of literacy, that reading and writing is a tool to speak truth to power, that it is this liberatory skill that we all need and benefit from. So the back wall here and that continues over into the corner. And thank you everyone for your patience readjusting. But isn't it fun to be surrounded by art? So covering this wall here, a range of tones, a range of approaches to thinking about end of life, mortality, and suffering. So in the corner here, we've got different takes on what happens to us after we die. Layton imagining herself as a corpse, which is a surprisingly sunny image, even though most of the visual field is occupied by her body as she imagines it dead. And so on the corner here, passing through the magic gate, entering into heaven, the afterlife, and imagining that as a cheerful, beautiful, hopeful experience.

Hospital settings here in Intensive Care Room and Pulling The Plug. Intensive Care Room was a deeply personal drawing to her. And I encourage you to really come close to this drawing too. It has a subtle color palette, but when you're standing very close to it, beautifully rich in evocative detail. So you can see that she's pulled up to the bedside here and balancing on her fingertip, and again, this is another collaged object into the drawing. I don't know if any of you have a blood drive donor pin that the Red Cross used to give out, but balancing on her fingertip is a donor pin that she'd received. And then drawn into the paper is another one on the collar of her dress with the number four suggesting that she's over time given four gallons of blood. And so she's remembering here, her experience in the intensive care unit when her son Riley was suffering from complications of alcoholism and just an utterly devastating and tragic experience.

How do you visualize life's greatest heartbreak of your child passing before you? So remembering that experience there. And then Pulling The Plug. In the 1980s, major conversations surrounding ventilators, life support, healthcare, the right-to-die movement, Dr. Jack Kevorkian, a major buzz. A couple of famous cases in Missouri that some of you may remember, of two women who were connected to life

support for many years and their family members petitioning for the right to let them go. Really complicated, deeply emotional pictures. And I really appreciate these drawings for the reason that the classic of Layton gives us everything to think about, but not going to hit us over the head with a message or a clean takeaway.

I want to, if everybody can shift a little bit and look at this wall here. If this is the last wall that people spend time with as they leave the exhibition, I'm excited about that as something that they'll walk away with thinking about the ways that Layton really pushed the limits of her formal education. It's hard to think of someone with greater intellectual curiosity, zeal for learning and a desire to know and experience things that were outside herself. And so her art making as well as learning about art and art history were one of the greatest, to me examples of the way that she's pushing those limits and using the drawing paper to experience. So on the far left there that really brilliantly marigold's yellow drawing where Layton's body twisted up in sort of a fabric bandage, it almost appears references, do some of you remember when the artist duo Christo and Jeanne-Claude did one of their famous wrapping projects? They wrapped the sidewalks of Loose Memorial Park in Kansas City.

Now Layton in Wellsville did not travel to see the installation, but was so fascinated by it, consumed newspaper material about it and collected a scrap of fabric that Christo and Jeanne-Claude used. So she's skipping imaginatively down the walkway there. And I'll leave you with a pair of two of my personal favorite drawings where I think we could even think of these as if Masks and Censored on that front facing wall of the exhibition are signposts for what the exhibition could be about. I think of these as beautiful takeaways for Layton's signature style, things that she was interested in and for me, her legacy, her celebration of womanhood at the particular stage that she was in, the sights and sound and feeling and look of growing older.

So on the left, again, experiencing art imaginatively, she's thinking about The Wing and Nike of Samothrace, if some of you know that very famous sculpture in the atrium of the Louver Museum in Paris. Layton had not been to Paris, but knew art history very well. And I love that though this could have been an opportunity to change her body in any which way, her breasts are pendulous, her stomach is hanging over her hips, her feet are beautifully veined and marbled with that purpley blue varicose color. And on the right, same. Kicking off the pantyhose and orthopedic shoes over the marble to celebrate and enjoy and show and share her body and herself and her work.