

Panorama

Rheumatology's Animal Kingdom: A Digital Art Series

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During my first 2 years of medical school, I noticed how many syndromes and symptoms are named after animals. These visual metaphors are especially memorable because they evoke clear and vivid images and shapes. However, there may be opportunities to take the metaphor beyond just resembling a condition—it may be a way to explore further the illness experience itself. This digital art collection explores 3 metaphors used in 3 rheumatologic diseases: systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE), rheumatoid arthritis (RA), and sarcoidosis.

The first piece is called “Butterfly Rash” (Figure 1). It is inspired by the memorable name for the malar rash often seen in SLE.¹ The rash, which covers the cheeks and bridge of the nose

but spares the nasolabial folds, takes the shape of a butterfly. In “Butterfly Rash,” a large butterfly covers a young woman’s entire face. This is meant to suggest that the emotional and social impact of her condition, including despair and isolation, may extend beyond the physical borders of the rash.

The second piece is called “Swan Neck” (Figure 2). It is inspired by the “swan neck deformity” seen in RA and in some hypermobility syndromes; it is also secondary to some physical traumas.² Patients with this symptom experience severe proximal interphalangeal joint hyperextension and marked flexion of the distal interphalangeal joint.³ In “Swan Neck,” the curve of a swan’s neck is the focal point, and a person’s hand reaches out



Figure 1. A young woman whose face is entirely covered by a butterfly. The piece is named after the characteristic malar rash in SLE. Brian Robert Smith, *Butterfly Rash*, 2023, digital art.



Figure 2. A swan with its bill rotated and a hand reaching out to it. This piece is named after the physical symptoms of severe hyperextension and marked flexion in RA. Brian Robert Smith, *Swan Neck*, 2023, digital art.

to it. The bill of the swan, which may appear normal at first, is rotated 90°. My aim in making this simple but jarring disruption is to emphasize how destabilizing symptoms like this can be for patients.

The third and final piece is called “Panda Sign” (Figure 3). It is inspired by the panda-face pattern of gallium scintigraphy of the head that is seen in sarcoidosis and some malignancies.⁴ “Panda Sign” shows a pair of lungs leading into the face of a panda. This is designed to evoke the pathogenesis of sarcoidosis, which typically starts in the lungs.⁵ This piece seeks to be a reminder that

many conditions may manifest in one body system but have systemic effects, and that many patients will need a well-coordinated team that spans multiple specialties (such as rheumatology and pulmonology, in this case).

In conclusion, “Rheumatology’s Animal Kingdom: A Digital Art Series” is an artistic exploration of 3 rheumatologic conditions, using the imagery of animals to represent specific syndromes and symptoms. The collection aims to take the animal metaphors commonly used in medical nomenclature a step further by exploring them through visual art. My hope is

that by viewing these pieces, one might gain a deeper understanding of these metaphors and how they might go beyond simply mirroring a condition's shape or form—they might be able to provide some small insight into the emotional experience of the individuals who live with them.

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The initial draft was made in Affinity Designer 2, then iterated through the artificial intelligence program Midjourney (Model 4). Afterward, the output was further processed in Affinity Designer 2 (Serif).

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Figure 3. A pair of lungs made from trees with a panda's face above. The piece is named after a radiological finding in sarcoidosis. Brian Robert Smith, *Panda Sign*, 2023, digital art.