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SUNDAY REFLECTIONS

Turning back the clock on our own lifespans

We should be doing better. We should be — not just the richest country on earth — but the healthiest.

Instead, we are going backward.

For the first time since the 1960s, life expectancy in the United States has gone down.

After 30 years of seeing deaths from cardiovascular disease decline, two years ago the rate became flat. Last year, it went up.

This is despite stunning advancements in medical research. The cardiac disease that killed both my grandfathers, after brutal open-heart surgery, can now be managed with medication and minimally invasive techniques. Public health officials had once projected that cardiovascular disease — including heart attack and stroke — would dip below cancer as the country's leading cause of death by 2020.

That's not going to happen. In fact, the death rate is rising for middle-aged Americans, as *The Wall Street Journal* noted recently. That is a number that should have dropped dramatically. What killed my family members were the sort of heart conditions now managed by drugs or small surgical interventions. Had they lived into the 21st century, they might be alive today.

But the sensational strides researchers have made in cardiac care have been undermined by us.

We are killing ourselves, acquiring chronic medical conditions that even the most wondrous medical breakthroughs are incapable of reining in. A breathtaking rise in obesity and Type 2 diabetes are subverting the progress we have made. Two recent high-profile stroke

TRACEY O'SHAUGHNESSY



The Earth

BY TRACEY O'SHAUGHNESSY
REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

'Flying Squirrels' by artist, writer and naturalist James Prosek

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The Earth is actually more fragile than it looks

Museum showcases 4 artists
whose body of work is at once
riveting *and* revealing

Early in the 1720s, Carl Linnaeus set out to name everything.

And he succeeded.

By "everything," Linnaeus meant every organism, plant, animal, bacteria and fungi on the planet. The 18th century was the great "let's catalog everything" moment, and the Swedish naturalist and explorer was among the most celebrated European organizers. Linnaeus was the first to frame principles for defining these organisms, and if you've spent any time in a high school science lab, you probably remember it: genus name and species.

Linnaeus's binomial nomenclature, established in the 1750s, is still in use today and was a spectacular leap forward. Suddenly, you could talk to your fellow plant enthusiasts in the same language. That happy-looking yellow flower in the meadow that looks like a daisy but is not quite, had, obligingly, a name: *Coreopsis* from the family Asteraceae.

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'Hope Spots,'
3-D artwork by
Courtney Mattison

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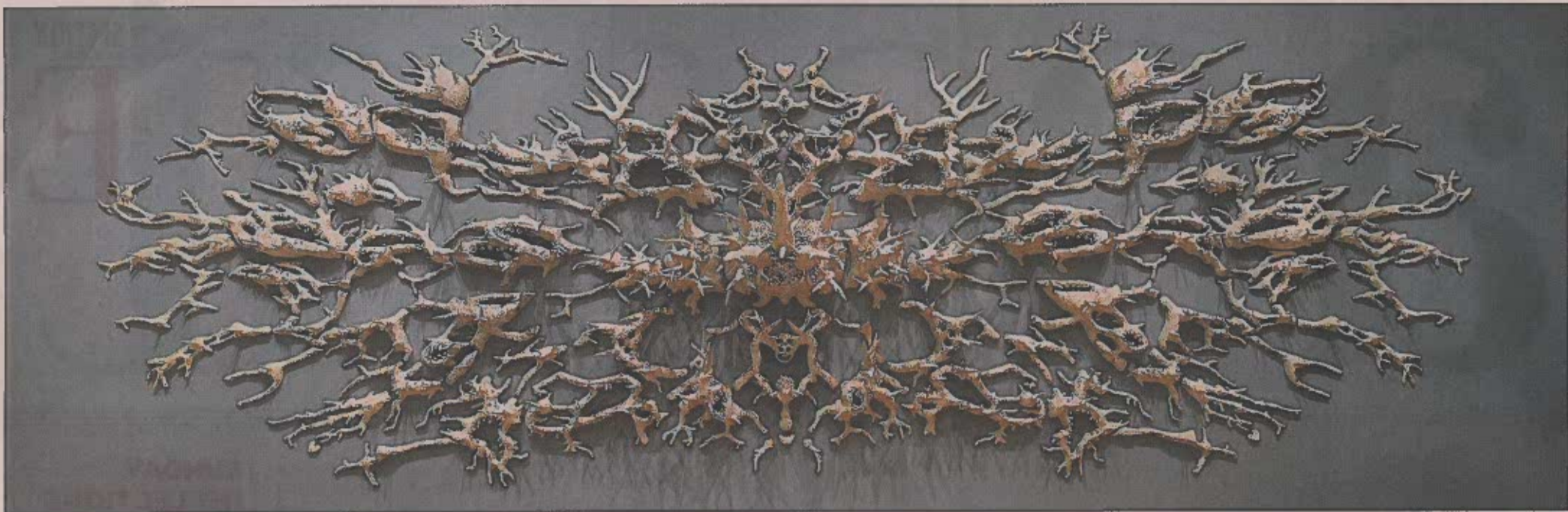
That's not going to happen. In fact, the death rate is rising for middle-aged Americans, as *The Wall Street Journal* noted recently. That is a number that should have dropped dramatically. What killed my family members were the sort of heart conditions now managed by drugs or small surgical interventions. Had they lived into the 21st century, they might be alive today.

But the sensational strides researchers have made in cardiac care have been undermined by us.

We are killing ourselves, acquiring chronic medical conditions that even the most wondrous medical breakthroughs are incapable of reining in. A breathtaking rise in obesity and Type 2 diabetes are subverting the progress we have made. Two recent high-profile stroke deaths — of 51-year-old filmmaker John Singleton and 52-year-old actor Luke Perry — exemplify this phenomenon. We can't keep looking to science to save us.

This is a runaway train that is going to tax our finances and break our hearts. Although the United States has slashed smoking rates from 67 percent in 1965 to 14 percent today, the rate of obesity has increased tenfold since the 1970s. Today, more than 40 percent of us are now obese and another 32 percent are overweight, meaning that three-quarters percent of us have a weight problem and more of us are morbidly obese than ever. At the same time, diabetes cases have tripled in the last century, at a shattering personal and financial cost.

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CONTRIBUTED

A coral graveyard of sorts in Courtney Mattison's breathtaking 'Malum Geminis,' a ceramic wall relief that stretches across most of one wall at Florence Griswold Museum in Old Lyme.

NATURALISTS: No apologies here: Earth is warming

Continued from 1E

But naming nature means claiming nature. And that friction — between the urge to name and the dominion over nature it conveys — is at the heart of "Fragile Earth: The Naturalist Impulse in Contemporary Art," a beautiful but alarming exhibit at the Florence Griswold Museum in Old Lyme.

"Fragile Earth" turns that whole naming-and-claiming attitude upside down and inside out. It is a powerful, compelling testament to the ways in which contemporary art speaks to one of the top-line issues of our time: The Environment. It contains art work by Connecticut native James Prosek, who is arguably the finest artist in the state to take on the challenge of whether art can be aesthetically gorgeous and politically persuasive simultaneously. The answer, at least where Prosek is concerned, is decidedly yes.

A WORD TO CLIMATE CHANGE DENIERS: this exhibit takes as established fact that scientific evidence for warming of the climate system is, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, "unequivocal." It also takes as fact NASA's assertion that the current warming trend is "extremely likely (greater than 95 percent probability) to be the result of human activity since the mid-20th century and proceeding at a rate that is unprecedented over decades to millennia. If you have a problem with that, contact NASA.

For these artists, the earth



CONTRIBUTED

'Striped Bass,' by James Prosek

is changing. And it is changing in ways that would break your heart.

Look at the agonizing coral graveyard that artist Courtney Mattison depicts in her breathtaking "Malum Geminis," a ceramic wall relief that stretches across most of one wall at the museum. These osteoporotic-looking ceramic shapes look like "trophy" antlers. Come closer and the forms become anthropomorphic, like beseeching, pleading ghouls. This is what ocean acidification does to coral reefs.

It's an abstract scientific

concept. Basically, when seawater absorbs carbon dioxide, it produces chemical reactions that decrease the pH in the seawater. As the oceans become more acidic, the shells of marine creatures like clams, urchins, sea snails and pteropods erode. More acidic oceans are particularly damaging to coral reefs, among Mattison's favorite subjects.

Her depictions of these teeming ocean viscera being bleached to death are among "Fragile Earth's" most searing works. The choice of ceramic as material allows

Mattison the capacity to present the porosity and luminosity of these magical reefs to the surface. The results are devastating in part because this is an area of our planet obscured from us. Mattison exhumes it and exposes it for the diaphanous, sumptuous and imperiled jewel it is.

THOSE OF US WHO CAN BE SPELLBOUND by the botanical art that flourished in the 18th and 19th centuries are often stunned to realize that the scientific precision with which these luxuriant works

were depicted came with a rapacity that seems antithetical to its visual poetry. Plants, then and now, meant big money, particularly to European explorers eager to "monetize" their New World flora and fauna. So, yes, that Franz Bauer illustration of "Fructification" was as scientific as it was aesthetically brilliant, but it dangled like a lure to colonialists ready to make a buck.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: Fragile Earth: The Naturalist Impulse in Contemporary Art
WHEN: Through Sept. 8
WHERE: Florence Griswold Museum, 96 Lyme St., Old Lyme
MORE: Visit florence-griswoldmuseum.org or call 860-434-5542

PROSEK UPENDS THAT RAVISHING CUPIDITY and turns it into an incriminating indictment of the whole concept of ownership. His predecessors, as recent as Roger Tory Peterson and as ancient as Georg Dionysius Ehret, likely did not consider their meticulousness audacity. At the time, they were enormously helpful to the study of nature, even if a few folks did become gluttonously wealthy because of them.

But Prosek comes at his work from the perspective of vulnerability. His watercolors of striped bass, black sea bass or quahog clams, come with a sense of awe and fragility. Prosek depicts each iridescent gill of a fish, delin-

eating the glabrous sag of the creature's mournful mouth as it sits on his tea-stained paper. The paper — which looks like a brown bag — emphasizes the disposable nature of the fish, while the delicacy of the limned detail mitigates against it. This is, in other words, a resplendent creature that we have turned into a fish fry.

In that, Prosek forces us to consider what we do when we classify nature — be it a fish or an eel or the reed from the Lieutenant River. It's not necessarily the consumption of fish Prosek decries but the almost Biblical presumption of naming, and thereby containing, the natural world. Amazingly, the work does not come across as hysterical or raving but as deeply considered and reverent, at times even wry.

His taxidermy sculpture "Flying Squirrels" is one of the most beautiful, funny and pointed of his sculptures. Here, two squirrels, one white, one brown, perch atop a tree. On them Prosek has placed the wings of a domestic quail and Bufflehead duck. These, Prosek tells us, are "creatures that became their names in protest of being named."

The work of conceptual artist Mark Dion dovetails nicely with that of Prosek. Dion creates assemblages of the objects we use — binoculars, tarps, chisels, cages, files, nets — to classify, capture and contain.

All of it makes you want to take a long, meditative stroll by the nearby Lieutenant River and relish the beauty that is so proximate, tender and wondrously beautiful.

HEALTH: Get out of your chair and go for a walk

Continued from 1E

By some estimates, diabetes will increase by 54% to more than 54.9 million Americans between 2015 and 2030. That will cost us more than \$622 billion by 2030.

But those are just numbers. That does not address the individual challenges of living with diseases that are chronic, costly and emotionally draining.

Nobody likes to hear about the obesity epidemic, largely because all of us struggle to maintain a healthy weight in a society that clamors for us

try that makes money by peddling an inverted value system. Yes, there are "bad foods" — plenty of them. And no, you can't sweat your way into a pair of \$100 jeans. Not without a diet heavy on fresh fruits and vegetables.

"I really do think that we are hard wired to seek out carbohydrates," said Dr. Kevin Kett, section chief in cardiology at Saint Mary's Hospital in Waterbury.

"What 100 years ago improved survival is now our detriment."

And speaking of 100 years ago, a century ago starvation

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whether it is our heart or our lungs in our arms, if we use that more often, the muscle will condition itself and be-

is nearly twice the state average. Often, the suburbs are no better. My son works 3.4 miles from our home. Ideally, he should be able to ride his bike to work, as I did at his age. But the road is frightfully narrow and notoriously rife with speeders. It's just too dangerous. That's wrong. Our roads should be designed to encourage pedestrian mobility.

We also need to re-evaluate how we think of "exercise." The longest-lived people on the planet live in areas where "exercise" is not a duty, but a part of life. Peo-

had a patient who was a book worm. But she also loved 1950s rock'n roll. OK, he said. Stand in the kitchen for four songs. Move a little. Have fun.

The rise in cardiovascular disease care is going to affect all of us. That means the fewer than 10 percent of us who get the modest (30 minutes a day) amount of daily exercise the government advises, as well as those whose idea of a balanced meal is Lucky Charms quaffed with Sprite.

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Nobody likes to hear about the obesity epidemic, largely because all of us struggle to maintain a healthy weight in a society that clamors for us to stuff our gullets and sit on our keisters. The din of a celebrity culture in which Q-tip shaped celebrities prattle about having the appetite of draft horses is exacerbated by a snack food industry that spends \$11 billion investigating us into gluttony. Shame, disappointment, humiliation and self-disgust are big players in this saga. We conflate aesthetics with cardiovascular health. What matters more — squeezing into a two-piece or living a healthy life well into our 80s?

Rationally, most of us would say the latter. But we're not rational creatures; if we were, we would know that a troth-sized platter of baked ziti might be fine for a family of six but is no good

try that makes money by peddling an inverted value system. Yes, there are "bad foods" — plenty of them. And no, you can't sweat your way into a pair of \$100 jeans. Not without a diet heavy on fresh fruits and vegetables.

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"What 100 years ago improved survival is now our detriment."

And speaking of 100 years ago, a century ago starvation was one of the three top causes of death (the other two were infection and trauma). Now it's excess.

"This is something I fight on a daily basis," said Kett. Trying to get a patient to move — not bench press a Mac truck or run a

TRIATHLON — is one of the hardest prescriptions a doctor has to deliver. Patients are stressed. They are tired. They are broke. They don't have the time. They just need to roll up on the couch and chill.

"There's a preconceived notion that when we are tired, often if we can just rest, we can get better," he said. "That used to work" in the days when most work was physical labor. "Now,

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whether it is our heart or our lungs in our arms, if we use that more often, the muscle will condition itself and become more powerful. As we stop using that muscle, we start to develop an atrophy of those muscles. And the more atrophy we get the more difficult it is for us to exercise or think about exercise."

Never before have humans lived in an environment where so much calorically dense food has been available for so little physical effort. Pick up an iron from the 19th century. Try to wash a load of laundry — or even dishes — by hand. The once-routine chores we once performed without considering the physical effort they involved, are now performed with the push of a button.

Streets that should be clean and flanked by sidewalks are instead filthy death

is nearly twice the state average. Often, the suburbs are no better. My son works 3.4 miles from our home. Ideally, he should be able to ride his bike to work, as I did at his age. But the road is frightfully narrow and notoriously rife with speeders. It's just too dangerous. That's wrong. Our roads should be designed to encourage pedestrian mobility.

We also need to re-evaluate how we think of "exercise." The longest-lived people on the planet live in areas where "exercise" is not a duty, but a part of life. People in these "blue zones," (bluezones.com/live-longer-better) move naturally, eat a plant-based diet and live in small communities where they feel a sense of purpose and connection.

"Our perception of exercise is the harder you work the more beneficial it is," said Brad Biskup, coordinator of the Lifestyle Medicine Program at the Pat and Jim Calhoun Cardiology Center at UConn Health. "No pain, no gain. You gotta sweat."

None of that really is a big indicator on how long we live. The biggest thing is that it doesn't take much time or energy. "We're trying to put everybody in the same box. We're not embracing what

had a patient who was a book worm. But she also loved 1950s rock'n roll. OK, he said. Stand in the kitchen for four songs. Move a little. Have fun.

The rise in cardiovascular disease care is going to affect all of us. That means the fewer than 10 percent of us who get the modest (30 minutes a day) amount of daily exercise the government advises, as well as those whose idea of a balanced meal is Lucky Charms quaffed with Sprite.

This country has made astonishing strides in smoking cessation, in part through aggressive public service campaigns. It needs to do the same in making our roads safe to walk, bike and run along and by vigorously counteracting the "Indulge!" messages sent by forces that profit from our lethargy.

The medical community has made praiseworthy progress in the treatment of cardiovascular disease. We need to meet them at least half way.

Tracey O'Shaughnessy is the award-winning writer of "Sunday Reflections." Reach her at Tosh@Rep-am.com.

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