

The charisma of schizophrenia

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The works of art in *For Matthew and Others – Journeys with Schizophrenia* illuminate the business of life with this ravaging illness. The selection is focussed on artists who live or have lived with schizophrenia, as well as artists touched by or interested in it. Alongside the usual curatorial processes of research and peer consultation, this exhibition involved contacting schizophrenia fellowships, mental health networks and people publicly known to have the illness.

All members of the curatorial board have been surprised by the preponderance of schizophrenia in everybody's lives. Approaches to artists were careful and required more than the usual degree of discretion; consequently there are many other distinguished artists living with or interested in schizophrenia that this exhibition did not reach. Nonetheless, three years' research has yielded astonishing riches. There is charisma, grave and fey, in schizophrenia - both in the perspectives it affords, and in the works of art by those who live with or are touched by the illness.

Of the thirty seven visual artists in this exhibition, twenty two live(d) with schizophrenia, or, as in the case of Albert Tucker, have at some stage in their lives been diagnosed with the illness. At least nine of the 'well' artists have loved ones living with schizophrenia. The other artists have an artistic and/or intellectual interest in experiences and perceptions of the illness. The following discussion moves back and forth between artists living with schizophrenia and "well" artists, and is structured by theme and subject. The following is a study of imagery drawn from psychosis and other physiological experiences of schizophrenia, mysticism and quietude and hospital experiences. The essay considers how artists deal with the venting of emotions and analysing depictions of schizophrenia in portraits, self-portraits and narratives. It concludes with a discussion of the relationship between illness and the archetypal visual artist, the symbolic position occupied by Van Gogh, and a curatorial summation.

This illness throws people big questions and challenges and this exhibition shows that artists with schizophrenia are eloquent and creative survivors. Some artists living with schizophrenia plumb the mind's caverns with

thrilling fearlessness. In Graeme Doyle's capable hands, memories of terrible experiences become compelling works of art such as the unflinching *Shelf Fish Paw Poor Trites* (c.2000), in which self-images merge with monsters seen during psychosis. Doyle's recent series *Rembrandt and Rave* (2006) transposes some of his psychotic imagery onto copies of the famous artist. By depicting the iconic portrait painter in his own tortured mode, Doyle destabilises perceptions of both Rembrandt and the archetypal artist. *Labyr Grunthians* (c.2003) draws on abstract expressionism, but also his recurring hallucination of floating face down in water and lifting his head to see an endless fathomless sea. Doyle's idiosyncratic practice of making highly detailed drawings, which he repeatedly photocopies and works over, results in images of velvety density.

Acclaimed Outsider artist Anthony Mannix produces powerful works using imagery from psychosis and other meanderings of his subconscious mind. He describes his practice as "cultural anthropology"¹; often it seems as if Mannix is offering the viewer an opportunity to scrutinise his perceptions and ways of processing the world. Mannix's opus, the monumental *Journal of a Madman*, covers more than twenty years of fluid drawings and compelling text. These tomes range from small notebooks filled with raw, thick black red and blue Texta drawings during stays in hospitals, to volumes of finely drawn erotic figures. In these journals, with his exquisite works on paper, paintings, assemblages and writings, Mannix reveals vivid imaginings, formidable intellect, searing honesty and an ocean of emotions.

A number of artists living with schizophrenia focus on stillness and quietude. Simon Champ describes himself as an artist who moves between activism and mysticism², and his paintings in the latter vein include an ongoing series of small acrylic paintings of geometrical forms, sublime landscapes, sometimes with improbable occupants like UFOs, levitating rhinos, ascending spirits, and night sky filled floating meditators. These works combine gravitas with a strange matter of fact quality. *Eye Painting* (2004) merges indigenous pictorial modes with the recurring eye, and represents a dream that prefigured a visit to Central Australia. Champ explains his enigmatic *Colour of dinosaurs* (1994) through his interest in the changing hue of the dinosaur as rendered by documentaries.

¹ Anthony Mannix, conversation with the author, Blackheath, 19 May 2006.

² Simon Champ, email to the author, 5 June 2006.

Damien Skipper's figurative sculpture and painting are meditative while Craig Phipps's acrylic paintings on paper include homages to his indigenous heritage and country. Ranging from bold abstraction to simplified figuration, these works pulse with tradition and life force. Although a different love of the land is expressed in Ray Hollingworth's romantic landscapes, these highly coloured works on paper also celebrate the calming power of the land.

The paintings and sculptures of Ophelia's Mink are characterised by preciousness, ethereality and the pursuit of peace of mind. Her painting of gold calligraphic marks in a bright blue sky, *Time to think*, celebrates expanses of mental space, and the weeping eye of *The reality of psychosis* challenges the viewer to acknowledge the pain and suffering of psychosis. The painted wooden birdcages house careful arrangements of precious trinkets, crowned by exquisite hanging shards of decorative glass or ceramic. Like *The Clogs*, these works are meditations on aesthetics, fragility and entrapment.

The confines of hospital have produced a stark group of works, including Frederick Jessup's work of chilling reportage, *Schizophrenic coming out of an insulin coma* (1943). John Perceval's superb *Patient* series (1981) was made during his time in Larundal hospital, Melbourne. In these anguished portraits, creatures emerge from the head or mouth, the fluid draughtsmanship creating Picasso-like icons of troubled mind states.

Pierre Comarmond painted *Saint Vincents* (1992) while studying at UNSW College of Fine Arts. This understated tonal study is in sharp contrast with Wart's harrowing *Isolation Room* (c.1995), which, with its scratchy bitumen paint, high walls, small barred window and rudimentary furniture looks like a grim jail cell. This is one of a series of hospital paintings made around 1995, including such powerfully direct images as *The Ambulance that Gets you There* and *Emergency room chairs*, and the hilarious painting of the screeching nurse who routinely wakes patients, *Just checkin*.

Hospital borders are significant structures for Wart, who recounts the lines of demarcation (and their associated privileges) of various psychiatric institutions. *Don't Go Beyond the Steps* (1994) shows the staircase border of Kirkbride Hospital, Sydney. *To Amber a Unicorn Warrior* (2005), a delicate depiction of a ghostly brown form with a pinkish halo behind a fence is named after Amber, a woman Wart met at a psychiatric hospital while speaking there during Schizophrenia Awareness Week in 2005. Amber

introduced herself as a "unicorn warrior" and her battles at the "fence-line of the landscape of the psychiatric ward" are of poignant importance to the artist.

Anne Ferran's book series *INSULA* (2003) is based on a 1940s photographic archive of patients at Gladesville hospital. In reproducing details of the original images, Ferran emphasises each subject's individuality, and reminds us that these people's independence and individuality were severely compromised by the system. Ferran's images raise questions about the system's failure to respect the dignity of all human beings.

Dennis Del Favero's interactive video *Deep Sleep* (2004) is based on the Sydney psychiatric hospital Chelmsford and the psychiatrist responsible for that institution's controversial deep sleep treatment, Dr Harry Bailey. Viewers can witness the experiences of nine different characters including Bailey and a female patient who was Bailey's lover.

From Derwent Lees's Bloomsbury-style portrait of his wife Lyndra, *The Straw Hat* (c.1914), to Alex Chernin's fine drawing of his mother, *Elena Kats-Chernin the composer*, the portraits in this exhibition record loving relationships. Adam Hollingworth's searching photographs of his father show Ray Hollingworth in a vast array of temperaments. Similarly, Peter Wegner's obsessive portraits document Graeme Doyle's splendid range.

Grant Rowe's twenty-two minute *Interview with John Bozic* (2006) is a rare portrait. Bozic was a friend who also lived with schizophrenia, and if Rowe's questions are insightful and sympathetic, Bozic's revelations are mesmerising. He talks about times when he has controlled crowd emotions, his experiences of poverty, getting stoned and the comparative merits of marijuana, heroin, cough mixture and other drugs. The last section of the film shows a severely deteriorated Bozic, whose life was thrown into chaos after the death of his mother. Bozic's monosyllabic lacklustre responses are a drastic change from the previous footage. The postscript states that John Bozic died a week after the final interview.

Matthew Dysart's *Starry Starry Night* is a commanding image based on the artist's painful memories of a close friend experiencing dangerous psychosis. Glenn Morgan's *Mad Man Attempting Suicide* and *A Friend having Shock Treatment* draw on friends' experiences to create visual stories of immediacy, humanity and humour.

The action-packed mythic series paintings of James de Blas occupy a unique place in this exhibition. De Blas's idiosyncratic heroes, the *Golden Grasshopper*, *The Eagle-Headed Man* and the *Blue Hairy Boy* undertake elaborate quests. Stupendous Australian landscapes are frequently the settings for these histrionic tableaux which often begin as studio photographs and collages. De Blas sees his past twenty-four years since diagnosis as two-part: the first featuring many substances and hospital stays, the second featuring painting, medication, meditation and very few episodes of illness. Given such an epic journey of his own, it is not surprising De Blas delights in crafting symbolic stories with lofty challenges and weighty consequences.

In the tradition of the political poster, the digital works of Richard McLean stand out for their angry commentary. These pastiches of text and manipulations of downloaded images stridently comment on national and international politics, mental health issues, sexual identity and drug use. *What a Bloody RAU* (2006) is typically outrageous, with an internet image of Cornelia Rau on the "screen" of a urinal; over the floor mat is text commanding Prime Minister Howard to "step up".

The portraits and narratives are supplemented by a group of analyses/depictions of the illness. James Gleeson's *The Mad Women* (sic) (1942), Joy Hester's *Mad Girl* and Albert Tucker's *Psycho* (both 1942) are all studies of mind states. Gareth Sansom's *Schizophrenia* (1993) depicts the physical experiences of distorted perceptions and delusions.

Ivor Francis's iconic painting *Schizophrenia* (1942), is a surrealist image of the inner machinations of the mind. Painted forty-two years later, Jon Cattapan's *Untitled (Head Fog)* is a metaphysical alternative; where Francis imagines busy cogs, Cattapan ponders a head without facial features, a tabula rasa.

Simon Champ's *Mind Map* (1999) combines a photocopy of a neurological map of Champ's brain with circles of sand. The sand drawing, with its visual links to imagery of outer space and indigenous traditions, reiterates the mysteries of the mind and other unknown worlds. In Hossein Valamanesh's *Home of mad butterflies* (1996), the artist draws on his beloved Persian literature, where "the idea of madness has been seen as a metaphor for courage, abandonment of material world and being blessed with love".³

³ Hossein Valamanesh, artist's statement *For Matthew and Others*, June 2006.

Anne Rowe's sculptural objects and installation practice have long focussed on psychological and emotional states; in *amantes amentes [L.lovers (are) mad]* (2006), an installation of drawings and reflective surfaces, Rowe examines self in order to unpack schizophrenia. The artist says the work addresses the "private struggle within the feminine self. From the psychoanalytical definition of schizophrenia as splitting, I went to adolescence." With a series of intense Gothic drawings, Rowe explores "the split between myself and the other. I'm interested in projecting the Romantic phantasy onto the other".⁴

The exhibition provides a safe space for the exploration of some heavy emotions. Jon Cattapan's painting *Sister* and its associated drawings (1984), are raw, expressionistic and visually complex outpourings of his grief at the loss of his sister Adriana in 1983.

Elizabeth Day's *Everything is Connected to Everything Else. Work for Uncle Frank and others who fell into the Chasm of Fear in History's Black Void* (2006) is an exploration of the shame, fear and silence around the institutionalisation of family members. Knitting and wool craft, one of Day's favourite mediums, is especially apposite in a work about a family in which there are "three generations of knitters". A white baby's wool web and a swarm of black woollen spiders are a threatening presence. The disquiet is amplified by such garments as the white baby jumper with a black wool "stain".

In this sculptural context of fear and disturbance, Day offers two iMovie videos. A text piece documents various family members' responses to the artist's questions about Uncle Frank – all uneasy refusals to disclose.

The second movie is a documentary of similar skeletons in the family closets of the artist's friends. Unlike her family, her close friends are willing to share their painful, vivid stories. Day finds the familial silence problematic. "When I asked my eighty-year old mother, she said 'my life's been happy since then'. I don't want to make Mum's life difficult but I meet Franks all the time". Day sees her fifteen years as a visual arts worker within the jail system as a direct response to the loss of her uncle: "I work in a prison so I'll neutralise this memory for myself".⁵

⁴ Anne Rowe, conversation with the author, 23 June 2006.

⁵ Elizabeth Day, conversation with the author, 7 June 2006.

Feelings of frailty and vulnerability are viscerally rendered in Wart's fast, scratchy paintings. In both panels of *Watch it*, based on a night of feeling mentally unwell, a solitary figure is dwarfed by huge buildings. The twenty-four part *Secret phases of fear* (2005) is a self-portrait of "fears that come up to me"⁶. Moving from raw figuration to smeared abstraction, the series is a slow revelation of naked agony.

Alex Chernin releases a flood of frustration in fluid and inventive ink drawings. Chernin's youthful intensity is heart-wrenching in the exasperated *Why Why Why* and *Brainstorming*, not to mention his brave attempts to depict his illness such as *Schizophrenia* and *The image within*.

The life of the visual artist is traditionally solitary, with much time spent alone making work. There is an even more heightened sense of isolation experienced by artists living with schizophrenia and isolation and loneliness are recurring themes in the works here, masterfully expressed in Mannix's *Groan Creatures* (1997).

From loneliness to love and lust; Anthony Mannix's erotic journals are infused with longing, Grant Rowe's *Never follow through* expresses romantic frustration, and Richard Morrison's figure paintings ooze sensuality and optimism. In Bruce Plant's vignettes of life with his wife Judy in Mirboo North, Victoria, the vicissitudes of the everyday are tenderly rendered.

For Matthew and Others – Journeys with Schizophrenia offers a unique perspective on the relationship between mental illness and the archetypal visual artist. The exhibition forces us to reconsider our understanding of imagination; in the case of artists living with schizophrenia, imagination is very often lived experience. The worlds of such artists as Eva Clarke, Pierre Comarmond, Graeme Doyle, Anthony Mannix, Brian Murray and Grant Rowe are filled with unearthly peoples, creatures, travel craft and environments. Simon Champ and Bruce Plant sometimes paint premonitions they have experienced, and conversely, both artists find their paintings sometimes function as premonitions. The relationship of such imagery to the artists' experiences of schizophrenia is as various as the artworks, nonetheless many of these wildly "imaginative" works have their basis in experience.

⁶ Wart, conversation with the author, 26 July 2005.

Vincent Van Gogh emerges as a recurring motif in this exhibition. In a review of an exhibition by Derwent Lees at Redfern Gallery, London, in 1934 the *Apollo* critic praised Lees's "exciting overstatement of colour... which makes one think of Van Gogh"⁷. The Dutch master resonates in Lees' work, often in palette and sometimes in subject, as in *The Drive to the Asylum* (1919), one of Lees's last paintings, a view of the garden in the hospital where he died in 1931.

In Martin Sharp's collage *The Yellow Chair* (1971), the artist's nose and right eye is obscured by the famous chair - a symbol of self for Van Gogh. The surrealistic image is a striking portrait of the troubled, isolated and gifted painter who was largely ignored during his lifetime.

John Perceval, who was diagnosed with the illness in his sixties, painted homages to Van Gogh all his life. This important aspect of his practice is represented in *For Matthew and Others* with a late *Sunflowers* painting which, with its red flowers and flowers with faces, is far removed from the original.

For some artists, Van Gogh's style and tone are important reference points. Bruce Plant, who describes himself as an artist who "conveys emotion through colour" employs bravura brushstrokes and a luscious palette in works such as *Sun Swirl*, *Village* and *Our Backyard*. Plant's idiosyncratic narratives are enigmatic and multi-layered in tone, as the compelling *Kicking a Goal* (2004) attests. Other Australian artists have been drawn to football and Kelly's mask, but the combination is wholly new. The blue and orange trees recall the Dutch painter but Plant's field of white crucifixes is an exquisite touch. The result is an arresting image of innocence, joy and sadness.

We must be wary of easy explanations. As Simon Champ wrote in his 2004 essay "Van Gogh's ear":

... It is now time that the arts community reviewed its attitude to artists who experience mental illness and their art and that critics began to rewrite our history in art. Hopefully such a history would not begin with Van Gogh's ear or end with the clichéd misappropriation of metaphors of

⁷ Henry R Lew, *In Search of Derwent Lees*, Melbourne, 1996, 23

schizophrenia being used to interpret contemporary society's dysfunction.'⁸

Leaving metaphors of schizophrenia and interpretation of society's dysfunction until the *For Matthew and Others* conference, in conclusion I must state that although I have worked with East Timorese and Australian Aboriginal artists, the lives touched by schizophrenia are the most difficult I have witnessed. It is hardly surprising that the works of art associated with schizophrenia are so utterly riveting. It is often said that art helps us make sense of life. With this illness, there's a lot to make sense of. As Anthony Mannix told Lisa Havilah and me at our first meeting about this project, "schizophrenia is a hard card".⁹

⁸ Simon Champ, "Van Gogh's ear", unpublished. An extract from this essay was published in *SANE News*, no. 30, Winter 2004.

⁹ Anthony Mannix in conversation with Lisa Havilah and Anne Loxley, Blackheath, 18 December 2004.