

Curatorial Text: Art and mental illness; light beyond the dark.

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Art and mental illness; light beyond the dark.

The Notion of a tortured artist is well documented and debated throughout history, but does all great art come from pain? Art is a reflection on humanity and part of humanity is suffering, many people still believe with the ability to create one must be touched by mental illness. It is thought that Aristotle once said *“No great mind has ever existed without a touch of madness.*

Whilst there seems to be an obvious link, one study conducted by deCODE a genetics company, based in Iceland and reported in the guardian, found that creative people on average were 25% more likely to carry a gene that raises the risk for bipolar and schizophrenia. Are creative people really predisposed to suffer with mental illness? or is the creativity a tool that one develops as a coping mechanism to be able to deal with demons? If mental illness is the key to creating great art what are the implications of managing an artistic temperament with a depressive one ?

Kay Radfield Jamison in her book *touched with fire* states *“Does psychiatric treatment have to result in happier but blander and less imaginative artists?”* 181:1 Jamison also quotes Edvard Munch, *“hospitalized on several occasions for his psychiatric illness, remarked, “A German once said to me: ‘But you could rid yourself of many of your troubles.’ To which I replied: ‘They are part of me and my art. They are indistinguishable from me, and it would destroy my art. I want to keep those sufferings.’”*

4047:6

Over time our relationship with art has changed. Art in history was essentially propaganda spreading the word of religion. Over time though relationship with God has diminished, however this doesn't eliminate our need for validation and support as humans.

Theodore Zeldin first brought forward the theory of *'art being a new religion and museums are our new cathedrals.'* Alain De Botton explores this theory further with his book *Art as therapy*. He explores the idea that art should serve the needs of our psyche and raises the notion that the art that moves us is our unconsciousness identifying what is missing from our lives.

'Art compensates us for certain inborn weaknesses, in this case the mind rather than the body, weaknesses that we can refer to as psychological frailties' 24;1 Alain De Botton discusses seven main functionalities of art that meet our needs.

- Remembering
- Hope
- Sorrow
- Rebalancing
- Self understanding
- Growth
- Appreciation

Obviously pieces of art can meet several of these functionalities but in order to gain something from them we must identify them as meeting a frailty that we have.

Mark Rothko also had similar views Deb Botton quotes him in a school of life lecture where he discusses his book as saying *"I've got sadness in me you've got sadness in you and these works of art are a place that two sadnesses can meet and therefore both of us can feel less sad"*

Of the pieces selected for this exhibition we can consider the seven functionalities and how they may relate to mental health both of the artist and of the viewer with the intention that these pieces may

bring more than one of these functionalities to the viewer or perhaps all of them. We can consider this from a contemporary position and from the point in time they were created and how we perceive the artists frame of mind at the time.

All the works in this exhibition have been juxtaposed together to highlight not only the different places that mental anguish can come from in artists, but how it can be brought together in art from both the artist and viewer to form a place of healing and be the light beyond the dark.

To I. A. Klimenko.

"May 1st (13th), 1870.

"... First I must tell you that I am sitting at the open window (at four a.m.) and breathing the lovely air of a spring morning. It is remarkable that in my present amiable mood I am suddenly seized with a desire to talk to you—to you of all people, you ungrateful creature! I want to tell you that life is still good, and that it is worth living on a May morning; and so, at four o'clock in the morning, I am pouring out my heart to you, while you, O empoisoned and lifeless being, will only laugh at me. Well, laugh away; all the same, I assert that life is beautiful in spite of everything! This 'everything' includes the following items: 1. Illness; I am getting much too stout, and my nerves are all to pieces. 2. The Conservatoire oppresses me to extinction; I am more and more convinced that I am absolutely unfitted to teach the theory of music. 3. My pecuniary situation is very bad. 4. I am very doubtful if *Undine* will be performed. I have heard that they are likely to throw me over. In a word, there are many thorns, but the roses are there too....

"As regards ambition, I must tell you that I have certainly not been flattered of late. My songs were praised by Laroche, although Cui has 'slated' them, and Balakirev thinks them so bad that he persuaded Khvostova—who wanted to sing the one I had dedicated to her—not to ruin with its presence a programme graced by the names of Moussorgsky & Co.

"My overture, *Romeo and Juliet*, had hardly any success here, and has remained quite unnoticed. I thought a great deal about you that night. After the concert we supped, a large party, at Gourin's (a famous restaurant). No one said a single word about the overture during the evening. And yet I yearned so for appreciation and kindness! Yes, I thought a great deal about you, and of your encouraging sympathy. I do not know whether the slow progress of my opera, *The Oprichnik* is due to the fact that no one takes any interest in what I write; I am very doubtful if I shall get it finished for at least two years."

Letter from Tchaikovsky to his nephew the life and letters of Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky

The first piece in the exhibition is this letter from Tchaikovsky selected from the book *The Life and Letters of Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky* written in 1870. Tchaikovsky was a composer from the romantic period and as part of the exhibition music composed by him will be playing, specifically Romeo and Juliette overture. The viewer is able to listen to his work, that he rendered as being unappreciated, whilst reading this letter that discusses his current emotional state. Tchaikovsky talks of 'many thorns' in his life such as ill health, struggles with his music, and anxiety yet he states that 'the roses

are there too ' which shows his desire to find the beauty in things and look past the darkness and talks of breathing the lovely air of a spring morning.



The unmade bed Tracy Emin.

Staged at the centre of the gallery is the *Unmade Bed* by Tracy Emin. Created in 1998 Emin presented her bed exactly as it looked, littered with bottles of alcohol, condoms, birth control pills

cigarette packets and dirty underwear. Emin states that this bed got her through a difficult time in her life. After not leaving her bed for several days she eventually went for a bath and when she came back she looked at the mess of her bed though about how disgusting it looked and wondered what would it look like in a white empty space. She says though to herself this wouldn't be the worst place for me to die this is a beautiful place that's kept me alive. This is not a sculpture or artwork that represents something else it is the object itself. It breaks many taboos regarding sexuality, humanity and shame.



Black and grey paintings by Mark Rothko.

Rothko painted a series of these paintings in 1969 before his suicide.

Due to the dark colour palette many people assume this is representative of his deepening struggle of depression and closure on his life . Rothko's daughter however sees them as being a new beginning,

and represents a new departure and a way of conveying his philosophy. Earlier in Rothko's career his palette was typically a lot brighter, the black and grey paintings were in stark contrast to these. Rothko's daughter felt that these brighter paintings were actually more representative to him of tragedy. Whilst looking at Rothko's paintings I feel they are derivative of Malevich's *The Black Square* 1930, in the sense of looking for meaning within nothing.



Vincent Van Gogh *Starry night*,

Where as three of the other works are more of the contemporary sublime, this post-impressionist piece is not designed to shock. Painted in 1889, an historical piece by one of the most famous artists plagued by mental illness. *Starry night* was created whilst Van Gogh was a patient at a mental asylum after cutting off his ear supposedly the starry night view was the view from his window. Despite the opinion that it was painted to signify his feelings of insanity and depression, the real inspiration behind starry night could be the feelings of hope Van Gogh conveys through the stars shining down in the dark landscape. Van Gogh once wrote in a personal letter of 'a great starlit vault of heaven one can only call god'



'I'm just a bit tired' by Sarah Vaci 2018

Vaci states that these were the words she used when the midwife asked her how she was feeling after the birth of her baby. She replied with I'm just a bit tired despite feeling horrific. Another contemporary sublime piece which at first glance is extremely hard hitting and morbid. I have selected it to be the conclusion to my exhibition not due to the representation of the end of life and the obvious representation of suicide, (which is prevalent within the world of of tortured artists) but because I consider it to be a new beginning. Out of the seven functionalities one would first assume that the functionality of this is sorrow however I believe it could meet all of them. Vaci did not create this whilst in the throws of her darkest days she created it on reflection of those times.

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