BA Fine Art: Studio, Site and Context

Ways of Perceiving (AE309A)

Essay and Exhibition title: How men's mental health is portrayed and recognised through art.

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27th March 2023

Mental health will always be an important issue but it is still widely seen as a stigma, people refuse to except or understand this challenge. However for men, having the challenge of mental health can be even harder. In this essay I will be looking into, how men's mental health is portrayed and recognised through art. In this essay I am going to touch upon: how men's and women's mental health can differentiate; I will then look into how common mental health issues effect men differently when compared to women. Throughout the essay I will look at various artists whose art pieces relate to mental health, specifically focusing on mens mental health. I will also touch upon philosophers and theorists that look into mens mental health. Throughout the essay and show, I wish to educate people on men's mental health and end the stigma surrounding this subject.

Mens mental health is a subject that is not widely spoken about, we know mental health is a fight that we need to discuss more openly however this is still to be accomplished. Various artists have spoken out about their experiences with mental health, such as Edvard Munch, whose work relays his experience with anxiety. We know it exists and people everyday, all over the world, struggle with their mental health. We know people have committed suicide through this struggle, however what we do not widely acknowledge is just how much men struggle with this fight. "In 2019, there were 5,691 suicides registered in England and Wales." (Mental Health Foundation) Three quarters of those were men, and in more recent years three times as many men have committed suicide, compared to the suicide rates of women. However, why do men struggle with their mental health more than compared to women?

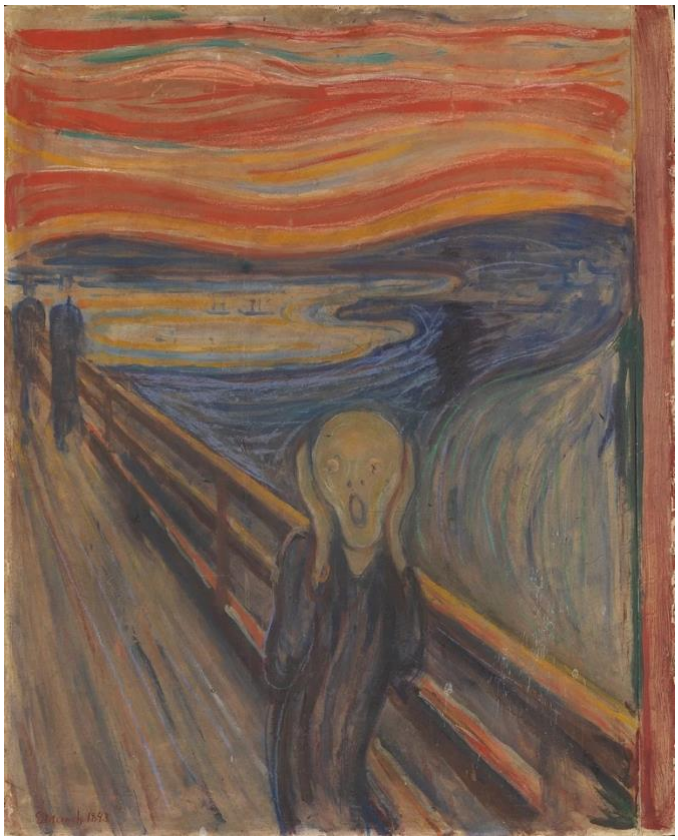
Women are mainly connected to the mental health campaigns as there are more cases reported in connection to women. However, between ages six-teen to twenty-four, only 9% of men are likely to experience common mental health issues. Although, men aged forty to forty-nine have the highest suicide rates compared to women. This suggests that men's mental health issues increase with age, this may be caused by the fact that sociably, men are seen to have a strong, emotionally stable, independent, self-reliant demeanour. As a result, men hide their emotions and feelings and only embrace them when they in their private spaces, as they feel they will not be judged. An exhibition which highlights the vulnerability of men called 'confessions' brought insight into men's mental health and how different individuals cope with their fight against it.

"87% of men sleep rougher than women" (Mental Health Foundation). A lack of sleep can be detrimental to living a healthy everyday life, both physically and mentally. When your body does not have enough sleep it starts a carousel of negative effects, tiredness leads to difficulty with completing simple daily tasks, this then causes low self esteem which makes feelings of worry and stress increase, which then causes a lack of sleep. This repeating pattern can be frustrating, your body is tired but your mind can not rest, your various mental health issues can increase and cause irritability and aggression. These are aspects that are not a huge concern when regarding men as they are traditional social assumptions. On the other hand, depression can also cause your mind and body to require more sleep, this is your mind trying to prevent the thoughts that depression can cause. A lack of sleep or an increased amount of sleep is a great inkling as to when your mental health is declining and can help with early prevention.

Scientifically speaking, it has been proven that gender does not effect how mental health develops, however the cultural views of gender does have an impact on mental health. Men are regarded socially as having 'stiff upper lips,' even young boys are socially told to not show emotion, when they fall over and cry they are told 'big boys don't cry.' Where as, women are seen to be 'expressive' and 'sensitive' individuals, who openly show their emotion without any judgement. As a result, men conceal health needs and are more than likely to refuse care, due to the stigma. Joshua Miles' paintings explore the explore the illusion that many try to hide behind, especially men. In relation, only 36% of men seek professional help, which is why men are more likely to be sectioned compared to women. Women will seek out help and advice, where as men only accept professional help and advice when it is forced upon them.

Unfortunately men are more likely to attempt to solve their mental health issues by self medicating themselves with frequent alcohol and drug use. Alcohol induces dopamine, also known as a chemical released in human brains that will make you feel good, it was discovered that men drink alcohol and release dopamine, they release more of the hormone compared to how much women release through alcohol. This explains why men are more likely to become alcoholics and rely on alcohol to drown out their mental illnesses. An artistic form called 'kintsugi' is what I connect with alcoholism, I find it signifies how a person can be at their lowest point and be described as 'broken,' but even those that are broken can be fixed and made whole again.

Edvard Munch



Edvard munch, *The Scream* (1893)

The scream is a reflection of Munch's personal struggles with mental health, specifically anxiety. Munch suffered greatly with both anxiety and depression, painting was his way of expressing himself and was said to find painting therapeutic. *The Scream* was a reflection of the isolation that he was experiencing at the time, which is shown with the lone figure unleashing their horrors out into the world. Munch created the oil painting after going through personal trauma and multiple panic attacks, after completing *The Scream* he signed himself in to a psychiatric hospital due to the severity of his mental illnesses.

Due to the fact that *The Scream* was created in 1893, Munch most likely did not know or realise what was going on, depression wasn't properly diagnosed until the 1930's, anxiety and panic attack diagnosing was not diagnosed until the 1980's. Back in the 1800's mental health was a sign of madness and despair, *The Scream* was most likely faced with backlash due to the fact this was a signifier of Munch 'losing his sanity' and 'becoming mad.'

I find *The Scream* to be frightening, not because the painting is scary, but because there are so many that suffer with their mental health in total isolation especially men that do not seek help, especially back in the 1800's when mental health was just referred to as someone being 'mad'. In present day we are not forced to keep quiet, it is a sociable standard that prevents people speaking up now out of fear of being judged. In my opinion this reason makes the painting all the more powerful, no matter what response Munch received, good or bad, he still went on to create art works that reflected on his soul and mind which likely helped others feel confident in what they were feeling instead of letting their mental health overtake them.

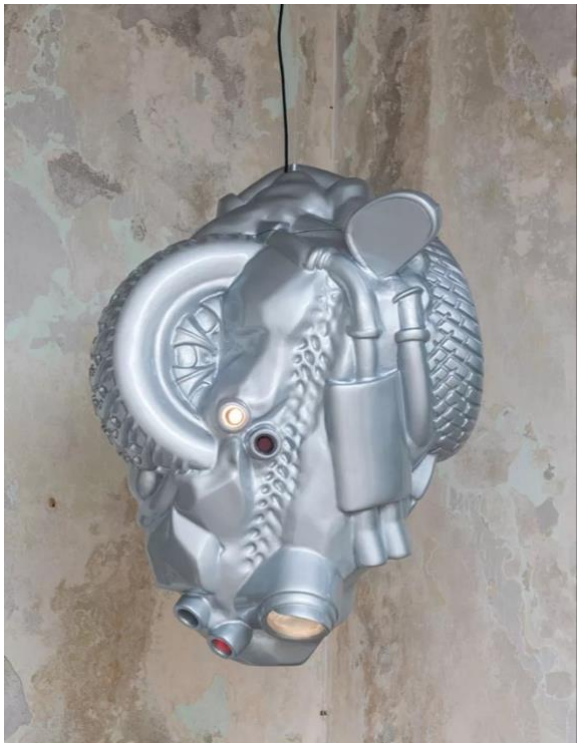
'*Confessions'* by Tableau exhibition

Confessions was an exhibition by Tableau that that spanned from 15th – 17th of June. The exhibition featured commissioned work from four-teen male artists, designers and architects that all had one aspect in common, disclosing the toxic masculinity, vulnerability and mental health that most, if not all, men go through. The creative director of Tableau, Julius Iversen, wanted the exhibition to be an open-minded space, where the invited artists had a chance to articulate their mental health struggles through their art pieces. When being invited to produce work for the show their only brief was that their pieces were to show "vulnerability,

something they have been struggling with or something they thought about when thinking about their mental health" Chan (2022)

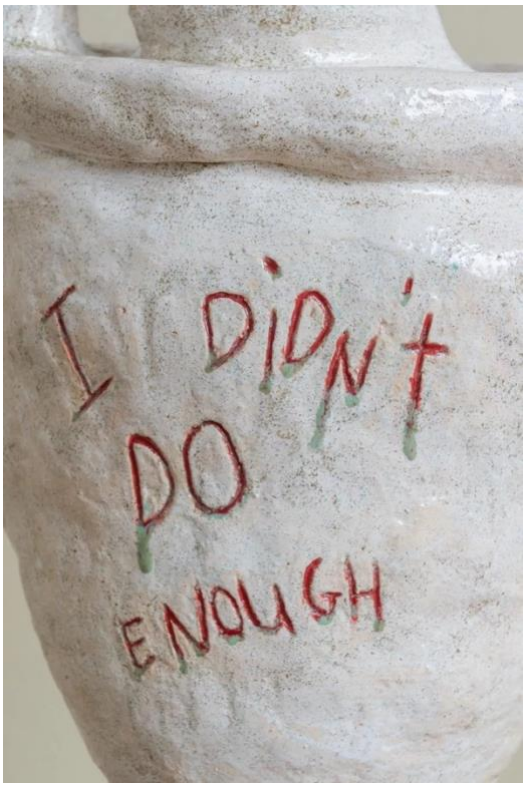
Paul Cournet, *Barcelona Silver Bed* (2022)

Some of the artistic pieces that were on display consisted of 'Barcelona Silver Bed' by Paul Cournet. This was a piece inspired by a psychotherapist office, it was a day bed with a recycled frame topped with a mattress and headrest filled with tennis balls. This was a piece that was to encourage visitors to lie down and release what they are feeling inside. There was also a piece called 'Fast As Lightening' by Jacob Egeberg that was a resemblance of a chandelier. However, it was not a traditional chandelier, in fact it was made out of car parts and was designed to become the shape of a human heart. This was to convey that men are vulnerable, a message that even with the most masculine men also comes vulnerability.


Jacob Egeberg, *Fast As Lightning* (2022)

My favourite piece of the exhibition is a piece called ‘I Didn’t Do Enough’ by William Van Hoff. This piece was made of ceramics and took shape of a vessel with the words ‘I Didn’t Do Enough’ scrawled across it. This resonates with me when I think of the ‘bread makers,’ one of the stereotypes when it comes to men is that they are to provide for their family, and the pressure they are under to do so, when they lose their jobs or unable to get work they are seen as ‘failures’ or they have ‘left their family down.’ Others forget that most of the time there is a spouse or partner that is able to work and support the family as well, however when it comes to a female partner or spouse if they stay home they are seen as ‘nourishing’ and ‘caring’, it is seen as normal.

‘I Didn’t Do Enough’ can also be a reflection on those that have an anxiety disorder. This can make people feel they are not enough personally, the artist viewpoint by William Van Hoff described that he wanted his work to convey the message of “why do we as humans doubt ourselves? Why is it never good enough”



William Van Hoff, *I Didn’t Do Enough* (2022)

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