

Question: From the MESSAGE, MEDIUM, CONTEXT research strand lectures, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists or designers that relate to your practice or interests, and construct a 2,500-word essay. Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.

Title: How is art used to portray and understand mental health?

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Module title (resit): Research in context

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Tutor name: Gwenllian Beynon

Word count: 2503

In this essay I will discuss how art can be used to portray and better understand mental health. Firstly, I will discuss Bernard Buffet who was a French artist born in 1928. The artist grew up during the Nazi occupation, being 13 when WW2 started and experienced the war as well as the deprivation that followed. (Lankarani, 2016.) These experiences inspired a lot of his work that gives off a sad or gloomy feeling.



Figure one (Buffet, 1954)

This painting is a self-portrait of Buffet from 1954. This painting is unsettling for many reasons. The first being the gaunt look of his face and body. He looks extremely thin and almost undernourished as though he hasn't been taking care of himself or cannot feed himself Adequately. This as a viewer makes me feel a sense of unease. His facial expression in this piece is also very unsettling as his expression is unclear whether he is smiling or just showing his teeth however I feel that the expression is blank and emotionless despite his teeth being shown. I believe this may have been intentional to show how he felt whilst creating this painting. Due to his depression, he may be feeling emotional-less or numb. His face also appears very long which makes me think of the expression "why the long face" in reference to a person looking sad. The colour palette in this painting is very muted and grey toned. Even the yellows and blues are so dull that you can hardly see that the piece isn't a grey monotone painting. The grey colour makes his skin look sickly and ill which further makes him look very gaunt and somewhat lifeless like his expression. It makes me feel that he doesn't see his life as being bright and colourful but instead very dull and monotone as though it isn't exciting or enjoyable for him. Overall, this piece makes me feel

uncomfortable and at unease as this piece gives off a very somber and lifeless feeling and atmosphere to it which I think was purposeful to show the state of his life and mental health at the time of the portrait.

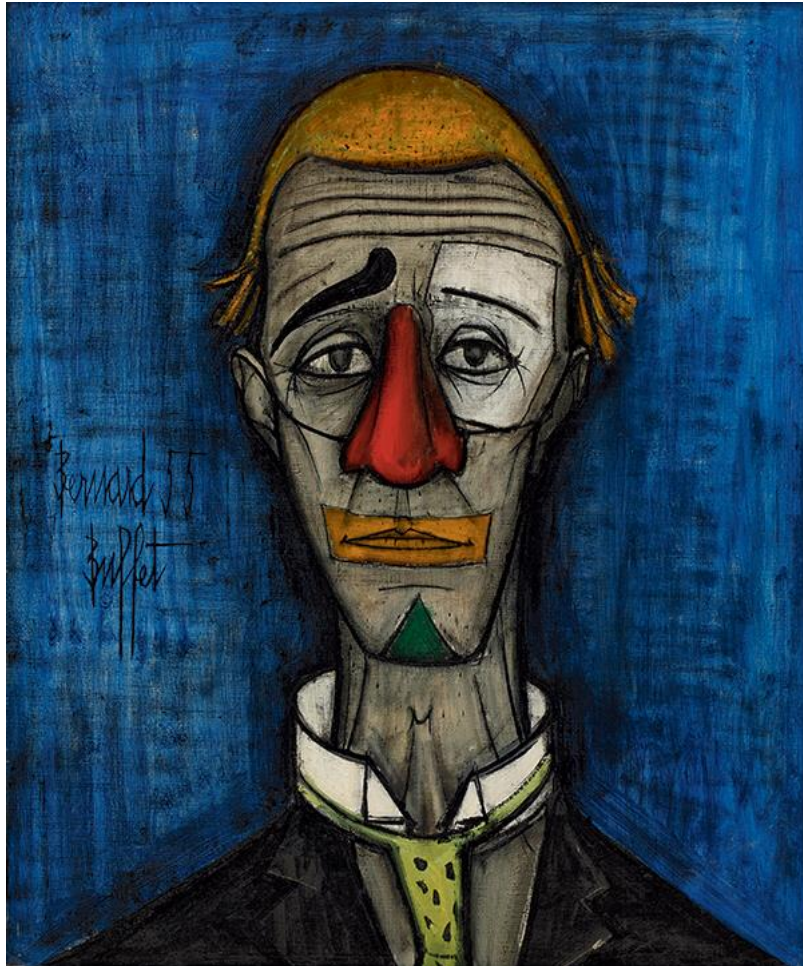


Figure 2 (Buffet, 1955)

This piece is called Head of Clown by Bernard Buffet (1955) and is part of a series of paintings of clowns that he created. The clown series are all very similar in how their faces are painted, the expressions on their faces and the colours used throughout the pieces. The facial expression of the clown is very neutral and almost glum or sad due to the raised eyebrows. This combined with the fact that the person is dressed as a clown is a big juxtaposition and seems as though they are dressed as a clown either to disguise their sadness or as a way of mocking them. Looking closely at the face of the clown you can see that the marks aren't central and seem to be slightly out of place such as the green triangle on the chin being off centre. The eyebrows are also very different in shape and size and only

one eye is painted over with white. To me this shows that maybe everything is a mess, that their life isn't in a good way, they aren't sure what choices to make, and their life just doesn't piece together the way they'd like. The bright colours of the background and the clown face paint are very bright which contrasts the colour of the persons skin and clothing as well as the expression on their face. This gives off an uneasy feel and atmosphere as it initially seems as though it should be a happy image but on closer inspection you can see that the colours also have a lot of darker tones that mute the colour slightly and make it muddy. The background gets darker around the bust of the clown as though they have a ring of negativity around them that dampens the bright colours that possibly could represent any joy in their life. I feel that this could be Burnett trying to portray depression.

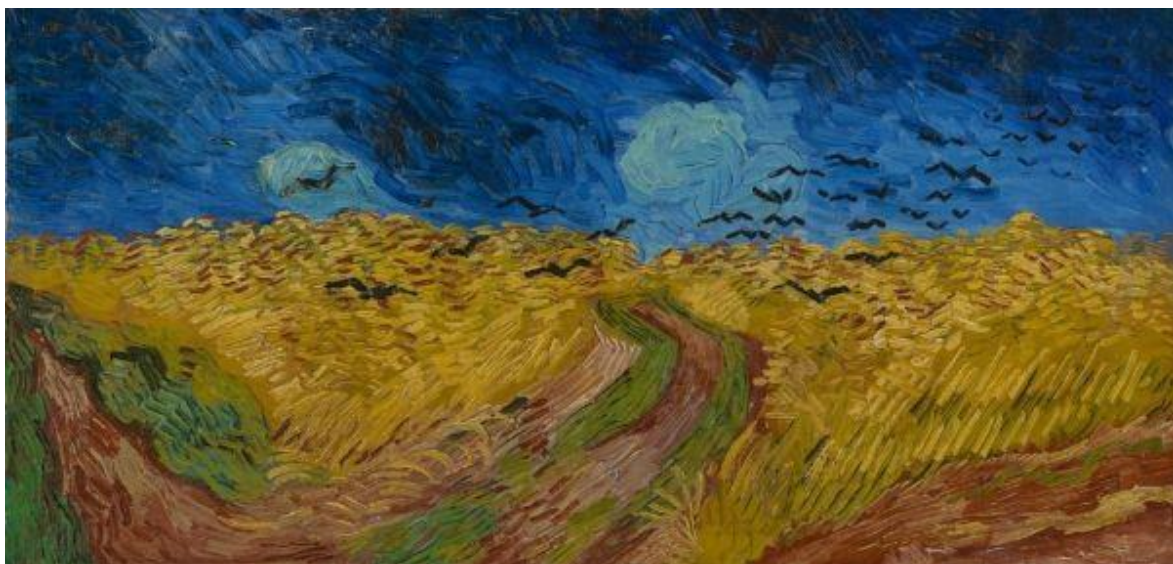


Figure 3 (Van Gogh, 1890)

Vincent Van Gogh was a Dutch artist born in 1853 in the Netherlands. (Britannica, 2021) He is well known globally for his artworks as well as his mental health. Van Gogh suffered with his mental health throughout his entire life, but it has not been confirmed exactly what illnesses he suffered from. However, it is understood that he most likely suffered with psychiatric illnesses, manic depression and some form of personality disorder such as bipolar. Throughout his life he struggled with loneliness (Nix, E. 2018). He had little to no success romantically apart from one relationship that failed and didn't have many friends. He felt like a failure and had only officially sold one painting in his lifetime. His most well recognised and popular painting 'starry night' was painted while he was self-admitted into a

mental asylum. It is thought that the swirls in the painting were hallucinations he experienced due to these illnesses. His brother was his only supporter in his life and stated that he wouldn't be surprised if Vincent was one of the great geniuses and would one day be compared to someone like Beethoven(The history collection, 2019) . In a letter to his brother Van Gogh had said "What preys on my mind is simply this one question: what am I good for, could I not be of service or use in some way?" (Good reads, 2021) which shows his disappointment in himself and his ongoing sense of failure.

This painting is called 'Wheatfield with crows' (Van Gogh, 1980) and is commonly believed to be the last painting that Van Gogh created before attempting to end his life in this very wheatfield. However, a few paintings were created after this one. This is personally my favourite painting by the artist for reasons I will discuss. When looking at this piece it can be easy for the average viewer to think that it is just a painting of a wheatfield but in the context of Vincent van Gogh's life and the events that would take place after the painting changes that entirely. The sky, although a vibrant blue, is mixed with a lot of black and dark blues to portray a stormy sky. This adds a gloomy and ominous effect to the painting and in my understanding signifies how he felt in his life at this time, that a storm was coming, especially in that field, or that he did not feel any light in his life anymore. The bright blue and dark sky contrasts beautifully with the yellow wheat. The red paths are intensified and brought attention to by the green surrounding them but the paths seemly lead to nowhere which indicates the end of his life approaching. In my mind the crows are the most significant part of this painting. The gun that van Gogh had shot himself with was borrowed from a farmer which he had claimed was to scare off crows from the field(BBC NEWS, 2019). In the painting the crows are clearly in flight and are close to the ground which could shows that they had all started flying from the ground at the same time. This leads me to believe that the birds had been scared by something such as a gunshot. This would make a lot of sense since it seems as though Van Gogh had planned to end his life soon with a gunshot to the chest. As you can see there is nothing else in the painting such as people or houses etc in the background which leads me to believe that Van Gogh felt very alone and deserted like the wheatfield toward the end of his life.

Moving on from Van Gogh I will be discussing Bryan Charnley's artwork as he was diagnosed with schizophrenia and created some very expressive, insightful work which he explains in

some detail unlike Van Gogh's work which is analysed more so with the power of hindsight. Charnley's work was aimed to be documentation of his schizophrenia whereas Van Gogh's work was not explained by the artist themselves before their death.

Bryan Charnley was a British artist born in Stockton-on-Tees in 1949. At 18 years old he "suffered a nervous breakdown but was able to study at Leicester School of Art later that year." However, he couldn't finish his course due to having another break down before being diagnosed with schizophrenia. Between 1971 and 1979 he had been in and out of being hospitalised and being treated for his illness. Onward from 1982 his work started to represent personal aspects of his life such as his "dreams and mental state particularly the nature of his schizophrenia" (Charnley, 1991) . Charnley decided that he would start a self portrait series, paintings while he experimented with varying dosages of his schizophrenia medication which gave great insight into his mental state.



Figure 4 (Charnley, 1991)

This is the first of Charnley's self portraits from 1991 trying to accurately represent himself as best he could before his schizophrenia worsened. I am showing this painting as a reference point for his later self portraits.

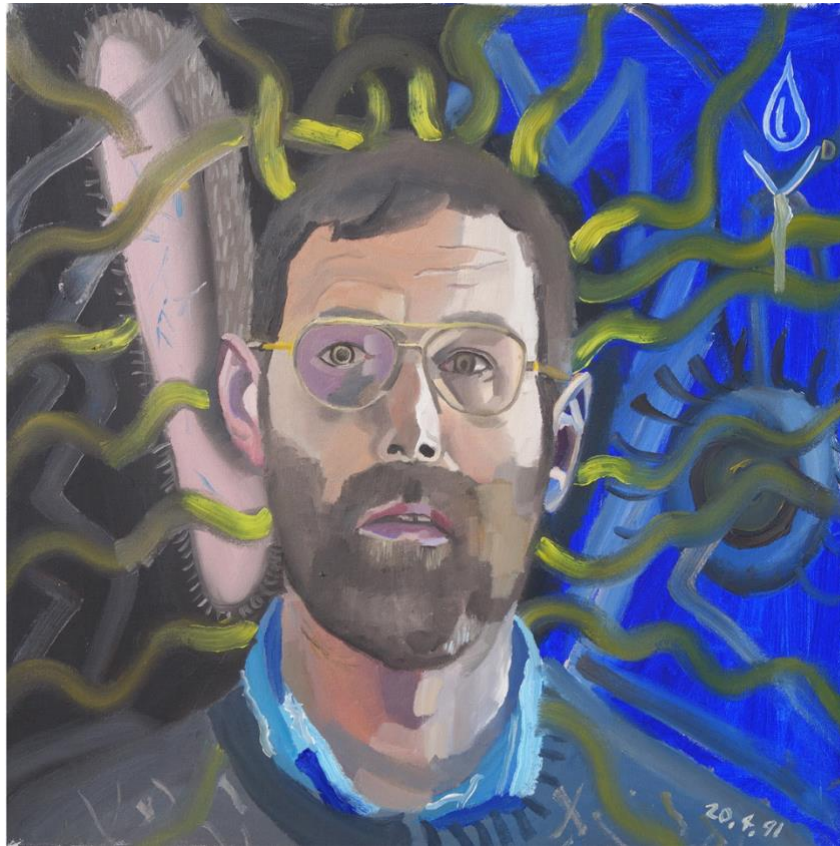


Figure 5 (Charnley, 1991)

This is the second of Charnley's self portraits. As you can see, his face has started to change slightly from the original painting, his face looks more blank or confused in expression with one eye being closer inward than the other. It seems as though his sense of self may already be starting to slip. He states in his diary that he is feeling 'Very paranoid' (Charnley, 1991) and that 'The person upstairs was reading my mind and speaking back to me to keep me in a sort of ego crucifixion.' (Charnley, 1991) Which I think shows how out of control his thoughts were becoming. He states 'I felt this was because I was discharging very strong vibrations which could easily be interpreted.' (Charnley, 1991) Which are represented by the wavy yellow lines in the painting. As you can see there are a lot of them and they cover most of the piece yet are still in the background behind him which to me seems as though he feels surrounded and overwhelmed by them, that they are consuming his every thought, pushing other things to become more irrelevant. He says that he painted himself with a rabbit ear as

he was feeling very confused and felt very sensitive to human voices as if he was a wild animal. To me this shows that he is already feeling some sort of dehumanising feelings and thoughts that are further pushing himself into being paranoid and unlike himself. He doesn't mention directly the blue background in his description but the eye in the background further demonstrates the feeling he had of being watched and observed by others in my opinion.



Figure 6 (Charnley, 1991)

Lastly I've chosen this painting from Charnley's self portrait series. He describes this piece as 'The eggs have been emptied like a head stripped of its contents. It has nothing left in it, no more secrets they went to satisfy somebody's appetite, some body that has power over me. They enjoyed every tasty mouthful.' (Charnley, 1991) which shows that he's portraying himself as something to be consumed by others, fragile and helpless to the power of others. He also says 'I feel suicidal so I painted in Van Gogh's crows from his final, suicide picture of the wheat field. E.S.P. horns, voices as mouths grinning. Birds come from eggs so the crows

can also be like my thoughts flying away.’(Charnley, 1991) Which I think is interesting as he also associates the feeling of being suicidal with crows and actually links this feeling with a painting that we have already discussed by Van Gogh. This expression of his thoughts flying out of the eggs and flying away tells me that he felt that he didn’t have control over his thoughts and they would go freely. The mouths grinning may be him portraying that he feels mocked or humiliated by others.

Next I will look at a more simple and illustrative artist. The next artists work is intended for different purposes than the previous 3 artists as his work was to be published in a book.

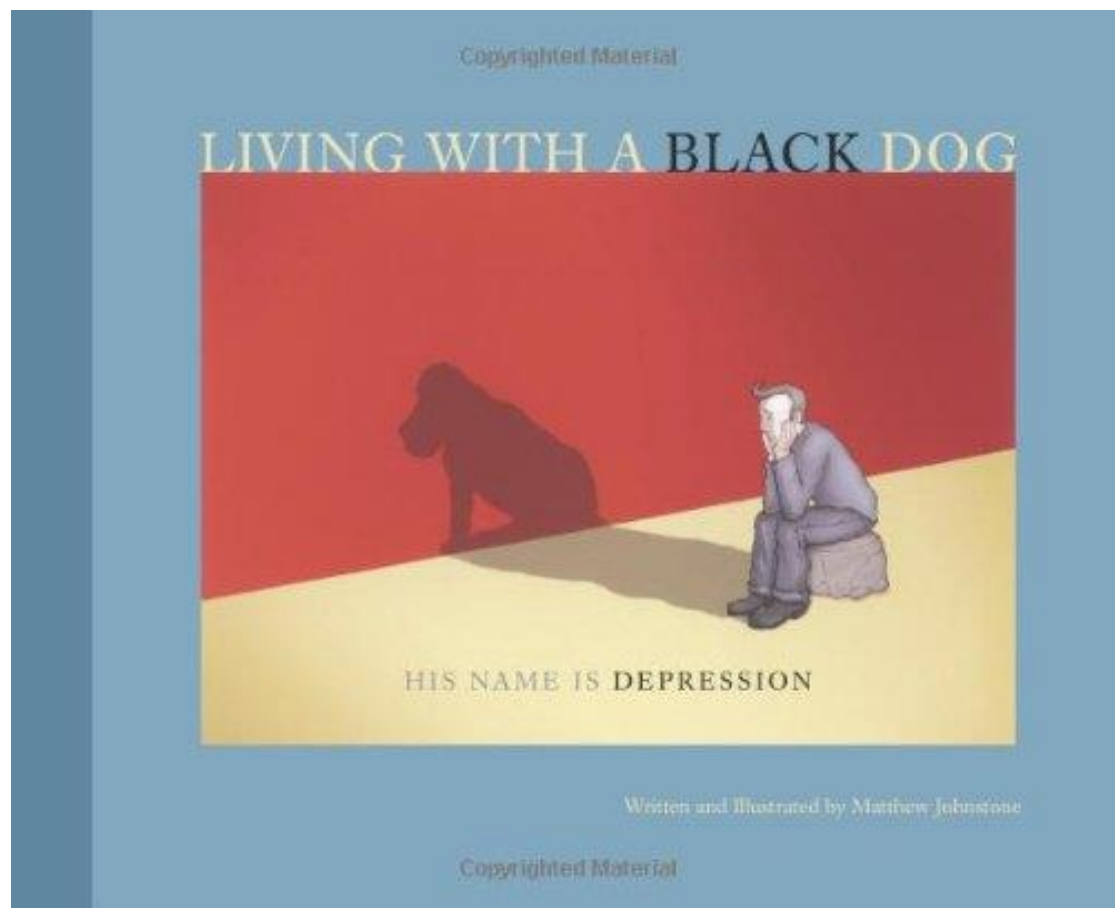


Figure 7 (Johnstone, 2005)

Matthew Johnstone is a speaker, author and artist who is now well known for his books ‘I had a black dog, his name was depression’ and ‘living with a black dog’ which were both best sellers. Johnstone mentions that depression had been in and out of his life since his late 20s and had spent so much energy in his life making sure to hide his depression from the

people around him because he felt shame about his mental state. I think that this is portrayed in this illustration very well. The black dog isn't physically present but instead is lurking in the shadows. The dog's shadow also is separate to the man but is attached to him. To me this shows that his depression doesn't define him or change who he is but it still has its effects. The man is also dressed in all blue which I think was intentional as blue is often a colour used to express sadness. The black dog being placed on the red wall makes the dog figure the main focal point of this illustration as it draws attention to it which makes it stand out from the rest of the image due to the blue and yellows not being as vibrant and demanding in the piece. I think that Johnstone's simple representation is very effective at what it intends to do which is to simplify and make the feelings of depression very understandable and relatable as it is meant as a sort of self help book or demonstration to be seen by the public to normalise and bring awareness to the effects of depression and how to seek help and manage it.

In conclusion, art can be used in a very wide range of ways to express the feelings of different mental illnesses from being more expressive and abstract due to the confusing nature of the sufferers illness like Charnley's work or to be simplified down into a more structured and easily digestible, relatable way like Johnstone's illustrations. Unfortunately a lot of understanding from paintings that are associated with mental health we can only analyse it in hindsight such as Vincent Van Gogh's work as they did not write down or aim to document their illness directly but the paintings still help us understand somewhat as they were created during a particular point in the artists life and is shaped by the artists visions and feelings. These paintings give us an insight into what it's like to experience certain mental illnesses on a basic level but I feel that we will never have a complete understanding of the workings of some people's mental state as it is very different from person to person based on their fears and so on. However, I feel that it would be very useful to have mental illnesses documented like Charnley's paintings on a much larger scale to get a much broader understanding of the condition as well as others as a whole.

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