

MA Contemporary Dialogues: Confirmative Praxis Report

Secret Smile: The Acceptance of Loss, and the Positivity of Change

- Diagnosed with Dyslexia and ADHD In 2022

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Introduction

My praxis focuses on the diagnosis of my ADHD and dyslexia made in early 2022. Looking at artists who represent neurodivergency and the theories of diagnoses made in later life, I'm aiming to explore how my experience has affected me based on personal and societal views and misrepresentations. The research has helped me to address my preconceptions and realise that there are positives alongside struggles that come with both ADHD and dyslexia.

The report will begin by reflecting on the exhibition, what I had hoped for it and how my work was received. It will then go on to describe my journey in getting to the final piece, by focusing on artists who were inspirational to me such as Salvador Dali, and how my understanding of neurodivergence influenced my designs.

The final part of the report will provide a detailed analysis of my own work and the rationale behind each of my pieces for the exhibition.

CHAPTER 1 : The Opening Night

The opening night was lively, (with a much better attendance than predicted). The work created by everyone was beautifully professional with the presentation executed to the highest standard that you would scarcely believe students had curated. Each space felt expertly accomplished, and overall we should all be proud with the outcome.

I have enjoyed expanding on my professional practice throughout the duration of the MA Contemporary Dialogues course. The modules provided such broad topics that I truly believe the themes and imagery I created during each allowed me to find a style that is much more natural; I love the strange, bizarre, horrific, odd and (very often) misunderstood.

The work I finalised and selected for showcasing met the criteria I had set myself, and despite having a shaky start they've achieved a quality that I have always strived for.

Regarding the subject matter of my ADHD diagnosis, I feel as though the interactions of each landscape and related character were successful, however the build up to the final presentation was not always so straightforward.

The paintings and sculpture that I created for this MA were about bringing my ADHD to life, making it more personal, and facing my new reality rather than pretending I'm 'normal'.

My final imagining of my character was effective: it represented everything I wanted to convey; growth, disgust, acceptance and above all, change. The initial developments however were difficult. In my initial designs my character appeared too young, with the aim for it to have been for an older audience in order to educate and enhance the fact that too many people are diagnosed with ADHD when they are adults; eradicating any chance of them developing skills they could have achieved at their highest potential sooner. To change the youthful appearance of the character, I considered feature placement, the head size and balance of the body; what would the head to body ratio be? These allowed for a more diverse set of illustrations that led to me choosing narrower eyes in comparison to big ones, a longer body rather than short, and more realistic limbs based on the references of gargoyles.

The sculpture I constructed had also taken far too long to complete, resulting in feeling rushed to the point of dissatisfaction. I love the face, but I wish I'd had more time to develop the body: the colour appears to be flat, the textures rushed and underdeveloped with pieces of the white paper still visible and barely covering the wire skeleton below. You could almost mistake it for the description of Frankenstein's creation:

His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful... His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; ... his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun-

white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips (Shelley, 2013 p.59).

To attempt to fabricate something of this size and in only a matter of weeks, with never having made anything like it before, it has certainly been a challenge. A rewarding one in fact, but only where the face is concerned.

The complexities of my mixed feelings towards this creature however remain redundant, as the feedback I received was generally positive. It looked like my illustration, it was recognisable as my work and it drew people in to see what was on display.

Since the Exhibition

Although I am happy with the quality of my work, I'm beginning to have mixed feelings about the meaning. The themes are strong and they are personal but people's reactions are beginning to make me doubt my abilities at conveying them.

I made a note concerning the feedback of the character's appearance being positive – descriptions such as "it's cute". However, there were other comments made with "what's going on in your head?!" and "where do you come up with these things" being common themes. As I mentioned earlier, the majority of feedback I received was positive, but I could see in a lot of people's faces how unimpressed they were.

I was not actively looking for validation, but I couldn't help but feel a sinking pit in my stomach when they judged my character by looks and failed to understand or even ask about the meaning.

Since then, I've doubted myself; I've doubted my perceptions: did anyone read what the work was about? Had the abstract I'd written on the wall not explained anything clearly enough, or had they simply walked past without trying to understand it? Was "cute" just a polite term?

Perhaps it's a lost cause to accommodate other people who have already made up their minds by not trying to understand it in the first place.

Observing people on the opening night proved this point, and I continue to think that my intentions for providing provoking work were thwarted, therefore making them incapable of confidently representing the relevance of neurodivergency in art.

I can't help but think that what I saw during the exhibition was merely a fraction of what society is willing to accept:

I empathise with the outcast, am attracted to the unconventional and I find peace in the solitary. To many, I would seem unapproachable, rude, distant and/or unlikeable, and yet to others I may be intimidating, intolerable, needy and/or intense. Both of which are extremes I wish to avoid, but with my ADHD it's difficult to keep a happy medium. The reactions I've seen to my paintings are very much how I have seen people looking at me, and it hurts.

When starting this project, my intentions were to focus on my strengths in character design. For my Explorative Praxis, I had created a set of characters that were meant to eradicate gender, sexuality, race and so forth in order to challenge the stereotypical norms that appear in character structures throughout pop culture.

I wanted to apply this project to be no different - although I started out by sketching people from life and exaggerating features, I knew I wanted to explore the path of the strange in more detail.

Eventually I settled on the idea of personifying my ADHD, using this as a better way to understand it myself.

I felt the general perception was that people outside the MA misunderstood the depth of my work, but I felt satisfied with the overall result. I am happy with each individual painting as they highlighted the key points I wanted to convey, but I feel the exhibition itself had room for improvement as some concepts seemed to get lost.

CHAPTER 2: Joining the Dots

I have known for a very long time (albeit subconsciously) that academia has not always come to me as easily as it does others. Despite having good grades I struggled in school, however as I climbed the scholastic ladder I found myself becoming more at ease with learning.

My teacher training enlightened me with the distinct ways in which we can learn and it opened up my mind to consider what could have helped me throughout my teens.

Pedagogically speaking I show stronger results through physical activities; doing something myself has lead to processes being remembered more easily if I were in need of completing the tasks again.

Writing was an entirely different story, with my last essay being the spark that ignited my need for clarification: was there something wrong with me?

Easily distracted, no interest, lack of motivation and focusing on anything but my assignment caused me to receive a lower mark than I wanted.

Although I knew I would not do well, I knew I could do better.

This led me to discussing my options with a lecturer and within a few weeks I was being tested for dyslexia and ADHD with a member of the Midlands Assessment Centre.

The Diagnostic Assessment Report came back with a very strong emphasis on dyslexia (which was a shock to me), with a touch of ADHD (later to be revealed that I was about half and half).

It claimed that although I have 'high levels of visual and verbal ability... [I] show underachievement in the following areas': reading speed, phonological awareness, writing and processing speed.

Accumulated, these meant that I'd have difficulty with my need to re-read text-based documents resulting in hindered progress when studying; difficulties with my ability to spell and read unfamiliar words; writing at an expected rate that will impact my ability to complete written tasks within a given time frame.

This information was enlightening with regards to being both confirming and surprising; it explained why I had struggled through education, whilst also informing me of new areas I previously had no concern with.

'...It is estimated that over 20% of the creative labour force are ND,' (<https://committees.parliament.uk>).

More people are discovering that they do not fit the 'neurotypical' way of thinking, but with very little research taken to diagnosing the different types of ADHD it's no wonder it can take so long to be recognised:- 'The Attention Deficit Disorder Association, a non-profit organisation for adults with ADHD, has noted that its membership more than doubled between 2019 and 2021,' (Carla Ciccone, 2022).

It's thought that with the rise in social media interest during the pandemic, TikTok became a leading factor in more people recognising similar behaviours and mannerisms to those with neurodivergent accounts, with diagnoses becoming a 'trend' with the hashtag "#adhd" having more than 13 billion views to date (Ciccone, 2022).

I believe the difficulties that arise with diagnosing would be due to the most recognisable symptom being the 'Hyperactivity' element of the condition. However, unbeknownst to many, there are actually three main types (Ciccone, 2022): Hyperactive-impulsive, Inattentive and a combination of the two.

'Hyperactive' is the most dominant, leading to many children (quite often boys), being diagnosed earlier in life, whereas 'girls are more often diagnosed with inattentive ADHD...' (2022) meaning there are struggles with focus, disorganisation, memory and sensory overload. Quite often ADHD is subdued in females, presenting itself less severely but effecting the person in a much more pervasive way in day-to-day tasks, especially if the person doesn't have any interest in the task at hand.

Sonia Boué, a multi form artist is a writer on autism alongside being a consultant for neurodivergency in art. Her short film 'Dual Identity' (Sonia Boué, n.d) was commissioned for the Barea Archive at the Bodleian Library with the intent to create post memory work showcasing neuro-inclusive, practice-based research around the theme of family and identity.

Boué along with thinkers and creatives such as Pablo Picasso, Albert Einstein, Marilyn Monroe and Steve Jobs were also believed to be under the banner of neurodivergence, (unknowingly representing a once believed to minority group in their endeavours). Steven Spielberg wasn't diagnosed as dyslexic until he was 60 years old, (Cristina Margolis, 2019).

With each little piece of information I found it was almost like finding another piece to a me-shaped puzzle. Starting from the edges and working inward I began to

understand myself just that little bit more, and that all the excuses I had made for my behaviours and decisions were not excuses at all, but in fact reasons.

I wanted to use these facts to influence my work in a personal way, much like how Salvador Dali personalised his own, incorporating elements of his life into his paintings. I wanted to achieve the same effect by conveying my own metaphorical imagery based upon my own memories and personal objects of significance.

'Dali's art drew from his everyday life and extracted seemingly arbitrary things...' (Dali Universe, n.d) from bicycles to telephones and clocks to snails, he was able to create thematic icons that became symbols of death, change and mortality. His own metaphors gained new meanings of their own and have influenced everyone's perceptions. I am not saying my work is of the same calibre, nor the ideas behind them, but I thought it certainly worth a try.

Some imagery I used (perhaps a bit more on the nose) were pictures of my family. Neurodivergence (ND) is hereditary, and family is also the reason I started the documentation of my lineage: I come from a small family of five who have been a close and consistent part of my life, and that never changed until January 2021 when we lost my grandfather.

I have experienced grief through the loss of family pets, and each loss has made the expectation of their smaller life spans easier to adjust to. However, losing my grandfather meant that my unvarying world suddenly became that much smaller. He had been ill for a long time and so his death did not come as a shock, rather a relief that he no longer suffered. In fact, nothing hit me harder than the effect it had on

my family and subsequently the view I had of myself when I didn't grieve in the same way.

After his passing we never had a funeral; that was his choice.

The continuation of lockdown also meant we could not see my grandmother and uncle (the two who faced my grandfather's deterioration first-hand) meaning it was rarely talked about for a long time, as they needed to grieve in their own way.

So I found a way to remember him and began looking through old family photos, recounted stories of my family growing up, and this led on to a time-lined photo book I curated, a family tree and eventually my genealogical testing via Ancestry.com.

The aim was to discover who I am and where I come from, along with physical similarities which is why I have a particular fixation with my grandfather's smile; ultimately my mother's and now mine, meaning that although I may not always remember the stories I'm told, a part of him lives on in appearance. This has given me a sense of closure and control over my grief, and has played a significant part in the ignition of my ideas.

I suppose including this picture in one of pieces would be the 'on-the-nose' idea I spoke of earlier, but I believe I incorporated imagery that truly captured meanings that were just as personal to me as Dali's work was to him, (I will discuss these in detail in Chapter 3).

In contrast to these aspects, I included 'obscure' characters and purposively placed devices, which I believed could promote conversation, make people ask questions about ADHD and dyslexia and perhaps even about themselves. This did happen during the

opening night, but only with others on the course and people I already knew, so the processes of my work gave no context to my paintings to any new onlooker. In an interview on 'The Dick Cavett Show' that aired in 1971, Dali expressed his thinking processes and specifics regarding his artwork. Cavett had a difficult time understanding Dali; (although there was a language barrier so some moments could be excused) he continued to undermine his creative processes because he could not fully engage with *why* Dali made his choices. This hit an experiential sore spot and served as a reminder regarding my own creative contexts.

I have always had difficulty expressing my ideas even among fellow creatives, leading to my inner monologue playing the broken record "*I must be the problem*". Knowing what I do now, this was never the case, as stated by Mark Bertin, M.D. on the A.D.D Resource Center (2014):

Managing ADHD is never about addressing attention or impulsivity alone. ADHD represents a deficit in executive function... Executive function acts as our 'brain manager' in coordinating our thoughts... One of the commonly overlooked aspects of ADHD is its direct effect on communication.

I think that this has played a huge part in influencing the ways I can communicate, morsels through the use of visual narratives; it's much easier to express feeling through drawings than words since I feel as though my vocabulary is stunted due to my lack of interest in reading.

CHAPTER 3: Designs

By trade I am a children's book illustrator and am therefore more accustomed to drawing for a younger audience. I have illustrated some educational books for older children (between the ages of 8-12), but naturally I lean towards books for teens and adults as I enjoy strange and obscure themes.

For this project I wanted to move away from children's illustration and target my preferred adult audience, allowing for my work to expand into areas I would not have had the opportunity to do otherwise. The aim was clear from the beginning: I wanted to focus on character design alongside the theme of my diagnosis.

The process became therapeutic, envisioning the character as a manifestation of my ADHD gave me the perfect motivation and excuse for me to research and gain a better understanding of my lifelong struggles. My fixation transformed my kryptonite into my superpower, and my drawings enhanced due to the micro-changes in the way I perceived the world.

There remained however, one stumbling block, and the longevity of that central problem was infuriating, circling back to my main concern stated in Chapter 1: the original design was too cute, certainly not for an older audience.

I knew I wanted to use a digital medium for my final pieces – I had become adept at using textured brushes that made my work look traditional, but with the added bonus

of being able to take it anywhere I went - thus allowing me to paint whenever the need arose.

My sketches however were in a notebook, as I like to keep my preliminary work together in one place so it is easy to go back to for inspiration. From these I then scanned them in and suitably adjusted what I needed to before I began painting on Procreate.

When I began jotting down ideas I considered how many there would be, deciding on three on the outset. I knew I wanted each to represent some aspect of how ADHD effects me, but I couldn't quite settle on which as they are so complex that each piece would have inevitably merged into having the same meaning. I then thought about my feelings with regard to my diagnosis. Focusing on this was essentially the same as what I did when my grandfather passed away, which led me to consider the 'Five Stages of Grief'. Observing this I decided to make my own and settled on producing five pieces, each one pertaining to a stage of my diagnosis before I eventually accepted it: 'The Five Stages of Acceptance'.

With the number of paintings decided, I needed to consider what the link between them would be: how could I show the maturing of my feelings over the months I had been changing? They needed a consistent component, something to show that they all belonged to the same visual narrative rather than being individual pieces with no correlation. This is where my character became a centrepiece; with each delineation the character would grow, representing my ADHD during the stages I had set out for myself:

Emergence. Seeking. Revolt. Apperception. Clarity.

The landscapes the character is placed in would represent different aspects of my ADHD and dyslexia and how they would affect my life, allowing me to show multiple factors and how they are separate problems while simultaneously showing how they overlap. I felt that changing the landscape could allow me to achieve this without causing too much confusion.

Above all they were intended to represent change, and showcasing my character's evolution into the final figure was perhaps the best idea to address that.

Piece number 1: Emergence

The results of my Diagnostic Assessment were posted in May 2022, and a feeling of dread overcame my body. I had considered myself to be slow and stupid in school, and I believed the focus of my struggles with "speed" and "memory" were a confirmation of that.

I decided to focus on the aspects of family (after all, this is where it began) and also to emphasise the fact that neurodivergence is hereditary.

The dark surroundings represent my subconscious, with the sticky black tar being reminiscent of the deepest part of my mind. The sepia tones of my family photos allow my character's colour to stand out much drastically, (a decision I had made much later in the process).

Piece number 2: Seeking

The thought behind the second piece was to show my stage of unacceptable change. The sun was a representation of the life I've always known, too far now to climb back to with the giant creature representing the inevitable change that threatens to consume it. The desert wasteland my character is traversing is representative of the uncharted territory of my mind that I have no choice but to understand.

This is definitely my least favourite piece - I struggled initially with achieving an atmosphere that felt right. The colours weren't looking right and it felt too claustrophobic, making the composition appear warped and because of this it ended up taking far too long to be completed.

In spite of the time taken, I am happy with the outcome - it looks cohesive with the others, (whereas the quality would usually have been lower due to my frustrations) and it conveys the feelings I wanted. With enough focus my perseverance paid off, much like Thomas Edison who, before succeeding in inventing the lightbulb, failed 10,000 times. When asked why he wasn't discouraged by his failings, he simply replied that he didn't consider them failures, '...rather, he had found 10,000 ways not to do it,' (Bonnie Mincu, 2022). Edison was believed to have been ADHD.

Piece number 3: Revolt

During October I had another meeting regarding the Learning Support I would receive during my studies, and it touched upon the fact that due to me requiring all software

available for aid, it was likely that I was just as much effected by ADHD as I was dyslexia (as both counteracted each other). Where one helped the other would not and vice versa, leading me to design my character splitting into two.

Having two distinct characters fighting each other, representing two opposing sides, while clearly being one entity (my mind) gives it an intriguing visage. It's the multiple meanings that draw me in and I can safely say that this is my favourite piece.

Along with my diagnosis came my learning support, but I was also given access to all software available to help me in my studies, (only relevant programmes are provided, very rarely all) because of my co-morbidity.

I also wanted to convey the frustrations and difficulties I often go through on a daily basis, and still struggle with since it will take a long time to recognise when I am being effected by my ADHD and dyslexia; but creating my own symbols based on the phonetic alphabet, the dyslexia side is subtle in the painting as it took me a while to accept that I am dyslexic.

Piece number 4: Apperception

This piece refers to my process of understanding what makes me neurodivergent. Originally there were going to be a lot more symbolic items thrown in, however I think the element chosen really sums up how I started understanding myself.

I wanted to convey what I believe are the most prominent aspects of my ADHD: sensory overload, empathy and hyper-focus.

One negative, one positive and one mixed.

The negative connotations are in the form of the metal, shell ear. It has never mattered what mood I am in, whenever I hear the clattering of cutlery on a draining board my mood plummets. The sound is deafening and sends my stomach in knots. I instantly want to hit something, but restrain myself mentally in a way that makes me angry for the foreseeable future, (although with my short attention span, it doesn't always last long). The sharp spikes represent my aggression and the sound it makes from my perspective.

The passing dark clouds with clearer skies on the horizon are representative of my past concerns being washed away, and the rain an emblem for empathy. With all the negatives that come with my learning disabilities there are positives: call it a 'sixth-sense'.

These people can feel a lot. In places where most of us are blind, they can, if not see the light, at least feel the light, and they can produce answers apparently out of the dark. It is important for others to be sensitive to this "sixth sense" many [ADHD] people have, and to nurture it.

(Edward M. Hallowell, 1992),

I have always been able to feel another person's emotions just as intensely as they do, and discussing the challenges others with ADHD face made me much more accepting of the way I am. They helped me to comprehend the good that comes with being us; we are highly creative, intuitive and imaginative (Tony Sinclair, n.d).

Piece number 5: Clarity

I wanted this piece to be the most simple in composition and content. My character is now fully formed, sitting alone on a small island away from any confusion and negative feeling (represented by the storm in the background).

This could also be interpreted as travelling towards the character rather than from, which would also be appropriate since there are still frustrations that come with having these learning disabilities. In the meantime however, the painting's uncluttered space implements the thought that I have now come to understand what makes me the way I am.

Trying to convey the right feelings in each painting has been difficult. Creating the right tone and atmosphere was hard since all my drawings show my imagination, so finding primary images as reference for the right 'look' was a struggle. All pieces were created from memory with multiple reference points that were only inspirations rather than direct aid.

Our focus and observational skills are heightened due to an increased sensitivity to our surroundings, 'often these people are highly imaginative and intuitive. They have a "feel" for things... This is the person who can't explain... [how] he suddenly produced such a painting... all he can say is he just knew it, he could feel it,' (Hallowell , 2016).

Although I wanted my paintings in reality, I also had to remind myself that since these scenes are based in my own mind, some elements would need to be irregular. I think this

played well with regards to mirroring how ADHD effects the mind when it comes to real life day-to-day tasks.

Conclusion

Regarding my process, I can't think of anything I have done that I would like to change - I did what's best and completed what I set out to do. I suppose I do wish I had more time for the completion of my sculpture, but considering it was the first time I had completed anything of that size I am rather proud.

For the exhibition, I think some extra context to my pieces would have been applicable - perhaps this would help those who only see the character to understand why it is the way it is. Maybe it would have given me less paranoia.

This project has helped me to achieve a quality of work I've had in my head of reaching for years. It has allowed me to consider the different pathways I can apply my work to, with animation now being an area I would highly enjoy, alongside a portfolio for concept designs that I hope to complete by the summer of 2023.

This also plays into my professional practice as an illustrator with the clients I currently work with. My work appears cleaner and much more smooth, imbuing me with the confidence to be a bit more adventurous in any future projects without worry that it won't be good enough.

Looking back over this last year, I haven't really had a central argument for my work.

The idea of 'Imposter Syndrome' would be a poignant issue to traverse; after all I am an outsider in a community I have always inadvertently been a part of. I could even say I've had an existential crisis of change in identity, with my excuses now becoming my reasons.

These reasons however have truly opened up my world: everywhere I go I see everything anew while also seeing the person I used to be. Personifying my ADHD has allowed me to accept a part of myself that I have always unknowingly had, a part of myself that I can now better understand and recognise without any negative feeling. I am becoming accustomed to my "sixth-sense" if you will.

I suppose the best way to put it would be through this poem:

Unable to perceive the shape of You, I find You all around me.

Your presence fills my eyes with Your love,

It humbles my heart,

For You are everywhere.

(The Shape of Water, 2017)

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