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Please take a seat...

May I present to you an exhibition concerning mental health, specifically the care of those with mental health problems and the systems in place, past and present. There is also an overarching theme of chairs, which will become more apparent as you read further. Mental health will always be a relevant subject to discuss so long as humans are in existence. It is something that affects each and every one of us to differing degrees. "Insanity is the only sane reaction to an insane society." (Szasz, T.S. year unknown, cited in Alexander, S. 2021). This exhibition will very aptly take place in Bethlem Museum of the Mind, placed in Bethlem Royal Hospital, Kent, which was the place of inspiration for my first work being shown. It is a place that supports peoples mental health and encourages community and gathering (Bethlem Museum of the Mind, 2026).



Fig 1. Mel Brimfield – From this world to that which is to come (2020-2021)

I have selected two pieces of art for the exhibition. The first is Mel Brimfield's *From this World, to that which is to come* (2020-2021) which is inspired by her two years of research at Bethlem Royal Hospital's National Psychosis Unit and the King's College Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience. There are various elements to the piece including a ring of chairs which double as speaker units. These chairs were made by Men's Sheds across the UK who are proponents of men's mental health. According to an article by Simon Fogal, there were over 100 collaborators for the entire eclectic sculpture (Fogal, S. 2021). The speaker units are projecting audio recordings of psychiatric unit patients, the central voice being heard, is that of Patrick. In the centre of the ring of chairs is a golden tree and, on that tree, sits a budgie. The budgie has been placed there to signify the memory of Patrick's mother (Rolls, D. 2021). Mel Brimfield is well known as a performance artist and

based in London. “Brimfield’s work aims to bring audiences for the arts together and erode historic distinctions between creative fields.” (Fogal, S. 2021).



Fig 2. Judith Scott – Untitled work 2004

The second piece is an untitled work made in 2004 by the late artist Judith Scott (1943-2005). Born with Down's Syndrome and later in life found to be deaf, also most likely from birth. She spent over 35 years of her life in psychiatric units (Hessel, 2020). Her twin sister Joyce, was able to remove her from psychiatric care (where she apparently suffered poor treatment) when Joyce became Judith's legal guardian. As Foucault poignantly reminds us "The judges of normality are present everywhere. We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the social worker-judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based" (Foucault, M, 1975). Judith was enrolled into the Creative Growth Art Centre in California. Judith found a love of threads during a fibre arts workshop at the art centre and went on to create her now well renowned art pieces. The main body of the work in the exhibition is a chair, which has been wrapped with strips of fabric, string and yarn. Typical to Scott's work she had bound several items into the piece. Visible are a wheel and a wicker basket.



Fig 3. A prisoner at Wakefield Prison is held in a chair by restraint collar and straps.
Welcome Collection, CC-BY



Fig 4. Drawing of the spinning tranquilizer chair

To round off the exhibition there will be two pictures placed on the wall. One a photograph (fig. 3) and one a drawing (fig.4). The pictures depict chairs from history that were used to restrain and to treat. There is evidence of many forms of restraints and devices used during the 19th century, believing they would cure illnesses of the mind (e.g., Science Museum, 2018; Logan, S. 2021). The use of restraints originates from custodial institutions such as prisons, as shown in the photograph which will be in display (Science Museum, 2018). In the drawing a figure sits on what was called a 'spinning tranquilizer chair' by Dr Benjamin Rush (Logan, S. 2021). It was believed that the movement of spinning would clear congestion in the brain, therefor curing mental illness. I do not wish to shock the audience with these

pictures, merely show how attitudes and practices have changed. I believe that remembering the past can give us a stronger appreciation of the present.

I hope that the audience can enjoy the way that the chairs are central to each piece but also used in varying ways. Chairs seem also a central part to psychiatric treatment, the idea of entering a therapist's office and being offered a chair. Often a comfortable chair to relax the client and help them to speak freely. A more formal and often uncomfortable chair in say a doctor's office where you are not encouraged to stay long. Chairs and their layouts (sometimes also the lack of chairs) are important in numerous social, clinical and workplace settings. As Robin Day said about chairs "A good design must fulfil its purpose well, be soundly constructed, and should express in its design this purpose and construction," (Day, R. 1962 cited in Jackson, L. 2011 pg.66) I like how in Brimfield's piece the chairs are used as speakers, they are also formed of a circle like you might see in a group therapy session, a format which encourages inclusion. Each chair is also representative of each Men's Shed that made the chair, so they are individual and expressive. The chair in Judith Scott's piece has been bound under layers upon layers of fabrics and threads, and possibly many other items, seen and unseen, have been bound up with the chair. Apart from the shape and the legs and the back rest sticking out, it is almost hidden. It is unusable as a chair is intended to be used. In the final historical pieces, both chairs are used to restrain. You could say that the inmates/patients were bound to the chairs. Chairs are such an intrinsic part of the human existence, I am hopeful that visitors to this exhibition will look at chairs with more scrutiny and interest after the exhibition. I would also add visitor seating to my exhibition. These would be three chairs of different design and comfort, a stool to perch on, a moderately comfortable office style chair and a very comfortable arm chair. It will be very interesting to

see how the visitors react to these chairs and if they notice the relevance to the artworks, or if they are simply used as a place to rest and view the pieces on display.

I will be engaging the public further by introducing a hands-on element to the exhibition. I will be providing materials for visitors to bind, as in Judith Scott's work. This will give people time to reflect and possibly understand the nature of the bound works. Turner Prize winner Nnena Kalu, the first learning disabled winner in the prize's 40-year history, works in a similar way to Judith. Lisa Slominski said of her time working with Kalu "Understanding her interest in responding to architecture, we reserved a structural pillar for her to wrap on site. Watching the colours and tensions accumulate through her gestures felt transformative." (Slominski, L. 2025). The visiting participants would be encouraged to ask themselves how binding objects makes them feel, do they like the physical feel of the materials in their hands, do they think that creativity has links to our mental health? Slominski went on to say "It invites the sector to rethink how we see, support and celebrate artists whose practices expand our understanding of what contemporary art can be." (Slominski, L. 2025)



Fig 5. Inside Bethlem Museum of the Mind

This exhibition will be shown in the Bethlam Museum of the Mind, a very prominent place on the grounds of Bethlem Royal Hospital, Kent. The temporary exhibition room has white walls and subtle but effective lighting which will help to display the pieces well. “We have not reached a point where we see not the art but the space first.” (O’Doherty, B. 1999 p14.) The exhibition will blend in seamlessly to the overall theme of the museum.

“I was deeply moved and inspired by the art on display, and the space that has been made for this work. Art should not be viewed just as a visual culture but as an essential human process of self-exploration and communication. The work the gallery and museum do is of vital importance and will create a legacy for the understanding of mental health for years to come. For me art is obsession, voyage of discovery and therapy all rolled into one.” (Perry, G. cited at: Bethlem Museum of the Mind, 2026).

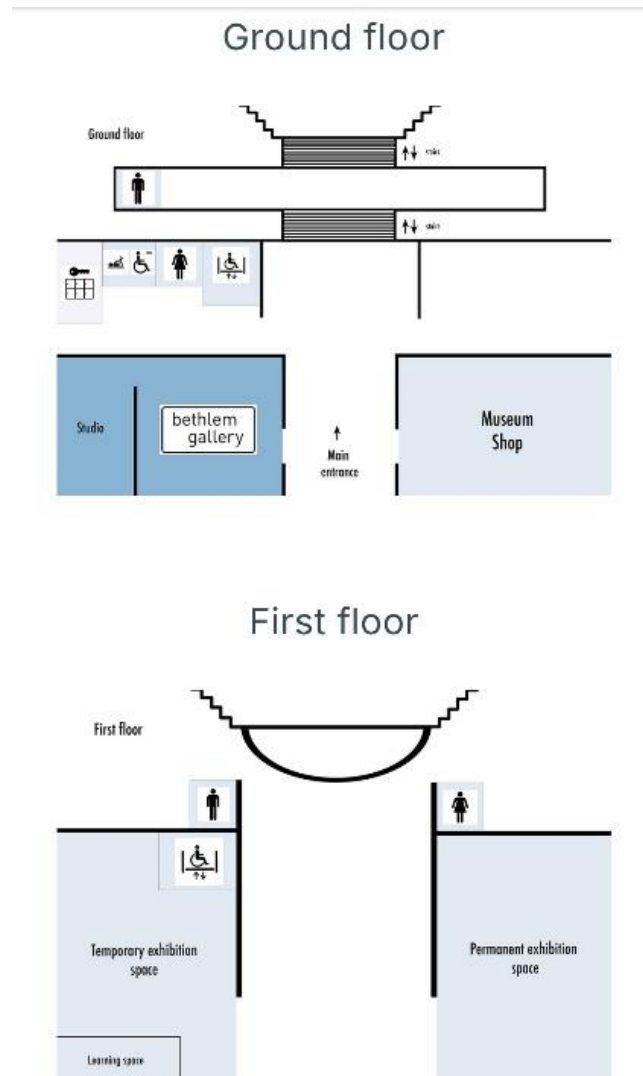


Fig 6. Bethlem Museum of the Mind floor plan.

Over the years there have been numerous opinions on what mental health is and what constitutes mental sickness. Why people are healthy or sick of mind and what should or should not be done about it. These views are conflicting and changing. I think that my exhibition shows the past views of constricting and harshly treating patients and the newer more socially accepting views in today's society where people who are 'different' or who have mental health struggles can still be valued for their creativity and individuality and be

seen as worthy members of society. How will people who are 'different' be treated in the future? Will there be more celebration of differences and realisation of abstract creativity?

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Fig 2. *Untitled*. Judith Scott. 2004. Photo credit: Benajmin Blackwell and Creative Growth Art Centre. Available at: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/judith-scott-untitled-4> (Accessed: April 2026).

Fig 3. *A prisoner a Wakefield Prison is held in a chair by restraint collar and straps*. Welcome Collection, CC-BY. Available at: <https://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/objects-and-stories/medicine/victorian-mental-asylum#physical-restraints-in-asylums> (Accessed: April 2026).

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Fig 5. Bethlem Museum of the Mind. Available at: <https://www.realstudios.co.uk/museum-of-the-mind> (Accessed: April 2026).

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