

THE LANCET

Outsider Art

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“And then he went mad. Not just a little bit mad, but quite spectacularly mad; a murderous patricidal madness of demons and Egyptian gods. He spent the rest of his life locked up—first in Bedlam, later one of the first prisoners in Broadmoor...Now there was an intensity to his paintings and drawings of fairy courts, of bible scenes, of his fellow inmates (real or imaginary), that makes those we have such treasures. They were worked on with an intensity and single-mindedness that is, quite simply, scary.”

Neil Gaiman's essay about the Richard Dadd painting *The Fairy Feller's Master Stroke* (1855–64) encapsulates many of the popular myths both about Dadd and the association between art and mental health disorders. Admission to a psychiatric hospital is equated with imprisonment: patients become “prisoners” and “inmates”. Dadd's psychotic illness, which led to the fatal stabbing of his father, is directly linked by Gaiman to a form of art that is intense, frightening, and largely disconnected from the real world.

It says something for the potency of these notions that an intelligent writer like Gaiman is drawn into repeating them. Art and psychiatric illness are both hard to understand, but that does not mean that one explains the other. In fact, Dadd's obsessive attention to detail was there long before his psychotic illness took hold; and besides the mystical paintings he produced well-observed portraits of his doctors, as well as decorations for the Bethlem

Royal Hospital. Neither was he entirely isolated; indeed, Dadd's work was described by a journalist in the *World* newspaper in the late 1870s, alongside an interview with the artist in which he discussed the disappointment of his stalled career.

The idea that mental illness breeds a type of hermetically sealed, pure form of art has become common currency since Jean Dubuffet included art by patients with psychiatric disorders in his category of Art Brut. The catalogue that accompanied the Art Brut exhibition of 1949 outlined the aim of finding “works executed by those unscathed by artistic culture...Here, we participate in an artistic process which is completely pure, raw, entirely reinvented in all of its phases by the artist, from his impulses alone.” Art Brut was later roughly translated into the term “Outsider Art” by critic Roger Cardinal in 1972: the Outsider Artist “should be possessed of an expressive impulse and should then externalize that impulse in an unmonitored way which defies conventional art-historical contextualization”. In an unfortunate turn of phrase, the Tate website's glossary defines Outsider Art as “art that has a naïve quality, often produced by people who have not trained as artists or commonly associated with the production of art. Children, psychiatric patients and prisoners fall into this category.” Again, people with mental illness are simultaneously attributed with innocence and deviance. The artists themselves are not asked what they think of their work, or of being co-opted into an art movement.

Is Outsider Art even a valid concept? I found myself asking this at a recent exhibition at the UK's Bethlem Gallery by the Bristol-based painter, [George Harding](#). *There is Good in Us* consisted of portraits of friends and professionals who have helped Harding through his experience of mental illness. The paintings are warm, witty, and technically accomplished (as well they might be: Harding trained at Chelsea College of Art and Design). I met Harding at his exhibition: I found him a self-effacing young man who seemed pleasantly surprised by my praise of his work. I asked him where he saw

himself in relation to other artists. “I don't know where I stand in terms of ‘art’”, he replied, “but I just try to do my own thing”.

Beth Elliott, Coordinator of the [Bethlem](#) Gallery, told me that this is not an uncommon attitude of artists who exhibit in the space. “Many of the artists that we show at some point ask themselves ‘Do I fit into this Outsider Art category?’ Most of the artists that we work with have either been in inpatient care, or are in and out of hospital. Some people feel ‘I don't want to be an outsider’, or ‘I want to be part of the mainstream’. ‘I don't want yet another label that marginalises me’. And then some people think ‘What the hell? If it's helping me to show or sell my work, then great, that's another platform where I may not get an in otherwise’. Probably the truest outsider artists are not bothered at all. They're not interested in whether their work is shown; they're only interested in making.” Elliott added that “despite the controversial nature of these alternative categories and forums for artists who operate outside of the mainstream, without them we would lose a very valid, valued, and important contribution to the arts”.

Writer and artist Siân [Pattenden](#) (aka Siân Superman) sees the lack of a definition as being one of Outsider Art's greatest advantages: “the problem I have with defining Outsider Art is that what I don't like about ‘real art’ is elitism. Because most art is elitist, and as soon as it becomes a commodity, it's about who can have the commodity, and who can have the best version of it, and it becomes about buying and collecting. And as soon as you have that in play, then something is lost. Outsider Art has to keep changing definition because it gets commodified very easily and becomes what it shouldn't be.”

We spoke about the forerunners of today's Bethlem Gallery artists, Richard Dadd and Louis Wain, who both spent time as inpatients at the institution. I mentioned that I found it difficult to try to connect the psychiatric illnesses these artists had with any changes in technique. Wain's more abstract cat paintings, for example, have been held up as examples of the effect of a

psychotic illness. To me, this diminishes both the work and the artist. The paintings become symptoms of a disease, whilst the artist is denied any genuine agency in their production. The striking thing about Dadd and Wain is their drive to create: a trait to be admired rather than pathologised.

Pattenden agreed: “Where you find some real expression is where people have felt drive, and I don't think there's anything wrong with drive. I think it's different to ambition, I think it's different again to commodification. The drive to do something yourself because you need to get it out, I think that that's very real, and I think that's the important thing rather than being handed something.”

In the world of mega-exhibitions and diamond skulls at the Tate Modern, when the dollar value of a work of art is its main talking point, is an Outsider Artist something to be? Maybe a category which, with good intentions, patronised and to some extent stigmatised people with mental health problems can be reclaimed to everyone's benefit. Pattenden herself prefers Dubuffet's term Art Brut: “It's without cynicism. It's without an idea, an extra take. And it's also not modernist or postmodernist. It doesn't have those things applied to it, which I think is quite a relief for art.”

This lack of cynicism is one of the things that struck me about Harding's work. The paintings radiate affection for the subjects. “All art has a therapeutic value”, he told me: and not just for the artist. Harding's paintings seemed to me to be a way of defining and cementing his connections with others: the warmth and acuity of his observation forms a connection with the viewer, too. It fits in with how Pattenden described Outsider Art as “true to the person who made it, and then it chimes with the person looking at it. That's very important, and that's what people probably spend years trying to spot or trying to engender within themselves: whether they can see something true and real. Much as it sounds like a cliché, that's the only thing that matters: if it's true, and if it comes from that place, and it's not pseudo in any form.”

The art that people who experience mental health disorders produce does not come from a separate universe: it comes from the common experiences of the creative drive and the desire to communicate. Artists like Harding and galleries like the Bethlem are presenting a form of art that is independent of modernism, postmodernism, manifestos, fashion, bidding wars, and politics. Is this true Outsider Art?

“The trouble with the modern world”, Pattenden concluded, “is that to be good at something is to be successful, and that shouldn't be so widely and tacitly accepted. I feel that that is the reason why so many people feel alienated, and I feel it's important to recognise that if you feel alienated, that is as valid a stance as anything else. This is why I still don't really mind the terms ‘Outsider’ and ‘Art Brut’, because life isn't about success. It just doesn't happen to most people in the way that it's meant to happen, and these ideas are wrong, and they're cruel, and people need to react to that positively.” Perhaps we are all outsiders now.