

Transcript of talk given, by Annabel Merrett,

at Bethlem The Museum of the Mind. London.13th January 2024

Thank you, Amy, for those kind and welcoming words. And thank you to all of you for being here. I can see some friendly faces and am grateful for everyone's support. Please bear with me as I haven't done a lot of public speaking, but I have lots to say and am happy to answer questions at the end.

It has been great exhibiting my work here. There has been a good synergy between my art and the museum's ethos, - which is a positive and progressive attitude to mental health and for a small museum, it really packs a punch. Considering we are in the grounds of the original, historic Bedlam. A positive and progressive view is something to smile about. Bedlam was a nickname for this hospital when it was a version of hell - with extreme cruelty and chaos and truly terrifying incarceration of the sane as well as the mentally ill. So, as I have said, a positive and progressive view of mental health, on this site, right here, right now, is heartening,

I'm going to talk you through how these sculptures arrived here from conception to delivery. And zone in on four of them. These four raised sculptures. Joy Above, Power, Decision and Head Noise.

After learning how to make clay portraits, usually called busts, I knew I wanted to make something that reflected on what goes on inside my mind. This then easily grew into thinking about what goes on in all of our minds and how we all have many common thoughts. I really warmed to the idea that a piece of art might make someone feel less alone and they might feel safer around the chaos in their own minds. This hope became my motivation - I aimed for each head to signal that we are not alone with our mad, horrible, and often intolerable thoughts. For me, lots of themes and concepts continually rattle and agitate around my head. Ideas arrive randomly. Whenever they feel like it and hopefully while I am swimming so I have a chance to hard-wire them into my memory. They arrive almost fully formed - so vaguely doable, and I have imagined maybe two key elements, including a material.

The idea will very often be based on an observation or experience of the human condition. For me, this potentially pretentious phrase is about human nature and how we are so often drawn towards protecting ourselves and therefore doing the wrong thing.

Injustice is another strong source of ideas. For example, I can channel vitriol, in a heartbeat, towards the post-office cruelty to sub-postmasters or the dubious

relationship with the truth our last five prime ministers have had, or....., the list grows.

On the subject of injustice, do look in the objects gallery to our right. There are lots of things there that were used daily in the hospital, both past and present. The straight jackets, particularly, gave me the chills. The fabric looks strong and thick and somehow decisive. I could imagine a fragile and angry body being held still while they were forced into it. And it was a horrid image.

In the opposite room, where all the paintings are made by artists who have spent time in the hospital. There is a piece by Tracie Hodge that worked on me. It's called 'Don't Just Medicate Me!' Using the words 'worked on me' might sound odd, but that is what good art does. It makes the viewer think differently, it gives out penny-dropping moments, and, at best, it changes attitudes. I like the idea that an artwork has a job to do

So, for me, having winced at the straitjackets next door, here, Tracie's work confronted me with the modern replacement. Which, clearly, is Tranquillising drugs. Who knew? I hadn't thought through this potential abuse. Art can be powerful stuff. Do go and see it.

Then, once I have an idea, developing it is an unknown process. I've realised that if I know how I am going to make something, I'm not truly creating anything. I'm just a rather inefficient factory line worker. I find not knowing - fun and freeing, and it is full of potential. I feel excited. A few ideas don't work out, but I am pretty tenacious, and most will result in some sort of sculpture.

I have bought some tools and bits and pieces from my studio - that I have used to make these heads. It all looks a bit DIY because it is. Really, DIY is an incredibly useful skill for me. Honestly, I get more kit from Leyland's, the building merchant, than from any art supply shop.

The process for these heads started with making a clay model of my head, and I did this in front of the mirror, with a few side- profile selfies, and used these callipers. I repeatedly measured my head, then the clay model, then a different angle of my head, then the clay model. I wanted a 3d shape that, at the very least, had the proportion of my head. The clay head was destroyed in the mould-making progress, which I found a little harsh, having spent so long crafting it. And I had to reduce it to gouged-out fistfuls of damp clay. But I've got over it! This is a rough idea of what it looked like before that micro trauma.

From here, I made a silicon mould - this is just one side. This is fun to make and suits my way of working. You don't need to measure anything, so there is no need

to remember any numbers. It's something that suits me! The correct amount of catalyst, this pink stuff, is judged by the shade of pink that this white silicon turns. So, you keep stirring away until you get the right pink - then you know it will set soon - it is fun. I was lucky enough to commission a professional to make a second 'identical' mould. And the difference makes me smile!

Here we have the mother mould- the mother mould is rigid and strong. It is the hard outer shell that holds the softer, floppier mould in place. Rather like a mother would hold up a baby's head to stop it flopping. Mine broke. Whereas this one will never break even if I stamped on it. The inside is smooth and consistent. There are tidy keys/divots, and studs, neatly marrying up so I don't end up with a squished mess looking like a broken nose.

The 2-part mould was then joined and filled with good old- fashioned Plaster of Paris. I recently came across a nice bit of trivia - Plaster of Paris is a naturally occurring material and the best source is underneath the hill of Mon Mart in, Paris, hence the name. Many of us might have childhood memories of plaster. I remember making a Winnie the Poo at my friend Kate's house. We put the filled mould in the airing cupboard, and he came out with a big dent in his tummy from one of the airing cupboard slats. I was cross. It's funny what sticks in our memory. Maybe that unaddressed irritation sparked my career? Who knows!

So, lots of mixing and waiting for setting. I have had to learn to stop fiddling with things that are just about to set and to give the material time. Impatience is destructive at this point. This project was great as I had several heads on the go simultaneously. So I was kept distracted.

The earliest heads (when I used my mould!) are all solid plaster and pretty heavy. They required a lot of sanding, which I did by hand. It was a lengthy and tiring process and made my arms ache. I have now bought myself a mini electric sander called a mouse. But pre-mouse, - when I got to the last plaster head, I was bored of sanding, and the tedium of sanding had given me time to think. I wondered if my ideas were over-earnest. The solution was Joy Above. It didn't need any more sanding. It was already a beautiful, white, snowy, wedding cake of a mountain. And it was a lighter and less earnest idea. As soon as I worked this out, I loved it almost as much as I love being in real mountains. Instantly, I was moving on, imagining and mixing the right blue for the mountain sky. The reason I'm telling you this is that it is a good example of how creativity happens for me- There is no plan! No plan at all. It can happen instantly, and, importantly, materials very often show me the way forward.

The next group of heads that I created were made of fibreglass. This is nasty stuff, but it suited the new, smoother mould well. Power was the first sculpture from this mould. Fibreglass is incredibly light. (Here is one I made earlier!) Picking them up is like lifting a newborn too high, as you don't expect them to be so light. It surprises me every time.

I wanted the surface of each head to be different and to make sure one surface was smooth simplicity so could paint in just one colour. A single colour can avoid complications and diversions and bring a single element into focus. In this case, this little chap. I chose black because of the obvious dark cloud that arrives when someone is frightened. I do think that we have all felt like this little person. At some point in our lives. Powerless and frightened.

Talking about the powerless People inside this hospital will have had their helplessness rammed home to them by the terrible way we have labelled mentally ill people in the past. I have a list. The poor sods have been called; prisoners, lunatics, Bedlams, madmen, maniacs, exhibits, inmates, patients, guests, clients and now service users. I LOVE this progression. I understand that an older generation may feel bemused by the newest label but words do matter and old-fashioned connotations are a dangerous thing - they stifle progress and harbour negativity.

So, on to Decision, the sculpture in the middle here. The number of suicides right on our doorsteps is horrifying and deeply shameful. It must be the ultimate state of loneliness. It's odd to call this one 'popular', but it is. Sadly. Which speaks volumes in itself.

This is a piece of chalk from the Thames, which a mud-larking friend gave me. I used it to draw the road lines here on 'Decision'. Chalk was better than any paint I knew because of its translucent quality, and I wanted the road to be 'quiet' and 'not the point'. Mainly, I feel sad about this piece; it is thoroughly depressing that it is so topical and resonant. However, I am pleased that the art is airing the subject - which has got to be good. And I am pleased to now take you on to something lighter.

Green Monster. This silicon pump produced black globules, perfect for Green Monster. I looked back at my sketchbook and found these random words that I wanted to play with and try to manifest. Are you ready? Shiny, glistening, classy, snobby, haughty, green envy, black dress, green drips, black tears, rotten, filthy, ruining, stupid. I must have been having an interesting day! Curiously, all the feedback has assumed Green Monster is about a woman - something that I am keen to explore further as I talk to more viewers. And according to age, feedback

has been fascinating. The clue is this fine emerald ring (which cost £1 from Argos) Depending on your age - it is about the car crash of a divorce or the stress of wanting to get married. I was thinking about periods of a woman's life when there is change a-foot and insecurity is baked in. For example, when she is either engaged or moving house or grieving. However, how I interpret it really isn't the point. "What is this one about?" Is a question I am often asked, and I have gone some way to answer it in my booklet. But, really, listen up, that is not the point. The point is how you interpret it. How do you feel when you look at it. What feelings are provoked in you. It is YOUR art to digest

Finally, Head Noise. I love this one, and it entertains me that I chopped its ears off. All the figures are opining on other people. In my sketchbook, I wrote, in a repeating pattern, chat chat chat - bitch bitch bitch - chat chat chat - casual - careless - gossip gossip gossip - chat chat chat. And it went on and on! In a curved shape - I might well have been in a slightly tedious lecture. The absence of ears is an instruction - Stop listening. Shut them out. Banish them. Ignore them. These opinions are not valid or nice or relevant. We all have a chiding voice in our head that comes from somebody else, and They are rarely helpful.

Thinking about chiding voices In the gallery to our left, please look at another powerful piece of art by a service user, Elise Pacquette. It is called The Fragile Board. It shouts about how a person suffering from anorexia nervosa may feel around the family dinner table. I am told that when schoolchildren visit, this is the piece they tend to gravitate towards, and I'm not surprised. It's arresting. I used this radiator paint to create just the white sheen I was aiming for, not glossy and almost bland, as if in a dream. I'm now on the hunt for a more sustainable solution. And the railway model people, my new best friends, directed me to these little white figures.

Here, I was thinking through the idea with a wax brain and a scalpel to see what would work. It was gratifying to reduce and somehow diminish these mean little people. I remember thinking, 'I am cutting you off at the knees because you can't shut up, and I might also be cutting the tip of my thumb off if I'm not careful.' Again, it is funny which vignettes stick in our memories. They are small and hard to slice For my entertainment as much as yours, I have put the amputated legs in a dinky little display case to show you.

I have had personal experience of sitting in a psychiatrist's waiting room, in silence, with strangers. A mother and her teenager unable to speak to each other or even look at each other. It is a painful watch. The disdain for each other was palatable, and I so wanted to help them talk to each other. I felt so strongly - it does not need to be like this. Since that day, I have been commissioned to make

another 'Head Noise' for the same waiting room, and I will be delighted if it prompts a conversation or a connection. I would be absolutely thrilled if it helps anyone find words. Or maybe a mother might find her ears! Even in silence, I hope this piece might make someone feel less afraid of their own madness, to understand that they are not alone and that others feel like this, too.

Onwards to the final stage of their journey. Once I had made all 14 of them (two couldn't fit on the table). I was very quickly invited to show them in the atrium at the Institute of Psychiatry, Kings College. Here, they have a footfall of about 200 people daily, and almost all are medics of the mind. I was delighted with this demographic. They were just the people who I would like to encourage to look beyond textbooks and statistics and symptoms and imagine just how alone and frightened some of their patients might be feeling. For the exhibition, my good friend and curator Mark Goldby and I put together the booklet you now have in your hands, and it has been my calling card ever since. Another friend told me about The Museum of the Mind, and I posted a booklet here. Rachel Raybone, the registrar, got in touch with me, and, along with Colin Gale, the director, we met and talked about dates a details, and they welcomed me in.

Ultimately, I wanted to make people think that mental health problems do not have to be scary, solitary experiences and that others are in the same boat, too. And I am honoured to have been given that opportunity, and I feel honoured that you have listened today.

Thank you. Any questions?