

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Stay Alive

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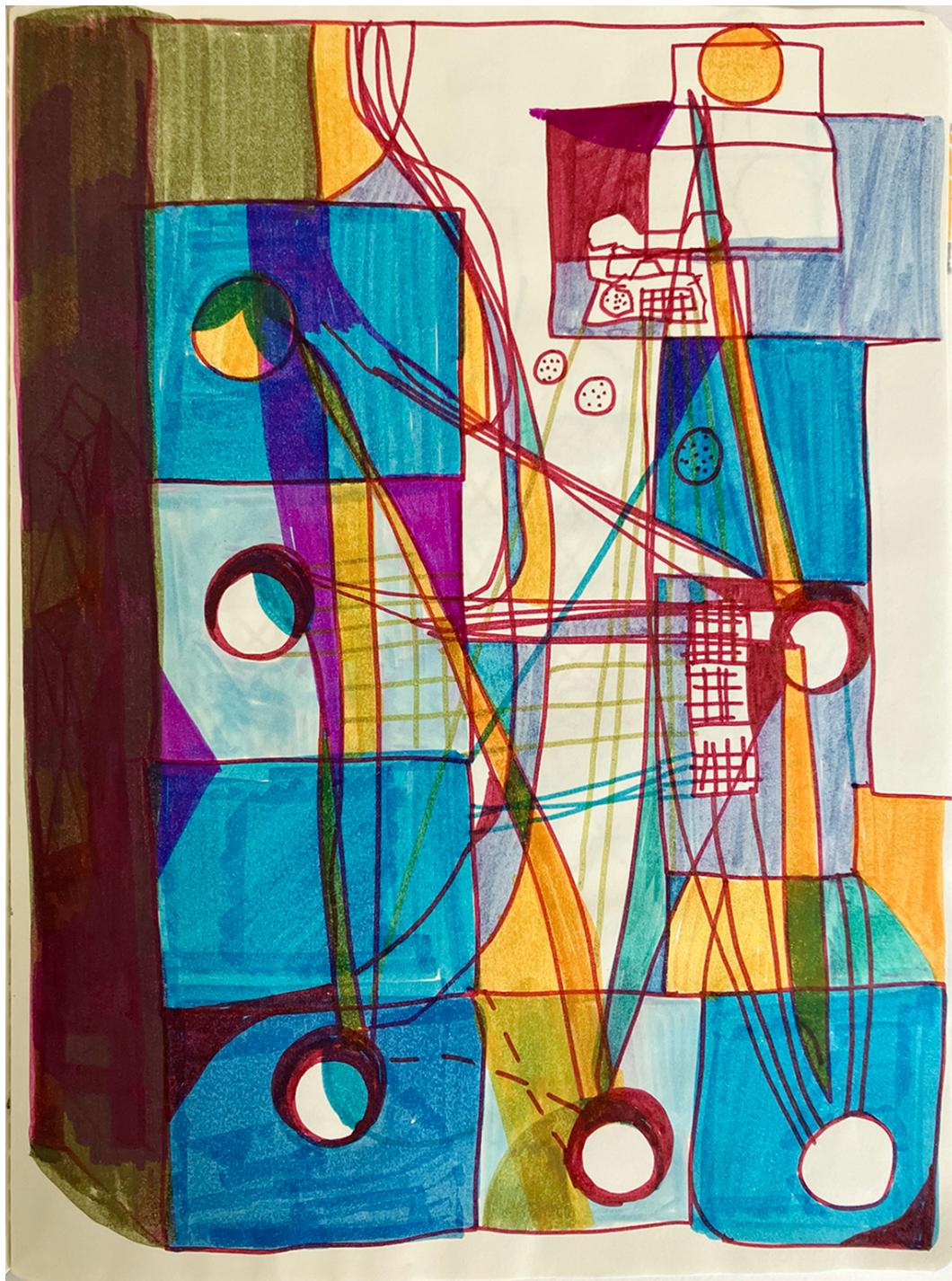
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Clare Mitten, *Stay Alive*, 2022, 28 x 21 cm, felt pen on paper in notebook.

Stay Alive was made on placement as a trainee art therapist with a National Health Service (NHS) Arts Therapies team, at an acute adult Mental Health unit in a diverse London borough. The drawing was a visual response to attending patient review

meetings with families and representatives from the multidisciplinary and community teams, present both in-person and remotely.

The specialist inpatient unit consisted of four 19-bed wards catering to adults experiencing a mental health crisis; prioritizing support, care, recovery and social inclusion. Within the broader socio-political context of ongoing NHS funding crises, rising privatization, national strikes following the COVID-19 pandemic, and escalating living costs and housing challenges in the UK, staffing and resource pressures increased, impacting patient experience.

Diagrams and maps became a go-to shorthand in my response artwork. I imagined the swiftly-drawn outlines of the remembered space of the room, as parallel two-dimensional holding-spaces; a kind of container-contained in which to express, record and process the volume of data and fragmentary sensory impressions (Bion, 1991). Mindful and absent-minded doodling seemed to allow both conscious and unconscious thoughts to emerge and be externalised for thinking about.

Physical movement in-and-out of the room, and what I imagined to be inter-psychic communication between people in the inter-subjective field, formed networks and junctions in coloured inks, absorbed and held in the warp and weft of paper fibres. The linear plotting brought to mind Bion's map drawings made during WW1 (Bion and Mawson, 2014); and with that, the history of the NHS as a military hospital. I wondered about the origins of institutional defences: protective policies designed to safeguard care, shifting towards more rigid rules and regimes as means to contain anxiety under stress.

The meetings seemed to navigate a complex dance, where emotions and expectations crisscrossed. I glimpsed familial dynamics suggesting the reciprocal impact of illness on individuals and their relatives, as well as variable power dynamics between patients and the mental health system. Frustration and anger often surfaced, directed towards the consultant but quickly retracted, followed by apologies and compliance, acknowledging the power dynamics at play. My drawing's web-like matrix suggested to me a back-and-forth of projections and being pulled in multiple directions; and a 'cat's cradle', indicated the collaborative dexterity and care required

of the MDT to ensure sustained, good-enough holding. The reviews typically ended with adjustments to medication charts: a tangible effort to regain some semblance of control perhaps, and to counter feelings of helplessness and despair in the face of overwhelming challenges (Menzies-Lyth, 1989; Lawlor, 2009).

Circles, like stenographic symbols, suggested disembodied heads, hinting at the theme of detached thinking as a defence. As holes they perhaps symbolised escape portals, or the perils of falling through gaps in the system. Ellipses and crescents implied recurring cycles of illness; beginnings and endings evoked primitive fears of birth and death, which resonated strongly in my counter transference as I approached the end of my course amid personal experience of loss. I was reminded of 'Stay Alive', a 1970s 'survival game' where players try to 'keep their marbles from falling through holes' in the game board.

The act of drawing and topographical perspective created necessary separation and distance. In my desire to 'take it all in' as a trainee, I sometimes identified uncomfortably with the panoptical gaze of the institution. In the counter transference, I resonated too with the patients' experience: placement and college supervision held a parallel process as spaces of assessment alongside care and holding.

Revisiting the artwork months later, the perspective tilts vertically, confronting me with my own use of manic defence to cope with the intensity of my placement and training experience. Vibrant colours evoke heightened emotions, masking underlying feelings of sadness and pain with joy and playfulness. This reflection underscores the vital role of art making in our practice and beyond as a medium for containment, reflection, and communication of complex thoughts and emotions. It serves as a vessel, holding unknown thoughts until they are ready to be processed and understood.

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Image credit: Clare Mitten, *Stay Alive*, 2022, felt-pen on paper in notebook, 28 x 21 cms

Biography:

Clare Mitten is a newly qualified Art Psychotherapist with an MA from Goldsmiths, University of London (2023). She holds an MA Fine Art Painting from the Royal College of Art (2006) and has worked for many years as an artist and artist-educator, and as part-time Gallery Coordinator for the Public Programme team at Camberwell, Chelsea and Wimbledon Colleges, University of the Arts London.