

Art Therapy Online: ATOL

A Unique Insight into The Lives of Four Girls With Mental Illness Through an Exhibition of Their Artwork

Review by Sarah Eley

Walking into to the Exhibition Venue at the ICCA in Nottingham, I was first struck by the grandeur of the building and the impressive curating of the exhibition by Artcore Derby (www.artcoreuk.com). There is a fascinating selection of work of mixed media including acrylic and oil paintings, clay and plaster sculpture, silk painting, drawing, collage and photography to name just a few.

As I got closer to the work, I was impacted by the contrast of the pain and chaos expressed in the artwork against the beauty of the building in which it was contained. The artists (Sarah Eley, Vicky Vaughan, Olivia Sloley and Sarah Clark) all have Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) and other associated conditions. Their art conveys aspects of what it is like to live with these struggles.



Simon Smith and Sarah Eley

Simon Smith (Nottingham's Executive Director: Local Services) attended the exhibition and met Sarah Eley there. Sarah felt really encouraged that Simon was so keen to talk to her about her instigation of the Borderline Art project, and not just about her artwork and the exhibition.

Sarah said: 'Simon was so positive and encouraging about the Borderline Art Project as a whole as well as the exhibition. It was a privilege to meet him and spend time with him. He is so down to earth and passionate about the same ethos: He wants to use the arts to raise awareness of and reduce stigma surrounding mental illness'.

This is not an exhibition for the faint hearted. The art addresses very sensitive and intense subject matter. It is an uncensored account of the reality of living with mental illness. In some of Sarah Eley's artwork, she even used her own blood to paint with, which in itself shows the disturbed state of mind she was in at the time of creating it.

In response to me asking Sarah about the nature of her work sometimes being so 'shocking', she replied:

'Some of the art is certainly very uncomfortable to look at, but as Cesar A. Cruz states, there are certain times when "Art should comfort the disturbed

and disturb the comfortable.”

I've only used my own blood on a couple of occasions when I was really unwell. Usually creating art is a perfectly safe and healthy way for me to express the difficult and overwhelming emotions, which come with having BPD.

I believe that the explicit nature of my work will break down stigma, enable viewers who have similar issues to realise that they are not alone in their struggles, and hopefully inspire others to express themselves through creativity too'.



One of Sarah Eley's pictures 'Dead'

Not all the artwork is 'disturbing'. Some is rather beautiful and each piece tells a story about their unique journeys and gives the viewer an intriguing insight into the lives of four girls with Mental Health Issues. All the artists are all passionate about the "Time To Change" Campaign which is England's biggest programme to challenge people to speak up about mental health, with the aim to break down stigma and discrimination hope that by exhibiting their work, they might be able to play a small part in this massive campaign and begin to make a difference.

Unfortunately not all the Artists were able to be there at the Private Viewing due to not living locally, but nevertheless, their art still made a huge impact on the viewers. They most certainly achieved their goal of raising awareness.



Sarah Eley and Vicky



Olivia's artwork



Sarah Clark's artwork

One of the 40 guests at the Private Viewing, reported that:

'A lady at the private told me she found the artwork depressing. She certainly seemed to be frowning upon it. I mentioned that the artwork is not 'happy' art because the purpose of it is to express the reality of living with the condition 'Borderline Personality Disorder'. She looked surprised and clearly didn't know

about the disorder. Although I was frustrated at her apparent ignorance, I realised that this is exactly the reason why the exhibition is shown- to raise awareness. She ended up taking flyers about the exhibition home with her'.

Another guest describes the artwork at the exhibition as being **'truly awe-inspiring, eye-opening and heart-rendering, giving an insight into their lives with BPD.'** This certainly seemed to be the consensus, with other viewers commenting that *'It is an **extremely interesting** exhibition and has truly opened my eyes into the world of Borderline Personality Disorder'.* Others commented that *'The exhibition breaks open the closed doors on personality disorders and gives the general public **an insight into BPD.'***

Sarah Eley has been told in the past that her artwork is not fit to be deemed 'art', because they are just 'therapy'. However according to comments from the viewers at this exhibition, this was not an issues in the slightest:

*'The whole experience was inspiring; **the art works were aesthetically fantastic'***

*'You are so **talented in all your mixed media.** You have dared to show how you really feel and I hope a bit of your courage rubs off on me'*

*'Your work is **original and unique.** I particularly love the mosaic. It beautifully and cleverly shows how a human can be shattered and rebuilt, but will never quite be the same again'*

For further information, go to www.borderlineart.moonfruit.com