

'Ways of Understanding'

Transcription poems
by
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From the words of Colin Hambrook

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My Mum

My Mum was brought up a Catholic
and like many Catholic families
she was one of nine kids,
seven sisters and two brothers,
three brothers. Ten kids.
She rejected the Catholicism
but she was looking for something else
In this kind of spiritual unfolding.

She was dealing with all the shit
of having grown up during the war
and I'm pretty sure
that there was some serious abuse
that was at the core of her problems
that never ever got out.
She never found a support to work through that stuff.

And so she turned to Jehovah's Witnesses
at the time of my birth and she said that I
as an old spirit, had come to her during her pregnancy
to tell her that the Jehovah's Witnesses had the truth.
And that she'd received some message
that this was the path that she needed to go down
to resolve all these deep-seated emotional issues
that were clogging up her life.

She projected a lot of this shit
on to me as a young child.
On the one hand it felt like I was very valued
and very much held on a pedestal.
But equally totally fucked.
And that's the story in a nutshell.

But there were other elements to it
where all these other characters came into play
that were very much on a spiritual dimension

and were invading our space.
It was a kind of suppressed grief there
that there was something that happened
that was deeply grievous
that got locked up in all this ridiculous shenanigans,
kind of spiritual kind of bollocks really.

And, yeah, I'll never know now.
I've carried that sense throughout my life
and I guess 'Knitting Time' was a chance
for me to redress that.

My grandfather

My first memory was of being
about the age of two and a half,
maybe three
and being held by my grandfather ,
by my mum's dad.

It's more of a feeling
than an actual visceral memory,
it evokes something of him.
He died when I was five
and that was a particularly powerful event.

It was very much in
that grand sort of Catholic kind of tradition,
his body being laid out in the coffin
for everyone to kind of mourn over
for several days before going to church
and all that kind of ceremony
that the Catholic church traditionally attached
to funerary rites.

And my memory is very much of being excluded,
of being considered too young
to go and pay last respects to him in the coffin.

And I had a very strong sense of injustice
that I was being denied something that was my right.
It was the first really big event in my life,
that made an impression that's never gone away.

Sightings

I was a very dreamy child.
I have very strong memories of,
in the back garden,
laying down looking at the sky
and the cloudscape coming alive
and turning into spirits
and levitating into the sky.

All my young child memories are of
quite strange events.
I always saw things
especially at night time.
I had lots of night visions of burglars
coming up the stairs with a big bag of swag
with archetypal burglar outfit
and a lion coming up the stairs
and coming into the bedroom.
These were all waking visions I suppose.

I felt in some ways more connected
on that kind of level than I did to reality.

Reality was always quite difficult,
quite harsh and was embedded
in the Jehovah's Witness faith.

Lies and Truth

The Jehovah's Witnesses came to the door shortly before I was born. My mum was very heavily pregnant with me. And I guess she was very frightened and very vulnerable. She didn't fit, you know, she came from this very close-knit working class family with twelve of them in a tiny flat to an environment with much more space but less connection at all levels really.

And I think like a lot of people who hit a particularly vulnerable period in their life they turn to religion. And the Jehovah's Witnesses were offering an answer. The fact that it was all a bunch of lies is neither here nor there. It was an answer and it was something that she unfortunately invested in very heavily. I was very much embedded in the story that she told herself, so the story that I heard later was that as a spirit, before I was born, I told her that the Jehovah's Witnesses had the truth.

Which was a particularly pernicious way of trying to justify your outlook on life, but then my mother was clutching at straws and so I got caught into this narrative. It was particularly oppressive because the Jehovah's Witnesses were preaching that the world was going to come to an end in 1975. This was their big message and the Watchtower Society, the Brethren had the connection with God

and God had told them this and had told them
how to interpret the Bible in such a way
as to see this truth .

They used all kinds of manipulation,
they had this thing called the Truth Book,
which was a book of stories about Jehovah's Witnesses,
contemporary stories about Jehovah's Witnesses world-wide
who'd been imprisoned and had undergone starvation
and undergone all kinds of ordeals
in the name of their faith.

This was used as a ploy to convince you
that you had to not just believe
but to go beyond the beyond
in order to believe.

It was on the scale of The Handmaid's Tale.
Only the men could have a connection with God.
And the women had to fall in line and obey.
This was the only way of getting to heaven.
So it, not unsurprisingly, sent my mother mad.

My father refused
to have anything to do with the religion,
so we were all damned anyway,
because only families with the male
at the head of the household leading the family
would enter into the Kingdom of God.

'Good morning, I'm God. Would you like to buy a magazine?'

My father refused
to be convinced of their lies,
and my mother went mad.
It happened slowly
over quite a long period of time.

She started to get her own messages from God
and to reinterpret certain aspects of the religion.
They were understanding and tolerant of this
up to the point where,
when we used to do what was called going on the doors,
which was going door to door
selling the Watchtower and Awake! magazines,
she started to tell people that she was God,
and that she specifically had come to save them.
Which was fairly alarming as you might imagine
for a seven, eight year old child,
to hear their parent coming out with this sort of gobbledegook.

I don't really remember very much
of the reactions of the kind of householders,
but certainly the brethren
they decided that she,
and in fact the whole family,
had been sent by Satan to disturb the flock.

I learnt to pride myself on the fact
that I have a hotline to Satan.
Others are very proud of their hotline to God,
but me, I've got Satan at my back.

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Sing a Song of Satan

The big event of 1967 was that
the Beatles' Sergeant Pepper's album came out.
The day that it was released
my brother's best friend bought a copy
and brought it round.
We played it on an old-style gramophone.
And I was completely transported.
I was totally transfixed,
I'd never heard anything like it.
I'd never heard music
that I was so captivated by.

'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds', specifically,
the Jehovah's Witnesses preached
that that song in particular was the sign
that the devil's influence on the world was increasing
and that the end of days had come.
And that song in particular
was regarded by the Jehovah's Witnesses
as the absolute epitome of evil.

The kingdom of Satan
is ruled by the imagination,
you're not supposed to have imagination
in a world that is very straight
and everything is explained.
There's nothing to worry about
because life and death have their place
and there is no thought required.

So I was a very confused ten year old.

Naming of Parts

I was very vulnerable and I was,
that vulnerability was picked up
by other bullying children.

I was sexually abused at the age of ten
by an older boy who had, who I'd sort of,
I think I was ten, he was probably thirteen , fourteen.
I was enthralled by the fact that
an older boy was interested in me.

It's difficult to get the years into,
maybe I was nine and he was thirteen,
but anyway what happened was that,
I'd say it was sexual abuse,
it was kind of fairly innocent really
in the scheme of things but I and he,
I'd invited him on a few occasions around the house
when no-one else was in
and he'd played around dressing up in my mother's clothes,
which I found a bit strange. And he had,
there had been some kind of, you know, fondling going on
and so I told my mother that this had been happening
and I got put up in front of the Brothers.

I remember this lecture, the three brethren lecturing us
on what a sin it was to touch your private parts.
And it's laid down in the bible what a sin it is
and especially for two members of the same sex
to touch each other's genitals was an especially sinful act.

The message that came across to me
was that it was a sin for me to touch my willy.
So I had years of painful experience after that
trying to wee without touching myself at all,
constantly flooding the toilet and trying to work out
the way that you were supposed to have a wee
without actually physically touching your penis.

These were the sorts of concerns
that were embedded in me throughout my childhood,
so it wasn't surprising that I went mad.

Excommunication

There was a strong connection
to the belief system that my mother
had inculcated in me in particular.

I was very anxious
to hold on to this connection
and I continued as a child,
as quite a small child really,
to go to the Sunday services.

It was about a twenty minute walk
down the road to the church.
I used to take my sister as well.
My mother encouraged this,
knowing that she wasn't welcome there.
It had been made quite plain
that she wasn't welcome there.

The last time that I went to the church,
I'd taken my sister and the Brother gave a talk
about devils in lambs' clothing
that had come into the church,
into the presence of the church,
and it was a direct reference to me and my sister.
I remember crying and leaving the church,
surrounded by the holy saved.

And so after that point
Satan never darkened their doors again, apparently.

Mrs Bickerdike

Mrs Bickerdike set us this task
of doing a portrait of someone important to us.
I started doing this portrait of my mum
and trying to get the likeness and of course,
the more you add watercolours
the muddier the painting becomes.
And so the uglier and uglier this portrait became.

I got very frightened
because I'd been having recurring nightmares
of my mother melting,
of her being made of plastic and melting
and these nightmares were accompanied
by a very strong sense of smell.
And I'd wake up with this smell of molten plastic.

I saw this happening in this painting
and I got very frightened.
When Mrs Bickerdike asked me who it was,
I couldn't admit that it was my mother
and so I told her it was her. To which,
she laughed in such a way as to completely dissipate
my fear and sense that I had of meaning
that I'd projected into this painting.

She was another teacher
who was a real lifesaver in that respect,
very warm kind person.

Secondary school

Secondary school was actually alright
and I was in the top stream for every subject
and we had a very brilliant English teacher called Mr Murphy
who really encouraged the devil in me, imagination.
He used to set us some very creative essay titles
and I really got into writing short stories.
It was a real outlet
and he was a fantastic teacher,
he was one of the first to really encourage me
and to really, not only to see some potential in me,
but to impart that, to give me something to be proud of in myself
and some faith in myself, some self-confidence
of which I had absolutely none.

Box Hill Blues

I became a disabled person
on my thirteenth birthday.
I suffered a brain injury
that was very significant.

I'd gone out on my bike.
cycled out into the country
and had come down the escarpment
on the other side of Box Hill.
There's a restaurant below the bottom
and the plan had been that we were going to meet
and have a birthday meal in this pub.

And I came off the bike.
I'd slammed the front brake on
and had flown through the air and landed on my head.
I was probably doing about twenty miles an hour
or something like that.
I didn't wake up for two or three days
and the whole of my head had swollen so I couldn't see.

And after that I went from
being the top of the class in every subject
to really struggling to be able to remember anything.
The key thing was that my memory
became very severely impaired
and that I suffered mood swings
that were put down to adolescence,
but were actually to do with brain trauma.
And it wasn't diagnosed.
I was left with this distress
and just told to get on with it.
It's not surprising
I made several suicide attempts as a child.

Intersections

I was eleven when my mum was first sectioned.
This was after she had had a bit of a spat
with the next door neighbour.
(She became very paranoid
about the next door neighbours
over a lengthy period.)
It all came to a head
and they called the police
because she'd been shouting at them.
And so a psychiatrist came round
and he took me alone into my bedroom
and gave me a lecture on how
he was going to make my mother well
so he wanted me to tell him
everything that my mother had been saying
and to whom.

He proceeded to take her away,
give her so much ECT that when we went to visit her
she couldn't remember who her children were,
didn't know that she had any children,
she hardly knew who my father was.
The doctor just completely eviscerated her brain
in the name of curing her.

I remember it was really like falling into a pit,
to the centre of the earth.
It was a very visceral feeling
of complete and utter devastation
that I was directly responsible for
because I'd told him all this stuff about her.
And so I, I took on the blame
for her being tortured by this fucking psychiatrist.

So the depression
was pretty understandable

from all kinds of different angles.

And then of course I began seeing things
and hearing things
and becoming quite disturbed myself as a child.
It was really only the bond,
the closeness between me and my sister,
that saved me really.

At a very fundamental level
we helped each other
to survive this particularly fucking awful childhood.
Me and my brother and sister,
we're all pretty mad in our own ways
but we're still very close.
We looked after each other to an extent.
It wouldn't have been possible
to survive that childhood without the three of us
having, at some fundamental level, being able
to give each other something quite precious really.

Cosmic Colin

I got to fifteen, fifteen or sixteen.
I'd really been hanging on by the skin of my teeth.
The school was a strange place
because on one level
I was very much the outcast
and was seen as a mental case really.
There was quite a lot of bullying.
But there was also quite a lot of acceptance.
I was the loony of the class.
I had various nicknames
that stuck from different times,
I was Cosmic Colin.
I would come out with stuff
that was just completely weird
and wasn't the sort of thing that fourteen year olds
should come out with,
you know allegiances to God and spiritual nonsense.
And also I used to draw a lot and so
that was seen as further proof
of me being a mental case
because what I drew wasn't representational,
it was from the imagination
and it was an expression of what I was feeling.
That was another key thing that helped me to survive.

Self Portraits

I woke up to the fact that I could use art
in a way that allowed me control of the narrative
and everything that was going on.
I couldn't trust my head
but there was something deeper
that I could put on to paper
that gave me something that I could trust
because it was concrete,
it was outside of me
and it was a reflection of who I was.

I found something really really precious
that gave me a sense that life could be magical
and that it could be fulfilling
and it could have meaning and all those things.
You know it didn't stop things being difficult
but it gave me some ground under my feet,
where there was none before.

This is going back to
when I was thirteen or fourteen,
which was a time of
one of my first major psychotic episodes .
I came to believe that I was invisible.
Literally invisible. And that
that there was some kind of energy
that was preventing me from being seen or heard,
that I was a kind of alien.
This feeling came over me
and became more and more oppressive.
I think I was hearing voices quite a lot
and was very disturbed
and as happens a lot
when people are in that psychotic state,
you're doing everything to present to the world
as if there's nothing wrong.

So I continued to go to school for instance
but became increasingly isolated
and non-communicative at home and at school.
I was in a pretty disturbed state of mind.

I did two watercolours that I've still got today
that were me expressing
what it felt like to be in that state of consciousness.
And they were really very pivotal
in unlocking a language,
a visual language that allowed me
to objectify my mental state
in a way that created a bit of distance.

One was a self-portrait
of me as this invisible consciousness.
There was a sort of muddy colours,
the sea and the sky and on the left
and the right there were two
tubular glass containers,
that were hanging by chains
from an unknown point above.

And there was nothing inside the glass
because I was inside the glass
but I was invisible
so there was nothing there.

These containers were representations
of the consciousness that had overtaken me.
They represented
the left and right lobes of the brain.
It was about an attempt
to bring something tangible into reality,
because I was so lost
and was trying to find myself.

There was another painting that followed that

that was a blue self-portrait
that was much more arranged and studied
and in which I thought about
all the different elements of my life -
family and school and colour,
sport and love of art, the love of the Beatles
and the artwork that went with Yellow Submarine.

It was from a photograph of myself
at the age of eleven.
The photograph was an accidental photograph,
I was playing with the camera
and it clicked very close to my face
so the whole of the photograph is my face.
And then subsequently, years down,
I used that photograph as the subject for this painting
and it was at a time
when I was really trying to work out who the fuck I was
that I had such little memory
and trying to piece it all together and you know,
I was hallucinating like billy-oh.

So I made the painting, about A3 size,
with myself in the centre
and I painted myself blue, blue skin,
I used this ultramarine blue
which linked with Hinduism
and an interest in Eastern philosophies
that was emerging,

It was like Krishna and there was
representation of family and home life in one corner
and a representation of a connection with nature
in another bit of the painting and then there was
a kind of derivatives of the Beatles' Yellow Submarine
fantasy figures that I identified with.
And then there was also this
deeply disturbed part of me that was represented

in the painting as well
with hands praying in a position of
'there's got to be a way through
but where does that come from?'

I did this when I was fourteen,
so it was quite simplistic in a sense,
but it followed on
from the invisible painting in that it was,
it was me going beyond
that sense of just being this invisible consciousness
to reflecting on all the tangible things about my life
and who I was.

Those two paintings were absolutely,
it was like unlocking a door
to a secret chamber
where suddenly the
potential and the possibilities
of what I could do with this language
were endless and there was a depth and a richness
and a sense of something that was just,
and I'd found it. I'd found it
through going through this psychotic episode.

And it was really
the foundation of all of my art practice,
it was the driving impetus
to create and express
and to allow these realisations
and understandings to manifest.

I thought there was something
pretty brilliant about doing that.
It was pretty amazing really
that there was something inside me
that knew that something was wrong
and responded to it

in a very clever and intuitive way,
a kind of consciousness
righting itself in some way.

I don't know if there was a chemical process
that was going on physically,
inside my brain,
but certainly at some level
it was pretty damn amazing.

Kevin

And then I made a friendship
that changed everything at school
that completely turned things around
because I was very much the outcast
castigated and to some extent bullied
but also revered in some strange way
and he was probably the most popular boy in the school year.
He had a knack of being able to get on with all the thugs in our year
as well as the more intelligent boys.
And so for him to befriend me was hugely important
and we bonded around music,
around our love of the Beatles' music.

And very, very quickly as our friendship developed,
he became Paul McCartney and I became John Lennon.
And we took to speaking in fake Liverpool accents all the time.
Much to the annoyance of many, I would imagine.
It was like oh God, those idiots they're at it again.
I guess it introduced a lightness into life
that hadn't been there,
it had been incredibly heavy and difficult,
and we started making lots of noise together.
We'd choose times when our respective parents and siblings
were out of the house and we'd take the house over
and anything and everything became a musical instrument.
My Dad had this reel to reel tape recorder
where the machine heads had become misaligned and so,
when you played back, it reversed the sounds.
And you could speed it up and slow it down
and create all these weird and wonderful noises.
And so we used to incorporate all of this gizmo
into a very ad hoc amateur way,
We sort of knew a few chords
and we'd endlessly write songs and started to make all these albums.

We'd choose times when our families

went away on holiday for a couple of weeks.
and just spend that time recording quite intensively.
We used to use cassette tape,
we made loads and loads
of these really dreadful albums.
And my stuff was all very deep and meaningless
and deeply philosophical
and Kevin's stuff was very much rooted in the real world.
We made an album of his songs
that were all about maths,
with titles like 'The Boolean Boogie'.

They were pretty happy days.
It was the first time in my life
that I felt genuinely happy.
I think the teachers were relieved as well.

Touring

It was the summer of 1975,
the year when the world was supposed to come to an end.
I went on an epic cycle ride from London to Scotland,
staying at youth hostels, which in those days
were very sort of hippyish places, there would always be
someone with long hair and a guitar and lots of singing.
My friend Richard and I managed
to get from London to Edinburgh in eight days.
He had had enough at that point and got the train back.
And I spent a further five or six weeks
during the summer holiday
just slowly making my way back south again.

It opened me up to life in a way that I hadn't,
I hadn't experienced before,
having interesting conversations with complete strangers
and finding people that I could talk to
about how weird life was
without being just completely dismissed
and looked down on for it.

It was a brilliant experience
and very influential for the group of us
who stayed to do A levels.
It became the thing to do.

I have a very strong memory on my eighteenth birthday
of a group of us camping in a field somewhere
and getting completely and utterly rat-arsed on Somerset cider,
had no idea it was as strong as it was,
because it came out of a barrel
and it just tasted like apple juice.
So they were good times.

The year that punk exploded

I was completely in the thrall of punk.
Seeing the Sex Pistols on telly
was a seminal moment for me.
And I remember Kevin wasn't impressed at all.
He was appalled by it at first
but I managed to turn him around
and then we went to see Marc Bolan,
and he was supported by The Damned.
This was at the Roundhouse in Finsbury Park
and we were just completely captivated after that,
the hypnotic wall of noise
and the sense of energy and the sense of fun.
The Damned in particular
were known for having a lot of fun on stage.
And being very silly.
Which was not the image that punk had overall.
Captain Sensible used to come on
dressed in a nurse's outfit and things like this.
It was an opportunity to dress up and be a kid for them.

So we started going to quite a lot of punk gigs in Croydon.
And in London. And our attempts
at making music very soon turned into punk.
And we formed a band.
We were called Scrambled Acne.

The friendship really worked because..
You know I had this deep depressive side to me
that Kevin was able to balance really.
And to bring me out of myself .

Nancy

Kevin had started going out

with one of Nancy's best friends
and she was looking for a boyfriend.
We got to know each other
through writing to each other,
that was how the relationship was nurtured.

And she was in
a similar situation to me,
with a parent who was
very very severely mentally ill,.

She also had two young brothers.
And there was an immediate
reciprocal understanding
of each other's difficulties in life
that were very, you know, unusual.

And so we formed a real bond
and she was wonderful,
she was absolutely gorgeous,
her mother was Egyptian,
her father was Kuwaiti
and she was just very very beautiful.
I was completely amazed
that someone so wonderful
would give me a second glance.
I was such an awkward animal socially
this was a huge boost
to my sense of self.
It was another real important life-saver.
The relationship was fraught in many ways
but also had lots of magical times
and aspects to the relationship.

Her brothers were about three and five at the time,
the pair of us looking after the kids,
taking them to the park and things like that
were just very magical times.

There were some nice moments,
we were very close,
and we still know each other today.
We've sustained a friendship of sorts.

Foundation

I'd invested so much into this process
of using art as a way of understanding
something much deeper and more fundamental
about life and relationship to life.
And then at art college it was just vilified.
It was really very much geared towards
how you saw yourself in relationship to the history of art.
And using trends in art as a focus
for developing your own artwork
and just copying I guess really.

You were meant to come up with something new,
but it also had to be derivative of stuff in art beforehand,
you were supposed to be learning the language of art.
Which didn't really hold very much interest for me at all.

I was much more interested
in art as a psychological tool.
I discovered this incredible life-saving
effect that art could have
and wanted to explore that
and to talk about that
but just found myself being shut down at that level.

I came out of that after a year,
being very disillusioned and confused really.
I had this deep-seated need to make art.
But equally there was how you gonna live
and if you, you know if you make art that people want
then you're selling out and
all these ridiculous ideals.
And I was just trying to cope with being a mad person.

And through all this
the hallucinations and the hearing voices
and all that completely, it never went away.

It was at that time I did start to take drugs,
which only exacerbated the situation.

I'd read quite a lot of R.D.Laing,
and his ideas around using drugs
as a way of breaking through,
that really appealed to me.

But I have to say
the combination of speed and magic mushrooms
on the top of Reigate Hill very nearly did for me.

I gave myself a mini-stroke
through this combination of drugs.

I physically felt my brain,
one side of my brain,
just closing down momentarily.

And that didn't help the brain damage!

Making a Living

I did the most fucking awful jobs.
I worked in a silk-screen studio in Loughbrough Junction.
It was in one of the railway arches,
commercial printing on vinyl,
it was very boring really.
But it was, having failed art college
it was the only place to go I suppose.
And, God's sake, they had these
huge five gallon cans of black vinyl ink.
And you prised the top off of the lid
and the fumes from this would just
completely knock you out.
Getting paid for sniffing glue.
It was horrendous.

And then I had this other job in Streatham High Road,
it was one of the big building conglomerates
and I was put rather unfairly
on to the dyeline machine,
which is this huge printing press
twelve, fifteen foot wide,
used to print out all the blueprints for buildings.
And it ran on hot ammonia fumes.

There was no health and safety.
And after a day's work I didn't know,
I couldn't remember who I was.
I didn't know who I was, I was completely at a loss.
My memories are very disparate
and fragmented
because nothing really made sense
and there was nowhere to go,
just relying on my own inner resources to survive.

And all through this
I was absolutely utterly convinced

that psychiatry was the modern day witchcraft
and I could see this line
from the seventeenth century
through to the present day
in which those ways of manipulating people
by inculcating fear into society
were still very prevalent.
And so I was pretty obsessed really
with understanding why society allowed psychiatry
to torture people in the way that it did
and the way that it does still to this day.

Fairmile

I took myself into the lion's den
and got a position as a community service volunteer
in an institution in Berkshire
halfway between Reading and Oxford, called Fairmile.
And of course I thought
well, you know, I'll be in the right place!
For trying to get to grips with my own madness.
And what I discovered
was that it was an incredibly violent place
where people were abused in the most horrendous ways
and that actually not a lot had changed
since the seventeenth century.

I saw people being subjected to huge amounts of drugs
people being coerced into spending day after day
in what was called 'industrial therapy',
which was a euphemism
for keeping people in a very very perverse
humiliated state of being used.
And people who didn't comply
would get physically abused
and locked up for long periods of time.
It was fucking awful!

It just confirmed all my sense of
the fact that society wasn't this
vener of civilisation.
That was actually a complete and utter falsehood.
And that actually, being mad
was probably the best way to be,
when everything, everything that I was confronted with
was just horrendous.
People were shit.
To each other and to themselves.
There was very little softness
or gentility or humanity about it at all,

and there were, there were a lot of,
there were women who'd been locked up there for life
for having had a child out of wedlock.
There were a lot of long-term patients ,
as they were called, inmates
who had ended up there
through no fault of their own
very much victims of families
who had rejected them
and found it a useful way of
getting rid of people that
they were associated with by blood
but didn't want anything to do with.

I was in the art department there
and just looked after,
you know looked after all the art materials
and encouraged people to paint
and to draw and to make pots.
And they had, there was a printing press there as well,
old-style letterpress
and I used to manage that as well
and I used to do stuff with people
and quite enjoyed that actually.
In that environment.

The art block was away
from the main part of the hospital
so I was cushioned from
a lot of the terrible stuff
that was going on around,
and just doing my best to
bring a bit of humanity into people's lives
in a really quite a desperate and awful situation,
where the people who got on
were the bullies of the institution
and it was very much run by the bullies.

Something like a third of the nursing staff

had breakdowns and ended up for periods
in other hospitals.

That's a mark of how harsh the environment was.

And the expectations you know
on this one hand psychiatry is
this caring and sharing and blahdeblah
but the reality is very very different.
And it is a very cruel, manipulative
and vindictive form of social control.

A lot of the long-term inmates
were just turned into vegetables
by a mixture of chlorpromazine and ECT.
And of course other treatments
that had fallen out of favour by that time
but had been used on these people
like lobotomy and leucotomy, all those experiments
in taking bits out of people's brains.

How could anyone with an ounce of sense
argue that this was a method
that was going to be curative
in any way shape or form?

Psychiatry has this veneer but the reality is that,
historically, it's a place for sadists
to go and do whatever the fuck they want to do.

That goes all the way back
to the beginning of the asylums.

I guess some were better than others,
Fairmile was certainly a very dark institution.

And I was very glad
to see myself with the mad people
rather than with the normal people
in that environment.

Normality had always struck me
as a manipulative concept.

Fighting the System

It might have been through City Limits
but equally it might have been through the squatting connections that
I got involved in the Campaign Against Psychiatric Oppression
and met Eric Irwin and Frank Bangay
and got a whole other education
and found a network of people
who'd been through the mental health system
who'd been labelled and who were also kicking back
against all of the abuse.

Through those years really
I was very much on the run in many respects,
because I knew that if I got caught
I would be sectioned.
Because I was not in a good state mentally.
And so it was really important to me
to form a bond
with a circle of people
who had been through similar experiences
and were fighting the system.

Close Escape

I used to spend
a lot of the time during those years
in London's parks and green spaces
and going out to the edges.
That connection with nature was
a thing that kept me grounded.
I did bits of gardening and stuff like that as well,
that was really important.

There was one occasion
when I'd found a jay's feather,
a beautiful blue and black
part of the tail feathers.
It was very exquisite and I had,
in my misguided mental state,
I'd imbued this feather with
much more meaning than was sane,
put it like that.

I was convinced that this had magical properties.
(There was part of me
that was always looking for something
that was going to save the world.)

I think that was a key,
a key theme through those years really,
trying to find the thing that was going to save my life.
Save the world in effect.
And this feather took on those nuances .

I ended up, I was on a tube
going to Seven Sisters and god knows,
I must have looked very strange,
I was dressed in pyjamas
and holding this feather
with some kind of glazed,

beatific expression on my face.

I made eye contact with a woman
who was sitting on the tube opposite me
and I made the mistake of smiling.
We got to the next stop,
which was Seven Sisters
and she immediately came up to me.
She was an off-duty policewoman.
She made the assumption,
not wholly unplausible,
that I'd just escaped from Friern Barnet.

But she was off-duty.
She was in conflict with herself
whether she should do her duty
and escort me back to Friern Barnet
or do a duty to herself
and go home and relax.

So we had this conversation
and I could see that my life was on an edge here
but I managed to have the sense
to promise her faithfully
that I would go back to Friern Barnet
of my own accord. And so I escaped.

There were lots of occasions like that.
I was very lucky.
I was very close to the edge
on several occasions like that.

Campaign Against Psychiatric Oppression

I think the really important thing that CAPO did was to produce a manifesto that set out a critique of the mental health system and deconstructed it.

(In Marxist terms it gets very left-wing.)

That really was the beginning of an attempt to make mental health services more humane, to bring in user-led forums and to change the balance of power to stop the psychiatrists being able to section individuals carte blanche without any other opinion. In order to section an individual there had to be more than one professional opinion. Things like that.

Survivors Speak Out was one of the other key groups and various programmes from within Mind. Some of the Minds also became very vociferous in challenging the mental health politics and the status quo and CAPO was very small, you know it was just a few individuals. But when I think back to what Frank Bangay and Eric Irwin achieved then, it was actually the seed for something that has been very important.

A lot of the violence that was carte blanche within mental institutions came under much closer scrutiny as a result of the pressure groups like CAPO and Survivors Speak Out.

And the question of accountability for psychiatric services came much more in the public domain.

I think there was a very important movement to try and create change for the better.

It's a conundrum really, or a paradox,
perhaps that's a better way of putting it,
because mental illness does and doesn't exist,
it's not a proven organic illness within the brain.
If you look at the arguments
that psychiatry puts as scientific evidence,
it's very easily pulled apart,
there is no science to it.

But of course on the other hand,
mental disturbance is a very real thing
and can be cause of a lot of suffering.
It can also be a wonderful thing
but if your brain's taking you off
on to other planes
being in that state of mind
isn't very conducive to having a job
and earning a living
and being able to function
in society as we know it.

And I think a lot of those challenges
were really about also trying to create
alternatives to the capitalist system
that insists that we exist
in this very narrow framework
where we eat, sleep and consume
and sell our services to society.

Interviews

There is a particular strand of culture
within art colleges
of just being really nasty and intimidatory
and very sexist as well.

I encountered a lot of discrimination
and perhaps foolishly, naively,
I was quite open about this technique
that I'd developed and wanting to push it further
and using the art
to understand mental health
and talking about those kind of things in the interview
and they didn't want that.

They wanted people that were gonna toe the line,
kowtow to the history of art
in a very conventional way
and develop an arts practice that was very much
a part of something that had gone before.
I was trying to do something very new,
I thought. And quite radical in that way.
And then I found Dartington.

Dartington

I had an interview at Dartington that was very, very different to any other interview that I'd had. They were very welcoming and very interested in the social aspects of the art that I was making, very interested in the fact that it was about connections with psychology and the connections with developing a practice that had a direct relationship to the functions within society. The course was called Art in a Social Context.

It was a mixture of fine art practice and community art practice. They were looking for students who had done art in community spaces and the fact that I'd done art in mental hospital put me very much on the list of the kind of person that they were looking for. It was a completely unique course, there was nothing else like it in the country at all.

And the ethos, rather than being about the history of art, was about the history of images and deconstructing the ways that imagery impacts on society.

Looking at the infiltration of advertising with fine art images and those kinds of things were at the core of the course, really fascinating studies in how the systems of patronage within fine art worked historically and how they'd developed.

What art got to be called Art
and what art got left behind
and why that was, those kinds of things.
John Berger was very big on the booklist, and Susan Sontag.
It was everything that I'd been looking for.

It was brilliant, we had twenty-four hour access
to the painting studios,
so there was no restriction,
once you got into something
you could just keep going, there was no nine to five.
There was a real creative buzz about the place,
it had a music course and a drama course
and all those different disciplines
got mixed up a lot,
students making things happen,
it was a lot of fun,
bloody interesting, it was really stimulating.

And I made lots of paintings about
dreams and visions and hallucinations.
I started keeping a diary
of all those visual experiences
and looking into the history of mental image-making
and looking at some of the philosophy behind it,

looking deeper into the psychology
and the ideas about spirituality
and all those aspects of it.

It was bloody brilliant.
I made lots of very big paintings and
I did a dissertation that was a
look back through different art movements
that explored the psychology of image-making.
Obviously Surrealism was a big part of that, Dadaism,
but looking at other cultures as well.
And relating that to my own experience

It was okay to be quirky there.
That was accepted,
they didn't want to encourage you too much!
But equally they weren't dismissive or judgemental.
Some very good tutors there.

The Big Picture

I started making these big paintings
that also looked at the history of psychiatry
and its relationship to
older, earlier forms of societal control,
the correlation between psychiatry
and the treatment of witches.

And it was great to have the freedom
to make all these large canvases,
that expressed those truths.
I've not managed to recreate a situation since then
with that same sense of
freedom to be creative
in the way that I really cherish.
Those three years were a window
where I had that freedom
and also the time to just really
let the art take me where it needed to take me.

And so the work was very,
there was a political edge to a lot of the painting
that was never really picked up on.
I think with the tutors at the college,
I think they were a bit scared of it to be honest,
because I was exploring things that were really very challenging.

I was reading people like Umberto Eco and Foucault
as well as the anti-psychiatrists, Szasz and Laing and so on.
The Umberto Eco book was called 'Travels in Hyper-reality'.
He talks about how we have this conception
that we're living in a modern liberal,
intellectually intelligent society
where we've achieved a level of education,
but in reality there are echoes of
ways of thoughts and action from the middle ages
that we're still living out

and a key function of psychiatry
is to keep the battens down
and ensure that there's this
very narrow band of consciousness
in which we exist as a society
and that anyone who breaches the boundaries
of that very narrow band is quite severely penalised.

And often the people that fall into that are
people on the edges of society,
the people to whom functioning in a capitalist society
is not such an easy thing.
You know the asylums came into being
in the sixteen hundreds and they were a means,
they were built and created as a means
to get all the mad bad people off the streets.

Then it was the nineteenth century
when that became medicalised
and all of these names
were pulled up out of a hat
as diagnoses for different states of consciousness.
They were then and are now too random.

Ten psychiatrists diagnosing a single person
will come up with ten different labels
That's not just me saying that,
I recently heard that being said
by the Head of Psychology at East London University.
It's not a science,
it's very bad science.
And psychiatry gets away with
pretending that it's a scientific study
and it's all hocus-pocus.
It's used to oppress people
in very very very bad
very difficult ways.

'The Nightmare'

I embarked on making work,
making these big paintings
that described a reality of
visions and dreams and hallucinations,
contrasting the reality of those experiences
with a psychiatric approach to understanding those experiences.

I did this huge six foot painting called 'The Nightmare'
that was the product of a recurring dream and hallucinations
in which I saw hundreds of people locked up together
behind bars en masse and left to rot, left to die,
incredibly oppressive image.

I wrote into the canvas
a creative response to persistently being put through this,
that there was this burning political question
of what do you do with those individuals
who fall foul of this very narrow band of consciousness
that you're allowed under the capitalist society
where everything's so controlled
and everything's got a mediation of its worth,
and consciousness becomes a commodity. And that's the system.

And so this painting's really very much about challenging
what it is that we've created that the world that we live in
that we think is the only way the world can be
and which is destined continually to lead to horrendous conflicts
that leave people's lives in a desperate state
and what do we do about that, do we really see our consumer society
as the apotheosis of everything that humankind aspires to?
Isn't there something better, isn't there something more?
It's a very powerful painting.
And a very strong message.
It should be in the Tate now.
But it isn't!

'The Jealous Psychiatrist'

This is a painting that I call 'The Jealous Psychiatrist' for short. But it's full title is 'The Jealous Psychiatrist, His Animus and One of His Wicker Dollies On the Dialectical Conveyor-belt of Reason and Unreason'.

So again the painting was very much linking witch trials and the attitudes of fear in consciousness that led to the witch trials, linking that to the way that psychiatrists condemn certain forms of consciousness because they don't understand it in the same way that people were condemned as witches. Because the society as a whole had become so embroiled in the fear of this invisible god that they had to manifest a way of expressing that fear and it led directly to the persecution of people across Europe. Psychiatry has a very similar function in that it holds and contains society's fear of madness and manifests, controls it by disabling people with drugs. And treatments are given over as cures but in fact are just ways of stopping the brain from functioning.

The chemical cosh, as it's called, you know it's locking people up by stopping their brains from functioning properly, it's a slow death really, isn't it? I think that neuroleptics are terrible drugs and it's a win-win for the system because the pharmaceutical companies make huge amounts of money out of it and the way that psychiatry has developed In more recent years, it's got to the point of, you have a drug and you test that drug and you see that it behaves in certain ways it does certain things to the human brain. And then, what you do is you invent diagnoses that fit the way that this drug works, so you create a market for your drug. And that's the way that psychiatry has functioned in the last ten or fifteen years. Obviously it's come from America and, and it's grown globally, certainly, you know in the English-speaking world

the number of diagnoses has increased hugely,
nothing to do with mental illness, it's all about selling drugs.
The madness, the real madness
is that as a society we think that's perfectly okay.
And it's utterly, utterly criminal.
'The Jealous Psychiatrist' is,
I think it's quite a darkly comical image really,
it's quite a caricature.
It's got strong mediaeval references
and shows an individual
being victimised by being injected
with a dozen or more depot injections of neuroleptics.

And of course
things have changed a little bit,
the more brutal approaches that Psychiatry made
thirty-forty years ago,
where they took people's organs out,
a big practice was to remove people's teeth.

They removed the kidneys and internal organs
as a cure for mental illness
and that doesn't happen now.

ECT is still used, it's very much a modified version,
but there's still a very strong element of punishment
to the drug treatments that Psychiatry doles out.
Back in the seventeenth century,
if you were accused of witchcraft
and sent to the ducking stool,
if you drowned then you weren't a witch,
if you floated then you were a witch and you'd be killed.

And there is a correlation of that to
if you admit to having a mental illness
and take the drugs and get zombified to hell,
then you're in 'recovery'
even if you get Tardive Dyskinesia or Aphasia

or all the other direct atrocious effects of medication.

But if you resist the medication,
if you say no, I'm not mentally ill,
that means that you are mentally ill.

And they will force even worse treatment on you
to control you.

'The Jealous Psychiatrist' is playing on that fact
and the way that psychiatry is a political function to control people,
to ensure that everybody's a good consumer.

'The Brickmen'

'The Brickmen' was a poem that was very much influenced by T.S.Eliot's 'The Waste Land'. It's kind of in that metre. 'We are the brickmen, the slick men..' And so the painting was constructed from a poem and typically with all the paintings of dreams and hallucinations and so on, I'd do a storyboard of the sequence and then find a way of encapsulating this moving image into a single frame.

It's quite typical of my work to come up with a piece of creative writing, a poem or a piece of prose, and to storyboard an image in response. Also for the artwork to be created the other way round, where I've got a strong image and then create a piece of prose or poetry that connects with that image and then gets painted into the canvas. That's still the basis of what I do today, the words and the art are very much interlinked.

And 'The Brickmen' was another in that series that was a reflection on the political state of society and the aggressive way that capitalism creates the society in which we are held bound to be consumers in order for the system to work and to perpetuate itself. Those people that aren't good consumers for whatever reason, for health or disability or whatever become worthless parts of that system and consciousness is reduced to this very materialistic idea of monetary worth above everything else. That was the basis of 'The Brickmen', the series of macho police characters,

controlling and really keeping people
in a state of oppression and victimisation.

Dr Norton

He had absolutely no moral decency
about him at all,
he just didn't give a fuck.

It took me something like
two, three years to get to see him.
And when I did manage to finally,
after lots of letters and phone calls
consistently over a long period of time,
the first thing he said to me was,
'I've got five hundred patients in my care.
What gives you the right to take up my time?'

And so I very kind of calmly
and rationally said well look,
my mother's on such a high dose of drugs
that she's living life as a zombie.
And if there was some way of kind of
measuring the dose of Largactyl that she's on
and bringing it to a level
where she has at least some functionality
and is able to get some enjoyment out of life
rather than just being completely doped up
into to a ridiculous zombie state.

It was her request, it wasn't difficult,
it wasn't asking anything of him
that was out of the question.
that they look at the dose of Largactyl that she was on
and bring it down to a point that she was able
to get some enjoyment out of life.

She was completely unable to function at all
in the state that they kept her in.
She was getting fortnightly injections.
She had no choice over it at all.

And the bastard took her off everything, like that.
He just took her off everything.
She'd been on psychotropic drugs, neuroleptics
for something like fifteen years.
And he just took her off everything suddenly,
knowing full well that she would
immediately go into a huge relapse.
It was a total vindictive punishment.
And the effect of that was that she lost hope.

And she had another hospitalisation.
The dose of drugs went back up again,
they didn't monitor the levels of red and white blood cells.

(Neuroleptics work by stopping the body's ability
to produce white blood cells .
That's one of the main nasty effects.
And that completely destroys the immune system.)

She put on huge amounts of weight.
She couldn't get any exercise,
She was just completely zombified.
And she died of a coronary atheroma.

Sam

I was at college and had what was
a very short-term relationship
and very passionate affair.
And as a result of that had a son.

Sadly me and his mum
actually split up before he was born,
but that was like a wonderful event as well,
I was so in love with Sam
and it was such a completely
new and different feeling
to anything that I'd experienced before.

It was really beautiful,
it was really, really absolutely fantastic ,
I was head over heels in love with him.
It was a big shame
that me and his mum weren't together
but equally taking some child care responsibility for him
from the first few weeks onward,
it was tremendously important
and I was really lucky to be living in a household
with a family with two other young children
who loved having a baby around.
And there was a great atmosphere in the household.

This was in Totnes
just down the road from Dartington College
and I felt very privileged. I was incredibly lucky
to have, to be there and so,
it was the first time in my life
that I knew what it was to be complete
in a way I never had before.
I was really lucky to be alive,
lucky to be there and
they were really good years.

By the time that I left Dartington

By the time that I left Dartington I felt that I'd really started to bring the illness under control. And just having that, being in such a wonderful environment and having the support of that college really changed my life. I mean it was hard, my mum dying during that time but equally it gave me the strength and resilience to move on, to find some determination to do something that felt right and to give something back to society. That was from a point of really thinking that I was never going to be able to hold down a job or to work at all really. I found new strengths. Other paths were opening up in a way that I'd never imagined could or would happen.

I came back to London and floundered a bit initially but then the really important thing that happened was that Survivors Poetry had just started.

Survivors Poetry

Several people that I'd known previously
from the Campaign Against Psychiatric Oppression
and Survivors Speak Out,
Frank Bangay and Peter Campbell,
were both founder members of Survivors Poetry.
So I had a community there that I walked into.
There was such an edge to Survivors Poetry
in those initial years that it went
from being a very small organisation
to having huge membership
and groups flourished all over the country
and in virtually every city.
There was a new group
starting up every other week.

And there was a real sense of peer support
for people coping with mental health issues.
That was a bloody fantastic thing, you know,
and it came from a real will
to try and make things better for a lot of people.
It was an intensely creative period.
We held monthly gigs
at the Hampden Community Centre in King's Cross
and then Camden Mind opened their doors to us
and we used their premises
to run workshops every other week.

That was a wonderful project to work on
and I really got to know Joe Bidder at that point,
who was a fantastic mentor,
he was very very supportive of me,
he was very encouraging.
I had periods of homelessness at that time as well,
but Joe really helped me through that time
and I managed to get a job,
couriering for a pizza firm,

managed to save up enough money
for a deposit on a flat-share
and things did turn around.

Joe was very much there for me
in terms of you know, encouraged me,
wasn't always gonna be like this,
helped me through that.
And there was a whole network of people at Survivors Poetry
that built a real sense of comradeship
and sense of beating the system really,
not having to kowtow
to the demands of the mental health system.

Frank was wonderful,
he spearheaded the work we undertook
to take survivors' gigs and writing workshops
into mental health units and day centres
and we really did give people
hope in a hopeless situation.
It was really wonderful,
fulfilling and creative
and just a terrific thing to be part of.

I was writing a lot
and trying out different styles of writing
and reading different poets
and mostly writing for performance at that time.
And then I edited 'Under the Asylum Tree',
the illustrated poetry collection
that was one of Survivors' Press's first publications.
I co-edited that with Jenny Ford and Hilary Porter.

Penmaenmawr

I took all the drafts and all of the illustrations.
We'd formulated a rough idea
of four different sections of the book,
four different themes that helped bind poems together.
I took myself off to North Wales,
to a place called Penmaenmawr
which is on the North Wales coast.

Penmaenmawr had been the place
for a very significant psychic childhood event
where I saw an angel. I spent a night with an angel
in a caravan in Penmaenmawr when I was ten,
around the time that
everything was breaking down
in a quite significant way.

This angel was a very powerful and nurturing presence
and so when I put 'Under the Asylum Tree' together
I decided to go to that place.
To find that it had a motorway running through it!
But that was fine, I camped in the caravan site
where we stayed when I was a child.

And I spent probably about two weeks there,
on the edge of Snowdonia, the foothills of Snowdon.
And worked in cafes and places I found
that I could just sit with all these papers and put it together.
And it worked.

'Under the Asylum Tree' won a Mind Award
and went into a second edition.
It was a really pivotal moment in my life
it was such a huge achievement,
the moment where I thought 'I can do this,
I can create something that has impact and is valued
and has a cultural collateral'.

I think without having done 'Under the Asylum Tree'
I would never have had the confidence
to start Disability Arts Online.

'Under the Asylum Tree'

I think there were probably
about forty or fifty poets
who got published in 'Under the Asylum Tree'.
It was really a calling card for Survivors' Poetry
that survivors of the Mental Health system
had something valid to say
and were valid artists in and of their own right
beyond this community arts therapy banner
that survivor arts gets dismissed under.

It had work that was professional
that talked about experience of mental illness
in all sorts of ways, in a very nuanced way,
that largely criticised the pathologising of people
going through mental distress.
And the ambivalence of calling it an illness.
Because if you call something an illness
then that implies that there's a cure.

And it's just the way that people's brains work.
And people's brains work in different ways.
It's not necessarily that they're ill,
it's that fitting in to this very narrow capitalist society
is not something that all people can do.
And the definitions of that
get narrower and narrower and narrower.
And who you're allowed to be
becomes more and more constricted
in the society that we live in.
And it's not an illness,
it's the bloody society that's fucking ill.
It's this insistence
on valuing everything and everybody
in numerical terms, it's a nonsense.
And it also is an abomination to consciousness.
And that is the pinnacle around which it turns,

because we don't know what consciousness is.
Because we don't know what it is scientifically,
we choose to dismiss it.

Rather than valuing the contribution of people
who are experiencing consciousness in different ways
we just throw them in a dustbin
and put the lid on it and say that's an illness.
'Under the Asylum Tree'
was about opening that out,
in very real ways without contriving something.

The way the book came together was quite organic.
There were people published in it
who were quite famous, and very experienced,
people like Billy Childish,
and there were people published in it
who spent their whole lives in psychiatric hospitals
and had never been published before
and had never performed before.

'Under the Asylum Tree' was also about
our cutting through that bullshit
about what's amateur and what's professional.
If it's good, if it speaks to you
if it resonates on an emotional level
about important issues, about human condition,
then that's the value that you put on it.

And it felt like we'd created something
that was bloody good
and that really challenged
a lot of the myths about mental illness.

Kit Wells

I had a jammy bit of luck.
I was doing all kinds of odd bits of work
and I had a gardening job.
working for a woman who was quite wealthy
and had a connection with a gallery in Portobello Road,
The Real Art Company. She got me an exhibition,
a month-long solo exhibition.
We had lots of poetry,
spoken word events in the gallery
through the duration,
I gave an artist's talk at one point as well.
It was just sheer kindness really,
gave me a break, and that was a real,
a real high point in my life.

And then I met Kit Wells.
Who took over Disability Arts in London Magazine.
He reviewed the show at Portobello Road
and he was a canny sod,
he purposely gave it a very bad review.
He was testing me
he wanted to find out what sort of person I was.

And so I think I wrote to him
to express my displeasure with his review,
which I thought was completely missing the point.
So he responded by saying
why don't you come and meet
and we'll go for a drink and we'll talk about it. Which I did.
And that was the beginning of a very good friendship.

Disability Arts in London

Damien Robinson,
one of the Disability Arts Officers at the Arts Council,
instituted a system of mentorships for disabled people
recognising that pathways into work
were very different for disabled people,
the usual lines of entry are not as straightforward.

This mentored bursary
was a way of addressing that and
giving disabled people a chance to develop careers in the arts.
LDAF had one of these, like an apprenticeship really.

Kit encouraged me to apply for the post.
And to my amazement, I got it.
It was an opening that I
never expected in a million years.
And I just dove into it
and really relished it, you know.
It was the first time in my life
that I could see an opportunity
that was really going to give me something
that I could get my teeth into.
And develop skills and be good at.
And give me a sense of confidence,
self-confidence that I was desperately looking for.
(Most of everything in my life up to that point
had just been another kick in the teeth.)
And so it was fantastic.
And of course, you were there, Allan.
You were my mentor.

I learnt a lot from you and from Kit
and that year was great.
And then of course I got to befriend Ruth Bailey.
We had a year of joint editorship
and she was a treasure to work with,

absolutely wonderful.
We had the most fantastic conversations
about art and disability
very very warm personality
and it was an environment
that I could function, having that.

It was really important having
that friendliness around,
London Disability Art Forum
was not always a barrel of laughs.
But there was a core sense
of kindness and support
and I could never have done that job without that.
You know I've always been pretty fragile really,
but have managed to find inner resources and strengths
through that fragility.

And the determination to just keep going,
not to be put off by the knock-backs
that come from time to time.
To be a journalist
had always been an ambition from childhood.
When I was quite young,
with all the problems that I had with memory
I found that writing things down,
keeping a diary was extremely important.
And the idea of being a journalist
and being able to use writing
and the love of writing
as a way of making a living
had always been there.
I never for a second thought it would happen
but suddenly, you know,
London Disability Arts Forum gave me the opportunity
and I was very grateful for it

So I got into Disability Arts

So I got into Disability Arts
and I really got it.

I really got the sense in that
this was art about real stuff in life.
And not pandering to some pretentious fancy.
It was art that had real stuff to say about life.

And so I related to Disability Art immediately,
very very strongly
people like Nancy Willis,
her drawing and installation and paintings
of the babies in the Premature Baby Unit
at Hammersmith Hospital.

And the sense of how
those images related to her life,
as a woman with quite severe impairments.

I was really deeply moved
by a lot of the work that I saw,
things like Tony Heaton's
'Shaken Not Stirred',
and deeply satisfied
in an intellectual way as well.

'Shaken Not Stirred'

'Shaken Not Stirred' was a seven foot high pyramid of charity collecting tins. It was created as sculpture, but then there was a performative element in which the artist threw a false leg at this giant pyramid and it all came crashing down.

It was Tony Heaton in a very humorous way expressing his anger at the way that the charities have taken hold of disabled people's lives and are telling us what's good for us without any consultation with us as to what we see the situation as. And those slogans, 'Nothing About Us Without Us' and 'Piss On Pity', I connected very strongly with the humour and anger that were at the foundation of those slogans. And I felt very strongly that I'd come, as editor of Disability Arts in London magazine, into a place where I was really meant to be. It was something that I could really get my teeth into and really help to steer in a way, in a sense to help to evolve. I wanted to see more art in an arts movement!

Disability Arts in its early stages was very much run by people who weren't that interested in art. I really wanted to find out about the artist and to write about them and to write about their work and to find ways of supporting their networking and getting Arts Council grants and challenging access in different ways. I think Disability Arts In London magazine did a pretty good job really. Five thousand of the newsletters every month got sent, got mailed out all over the country. It really felt like being at the heart of,

you know a lynch-pin at the core of the movement and I felt very privileged to be in that place. It was brilliant! I mean, it was difficult in lots of ways, it was challenging for me personally, but that was a good thing too. I enjoyed the challenge of how did I as someone with a history of mental health issues fit with a movement that was largely run by people with physical impairments.

And there was always that disconnection with mental health in that the political heart of the survivor movement was very much about challenging sense of there being a mental illness at all, challenging the fact of impairment at all levels, whereas disability arts was very much about accepting impairment and challenging the way, the barriers that society placed in front of the individual for being different, for having a different body to what was seen as the norm.

On an intellectual level there was very much a disconnect there between the survivor movement and the disability arts movement. I reconciled that to myself through seeing how disabling the treatments that psychiatry dishes out are. And how people under mental health are disabled by attitudes from professionals right down to receptions from everyday people. How probably in some ways there is the biggest amount, bigger amount of discrimination against people with mental health than any other impairment group.

Because it's invisible

because there is no real scientific basis
for understanding what happens with consciousness
when consciousness takes on these other forms.
If it is an illness, it's an illness of consciousness.
Which is something that scientifically
we know very little about.

I loved learning about journalism

I loved learning about journalism
and I loved doing all those
different journalistic tasks
and learning about technology as well,
it was all real grist to the mill.

I was connecting with people
from the Direct Action Network
and going to demos and all of that.
But I think people very much saw me
as a non-disabled ally.
I don't think people really understood
my sense of myself
as a disabled person.

And I was struggling with that too,
I was struggling to understand
what that sense of identity was about.
And that was interesting in and of itself.

I think subsequently
in the early two thousands,
it became clearer and clearer to me
that I had a physical disability impairment as well.
I got diagnosed with M.E. in the early two thousands
and realised that that was largely a result
of having been on Lithium for years and years.

I carried on drawing

I carried on drawing
but there was so much to learn
about publishing and computers and software
and the internet was starting to become a thing
and email, and the demands of meeting the deadlines
for a monthly print publication.

I always found that making artwork with serious intent
isn't something that you can just turn on and off.
I have to get into quite specific mental space
to be able to pull up the ideas and to make them work.
Psychologically it requires quite a lot of time
and it requires the right environment.

That's the other thing that's always got in the way of the artwork,
having the right environment to work in.

I was so lucky when I was at Dartington
because the environment there was such a creative firmament
and there was such a wealth of encouragement and interest
and it was the most creative period in my life,
because it was the right environment,
it was the right space, it was the right conditions.

The main thing that's got in the way
of me being an artist
is having the right conditions
in which to be able to really develop what's going on
because it means getting to quite a deep level,
psychologically and emotionally.

Brighton

When I moved to Brighton
I lost that creative connection.
There wasn't quite the same thing
happening in Brighton creatively.
There was a poetry scene,
but it was all quite cynical and quite competitive
and really the anathema of where I felt comfortable.

There were pockets of places
to share that creative stuff but not enough
and I lost a lot of confidence.

I lost confidence in my own abilities
to produce stuff as an artist.
And for me art and the words have always gone together.
They're inextricable,
the drawing comes out of the writing
and the writing comes out of the drawing.
That's always how it's been for me.

There was constantly too much on my mind

There was constantly too much on my mind
to really be in a space to develop those ideas
that were unfurling through the period at Dartington
and the following years when I was exhibiting quite widely.
It just went on the back burner
for a few years and then into the 2000s.
I continued to have exhibitions here and there
but the amount of energy that it was taking
to get an exhibition together,
even to get work together for a group show,
it just wasn't the amount that it needed,
The reward just wasn't enough to really sustain that.

I carried on drawing but not in a studied way so
I was I guess drawing really more as a form of therapy.
Having a very ultra-nervous personality
has always meant that I need
to be doing something with my hands.
And so from a therapeutic point of view
drawing has always been
a really important expression of that nervous energy.

And so the artwork took on a different mantle.
I lost the impetus for making work
that I wanted anybody else to necessarily see.

Disability Arts Online

Conversations were facilitated by Joe Bidder.
Joe was so key
to everything that I've done really.
He was a terrific mentor,
he was the one that encouraged me
to move on into working for LDAF,
he thought that was a brilliant move.
And he saw what I was doing with the magazine
and always gave me loads of encouragement.

And then critically, when I left,
he put me in touch with Kwabena Gyedu,
who was the Arts Council's Disability Officer.
I started having conversations with Kwabena,
probably sort of about early 2001
about how the Arts Council wanted
to continue the kind of work that DAIL was doing
but they wanted to produce something that was online.
They saw that as the way forward.
And Kwabena saw that as the way forward
and in conversation I realised the potential of online
as a way of linking people nationally and internationally
as a way of creating access to artists
and access to work being created
within the performing arts,
within the visual arts and within literature.
There was a limitless number of possibilities
that it was something that was going to grow and grow.
I went into those meetings with Kwabena
thinking I'd really like to do another print publication
but was very soon in complete agreement
that online was going to be the way to go.
And that the positives about online
far outweighed what you could do with print.

Print has more gravitas to it

and online's more ephemeral
but the potential for access outweighed print really.
I think the potential for creating access
and disseminating disabled people's voices,
holding conversation about disability,
a constructive conversation about disability identity
and what that means, was huge potential
for creating something online.

So I was absolutely delighted
that the Arts Council saw something
in the work that I'd done to that point
that they were willing to back.

'100 Houses'

(I)

Stevie Rice encouraged me
to put an illustrated collection of my poems together.
I needed to express something
about how difficult the journey had been
and the struggle to get a roof over my head,
to find a place that was safe, that felt like home.

In many respects home was never a home
and it wasn't a place of safety.
And so through the seventies, eighties,
I'd been moving house for up to thirty times a year.
Every month it was somewhere else.
So that's why the collection got called '100 Houses'.
It's quite an angry collection of poems.
And quite darkly illustrated,
just expressing my sense of anger at the world
for not seeing my genius
and not realising that society
didn't need to make it so hard.
It was also me working out how
I'd constantly left-footed myself
right through my life,
how I'd brought all this stuff on myself as well.

It's quite reflective in that sense.
My survival mechanism
was not to believe myself.
And if you don't believe yourself,
then your ego doesn't get a chance
to develop in a healthy way.
And everything is your fault
and you can never be at peace with the world
because the world is constantly telling you no.
And you don't have the right to say yes.

Or actually, more importantly,
you don't have the right to say no,
I'm not going to put up with that,
I'm going to have this.
I was like a refugee in my own life really.

I got down to Devon in 1990
and I thought this is a clean break,
it's a chance to leave that
cycle of constantly moving house behind.
It didn't happen. I still found myself moving,
perhaps less but still six, ten times a year.
And all this precious art work
that I had to carry with me everywhere as well.
It felt like one of these mythological cartoon characters
who carries a house on their back.
It was a bit like that.

'100 Houses' was a bit of an outpouring of that,
a reconciliation with the past.
It was a drawing of the line in the sand
between what had gone before
and what the future was going to be like,
facing up to quite a lot of things.
And it's very raw.
The poems are very raw
in terms of how well they've been honed.
And the illustrations are also likewise quite raw,
the drawing is largely much looser,
much more expressive and physical
and still quite detailed
but it has more of a visceral quality to it.

(ii)

It was a good moment,
having something solid.

Exhibitions are so ephemeral,
you know they happen for a week,
two weeks, if you're lucky a month.
And then they go away
and it's as if they didn't happen.
But with a book you've got something solid
that you can refer back to.

Stevie was fantastic for helping me
to get myself back into valuing that I could be creative
and make work with limited resources
in terms of the conditions for making artwork.

I didn't need to put so many things on myself
to stop the creative process,
you know I need a studio, I need the space,
I need peace and quiet
all the things that I was telling myself
I needed in order to be creative,
the work constantly getting in the way.

'100 Houses' was a bit of an outpouring of the frustration
at having been through a decade where
I'd really not done much creatively for myself at all.

When you're just doing stuff for yourself
you get to a point where you think
I'm not showing this to anyone
and I'm just keeping it to myself
and what's the point,
it's just gonna sit in a cupboard till I die
and then it's gonna get thrown away.

But at the same time
having that really strong need
to be creative as well.

Day Patient

I've been prescribed anti-depressants by GPs from way back from the early eighties really.

And then there have been intervals where I've had to go and see a psychiatrist and have been put on different sets of drugs.

But typically, all of the drugs that I've been prescribed have made all of the symptoms a whole lot worse.

The only exception to that has been Valium, that's the only drug that has relieved the anxiety and the brain fog

and the oppressive feeling, physical feeling that comes with M.E.

Valium's the only drug that has any lightness or relief about it. Every other drug without fail has just made it a hell of a lot harder to function and has increased all of the symptoms in really quite horrible ways.

I take these drugs I think, well you know, when I've been in desperate straits, it's like you'll try anything.

You've got this person in a position of power telling you that this is going to help you or even cure you

and you think well I've got nothing to lose, life is so difficult because of the state that I'm in and it can't get any worse,

and then you take the bloody drug and it does get worse.

So you go back to the doctor or the psychiatrist and you say this isn't working,

and they say oh you have to keep taking it for two months, six to eight weeks or else it's not going to work properly, it takes that amount of time to work properly,

so you think aohhh, I'll carry on down this roller coaster that I know is going to spit me out and throw me into the shit.

And that's what happens, time and time and time again.
Just doesn't work, don't bloody work, so you just,
you just find other ways really, of coping with it
and that's just how it is.

I've been very lucky I think
in that I've managed to forge a path
that means when I'm having difficult days or a difficult week
I don't have to get out of bed.
I can get on with the work that I need to get on with
from my bed. And that, you know,
I think that's a very privileged position to be in really ,
I'm very very lucky. I think for a lot of people,
a lot of people are really struggling financially
because that option isn't there
and they're much more disabled by society.
There's an irony in that,
that in terms of disability it's the lived experience of barriers.
I've managed to forge a path in which
the impact of those barriers is very much mitigated
and that's no little thing. I'm very very lucky.

'Big Brother'

It was really interesting reading Louis Quail's book about his brother, Justin. He talks about how Justin is charged as a criminal and punished for destruction of a cigarette.

He's got all of these charges against him and it reads like something from the seventeen hundreds. Caught on the road as a vagabond, destitute and imprisoned for being on the road without shoes or whatever.

And there's a litany of stuff that the police have charged Justin with, that reads just like something from three hundred years ago and it's come about because of austerity measures that all the places Justin can go to to be safe have been closed down. All of the resource centres and day centres that were central to his world have gone. He continually gets into these situations.

And he's a really nice bloke, he's a bird-watcher, he loves nature, he writes poetry and he paints. He's a very sweet man. But if you read his criminal record, you'd think he's an axe-wielding dangerous individual that you would have to be very wary of.

Something like ninety, eighty, ninety per cent of what the police are having to deal with are people with mental health issues on the streets directly because of austerity,. So many people are homeless now and because so many people are destitute and desperate, desperately ill from being in such difficult circumstances which would drive anybody mad.

'Knitting Time'

(i)

In 2013 I managed to get a Grant for the Arts
to put the next illustrated poetry collection together.
And with the money that I got from the Arts Council
I got John O'Donoghue to mentor me.
John was great at getting me to write in different ways,
getting me to use rhyme,
which I'd never before felt
was something that I could do.

Rhyming poetry is a bit like watercolours.
It's the place that people go to first when they think
'oh, I want to write poetry' or 'I want to paint'.
People think that poetry is rhyming.
And people think that painting is watercolours.

Not realising that watercolour and rhyming
are actually the hardest to craft
to a point where it's art.
And so with my poetry
I never thought that I was good enough
to be a rhyming poet.

The other thing that John O'Donoghue did
was to encourage me to give the context to the poems and
so there's a middle section of the book
which is a memoir.

But the book is largely a homage to my Mum.
And a following on from 'Under the Asylum Tree'.
It's a valuing of consciousness and being in its own right.
We dismiss people's lives,
we dismiss people because they don't quite see the world
in the way that they're meant to see the world.
And so their experience of the world becomes diminished.

And 'Knitting Time' is a repositioning of that, challenging the notion that mental illness is all about torment and all about illness.

(li)

There's another narrative that is actually much more healthy and much more nuanced that needed to be understood.

If science is going to get anywhere, if the science of the mind is going to get out of the middle ages, then it needs to embrace consciousness as a valid field for scientific research.

This chopping off of the head and the body and looking at what this neuro-transmitter is doing and that neuro-transmitter is doing, it's a nonsense.

Because the head doesn't exist on its own in isolation without a body and all the other organs. It's fucking stupid, you know, you can see how it's to do with the way that medicine in the West has evolved and the specialisms have got more and more detailed.

So we know what's happening with the nervous system and we know what's happening with the lymphatic system and the nuances of how to cut people open and take out a damaged liver and put another one back.

But this sort of cutting everything up undermines the importance of consciousness it just gets left off of the map. And actually it's all that we are in many respects.

It doesn't have to be like this,
we don't have to understand the world
and our place within the world
in this constructed hierarchical manner.
We have self-reflective consciousness.
Which is fucking amazing.
But we don't know what it is.

And that's what 'Knitting Time' is about.
it's about our connection with the elements
and our connection with nature
and it's about valuing the fact that
we're nothing without appreciation
of that connection with nature.

(lii)

As John O' Donoghue supported me
honing the poetry
and really working on it in a quite studied way
and making it the best it could be,
so the drawing techniques
that I'd been using for quite some time
also became much more polished.

It was a drawing technique that I'd developed in the '90s
but then had become much looser but with,
through 'Knitting Time'
I found another place for it.
A lot of the drawings are direct illustrations of the poems,
taking specific images in the poems and visualising those.
My poetry is quite visual poetry,
uses a lot of imagery and so
drawing that imagery was a positive step.

And so as part of it,
as a full project

I got back to painting and print-making
in a smaller way,
but I got back to some painting and printmaking.
And I think using different media also helped the drawing,
'cause I was thinking about the drawing and using different tools,
using paint brush and drawing with a paint brush,
with the lino cuts drawing with a blade.

And so I was really proud of 'Knitting Time'.
It's a beautiful book.

I suppose it falls within
what's loosely labelled as confessional poetry.
And that's where a lot of my poetic influences come from,
that's where Sylvia Plath and Stevie Smith
and Ted Hughes and Thom Gunn come to mind.

Those poets that write very personally
but also there's a thread of nature
that runs through a lot of their work as well
and connection to nature.

So I'm happier with the art work.
It doesn't have to be these big statements
that 'Dreams of the Absurd' was,
the big four foot by four foot,
six foot by four foot paintings.

'Dreaming the Absurd'

It's the poem that has followed me right the way through,
that has become a bit of a party piece
and it's something that I really enjoy doing.
It has elements of song and elements of movement to it
and it's fun. But it's also quite deep.

And it sums up everything
that I've been saying about consciousness,
about our relationship to consciousness
and the nonsense of valuing our lives numerically.
Pythagoras didn't get it all right!

It's quite concise, but also
every line is very considered.
John O'Donoghue was quite appalled by the line that goes
'There's a bureaucrat in the toilet of my mind
He's counting the faeces I've left behind'.
He didn't want me to keep that in.

But to me it's actually really important.
It may come across as a bit base
but that's what we are, you know
we are just animals like any other animal
and we all eat and piss and shit.
If we didn't do those things we wouldn't be alive.

Daybreak

The Arts Council want to see
that you've got this partner. And that you've got
so many other creative people involved in it.
Very generously Mark Steene at Pallant House Gallery
gave me the opportunity to exhibit
in the Education Space at Pallant House Gallery
and to launch the project there.

And to work with Outside In
to produce a series of workshops
which were about working
with grievous moments in our lives,
working with grief in a creative way.
Which was also an essence
of what 'Knitting Time' was about,
it was about accepting the grief
that I'd been living with for so long,
grief about my mother
and about what happened to us.

It's also that thing where
if you're someone who's had a difficult life
then society doesn't give you
anywhere to talk about that.
You don't get a chance
to learn to talk about who you are,

because those things,
those experiences can make you who you are.
But it disavows you from,
people don't want to know,
you're not supposed to tell people about this stuff.
it's like admitting that
your life is totally worthless
and that you should be dead. And so that puts you
in a very very ambivalent relationship to the world.

And so 'Knitting Time'
was an evaluation of that
and an embracing of that.
It was an embracing that it was okay
and that I didn't have to feel
that my life was under a cloud.
And that I didn't have to worry
about other people's perceptions,
that I could accept myself for who I am
and what I've been through
and what I've come through
and that that was a good thing
and that I had something really valuable
to offer the world.

I think a lot of my life
has been about the struggle with that,
having grown up from childhood
with a sense that I didn't have a right to be here.
That then puts you in a position of well,
what is it that I can give to the world
that I can also value for myself
and feel that I have an important contribution to make.

Colour

I always liked using very bright colour in my painting and contrasting bright colours and doing that thing where you create a three-dimensional sense to a two-dimensional plane by making warm colours sit behind the cold colours, it's something that I've done a lot in the painting. I don't know how I do it, but when it gets there I'm really pleased with having done that thing. With the drawing, it's pen and ink. A lot of it was really about struggling to find the right medium to start to put colour back into it.

Quite a few years I was very focused on the power that a black and white image holds and Rachel Gadsden was always very encouraging of the black and white. She encouraged me to try my hand at working with white on black, reversing the process. Although with the Rotring pens, with the drawing pens, the white ink is very chalky and it clogs the pens up really quickly. So I never quite really took that to where it could have gone. They remained black and white for a long time, through the '100 Houses' period.

It was also about monetary constraints that publishing a full colour illustrated book is hugely more expensive than black and white. So I resolved to keep the drawings black and white for the purposes of the book and then once they were digitised,

that then left me free to colour them.

The yellow, the very bright primary yellow was quite important to 'Knitting Time' because it was the colour of a wool that was quite significant to my Mum to knit with this very bright yellow wool. That's why in the 'Knitting Time' illustrations when they got coloured the knitted boats were coloured yellow, because that's a connection to my Mum and search for joy, I think.

Yellow's one of those colours that has a kind of, it has that ambivalence, doesn't it, because it's kind of heightened joy but it's also a kind of dark despair, it's also the colour of suicide.

I think all of that work would have been coloured from the get-go if there wasn't that constraint of having to reproduce the illustrations in black and white for the book.

'100 Houses' was a bit locked in to the anger and it was important to express that anger. The flip side of that anger is suppression and I didn't feel like colouring the drawings. But then it became quite an important thing to do for 'Knitting Time'. I've enjoyed exhibiting that work in various places where it's gone up. The illustrations in 'Knitting Time' purposely had a 1950s feel about them, I was looking to get a 1950s feel because that was the sort of time period, 50s and the 60s was the time period

that I was referring back to a lot in the work .

Because of that it was quite natural
to go back to using coloured pencils,
using Caran d'Ache coloured pencils.
Which never felt like a serious medium to use.
But then I discovered the watercolour pencils.
You can use them as coloured pencils
but then they'll also dissolve in water
so you can paint them as well.
And then you can blend the colours.
So yeah, it's fun.

Final thoughts

I'm very proud of what's been achieved, really.
It's pretty damn good
and you know all those same things
that I enjoyed doing
with Disability Arts in London magazine
I continue to enjoy doing now,
with Disability Arts Online,
talking to artists
and getting them to talk about their work
and showcasing that work
and creating discussion
and creating a dialogue around work.

It's just been an incredible journey,
meeting some of the most amazing people
like Mat Fraser, for example
and seeing Mat perform
in mainstream productions
of Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels,
seeing him doing his freak show,
seeing him do all of his cabaret stuff and rap stuff
watching him build a career
and come on to play Richard III at Hull Truck Theatre,
which he did this summer.
And brilliant artists in visual arts,
people like Aidan Moesby,
from his first outings as a text artist,
using text to ask questions
and framing it as a piece of art,
and seeing him going on.
He's making work about
the relationship of the weather to mental health
and he's got himself an M.A. in Curation
and is challenging the fact that
Disability Arts has never
had a curatorial bone in its body

and it's time that curation becomes a key thing
to the development of the disability aesthetic
within the visual arts.

I could go on,
there's loads of artists I could talk about,
it's just brilliant.