

Art Panel members Hollis Dixon and Wendy Ball in conversation with artist Bernadette Martin

We looked at two pieces of Bernadette's art:
The Scribe, Digital photograph, HPFT Theme: Memory

Silent Tears, Digital photograph, HPFT Theme:
Unspoken, Stillness

How do you feel seeing your art on the wall of a Trust building and what does this mean to you?

When I had art therapy I spent quite a bit of time looking at other people's art on the wall. It gave me a sense of the different people who had passed through the room and I felt their presence even though I'd never met them. So it reminds me of that in a way. None of my own art ever ended up on the wall during therapy, but this project has given me an opportunity to make a contribution and feel connected to a wider group. It's a positive thing in a setting where things can be quite difficult. People can be experiencing a whole range of emotions – anxiety, boredom, sadness, anger – and it can help to have something to focus on on the wall.



How did you hear about the art project?

I'm part of a service user involvement group, mainly sitting on interview panels as part of the recruitment process for new staff. An email came through that channel for the Art Project. I was pleased to see that photography was included in the brief as I hadn't previously thought of it as 'art'.

What appealed to you about the art project?

One of the things that appealed to me about the art therapy was that it wasn't in any way medicalised. It's something positive and creative, and it gives you some agency instead of having things done to you or for you. It helped me probably more than anything else I've experienced over the years. The art therapy is over now, and there's some sadness in that. But this project was a chance to make a connection with the therapy, and have some continuity with it.

How has making this artwork, and having it accepted by the art panel, contributed to your wellbeing and recovery journey?

When I'm taking photos I feel more engaged with my surroundings. It takes me out of myself, makes me more present in the moment, so that I'm not conscious of time passing. And I connect with things much more than when I'm just standing back and observing.

The photos I submitted were actually taken before I heard about the Art Project. So what I did was go back and look at my existing photos in the light of the different themes, trying to see where they might fit in. That was a really interesting process, almost a meditative experience, because it made me see my images in a completely different way. For example, when I took 'Silent Tears', the photo of the plant with raindrops, I saw it as a refreshing image, something pretty. But when I looked at it through the theme of 'Unspoken' I saw the raindrops as tears, which added a whole new layer of meaning to it.

I thought of the times when there are tears, of how tears can replace words, and of how they can represent all those things which are unspoken.

Has your art-making continued/increased since having work accepted by the Art Panel? If so how?

It's given me a boost because beforehand, I just took the photos for the pleasure of taking them, and shared them with family and friends. So it's good to think that people might take pleasure from them more widely. With other forms of art making I feel a bit conflicted. In therapy the art was a means of expression and I just enjoyed using the different materials. The therapist never once said that something was well done or badly done. But I sensed from him that the art had value regardless, even though I was often conscious of my lack of skill. Since it ended I've taken a couple of art courses and I've become much more hung up on skill and technique. So although I often feel a strong desire to put something down on paper when I see paints or pencils, I don't because I know I'll probably end up feeling stuck and frustrated with the end product. It's a shame. Perhaps I should just do something anyway! People look at things in different ways, and they can sometimes see things in our art that we can't see ourselves.

How important to you was it that the Art Panel was made up of a mixture of people with different experiences of mental health: service users, carers, young people, mental health professionals, representatives of University of Hertfordshire?

Very important. In a building it's often the staff who make a decision about what goes on the walls. In this case all of the different people passing through the buildings were represented on the panel. When you're staying in hospital you can spend a lot of time just sitting, so having something to look at on the walls is important. And staff spend a lot of time in these buildings too, so they also need something to look at!

How helpful did you find the themes: Hope, Resilience, Empowerment, Choice, Memory, Unspoken, Stillness, Journey?

They made me see my pictures in a different light, through a prism. It's funny because when I was looking at the questions you were going to ask me today I realised I'd completely forgotten which themes I'd associated with which photos. And in fact I could have placed them completely differently the second time round. But I think that's the beauty of art, that different people can see completely different things in the same piece of art and interpret it differently. Even with your own work, you can see it differently after time has passed, even just a couple of days sometimes.

How do you feel seeing the other people's art displayed here?

It's been fascinating to see everyone else's artwork, I could happily come back for a second viewing! There's such variety in style and choice of subject and I was struck by how original and individual each piece is. Seeing artwork like this gives you a connection to the people who've created it and all their different experiences, without the pressures that come with a face to face meeting.

What do you think are the benefits and disadvantages in having one consistent person throughout the art project?

It's good to have a named person to deal with and nice to meet Katie face to face today. It's certainly easier to build up a relationship with one person.

Would you like to take part in any future creative projects with us?

Yes, definitely.

Is there anything else, not already covered, about the art displays you want to talk about?

Only that I think it's a really good thing to be doing. It's good that thought is going into what's around people and that lots of people can contribute. And actually creating the art is a positive thing too. You receive a lot when you're unwell – from family, friends, staff, other service users - and this is a chance to give something back and make the environment