Mental illness is a subject clouded by misunderstanding and prejudice. Creative works by people with an experience of mental illness and/or psychological trauma are often similarly misunderstood. There is a tendency for such works to be viewed from one standpoint only, thereby denying their multi-faceted nature.

The exhibition, *The Art of Making Sense*, has been developed to resolve some of these difficulties. Several years of research undertaken independently by the Cunningham Dax Collection, and more recently in partnership with several partner institutions, have led to the development of a “multi-dimensional” framework for exhibiting, viewing and understanding the art of people with mental illness and/or psychological trauma. The central idea behind the multi-dimensional framework is that creative work by people with experience of mental illness and/or psychological trauma cannot be understood through one perspective. As this exhibition proposes, such work can be viewed through several different interpretive frameworks including, but not limited to, the personal, the medical, the ethical, the historical, and the creative.

For the sake of clarity, the exhibition is divided into five separate sections in which one or two perspectives are emphasised, sometimes at the expense of others. Nevertheless, each individual work can be viewed through all of these perspectives simultaneously.

The first section of the exhibition, “Questions,” helps the viewer make sense of the complexities involved in viewing creative works by people with experience of mental illness and/or psychological trauma. The first set of questions and answers deals with common assumptions about the relationship between art and mental illness. For example: Can we understand works by people with experience of mental illness simply by looking at them? Are all works by people with mental illness and/or trauma in a particular style? Do all creative works by people with mental illness show traces of illness? The second set of question and answers relates to ethical issues raised by the display of such art. For example: Is it ethical to show works without the artist’s consent? Should the creator’s name always be made public?

The second section of the exhibition, “The Inner World,” deals with how the individual’s inner world influences the making of a creative work. The inner world of the creator consists of their thoughts and feelings about their past, present and future. They may be aware of some of these thoughts and feelings; these are considered to be in the conscious mind. There are also thoughts and feelings that a person may not be aware of and these are considered to be in the unconscious. The processes that regulate these thoughts and feelings become impaired in mental illness; thinking may be disorganised and feelings may be thrown into turmoil. These disturbances in the functioning of the inner world may affect the making of a work. The extent to which a creative work does reflect such disturbances depends on the degree of control a person still has over their creative processes, and whether they choose to portray the experience of their inner world or focus on their outer world.

The third section of the exhibition, “The Outer World,” displays works by people with experience of mental illness and/or psychological trauma which depict historical events, the broader social sphere, or the more limited social context of the psychiatric hospital. They relate, in other words to the “outer world” which lies beyond the interior realm of the creator’s thoughts and feelings. Creative works by people with mental illness are sometimes exhibited and discussed as if their creators lived in a private world completely sealed off from historical events and cultural developments. The works in this part of the exhibition depicting historical events and the broader social sphere demonstrate that such art has a public dimension – it relates to experiences shared by all people whether or not they have experience of mental illness. They depict a wide range of subjects including global politics, sporting activities and public transport, to name only a few. The works in this section which refer to life inside the hospital environment are also very diverse, and depict living conditions, art classes, hospital interiors, and sometimes comment on doctors or the use of medicine. These works also relate to a world shared with others, a more limited world to be sure, but a nonetheless social one.

The fourth section of the exhibition, “Personal Narrative,” which occupies the greater part of the second room of the
display area, views the creative works through the lens of an individual’s life history. Three artists are shown here, with several works each, to give a sense of the richness and development of their work over time. Biographical readings of art traditionally emphasise the private life of the artist – the events which make up an individual’s life story. Through presenting selected details of the biography of each artist, both those connected to their experience of illness and other details relating to other aspects of their lives, this section emphasises the life story of the artist, while also drawing attention to other dimensions, including psychological trauma, the artistic, the medical and historical. In this exhibition biography is therefore used to emphasise not only the private inner life of the artist but also their connection to broader historical and cultural events, such as art movements. In this way the artists who created the works exhibited here are presented as individuals with rich inner lives who have deep connections to the world around them.

The fifth and last section of the exhibition, “Creativity,” deals with the relationship between experience of mental illness and the concept of creativity. Individuals with experience of mental illness are often thought to be especially creative. One thinks, for example, of Vincent Van Gogh. However, what is the definition of creativity in this sense? For some, being creative means having artistic talent or skill – for example, having the ability to create a realistic portrait. For others, creativity means the ability to create something new, such as when a novel artistic style or material is invented. This section of the exhibition includes works that satisfy both definitions of creativity. One artist, who drew realistic depictions of faces and objects, also created drawings which are an astonishing and novel combination of abstract forms. Other works in this section employ unconventional styles and materials. Such creative experimentation may have little or no connection to mental illness, and simply reflect the artist’s desire to invent something new.

The exhibition as a whole aims to demonstrate the multi-faceted nature of creative works by people with experience of mental illness and/or psychological trauma by highlighting, in separate physical sections of the galleries, how certain works relate more closely or obviously to some dimensions than others. In most cases, however, individual works can be related to virtually all the issues raised throughout the exhibition. The exhibition has succeeded if it persuades the viewer that no single way of looking at these works will suffice to give a full account of their meaning.
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