

Psychiatry in pictures

CHOSEN BY ROBERT HOWARD

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Cynthia Weldon (*née* Pell), 1933–1977: *Going to Shenley* (top left), *By Moonlight* (top right) and *Cat with Spilt Sack* (bottom)

Cynthia Weldon, a graduate of Camberwell College of Art, developed a devastating bipolar illness at the age of 16 and was first admitted to St Bernard's Hospital, Southall, in 1961. During the next decade of her life she made several suicide attempts and had frequent admissions to St Bernard's where she was treated with antipsychotics and electroconvulsive therapy. In May 1973 she was admitted to Bexley Hospital and it was while she was nursed on the locked or longer-stay wards of this institution that she produced some of her most haunting images. Britta von Zweigbergk, Cynthia's art therapist, became the unofficial 'keeper' of her drawings and paintings. Writing in 1999, von Zweigbergk explained that she began to see Cynthia as being like a war correspondent reporting from the war-torn battlefield of her experience of severe mental illness.



'Her drawings and paintings were her dispatches often sent in a hurry with scant regard for personal safety, the Art Therapy Department acting as a base from which her materials were supplied'. In her pictures, Cynthia portrayed scenes from the daily life of the hospital, of her own suffering and that of other patients with great simplicity and feeling. Sometimes the choice of subject matter reflected touching and ordinary moments during periods of relative tranquillity such as the picture of one of the feral cats that roamed the hospital. In July 1977 she killed herself by cutting her throat while von Zweigbergk was on holiday and took care to choose a time when her friend the charge nurse Brian O'Connor was not on duty on the ward. Writing (again in 1999) O'Connor recalled, 'When I was notified, I did not grieve, I felt relieved that for Cyn, who was always tormented by depression and her other thoughts, her tortured life was over'. These and other pictures by Cynthia Weldon can be seen at the Bethlem Royal Hospital Archives and Museum (telephone 020 8776 4227).