

Psychiatry in pictures

EDITED BY ALLAN BEVERIDGE

Do you have an image, preferably accompanied by 100 to 200 words of explanatory text, that you think would be suitable for Psychiatry in Pictures? Submissions are very welcome and should be sent direct to Dr Allan Beveridge, Queen Margaret Hospital, Whitefield Road, Dunfermline, Fife KY12 0SU, UK.



Self Harm. Anna Donovan (b. 1948)

Anna Donovan was born in Cornwall and studied Fine Art at Falmouth School of Art. She completed an MA in Critical Theory and a PhD on Virginia Woolf's use of photographic images in her fictional works. Two serious episodes of depression led to hospital admissions but she is currently well and happy and taking maintenance medication.

'Ever since I can remember I have been subject to serious mood changes. For a long time I have tried to make sense of my life through drawing, painting and writing. This charcoal drawing was done on the brink of a severe depressive episode. Unfortunately, the attempt to express my feelings in this way did nothing to relieve my pain. Instead it precipitated more pain. I gave myself up to the image. I soon felt that I had to make myself hurt just as the woman I was drawing was hurting. The depths of depression required another outward sign, a blast of anger with myself. Later, on the road to recovery, I tried to write about the quicksand of emotions that led me from the drawing of a self-portrait to an act of savage self harm. But words seemed inadequate. I had to distance myself, to find a safe place from which to look back, and so I wrote in the third person. *Self Harm*. Once the decision is made there is no going back. She crouches on the floor like an animal, listening, listening. This is a very private and silent affair. A ritual has begun in which the solemn preparation belies the violent intent. The simple household materials, just caustic soda and water, take only moments to assemble. No longer thinking, no longer knowing anything she pours the innocuous looking substance quickly across her wrist. Certain where to start she is uncertain as to where the end might be. Intricate as a wren's ripples the shock of pain electrifies her whole body. A cold-blooded moment turns into a network of dancing nerve endings as the searing shock burns through numbness, anxiety, anger and fear. There is nothing in the world except pain laced with the sharp scent of morning. Her wrist darkens and stiffens into a black badge of destruction, a shield of despair. *Reparation*. A clinical white dressing, soft now, gentle. The pain creeping back to hide deep down inside, invisible. A crinkled crepe bandage covers, pretends. All is neat, finished with. Until tomorrow. Then scalding shame will pour through her, tingling her skin with panic and presenting her with a new persona, a paradox – flippant, carefree, but also sullen, crawling, grovelling'.

With thanks to Anna Donovan for permission to reproduce her picture and for explanatory text. Picture research and additional text by Robert Howard.