

Psychiatry in pictures

CHOSEN BY ROBERT HOWARD



2001: A Mind Odyssey is a celebration of the arts, psychiatry and the mind. For further information see <http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/campaigns/2001/> or e-mail: awedderburn@rcpsych.ac.uk



The Maze (1953)
William Kurelek

The Maze is an autobiographical picture painted while Kurelek was a patient in the Maudsley Hospital. His own description follows:

“The subject, seen as a whole, is of a man (representing me) lying on a barren plain before a wheatfield, with his head split open. The point of view is from the top of his head. The subject is then roughly divided into the left hand side of the picture, with the thoughts made in his head represented as a maze; and the right hand side, the view of the rest of his body. The hands and feet are seen through the eyes, nose and mouth, tapering off into the distance and the outside world. The Maze. An exitless one, it occupies and divides the inside of the cranium into groups of thoughts, the passageways being calculated to do the grouping. The white rat curled up in the central cavity represents my Spirit (I suppose). He is curled up with frustration from having run the passages so long without hope of escaping out of this maze of unhappy thoughts. Outside World. Grasshoppers and drought (sun before the clouds) represent the mercilessness of Nature, which bankrupted my father, a farmer, and brought out of him the cornered beast. The thorny, stony ground is a kind of T.S. Eliot Wasteland – spiritual and cultural barrenness: the pile of excrement with flies on it represents my view of the world and the people that live on it. The loosened red ribbon bound together the head of a T.S. Eliot Hollow Man, and was united by psychotherapy (Dr Cormier), but since the outside world is still unappealing, the rat remains inert. Before the head was opened, burrs (bitter experiences) choked the throat and pricked the sensitive underside of the tongue, and when it was opened the sawdust and shavings (tasteless education) spilled out from on top of the tongue: mixed with the sawdust are symbols of (to me) equally tasteless Art, painting, literature and music. The burrs also represent, in the eye socket, the successive evaluations of my character by any friend during the process of acquaintance, all repellant but hopeful till the last, when the heart is discovered to be a grub. On the tongue and in the throat, the Kurelek family (big burrs produce little burrs), representing my father as the hard domineering blue burr opening up the mushy yellow burr, my mother, to release a common lot of burrs, my brothers and sisters, and one unique orange one – myself. The last burr, spearing culture, is I at the university. The inverted one is I as a child, trapped painfully between two aspects of my father, the one I hated and the one I worshipped.”



Out of the Maze (1971)
William Kurelek

Out of the Maze was painted after his recovery and return to his native Canada. The picture shows Kurelek with his wife and children enjoying a happy family picnic. But all is not as idyllic as a first glance might suggest. An empty skull in the bottom left hand corner is a reminder of the psychological prison from which the artist has escaped and the impending storm on the far right horizon hints at Kurelek's premonition that the world was heading for a nuclear holocaust. Both pictures are in the collection of the Bethlem Royal Hospital Archives and Museum where *The Maze* is on permanent display.