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psychiatry in music

Idles: 'Stendhal Syndrome'

Gary Woods

'Stendhal Syndrome' is the ninth track on *Brutalism*, the debut LP from Bristol post-punk five-piece, Idles. The song rails against the ignorant dismissal of art by the ill-informed or those full of 'hot air'. Its lyrics include several wonderfully puerile playful critiques of works by Bacon, Basquiat and Bellingham, opening with the memorable: 'Did you see that painting what Rothko did? Looks like it was painted by a two-year-old kid'.

The song's title was inspired by vocalist Joseph Talbot's experience in a Valencian gallery, which rendered him awestruck, tearful and 'captivated to the point of nausea'. His subsequent enquiries revealed that the phenomenon had previously been documented in the medical literature, where it has also been referred to as Florence syndrome or hyperkulturemia. Stendhal syndrome is an acute and transient mental state disturbance, which typically follows exposure to captivating works of art. Individuals experience prominent anxiety symptoms including tachycardia, dizziness and syncope, with affective or psychotic symptoms also commonly observed.

The Italian psychiatrist Graziella Magherini christened the condition Stendhal syndrome in reference to a pseudonym of the 19th-century French author Marie-Henri Beyle, who had in 1817 written of becoming overwhelmed by the Italian Renaissance artworks he had observed during a trip to Florence. In 1989, while chief of psychiatry at the city's Santa Maria Nuova Hospital, Magherini published a detailed case series of more than 100 tourists affected between 1977 and 1986, often after visiting the famous Uffizi Gallery. With a previous psychiatric history observed in approximately half her sample, Magherini concluded that the condition was frequently associated with a latent psychological disturbance that manifests itself as a reaction to profound works of art.

Stendhal syndrome demonstrates similarities with other city-specific disorders such as Jerusalem syndrome and Paris syndrome, overlapping most closely with the former. In addition to Beyle's description, it has been proposed that the psychoanalysts Freud and Jung both wrote of their experiences of Stendhal syndrome, at the Acropolis of Athens and Pompeii respectively. While discussing the single's entertaining promotional music video, featuring footage from several London galleries, Idles' bassist Adam Devonshire has revealed that his apparent stereotypes were gin-fuelled rather than indicative of an episode of the syndrome.



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