

That's Good. That's Good

by Gill Nicol

The boundaries between you and not-you - what lies beyond your skin - relax and become more permeable. While infused with love you see fewer distinctions between you and others. Indeed, your ability to see others - really see them, wholeheartedly - springs open (1)

What does it mean to interact visually with another - another who is locked inside their head? Who cannot remember what they said a few moments before?

Artist Simon Ripley and his work - his prints - have been in a dialogue with patients experiencing severe Alzheimer's disease and dementia based at Franklyn Hospital, Exeter for a period of 12 weeks. He sees the whole project as a two-way process; his work responds to the atmosphere, to the people, what he hears and sees. He works with patients observing what they make : the colours they choose, what they say and so on.

This desire to investigate such a disease is to look into the heart of what it means to be a human being. When we lose our memories, we lose our sense of identity, we need our stories to make sense of the world.

Through making art, artists create their own worlds; boundaries and edges. Often an act of communication, the meaning conveyed can be read differently by others. One of the joys of contemporary art is that it can be interpreted in different ways; how we approach any artwork is shaped by our own histories - how our past is related to the present. There is no right or wrong meaning - meaning is never static or fixed. And therefore never fully 'complete'.

How can Simon in this situation understand where meaning lies for the participants in his weekly sessions? Is it found within the artwork itself? Or contained within the artist, the calm presence he can bring to the room? Or the conversation, the questions that are asked?

In a conversation with me, trying to pin down what was happening in the room each week, Simon talked of love; of work made from a place of the heart, of feeling, of a connection made from an emotional engagement. Fredrickson redefines love as fleeting moments of emotion we feel whenever we make a real connection with another human.

Whilst observing a session taking place, I became aware of time passing; the slowed down-ness of it, the attention given to the one thing, but for a short of time. there are different levels of attention with different individuals, and keeping the group focussed becomes key.

Printmaking has the ability to provide a process which enables the group to focus. this is the power of print - the roller, the colour, the physicality of it all, the mess, the shapes. For a short time 'flow' happens - that being 'in the moment' when each person seems fully immersed in a feeling of energised focus and enjoyment in the process of the activity.

Proposed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the term 'flow' is a feeling of joy - to be depressed or anxious is to be barred from flow.

At the end of the session, the occupational therapist - who knows each of them very well - says she is overwhelmed by the quality of conversation. One patient had described in detail what effect she had wanted with her print - 'light, not heavy; not like this postcard here - I want it light because I want the space around it'.

'That's good, that's good', another said.

And what of Simon's work?. His new prints are shown to the group and someone says how 'organic' they are. And they are right; there are literal images of trees; maybe bark. They are full of colour, and lines. Paul Klee talked about taking a line for a walk, a lovely if now overused phrase.

But the simplicity of it describes drawing in its purest terms. It speaks of the fundamental nature of making a mark, whether it be pencil, a brush or a scalpel.

One of the most interesting things about the work is that some of them have odd marks on them, acting as little pokes or prods, saying 'don't get too complacent now'...they act as a jolt, a wake up call. They are reminiscent of Barthes 'punctum', a term used in his short book entitled camera Lucida about photography, published in 1980. He uses the term to denote the effect that the photographic image has on the spectator - the wounding, touching detail which reaches out of the image to establish a direct relationship between viewer and object (in this case, marks).

Can we see those marks as symbolic of the nature of the relationship between the artist, the patient and the disease? Or the very process of making itself within this tender situation - full of warmth, love and beauty.

Gill Nicol May 2013

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(1) Barbara Fredrickson in Love 2.0: How Our Supreme Emotion Affects Everything We Feel, Think, Do and become.