

The image shows a piece of fabric with various hand-drawn sketches. The sketches include human figures in various poses, tools like scissors and a key, and symbols such as a heart, a pulse line, a sun, and a net. The sketches are arranged in a somewhat grid-like pattern, with some figures appearing in pairs. The fabric has a visible texture and some stitching along the edges.

Switching Perceptions

bethlem
gallery

Eleanor Minney

Switching Perceptions

5 January–30 March 2019

In collaboration with Professor Liz Tunbridge and the National Psychosis Unit at Bethlem Royal Hospital

Bethlem Gallery is delighted to present *Switching Perceptions*, a new exhibition by artist Eleanor Minney in collaboration with Professor Liz Tunbridge and patients from the National Psychosis Unit at Bethlem Royal Hospital. In a new body of work spanning textiles, drawing, collage and handwriting, Minney untangles the fragile threads of the human mind through delicate, detailed explorations into what creates a sense of self, and the relationship to psychiatric conditions.

Dissecting the gallery space is *Segment of a self*, Minney's four-metre long textile work, featuring two lengths of calico separated by thick wadding. On one side are hundreds of hand drawn ciphers alluding to a person's holistic sense of self–relationships, spirituality, illness and wellness, home, movement, communication–and on the other side, row upon row of genetic markers, only three of which relate to psychotic illness. On the walls of the gallery are smaller textile pieces combining stitch, drawing and natural elements, including *Calcium channels* and *Test sample garden*, the artist's explorations of brain, body and environment.

Switching Perceptions also presents work by C.A.S and Anon–two patients from the National Psychosis Unit at Bethlem Royal Hospital, with whom Minney has been working for the past three months. The patients have created a series of drawings and text works exploring their own sense of self, belief, faith, feelings and nature. Some are diagrams created around the concept of a think tank, developed by C.A.S. as a way of connecting clinicians, academics, patients

and other specialists. The think tank will expand into a public event for the exhibition with contributions from Eleanor Minney, Prof. Liz Tunbridge and other specialists.

Switching Perceptions has developed from Eleanor Minney's two-year collaboration with Liz Tunbridge, Associate Professor in the Department of Psychiatry, Medical Sciences Division at the University of Oxford, exploring the question, 'What creates a sense of self?'. Tunbridge's ongoing research aims to elucidate the links between genetic heritage and predisposition to schizophrenia, with Minney's artistic enquiry probing some of the central themes and implications of this challenging meeting between science and subjective human experience.

Switching Perceptions is supported by The Royal Society Public Engagement Fund and the University of Oxford Public Engagement Seed Fund.

Artworks

Segment of aself

Mixed inks, cotton calico, wadding, threads, old book, acrylic. 2018

Segment of aself manifests as two lengths of calico separated by thick wadding. On one side are hundreds of hand drawn ciphers alluding to a person's holistic sense of self—and on the other side, row upon row of inked genetic markers, only three of which are highlighted as being related to psychotic illness. These three genetic markers or switches form the focus of Professor Liz Tunbridge's research: she seeks to understand how the protein channels encoded by these genes alter brain function in psychotic illnesses. She hopes ultimately to improve treatment by developing better medications through understanding of the brain. Conceptually, Eleanor situates Professor Tunbridge's research in the thick wadding between the two layers of calico and between the subject life experiences and the hard science of the genetic code, in a hidden complex cellular area. The intricately drawn symbols in Segment of aself are representative of the whole person and their subjective reality. This may include universal and individual facets of life such as relationships with ourselves and others, spirituality, growth, home, movement and communication.

Layer II ATCG

Ink, pencil, tracing paper and watercolour paper. 2018

ATCG are the four chemical bases of our DNA. The way the genes formed by these letter turn themselves into the molecules that make up our human selves is through a self-regulated process of snipping and stitching different

pieces of transcripts together. For Layer II ATCG, Eleanor has layered her interpretation of this process over drawings of cells and chromosomes with reference to tools associated with hand made textile work, suggesting to us possible connections between genetic processes and the social and cultural associations we have to textile making and usage.

Calcium channels

Acrylic ink, cotton calico, wadding, threads, old book. 2018

Calcium Channels has been made from the wadding material found in the middle of Segment of aself and explores this area of research through a hand-made materials based interpretation. Professor Liz Tunbridge is currently working on a particular subset of genes that are known to influence brain function in people living with schizophrenia. Her team are looking at the calcium channels encoded by these genes and the way in which they control calcium flows in the brain and the heart.

Think Tank Diagram Responses

Ink, acrylic, cotton calico, old books. 2018

As part of this project, Eleanor spent several weeks facilitating workshops with groups of patients on the National Psychosis Unit at Bethlem Royal Hospital. Participants came up with intuitive and thought-provoking responses to the theme and produced a series of artworks in response. One of the contributions from C.A.S. was a concept she called the Think Tank, a space for people from different fields to come together and discuss a particular subject. One calico diagram is Eleanor's personal response to the Think

In Conversation

Tank concept that became the space she worked with patients in. The other diagram response is thematic, trying to work out how the Think Tank could be realised as either an event or in the gallery space. The ink drawn lines join the various subject areas and people within them, in a conversation.

Test sample garden

Ink, pencil, cotton calico, dried beans, thread, old book. 2018

The garden as metaphor is explored in Test sample garden and in other areas of Eleanor's practice. This particular garden references the Buddhist notion of a store of consciousness where our mental formations reside in our store of consciousness in the form of seeds, before sprouting on the surface if they are watered. Eleanor suggests that every garden is individual and subject to different soil and growing conditions and from each set of seeds, a unique plant may grow. The use of cut up words from various books give us the sense that the instructions or narrative are always present but that we need to unearth or decode them from the flow of everyday information.

Please see section Working with the National Psychosis Unit for details on artworks from C.A.S. and Anon.

Eleanor Minney Professor Liz Tunbridge

Liz The whole project feels very organic, it just feels like it came out of those early conversations that we had about the research that I do, and then the more philosophical and moral aspects of the work...

Eleanor Yes, I don't think either of us had outcomes in mind along the way....did we?

Liz No, not to start with.

...

Liz I guess that is where the idea for the main piece came from, those discussions of to what extent our DNA governs who we are, and to what extent mental health and mental illness is tied up with who we are as individuals...

Eleanor and these switches, and it not being quite so straightforward, well not straightforward in any way... as it might seem.

Liz There is that narrative that you see a lot in the media, a gene for this a gene for that, and it is just not like that, it is so much more complicated.

....

Liz Coming from a fairly molecular point of view I tend to think molecules upwards, and I guess that's probably opposite to most people starting with 'who am I as an individual?' and thinking about how you got to be that person, rather than starting the other way around.

...

Eleanor Hopefully what we have been doing throughout is knitting,

Liz Trying to meet in the middle,

Eleanor Trying to meet in the middle, creating this bridge.

Liz Exactly.

Eleanor I suppose, with the work and as an artist I have been trying to be that bridge between experiences and ways of perceiving an experience.

...

Eleanor In your day-to-day work you have to use this lens of science.

Liz Yeh, to try to understand what might be going on behind that, essentially. I think the great thing about the workshops was we really had time, to get to know people, and to get to understand the perspective that they have. That's been hugely valuable to me, it is one of the most important things I think I have taken from the project so far, has just been understanding the experiences of individuals and how they view themselves, and how they view their experiences.

Eleanor And you feel that will inform your work?

Liz Yes, absolutely. Particularly as scientists it is so important to have an understanding of all the different perspectives on your research... particularly in the field in which I work everybody has some experience with mental health or mental illness of some description and so it's inherently something that people have an understanding of. And in

the work that I've done talking to members of the public and generally in day-to-day life I find as soon as people start to think about genetics the conversation becomes quite loaded, in a way, and people worry...

Liz It is so important to try and communicate the complexities of that field...

Liz It is just a field that has quite a lot of general interest, but also a lot of misperceptions and misunderstandings associated with it... so I think it is really important to listen to people really! I think that in life generally! (laughter)

Eleanor I suppose we tried to encapsulate what you have just described in our titling for the exhibition really – 'Switching Perceptions' – and just softening the conversation maybe. I think that is why I am drawn to making things by hand, using fabrics, simple ink drawings and lines and threads... trying to create a softening of that scientific language that can feel quite hard-edged. Certainly in our conversations it doesn't feel hard-edged, the way you talk about science, the language you choose to use frames it very differently but the way the words of genetics and that field of research can come into news articles I read or on the radio... it is a very careful balance isn't it.

Liz It is. One of the themes that has come up again and again... is language as a means to bring people together but also to divide people.

...

Eleanor I had questions, lots of questions, from very early on and particularly when I

started reading and having conversations with you there were just more and more questions all the time! It was a bit uncontrollable!

(laughter)

Eleanor ...and fortunately, for myself and everyone around me, (laughter) as the process evolved there were less questions and it became more important to just be with what was already there.

Liz and I guess a lot of the questions that we ended up talking about kind of clustered around the same themes...they were skirting around the same central questions.

Eleanor Exactly, I don't think I ever would have believed that I would have managed to get the questions down to two at the start!

(laughter)

Eleanor But the two we're thinking about now, or inviting other people to think about, as you say encapsulate those themes. So, 'is my mind not working or my brain?' For me, I spend a lot of time thinking quite philosophically and about spirituality and about the mind. Whereas I am not sure, I think you would use the word brain more often...?

Liz yes, it is funny I've had this conversation with lots of different people from different fields and I guess often it strikes me most when talking to people who are clinical psychologists for example who come from a very mind focused perspective, and I often think again, that's an almost-a language barrier, I would use 'brain' where they would use 'mind', because I sort of think of them as the same thing... what I think the mind is, is

just what arises from the function of the brain and our perspective on that, but I know that that's again because I come from quite a reductionist point of view!... tend to think about everything in terms of biology. I don't really conceptualize those two things as being terribly separate because for me they are the same.

Eleanor I was thinking about a neuron, a brain cell, and what that can really tell me about my thoughts? It just feels like there is a vast gap between this brain -

Liz Yes there absolutely is.

Eleanor - and the mind and all these thoughts and how it is all tangled together, so I find it amazing that you can bring them together.

Liz I don't think we can yet, you know, that's an intellectual leap of faith that I take...

...

Eleanor There is a confidence in the location of the mind for you.

Liz Yes, Exactly, that's it. I don't worry about it being somewhere other than in my head! (laughter)

Eleanor Interesting. So to say, is my mind not working or my brain, you would just say – 'well, it's the same thing'.

Liz In my perspective... I do, just have faith that they are the same thing. I think it is an interesting question as to whether, given that our minds come from our brains and in my world-view whether we could ever

understand our own minds or whether we are limited by the fact that they arise in our brains. Do you see what I mean?

...

Eleanor ...I don't know, it's difficult. I am not sure I have come to a decision, I don't have a confident decision, but I suppose for me, the mind isn't just in the brain somehow. I can't tell you where else! (laughter) But it feels much bigger than that, spanning more than just this life with this brain.

Liz I understand what you mean.

Eleanor The time, I can't really remember what was happening, when I was asking myself: is my mind not working or my brain, but it felt like they weren't talking to each other!

(laughter)

...

Eleanor it is just all so fascinating, it's all so interesting.

Liz I do find myself in a sense of wonder about how complicated things are and yet how most of the time it works! Even if you look a cell, it is like a little city in there. There's so much going on all the time... all of it is beautifully orchestrated.

...

Eleanor I suppose that's why I think there has to be a sort of nourishing of the mind...

Liz When I think about the brain I don't think of a static thing, maybe that's part of it. I see

your brain is literally changing millisecond to millisecond... Even in terms of its structure. New connections are being built and connections you don't need anymore are being destroyed... For me, I think literally everything you do changes your brain, you open your eyes, light comes in, that changes the state of the brain ... Your brain is just permanently changing, dynamic, and so I don't think of it as a static passive thing... The things that we do influence how our brain works. So I suppose, if people think about the spiritual side of things I would see that as being something that would change the way your brain is working and how you are interacting with the world. I suppose that's how I reconcile all those sorts of questions.

Eleanor I suppose I would agree with that then. Maybe I am thinking mind comes first, mind is a more accessible thing that I can almost shape and have communication with.

Liz it is funny that isn't it, again – language– 'you know your own mind', which is funny 'cos I don't think I do!

(laughter)

Eleanor Oh, you see, I think I know mine a bit too well! (laughter) I've spent a bit too much time with it!

Yes, so I feel I can definitely have communication with my mind...I can do things to kind of shape that. Whereas the brain, I don't feel I can do anything about that. But then I suppose indirectly, if I am shaping the mind, I am shaping the brain! ...That's the interesting thing about all of this, we come from our different perspectives, but it sort of boils down to the same thing in the end doesn't it.

Liz I think again that's one of those things where language is really important, or even just discussion, listening. And that is one of the things I have really enjoyed about the project, but also just the conversations we've had more generally, thinking about things from a different perspective and working out where we do think the same and where we don't. And actually I think probably more and more when we drill down into it we do think relatively similarly about things, but just with a different lens, a different perspective. That's one of the things I have found most interesting.

Eleanor I would say the same actually.

...

Liz I don't think you could be right or wrong with something this complicated.

...

Liz I see our selves as being intimately entwined with our minds and our brains and again I see not that much distinction there between these things.

Eleanor Because it is in consciousness and consciousness is in the brain.

Liz If I think the brain gives rise to the mind, and maybe the self is our framework to understand the mind, we have to have some conception of who we are. If I think about experiences I have had that have been difficult... often one of the most difficult things is when your sense of self clashes with something, when your sense of self is challenged in some way, I think of myself in this way, and then this happened, and why

did I do that? – That's not 'me'! I think that is an interesting question.

Eleanor As you say, there is the brain, then there is the mind, and then there's the self, and the self is sort of the story that we weave,

Liz exactly, yeh. To make sense of the world.

Eleanor to live the world, to get up each morning and know what to do, or figure it out... you know, if we hadn't weaved that self story then it would be very difficult to do anything really.

...but actually the sense of self isn't really a fixed thing...

...If anything, the brain has more substance?

Liz Yeh, that's an interesting question.

You can hear more from their conversation by using the headphones to hear the audio excerpt in the exhibition space.

Events

Please visit our website for details on how to book events.

Drawing the Symbols of the self

Workshop

Saturday 5 January

10:30am–12:00pm

Bethlem Gallery

Artist Eleanor Minney *has been exploring the language of the self in her fabric drawing, and in her work with a group on the National Psychosis Unit. Join Eleanor in contemplating the shapes and symbols that represent ourselves, and draw with pen or stitch onto cotton calico squares. Talk with Eleanor about her process and themes, and develop your own.*

Collaging Personality Postcards

Workshop

Saturday 2 February

10:30am–12:00pm

Bethlem Gallery

Inspired by the text-based works that Eleanor and Liz created with patients on the National Psychosis Unit, join us to develop personality postcards or pieces of experimental writing using words cut from second-hand books.

Neuroscientist in Residence

Workshop

Saturday 2 March

10:30am–12:00pm

Bethlem Gallery

In this workshop we will have Professor Liz Tunbridge with us, as well as a selection of human brain tissue samples, slides and neuron imagery. Join us for gentle drawing exercises inspired by the scientific specimens, as well as an opportunity to ask Liz your science related questions!

Think Tank

Discussion

Thursday 21 March

5pm–7pm

Bethlem Gallery

Join artist Eleanor Minney, Professor Liz Tunbridge, clinicians, occupational therapists and others involved in the mental health care system for the Think Tank to explore some of the central questions and provocations from the exhibition. The Think Tank concept was initiated by C.A.S. during workshops on the National Psychosis Unit and Eleanor and Liz understand it as a space in which people come together to have conversations—to share and to listen, contribute or observe, write or speak or draw. We invite a range of people – professors, the public, artists, care professionals... it is as much about relationships as it is about individuals.

Working with the National Psychosis Unit

An integral part of this project has been the collaboration between artist Eleanor Minney, Professor Liz Tunbridge and the National Psychosis Unit. Eleanor and Liz spent several weeks throughout 2018 facilitating workshops with groups of patients on the National Psychosis Unit at Bethlem Royal Hospital to explore some of the central questions and themes from the project. In order to counterbalance the, at times, controversial nature of genetic research into mental illness, it was important to create a space for people with lived experience of psychosis to contribute their thoughts to the exhibition. As Eleanor says,

“To me there has been a real importance in working collaboratively, alongside one another, trying not to place focus on our unequal situations or the things that separate us, rather on a shared experience of making work together.” — Eleanor Minney

Using a variety of materials and techniques she utilises in her own practice, Eleanor worked with patients on exploring symbols that represent ourselves, words that connect to ourselves, science of the mind diagrams and designing personal responses to the Think Tank concept.

C.A.S. has made the majority of her contributions through conversations and sharing thoughts and ideas. Her main contribution to the exhibition is an ambitious conceptual space – the Think Tank, a space for people from different fields to come together and discuss a particular subject. Eleanor suggested a way to record this Think Tank by creating a diagram together. The Think Tank evolved through the workshops and now forms an interactive space within the exhibition and culminates in an event with invited guests.

The resulting artworks and contributions made by Anon contain expressions of openhearted and universal subjects and have created a valuable balance to the cerebral quality of the Think Tank with emotive and organic themes. In her own Think Tank Diagram, Anon depicts a clear visualisation of these themes.

Artworks in exhibition

C.A.S.

A series of pencil drawings and a Think Tank Diagram.

Anon, A series of ink drawings and collages and a personal Think Tank Diagram.

Biographies & Thanks

Eleanor Minney lives in Oxford, and works in Oxford and Kent. She studied Fine Art at University of Oxford (2013–17), and has a Graduate Certificate in Humanistic & Psychodynamic Counselling (Goldsmiths University of London, 2017–18). She is currently training in Contemplative Psychology. Solo exhibitions include Anonymous, St. Edmund Hall College Chapel, Oxford (2017) and A-X, The Dolphin Gallery, St. John’s College, Oxford (2015). Selected group exhibitions include Trinity Buoy Wharf Drawing Prize, 2018-19; It’s Fragile, The Dolphin Gallery, St. John’s College, Oxford (2017); Art Meets Science, Radcliffe Science Library, Oxford (2015). Minney’s work is in the collections of Ashmolean Museum - Western Art Print Room, Oxford and Sir William Dunn School of Pathology, University of Oxford. www.eleanorminneyart.co.uk

Professor Liz Tunbridge, B.Sc. M.Sc. D.Phil. is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychiatry, Medical Sciences Division at the University of Oxford. Her research aims to understand how individual genes impact on the complex brain functions that are altered in psychiatric disorders. She believes that understanding these links will help to explain why some people respond well to treatments, whilst others do not, and will ultimately lead to new and improved therapies. She uses a wide range of experimental techniques, which allows her to study the function of these genes at all levels—from individual cells to the whole person—in collaboration with many other researchers within Oxford, elsewhere in the UK, and internationally. <https://www.psych.ox.ac.uk/team/elizabeth-tunbridge>

Thanks

We’d like to thank Eleanor and Liz for all their hard work and thoughtful approach to this project and exhibition. A big thank you to Professor Sukhi Shergill, Hettie Webb-Wilson and all the staff from Fitzmary 2 for their support and collaboration. Thank you to Mike and Sue for their technical expertise. And a huge thank you to all the Bethlem Gallery volunteers who help make everything we do, possible: Susannah, James, Beth, Kim, Amy, Alex, Anna Maria, Ann, Ben, Michelle, Kim, Xavier.

