

ANDY WILD is an artist. He has held both solo and group exhibitions throughout England, from the Waterside Arts Centre in Manchester to the Nunnery Gallery in London. His poems have been published in the book 'Words for Wellbeing' and images of his paintings were selected for the 'Yellow Book' (part of the 'Rethink Your Mind' project).

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Short Circuit

Art and Empowerment

Andy Wild



ANDY WILD INVITES CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS ABOUT IDENTITY THROUGH A FILM ABOUT HIS LIFE, HEALTH AND ART; the three seem to be intertwined and require further unravelling.

Q. Tell us a little bit about yourself - who you are/what you do. What got you interested in art?

A. I am an artist. I am 50 years old and I live in Cumbria with my wife and young child. I tend to split most of my time and energy between making art and looking after my daughter.

My artwork is an expression of my viewpoints and feelings. I use a variety of different media in my work, ranging from using my own MRI scans to a glass head stuffed with drug packets, but primarily I am a painter.

When I paint I start with a blank canvas and some idea of the forms, marks and colours I want to use on that day. On some days I may have an idea of what I want the painting to be about and on other days the feelings are intangible, but the painting process is always about arriving at an artwork that reflects my views and feelings about the world around and in me.

I allow myself the freedom to let the marks and the paint take me on a journey and my often urgent need to get my feelings down on canvas leads to a loose and sometimes flowing style of mark making. Using acrylics further enhances this process as their quick drying nature can

allow me to re-engage with the work within a short period of time. For me, painting is also a very physical process; I apply paint using brushes, palette knives and cloths but also my fingers and the palms of my hands.

My journey into art started when I discovered I had a brain tumour. My diagnosis was in 2008. After receiving the diagnosis I sat down and thought; 'before my time is up, what do I want to do that I have never done before?' - and painting came to mind. I can't even remember what art we did at school so I thought I would have a go and try something new.

We are very lucky in the South Lakes and North Lancashire because there is an organisation called Cancer Care that offers free art classes on a weekly basis. It is not an 'Art Therapy' class but one in which art gets done in a therapeutic environment, so that is where I started.

From attending the class once a week and producing something in that group environment, I then started to work on my own at home and, after a few years and success in getting my work exhibited, I now work from a studio in Kendal.

Q. Could you share some details about the film?

A. The film was produced in the context of 'Raw - an exhibition about recognition, illness and joy'. The exhibition that is referred to in the film was held at Looking Well Studios in Bentham. Pioneer Projects [Celebratory Arts] Ltd, with whom I collaborated with for the exhibition, are a local charity and their aim is to promote the use of arts and celebration to impact positively on the health of individuals and communities. They are a very supportive, creative and thoughtful group of people. So, once I had decided that I wanted to exhibit my work, they seemed an obvious organisation to approach. After showing and discussing my work with their team, Philippa Troutman, the curator, and I worked together to present my work and the exhibition went up.

Both the charity and I were very pleased with how the exhibition was received. The engagement and discussion it caused prompted Pioneer Projects to extend its duration. I was very happy for this to happen. Following on from the exhibition, we talked about how we could work together again, and from this conversation Pioneer Projects came up with the idea of making a film. At the time of my exhibition, Pioneer Projects was working with various groups across Craven and South Lakeland on what was called the 'Borders Project'. That project was about exploring questions such as 'What makes us feel well?', 'What makes for good mental health?' and 'What makes a difference?' We both felt that my exhibition related to these issues, to my own sense of wellbeing and how my exhibition had affected me and others who had seen the work; we subsequently made a film that tried to work with these issues.

Q. In the film you mention that art is an expression of one's own voice. What would you like people to 'hear' through your work?

A. In the exhibition that the film refers to I wanted to show how painting has helped me – not only in dealing with my cancer, but by giving me the opportunity to express my view, my feelings about the world. I find that it is a powerful thing to do – to put yourself down on paper – it's a statement of "I am". It is separate to the cancer, and separate to the 'noise' of everyday living; it's your own unique take on the world and when I recognise that I feel uplifted. Knowing that I have

my own voice is a powerful thing; it gives me a feeling of confidence that I can make my own decisions about how I am going to approach life and I wanted people to hear about this possibility that can be offered by making your own art.

Q. What does it mean for you to be an artist and exhibit your work for an audience?

A. The meaning I get from exhibiting my work is twofold. I gain public recognition for my voice, for what I want to express about the world in and around me. This leads to a personal affirmation that there is value to what I have to say. The other meaning I gain from exhibiting my work is based around a sense of purpose and achievement. By exhibiting work I feel as though I am contributing to society, that I am putting something in front of the viewer that might make them feel or think about something. It is about recognising my own value and trying to be purposeful for others.

Q. It seems that the exhibition has enabled you to assert your artist identity among your family and friends, some of whom hadn't seen you for several years. Was this important for you? If so, in what ways has this influenced your practice and your identity?

A. The exhibition was not only a display of my work but also a display of my new identity as an artist. This was important for me as it was a statement to family and friends that although I have a life threatening disease with its daily trials and tribulations, I am not lost. They saw that I had not lost my vitality, that I had just chosen a new direction.

I have always had a lot of self-belief and I have always had the ability to reinvent myself, from working as an IT recruitment consultant, to working as an outdoors instructor, and as a primary school teacher. My family and friends know that I am ready to adapt to change. So I don't think my family and friends influenced my practice and identity, they just accepted my new identity. They primarily came to offer support and see if I was alright and maybe get a better understanding of what it is like to walk in my shoes.

Q. It is interesting to see in the film how your health influences your art and vice versa. How has your practice changed over time?

A. My epilepsy has affected my art in several ways. Epilepsy is the actual subject of some of my artworks, pieces solely produced as a need to express how I feel about my epilepsy and an attempt to find some understanding and peace with my illness.

My epilepsy has also affected the physical process of making my art. The anticonvulsant medication and the seizures sap my energy and sometimes I am just too tired or too vague to work. Something I also find strange is that using my right hand too much can cause a partial seizure. I don't know why this happens but from being a right handed person I now paint with my left hand. In some ways, however, I think this frees me. I can no longer paint precisely and that means I just have to let go and take the paint where it will go. I like that.

Over time my art has changed but I see that more as a case of natural creative development rather than the effect of my ill health. For example my type of mark making has changed somewhat. Previously I was more interested in using blocks of colour whereas now I often use

more flowing strokes in my work. But that is to do with my preference, with what I think works best artistically rather than being a change caused by my health.

Q. You refer to managing your medication and that art takes you away from your illness; how much would you say the content/specific nature of your work reflects this 'taking away'? In what ways would your work be different if you moved more towards yourself than away?

A. As a whole my art is an expression of feelings and views. As such, work about my illness is a part of that but not separate to the general thrust of my work. I have created artworks that solely deal with aspects of my illness - but then others, for example, are a portrayal of the energy of my daughter. In 2013 I held an exhibition in Manchester entitled 'The Patient Experience'¹ which dealt directly with my experience as a patient with a life threatening illness and yet in 2014 I held an exhibition in Kendal entitled 'Forms, Feelings and Colour' which had nothing to do with illness. So I suppose you could say that my art both takes me in and takes me away from my illness. If I made art that was solely to do with my illness it would be an incomplete portrayal of my life and I admit, it would be a depressing one.

Q. Please share any final thoughts about the theme of the issue 'The artist identity' as it pertains to your case.

Art has been good to me. My illness is what brought me to making art but now making art is part of me; it is a part of my identity. I do believe that everyone is creative but that so many of us don't know, or feel we can't let that creativity out; I have now found that vehicle to creativity and I will keep using it until I drop.

Notes

¹ Andy Wild, 'The Patient Experience', Picasaweb, 23 April 2013 <<https://picasaweb.google.com/100280856281393519280>> [Accessed: 15 November 2015].