

Toby Brown: Behind the smile



Artist Toby Brown creates an exhibition like no other. A captivating portrayal of the anguish and torment that can consume sufferers of depression, for Brown, the story is in the eyes. He explains: "It's the eyes which are important. You see everything you need to know through the eyes. A person may be smiling but if you look closely enough, you can see the sadness and the sorrow, you can see the truth."

Toby Brown's struggle with mental health began in 2008 when he found himself in serious debt, facing the collapse of his family-run business, and later, his marriage. He sought help for clinical depression, started seeing a psychiatrist and taking anti-depressants. He also turned to illegal drugs in a bid to self-medicate and his mental health quickly began to deteriorate. He started to hear voices and became increasingly paranoid, which led to him being prescribed a cocktail of drugs including Olanzapine, an anti-psychotic. He was labeled by doctors a 'paranoid schizophrenic' and was later admitted to The Priory hospital in London.

Recovering from mental health problems can at times feel like an uphill battle and requires relentless hard work and dedication. These efforts can often go unnoticed as mental illnesses are usually invisible and it is extremely common for others to fail in offering adequate support. It was precisely this lack of understanding and empathy from the people around him at that time which led Brown, who is partially sighted, to art.

He tells me: "That's where it all started. The people around me just could not understand what I was going through. They would say: 'Why can't you just snap out of it?' I needed to express myself and I couldn't find the words to explain, so I decided to paint. It was my way of saying, 'Look, this is me, this is what's going on in my head.'"

Now key pieces in this incredible exhibition, Brown's first works were three self portraits, which he painted almost four years ago. They are powerful and compelling in the way in which they communicate the hidden 'pain and torture of depression'. Brown says: "I wanted to capture the inward struggles for all to see. We try and carry on with our daily lives even though this is how we really feel. We can't just pull ourselves out of it. It takes time and a lot of fighting with ourselves. Depression gets inside your bones and even the smallest of tasks takes pure strength and determination."

The exhibition, which runs at The Debut Contemporary in Notting Hill, until 26 th May, also consists of portraits of Brown's friends, family and some celebrities including: Georgia Taylor, Danny McNamara, Sandi Thom, Carrie Grant and Alastair Campbell. They are sharing their stories and lending their support in order to raise awareness and show others who are suffering, that they are not alone and that everybody is vulnerable to mental illness regardless of who they are or what they do.

Speaking at the launch, Alistair Campbell discussed the importance of Brown's work. He said: "When I was working in government, I now realise I underestimated the extent to which culture and art can actually deliver change. If you just look at this, as this campaign goes on trying to change the way we think about mental illness, people like Toby doing what they're doing is going to have a massive impact on us. It's not just about nice pictures, it's about really changing the way we think in the shortest time and making the world a better place."

The paintings also resonated personally with Debut Contemporary founder, Samir Ceric, who talks openly about his partner's personal experience with depression and anxiety. At the launch, he said: "This goes way beyond a beautiful exhibition in Notting Hill, for a select few. We want to encourage, inspire, engage and really get people to come out and talk. This is the mission we all share together."

Although the subject matter is tough, the atmosphere is one of positivity and real strength. Brown says "I didn't want the paintings to be sad; I wanted them to show vulnerability and understanding". His courage to be so open and honest, coupled with his incredible artistic talent, achieves exactly that.

I ask Brown what he would like his ultimate message from this exhibition to be. He tells me: "I just want to encourage anybody who is struggling with a mental health problem, to share how they are feeling. I know it's tough, trust me I do, but you don't have to talk about it if you don't want to. You can write a poem, write a song, or like me, draw a picture."

With the levels of male depression and suicide ideation, currently the highest they have ever been, the work Toby Brown is doing to encourage individuals to express themselves in ways they feel most comfortable, is crucial. He represents strength and bravery. He is an inspiration to us all.

Toby Brown is currently working with Mind charity to raise awareness and proceeds for mental health.

Lutfiye Salih is a trainee psychologist at City University, living & working in London. She currently practises CBT, psychotherapy & art, and play therapy.