

'For me the eyes tell the story'

Ella Rhodes speaks to artist Toby Brown about his portraits of mental health problems.



It's an expression so familiar to many of us – wide-eyed, helpless, numb. Toby Brown's captivating portraits have been striking a chord since his exhibition opened in London: 'For me the eyes tell the story, not necessarily the rest of the face. A person can still be smiling, but their eyes can say the opposite. The story and the battle scars are all there if you look close enough,' he said.

Brown spoke to *The Psychologist* about the harrowing experiences that eventually inspired him to turn to art, which had always been a hobby, in the face of depression. In 2008 while working as a motorbike courier Brown was weighed down with a mortgage and other debt, and faced with a family-run business on the brink of collapse. He took anti-depressants and visited a psychiatrist but struggled to open up, and self-medicated with illegal drugs.

Later he started to hear voices: 'A part of me knew it was wrong but I couldn't help myself, I found that I'd lost control, my family took over the day to day of my life, paranoia pushed me away from them. All of a sudden I found myself on a cocktail of antidepressants, sleeping pills, Olanzapine, an anti psychotic and illegal drugs. The voices in my head took over. I'd created my own world that I thought was reality. What started as depression was rapidly leading to doctors labelling me as a paranoid schizophrenic, a drug induced psychosis.'

Brown was eventually admitted to hospital after which his marriage dissolved and he ended up starting over, moving into an old caravan on an industrial unit. Since that time in 2009 he has worked tirelessly to lead a 'normal' life again.

Around four years ago, after suffering and battling against his mental health problems, Brown took up a brush and painted three self-portraits in an effort to convey the 'pain and torture' of depression, so often thought of as an invisible illness. '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,' he said.

More recently he has taken to painting both celebrities and members of his family, including stepdaughter Jade, who suffered in silence for many years with an eating disorder and was eventually hospitalised. Brown said: 'Ed [Eating Disorder], as she had named the voice in her head, had taken over. After five months of battling Ed she is now home and winning the battle. Ed is still there but he is not in control anymore. At the time I painted her portrait she was in hospital. In a way it helped us both to paint the portrait... it gave me something to focus on and help her and it gave her a boost of confidence and belief in her fight with Ed.'

A collection of his portraits, including those of Amy Winehouse and Alastair Campbell (above), are on exhibition at the Debut Contemporary Gallery in London until Thursday 26 May. He said it was important to include both celebrities and regular people in his work to convey the fact we are all vulnerable to this kind of suffering. As Brown succinctly puts it: 'That black dog can be anybody's unwanted pet.'

Brown's work has already captured the attention of many, including celebrities hoping to sit for portraits themselves to help show that no one with depression is truly alone. But does this work help him? 'It helps because I know I'm not alone. I feel like I'm getting my feelings off of my chest in my work. Even one single energetic brush stroke can make the world of difference. I can stand away from a painting and know I've left something negative or something born from my paranoia there on the canvas.'

President of the British Psychological Society Professor Peter Kinderman said Toby's story and his work were a truly powerful combination: 'Toby's personal journey, plus the actual artistic quality of the work itself, is fascinating. It all relates back to the idea of "only us", there's not mad people and normal people, not professionals and patients, just us complicated human beings trying to find our way in the world and this is a fascinating example of it.'

Professor Kinderman said there was good psychological science behind the idea that 'eyes are the windows to the soul', including humans' ability to read subtleties in the genuineness of emotion depending on the micro-movements of surrounding muscles and inferring intentions and mental states from a person's direction of gaze. He added: 'They're amazing portraits. But that, combined with the fact we convey deep and meaningful things through our eyes, and his personal story, means work like this brings us all together in terms of our shared humanity. It's a wonderful story.'



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