

Book review

Bryan Charnley: Art & Adversity

by James Charnley

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REVIEWED BY PETE COWARD



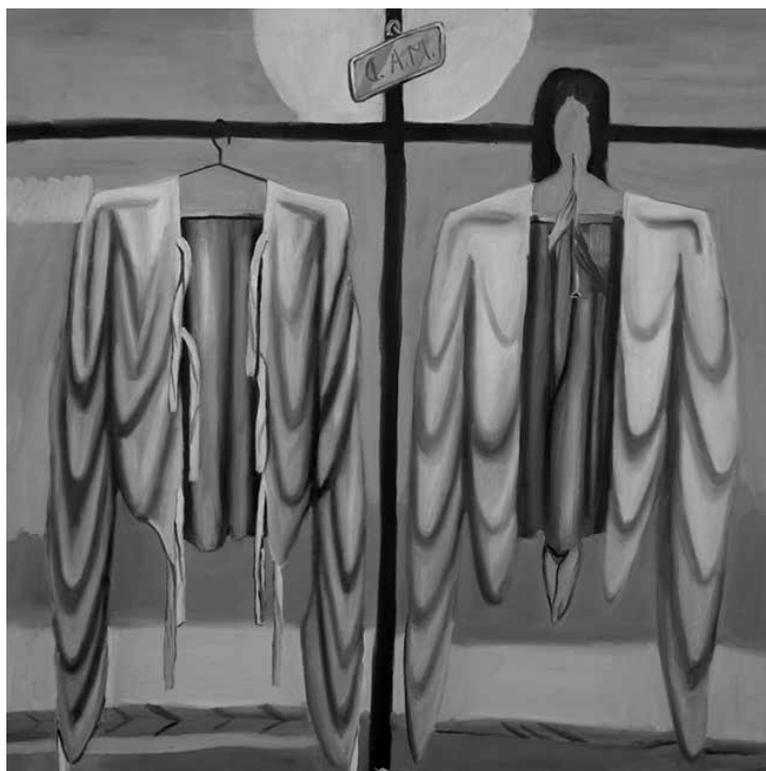
Bryan Charnley (1949-1991) has a secure place in the history of psychiatric art. Several of his paintings are held by the Wellcome Collection and Bethlem Museum of the Mind. Both collections have a particular interest in examining the links between mental illness and creativity, and Bryan's work is generally displayed or written about from that perspective. In this book, James Charnley seeks to adjust that balance by putting the art front and centre thereby staking Bryan's claim to a place in the wider history of art.

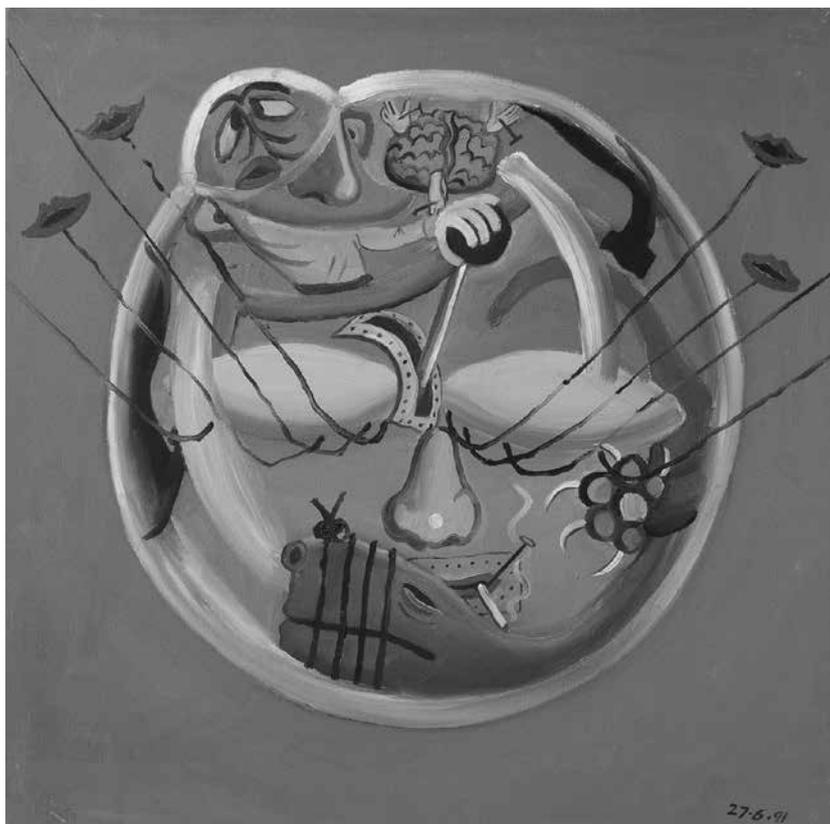
It is an ambitious objective, and one that should be qualified. Bryan's art is inextricably linked with mental illness: he was diagnosed with schizophrenia while still

at art college and the remainder of his life was spent examining the effects of that, through both his art and his wide and deep reading, which had a particular focus on Freud and psychoanalysis as a way to unlock the secrets of his own distress. James writes: "Bryan wanted his work to be seen as a commentary on madness rather than the work of a madman. He was primarily an artist." He treads that fine line throughout the book, analysing the art for keys to Bryan's mental state, indeed in an excavatory psychoanalytical manner, but always within the context of the art as art, not therapy, and Bryan as an artist and a human, not a patient, or a "schizophrenic", to use the word that Bryan himself preferred.

It is also an objective that James is singularly qualified for. As Bryan's twin brother, he has had a lifetime of preparation for writing this book. James also served as Bryan's ad hoc agent while he was alive, witnessing Bryan's art world successes, in terms of sales and exhibitions, and disappointments, the latter far outweighing the former. That is another balance that James intends to strike: by writing about Bryan's work (including an article for the Autumn 2017 edition of *Asylum*, co-written with Nick Bohannon and available on *Asylum's* website); arranging exhibitions; placing the paintings in collections; and generally ensuring that it receives the recognition that it was denied during Bryan's lifetime.

It was not only mental illness that contributed to Bryan's critical neglect and relative lack of recognition. A painter working in a predominantly realist style at a time when both media and form were out of fashion, he was also stymied by curators' preconceptions of what a "schizophrenic artist" should create. James draws on his studies in art history to skewer such lazy pigeon-holing with





evident frustration. An interesting parallel touched on in the text is with the Canadian painter William Kurelek. Institutionalised in Bethlem himself, his great work *The Maze* served as a stylistic and structural jumping off point for Bryan's series of Schizophrene paintings, each representing key aspects of the painter's emotional story in dense, allusive fragments, using their own head as a framing device. Kurelek managed to move beyond any psychiatric and artistic ghettos, making a full recovery from his psychosis and becoming a well-respected and successful landscape painter.

The position of James as author and brother inevitably adds personal dimensions to the book that are among its great strengths, but also makes it an uncomfortable read. Bryan committed suicide while engaged in his most ambitious art project, *The Self-Portrait Series*. Bryan painted himself at regular intervals, days apart, as he rapidly withdrew from medication for his mental health conditions. He completed 17 remarkable works, mostly annotated, all reproduced here, before ending his life with the final portrait remaining on his easel. It was more than an art project, more a culmination of his life project, of coming "face-to-face with schizophrenia".

Similarly, this is more than an art book, but also a mirroring of that quest. James' attempt to face down and explain the origins and development of his brother's schizophrenia. James walks in Bryan's footsteps, reads his diary entries and dream records, reads works that Bryan referenced in his notes, analyses his art, asks the same insistent questions that plagued his brother: what went wrong, why and when? He also has his own painful

questions to ask as a surviving family member: "could I have done more?"

It is this questioning that forms the knife edge of the book. Bryan sought answers all his life, courageously but I think we must assume unsuccessfully: "While the paintings expressed his dilemma, they did not present an answer. Bryan was unable to find anyone that could offer him any insight into his condition...At some point his original self had been lost. What had caused this to happen?"

With the benefit of hindsight and a certain degree of detachment James can provide theories and context for Bryan's loss of self, but the core existential questions remain unanswered. I think this is something that will resonate with readers who have their own histories of mental distress: the search for origins and explanations is an understandable reaction but rarely helps with the day to day business of living with such pain. Bryan had great depth of insight into his condition, evident in the detailed symbolism of his painting and his writings, but what James touchingly suggests is

that what helped him most were kind words from others and the opportunity to explore his creativity.

Readers with experience within the psychiatric system are likely to be disheartened when considering how little has changed since the events described in the book. The anti-psychotics of choice may have changed but not their purpose of sedation and control. Service users remain defined and limited by their diagnosis. ECT, which was inflicted on Bryan, is less common but still used. The greatest hope for survivors, as for Bryan then, lies outside of hospitals, and in connections to peers and friends.

Art and Adversity is a genuinely unique book. It works on multiple levels: as art monograph, searingly honest family memoir, and survivor history. Minor criticisms can be made. A proof-reader should have been employed, given the inconsistencies and infelicities in spellings, particularly of people's names. There is a generous amount of illustrations, but they are reproduced in frustratingly small dimensions, so much of the intense detail of Bryan's art is lost. The book, however, stands as a triumph and a labour of love which I hope will further a broader interest in the art of Bryan Charnley.

James writes "In all the difficulties I have encountered in writing about Bryan, all the doubts I have as to the validity of the enterprise, I can at least take some consolation in being able to present a rounded account of an individual." He has achieved that deceptively modest aim and much more. ■

Bryan's artwork can be viewed at <https://www.bryancharnley.info/>