

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Exhibition Review by Christopher Brown

Studio Upstairs – 30th Anniversary Exhibition

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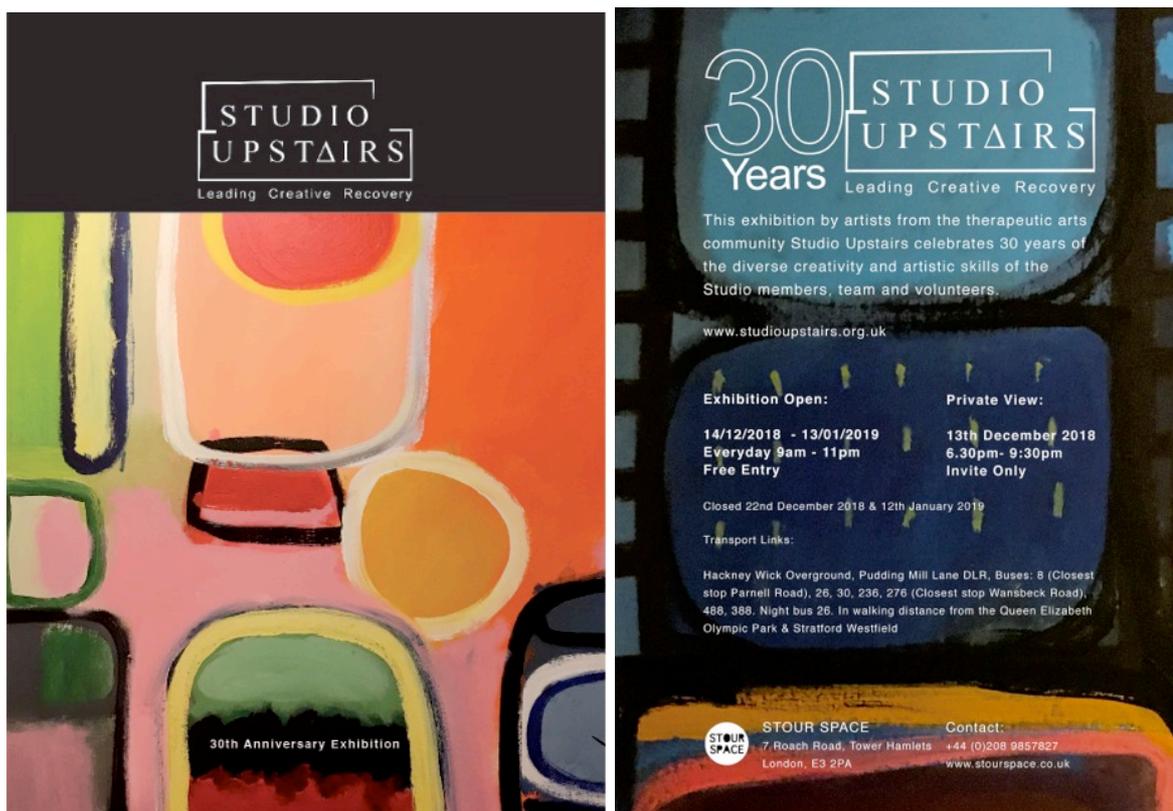
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Thirty years! That's quite an achievement for a small organisation dependant upon a variety of funding streams, which are often precarious, that continues to occupy a central position in providing an alternative approach to the support of individuals with mental health issues – a phrase that gives rise to some tension within the organisation – and indeed, the exhibition itself.

The exhibition is located in the gallery of Stour Space, 'a socially minded organisation offering exhibition, performance and studio space for the development of creative enterprises' that has been part of the Hackney Wick arts scene in London for ten years. A cavernous, ex-industrial space right on the canal opposite the Olympic Park, a paradoxical juxtaposition I thought, one that highlights another tension between opposing ideologies.

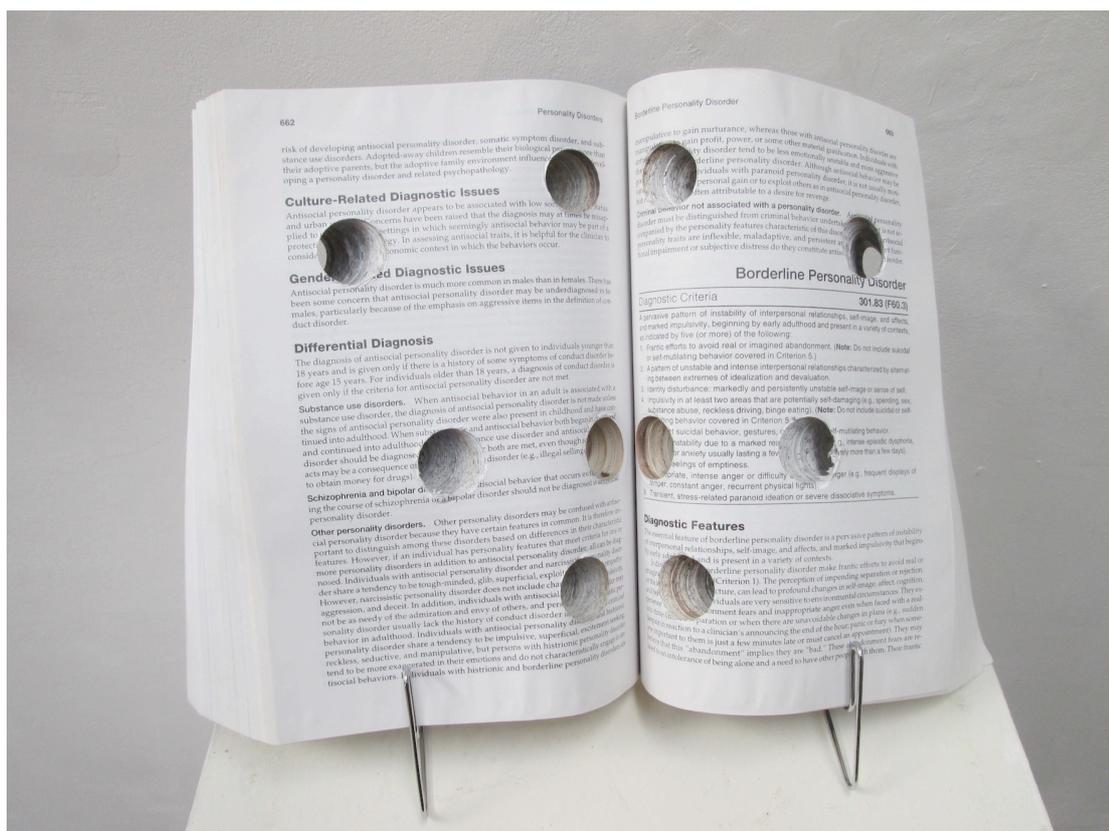
Exhibiting art produced by both members and staff has always been a regular part of the activity of Studio Upstairs, a charity 'founded in 1988 to meet the needs of people moving out of the psychiatric health system, by providing a supportive

community-based environment somewhat removed from the conventional clinical setting, where members could communicate their experience through making art'. This particular show contains 51 pieces in a rich variety of media that display the creativity of artists working in a communal studio. Sometimes startling in their rawness, sometimes sophisticated in their execution, but always indicative of inner worlds whether troubled or not. There is turmoil and pain in these works but also celebration, vision and humour carved out of the lived experience of the artists. This emphasis on internal states of mind was cleverly put in an anecdote given on the opening night by Clare Manson, one of the three original founders: 'It was called Studio Upstairs because in the beginning we were housed in the top floor above the offices of Diorama Arts – but it was also a *pun* – tapping her finger on her forehead – the studio is *upstairs!*'

The tension I referred to earlier, between being labelled as having mental health issues or inhabiting an artist identity, was made visible by the absence of any detailed written statement about the exhibition. It is usual to have a press release or a text that gives some context for the viewer. There was, in fact, a short statement on a wall by the entrance, which I quoted from above but I thought the absence of a hand-out was perhaps both an expression *against* being labelled with mental health issues and *for* the promotion of what you see is what you get – just art, to be taken on its own terms. This tension around how someone is seen often arises due to a brutalisation process within psychiatric diagnosis and treatment, leaving individuals feeling stigmatised, de-valued and marginalised – the very things Studio Upstairs aims to repair. That members feel so strongly about this aspect of their lives is not surprising, but I wonder if it is really possible to view art without some awareness of the context in which it is produced, whether explicit or implied? Is what we are asked to view in this exhibition what David Maclagan (2009) describes as a hybrid kind of art that has its own profile of difference? If we acknowledge difference does it lead to acceptance or disapproval?

One piece in particular tackled the issue of diagnosis directly. Displayed on a plinth, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5), a large, heavy, hardback tome, is open at p 663 where you can read about borderline personality disorder. Well, you could, except for the fact that the whole book has

been drilled through with 5 one-inch holes. I was fascinated, not only by the conceptual underpinning of the work, but also by its aesthetic facture. I wondered what kind of drill bit had been used to get such perfect holes and asked about this during a conversation with one of the studio managers. She told me that it had indeed been quite a process of trial and error, requiring resilience in the artist until the technical aspects had been mastered.



Bekki Perriman *Picking Holes* Destroyed copy of the DSM – V 25cm x 17.5cm x 5cm.

Returning to my point about the paradoxical juxtaposition, what struck me quite forcibly was how the ‘gentrification’ of the area threatens the existence of spaces like this community arts hub through the increase in land and property value it generates. Financial gain versus alternative spaces for creative expression is an ongoing social and political tension. Existing in the margins is a familiar position for art therapists, one that is perhaps a good fit, but we do need these marginal areas, like

Studio Upstairs, that provide eco-systems where vulnerability can be met with understanding and compassion.

In a group exhibition like this is there will always be variation in what appeals to any individual viewer's set of values, likes and dislikes. The fact that it is such a richly varied exhibition means, I hope, that it will have a wide appeal – these are artworks that need to emerge from the studio in which they were created, to be made visible and valued.

Reference

Maclagan, D. (2009) *Outsider Art: From the Margins to the Marketplace*. London, Reaktion Books.