

BREAKDOWN



YVONNE MABS FRANCIS

**A description of her nervous
breakdown in paintings and texts**





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Yvonne Mabs Francis

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1969 my beloved father died. I was twenty four years old, and I immediately had difficulties sleeping, and had nonstop obsessive thoughts. At this stage I believed these thoughts had expanded my brain manifesting itself as horns above my head, as shown in the painting 'Liar'. After the funeral I returned to work at Wolverhampton College of Art, where I lectured on Contemporary Art. I was hardly sleeping at all, and

when I went to the painting studio suddenly all the obsessive thoughts stopped, and it felt like death. The fear of not having any thoughts again terrified me. I managed to get back to one of my students rooms and laid down on her bed and fell asleep. When I awoke I felt temporarily better and managed to return to London, where I lived at that time.

In the proceeding weeks my sleeplessness continued, and, feeling afraid, I returned back to my home in Oxford to stay with my brother. I eventually admitted myself as a voluntary patient to the Warneford Mental Hospital at Oxford, for a period of three months. At first I was put into an open ward on the ground floor. During this period I tried to run home across the lawn as I describe in 'The Madness of Medication'. I felt the medication was actually making me worse, and within four weeks I was put into a locked ward. I was, in time, given a room in which I was locked in on several occasions as shown in 'Double Deaths'. I was given deep sleep treatment and rendered semi-conscious. I was still suffering, so not being able to communicate my distress, made the situation even worse.

The turning point came when they gave me ECT. The treatment was carried out sensitively and afterwards I felt, temporarily, better. However I hung on to these

ever increasing better feelings until something near normality returned.

I was never at any time talked to about my condition. Nothing but a wall of silence grew up between me and the Doctors. Sometimes the nurses were kind but often impatient and lacked understanding. When I left I asked the Psychiatrist, who treated me, why had he not talked to me. He told me he could not communicate with me when I was ill. I realised what he meant, as my reactions may not be intelligible. However mental illness is like a wall. You are very logical behind your wall, but it's not the side others usually stand. I could not help thinking this Psychiatrist should have known this, and consequently he did not have a clue to the actual experience of mental illness.

I felt even professionals, let alone the general public, did not understand the experience of this illness. In 1999 I decided to paint my journey through my psychosis, partly because I thought it would make good images, but also to explain the actual experience and bring psychosis into the open to make these experiences understandable, and even common place for those suffering, which, I believed would take away some of the dreadful fear.

I can imagine, as being worse, being put into a concentration camp or caught up in the brutalities of war but very little else: such are the tricks of the mind.

I made a good recovery and although I suffer depression, it's nothing in comparison to the hell of the summer of 1969. If the Doctors could have talked to me to just give me hope of recovery it would have helped. If they could have explained that this suffering is commonplace, and frequently formed patterns, that could have helped even more.

Beginning in 1999 I made a set of eight large canvases. However, the images alone would not explain the story, as paintings are open to interpretation. I made a text, which I always show with these works. I remember I took 'Breakdown' to the opening in London, of the magazine called Reflections. A young lad kept returning to look at my painting 'Breakdown'. Eventually he asked me what it meant. I pointed to my text, and after reading my text his face looked as if the whole universe had fallen into place.

I don't know if I can make the whole universe fall into place for you, but I certainly would like to give you some insight into mental illness. And, for those suffering such a condition, the knowledge that someone has been in the same place and, has made a successful recovery.



BREAKDOWN

Oil on Canvas, 164+121 cm.

This picture illustrates how metaphor is misunderstood during mental illness.

I thought I read in a hospital magazine that 'if you lie the Doctors see through you'.

In a desperate attempt to establish the truth, I stripped off all my clothes, so if I was lying the Doctors could literally see through my body.



THE MADNESS OF MEDICATION

Oil on Canvas, 182+152cm.

During my illness I was given many drugs. I thought then, as I do now, that these drugs worsened my condition. After four weeks I was sent from an open ward to a locked ward where I was put into my own small room and on several occasions locked in.

While I was still on an open ward I decided one night I wished to return home to my mother at Garsington. Dressed only in my nightdress, I pointed myself in the Garsington direction and ran across the hospital lawn believing if I could get enough acceleration I could take flight. While I ran I became conscious of a figure following me. I was convinced it was my dead father. His body formed a silhouette of drug capsules, surrounded by light. In the picture he lightly and tenderly touches my shoulder as the pursuing nurse blunders her way forward oblivious of the apparition.



DOUBLE DEATHS

Oil on Canvas, 162+274cm.

This painting is a story of my delusion intertwined with a Renaissance painting by Paolo Uccello 'Profanation of the Host'. I have taken the form of the Uccello painting. The right hand figure is locked into a small room similar to the one I was given in hospital and on this occasion I was locked in.

I banged desperately on the door and I believed a nurse outside my door was drawing up a coffin which I would at some stage fall into and die. At the same time, I believed my mother was near the coffin and she would die by lethal injection, administered by the doctor running through the door.

Uccello's painting, presented in a series of images, explains the story of a Christian woman who redeems, with consecrated bread, her cloak from a Jewish pawnbroker. The Jewish pawnbroker burns the bread in the fireplace causing blood to flow from the fire. In my picture blood flows from the fireplace, under the coffin and out of a hole in the wall. I am suggesting there is a relationship between the belief of consecrated bread when used in the Eucharist, being the body of Christ and that of mental health delusions.



LIAR

Oil on canvas, 182+121cm.

Mirror, mirror on the wall who's the liar of us all?

This painting shows a figure looking into a mirror but she refuses to accept the horns on her head are only imagined. The mirror tells the truth but the figure is so convinced of their existence, she believes the mirror is lying.

Fifty years ago, just before I entered the Warneford Mental Hospital, I believed my brains had grown like reindeer horns outside my head.

I looked in the mirror, constantly asked people if they existed and even felt the space above my head in an attempt to examine these horns.

None of these actions convinced me they were imaginary. I believed I had brains like this on my head. Absolutely nothing would convince me otherwise.



THE BODILY TIME MACHINE

Oil on Canvas, 182+137cm.

The scene represents an experience, a common one I believe, when I felt I was going back in time to become a child, then a baby in the womb.

The frightening part came when I went back before birth: so I had met death not by time going forward but by time going backwards.

I fretted on the chance of being born again, so much so that to solve my anxiety I clung to the image of my father, finally entering his body, so that if time went forward at least half of me would survive if the union between him and my mother failed.

For weeks afterwards, I was totally convinced it was the 1930's and I had entered and taken over my father's body, when at that time he was a young man.

The main figure is based on The Madonna of Mercy by Piero Della Francesca.



THE STAGES OF HOSPITALISATION

Oil on Canvas, 213+167cm.

While in a side room in the hospital my mind reflected on my entire stay which I divided into three stages of four weeks.

I thought I could see two lockers in the outside the side room, in which my body had been kept. The first figure was in a very tall locker, so consequently had grown tall and slim. The second figure was in a very low locker where the figure had tried to grow, so consequently formed what resembled a toffee apple head. Each figure represented four weeks of hospitalisation. This took me through two months of my hospitalisation.

I had entered the third month. To my horror my third month was not in a locker, but I had become a severed head which swung from side to side in order to waddle down the passageway. My long hair caught under the bleeding severed neck and mixing with the blood was pounded against the hard corridor floor and made a squeaking noise which set my teeth on edge, a sound I remember to this day.



THE THIRD MONTH

Oil on canvas, 121+167cm.

This painting follows on from 'The Stages of Hospitalisation' where I had divided time spent in hospital by three, all in four week stages. In the third month I believed I had become a severed head: a realization I made while sitting in a side room as the left hand figure sits in the painting.

'I had entered the third month. To my horror my third month was not in a locker, but I had become a severed head which swung from side to side in order to waddle down the passageway. My long hair caught under the bleeding severed neck and mixing with the blood was pounded against the hard corridor floor and made a squeaking noise which set my teeth on edge, a sound I remember to this day.'

A stream of blood runs across the sea to the suggestion of Arnold Böcklin's, 'Island of the Dead' a Symbolist picture where death is shown as part of life's experiences. The stylized fish and the bottle shaped fish float in a cage on top of the water, while the bird, unappreciative of its freedom hovers above wanting to be caged.



THE ELECTRIC BED

Oil on canvas, 152+193cm.

When my condition worsen I was put into a locked ward and finally into a side room. I believed for a period of time, my bed had been wired up to the electricity supply and it would be switched on at midnight precisely and, I would die by electrocution.

I would on most evenings try desperately to find the wires leading to my bed and detect the source. A box of some sorts situated on the wall just outside my room became of great interest to me, although I never did discover how it was connected!

I would wake in the morning my body covered with perspiration and laying on my back with my legs and arms outstretched, all firmly pressed against the mattress: a good bodily position for effective electrocution.

Biography

1945 Born in Oxford

1962-'63 Oxford Polytechnic, foundation course.

1963-'66 Brighton College of Art

1966-'68 Slade School of Art

1968-'69 Lectured on Contemporary Art at
Wolverhampton College of Art

1969-'80 Returned to Oxford and created a dress
design business called MABS with retail shops in
Oxford and Cambridge.

1980 Returned to painting full time

Exhibitions

1966-'68 Young Contemporaries, London Group,
John Moores Liverpool exhibiton.

1996 The Mill, Banbury

1999 Modern Art, Whitchurch-on-Thames

2001 Reading Museum, ITHACA exhibition

2002 Diorama Arts Centre, London

2002 I.C.I. Main headquarters, London

2003 Reading Museum and X-gallery, Oxford,
ITHACA exhibition

2003 & 2004 Raw Arts Festival, London

2004 Art-T Gallery, AIMS group show, Oxford

2004 University of Edinburgh with Artesian

2004 Mexico Gallery, London

2005 Ovada Gallery, Oxford. ITHACA Synergy
Season

2007 The Gallery, Oxford Town Hall, AIMS

2008 The Oxford Open, Modern Art Oxford

2008 Wild Old Women, Novas Gallery, London
2009 The Jam Factory, AIMS group show, Oxford
2010 Legacy, The Gallery, Oxford Town Hall, AIMS
2010 Dare to Wear, St. Pancras Crypt, London
2011 The Gallery, Oxford Town Hall, AIMS
2013 Epiphanies, St. Pancras Hospital, London
2015 Rethinking, The Gallery, Town Hall Gallery
2016 The Mind Machine, Menier Gallery, London
2016 What Goes On In The Mind, The Gallery,
Oxford Town Hall

Publications

2001 Began to publish with Reflections
2001 Front cover of Openmind
2017 Raw Vision, article written by Barbara Herbin

Websites and contact details

Google: full name: Yvonne Mabs Francis

BBC, Open University, featured all the mental health series online.

www.facebook.com/Yvonne-Mabs-Francis-758509344246767/

email: mabsymf@gmail.com



Fragment: 'Batwoman'



'The Impossibility of Being in the Brain of Someone Living'