

ART ON DEMAND

KAITLYN ROBERTS

CURATED BY DAYLYNN ONUCKI

10.3



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Please be aware that the following text deals with subjects of suicidal ideation and mental illness.

Kaitlyn Roberts is a Lower Mainland-based interdisciplinary artist intent on creating an empathetic dialogue surrounding the vulnerability and isolation of mental illness. Through a variety of different mediums, Roberts utilizes her autobiographical experiences to explore the multifaceted realities of mental illness, working to bring emotion and mindfulness to the gallery space.

Mental illness has long been thought of as a woman's disease. Throughout history, when women have expressed symptoms of genuine mental health disorders, they have often been met with a lack of proper consideration. Throughout a large portion of the 20th century and prior, any indication of mental illness in female patients was – instead of being regarded with empathy and respect – treated with remedies that were disparaging and even actively harmful. Historically, the very state of being a woman was thought to inspire symptoms of sickness and irrationality; it is from such attitudes that terms such as “hysteria” came into existence. Defined by the Merriam Webster dictionary as a “psychoneurosis marked by emotional excitability and disturbances of the psychogenic, sensory, vasomotor, and visceral functions,” hysteria has historically been a uniquely gendered term. The root of the term comes from “hystera,” the Greek word for uterus. In the ancient Greek world, hysteria was associated with the movement or starvation of the uterus, which was thought to cause erratic and irrational behaviour in women. Though at the time hysteria was considered a physical ailment, in the 18th and 19th centuries the term re-

UTILIZING HER AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL EXPERIENCES TO EXPLORE THE COMPLEX REALITIES OF MENTAL ILLNESS, ROBERTS BRINGS MINDFULNESS TO THE GALLERY SPACE.

emerged as a mental disorder. Even today, the patriarchal standards woven into the foundations of psychiatric practice persist; women struggling with mental illness are often met with a demoralizing and dehumanizing lack of empathy. Rather than genuine concern and care, women seeking help for mental illness are met with cold, clinical evaluation.

With text taken directly from Roberts own medical records, *The patient, named above* confronts the frustratingly sterile manner in which sufferers of mental illness are often regarded within medical practice. The piece consists of a large white piece of silk fabric. Printed onto the fabric is one of Roberts' medical records from her time with Bounce Back Canada – a suicide prevention program. The words of the document have been all but completely redacted using black sewing thread, with the artist having methodically covered each word by hand. Only one sentence remains legible: “Kaitlyn did not endorse suicidality.” The phrase exemplifies the clinical detachment between patient and psychiatric institution. These words are not Roberts' own – the words are meant not to inspire empathetic consideration, but instead to clinically and unfeelingly evaluate the patient like a specimen to be studied. The piece forces the viewer to confront the often-hidden subject of suicidal ideation; rather than confining the subject within hushed tones and classified medical records, Roberts magnifies the subject. The hand-sewn embroidery that methodically covers each word imbues the once-sterile document with a tangible sense of humanness. The use of white silk fabric recalls images of domesticity – silk dressing gowns and pillowcases. Here, the silk banner instead reads more like a flag – a call to attention. It proclaims: “behind this cold academic jargon, there is a real, feeling person. See me.”

Out-Numbered is a photographic installation which, along with *The patient, named above*, approaches the vulnerability associated with mental health. Documented through photography, *Out-Numbered* captures the performance of Roberts' repetitively drawing tally marks onto a seemingly endless scroll of paper. Each tally is representative of a moment wherein the artist has experienced a panic attack or suicidal ideation. The paper – actually medical exam table paper – encapsulates the ways in which mental illness consistently infests itself within every aspect of the artist's life. Mental illness is exasperating in its certainty; there is a mourning that comes from the understanding that mental illness will follow you everywhere you go. The two elements of this piece work in tandem to reflect this idea, with the photographs themselves being

disordered and sporadic, with no mathematically governed pattern or layout. Yet, the action presented in the photographs is tediously repetitive, with no conclusion in sight. Atop the mass of photographs looms the scroll itself – the physical embodiment of the toll that mental illness has taken on the artist’s life.

The combination of research-based and autobiographical approaches within Roberts’ work encourages an empathetic attitude towards the effects of mental illness. Her work particularly inspires a nuanced understanding of the unique experiences of women – both past and present – who are navigating life with mental illnesses. For viewers who relate to Roberts’ experiences, her work offers a visual reflection on lived experiences too complex to express with words. For viewers who do not directly relate, her work provides a sensitive foundation for the understanding of a complex experience often shrouded by shame and fear.

Daylynn Onucki
Art on Demand 10.3 Curator

NOTES

1. Cecilia Tasca et al., “Women and Hysteria in the History of Mental Health,” *Clinical Practice and Epidemiology in Mental Health*, 2012, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3480686/>.

IMAGE CREDITS

Front Cover: *Out-Numbered* (detail), 2020, inkjet on paper, each photograph 8 x 8 in.; overall dimensions variable

Inside: *The patient, named above*, 2022, hardened sugar and thread on silk, 54 x 47 in.

KAITLYN ROBERTS

I am originally from Bowmanville, ON. I achieved my Honours BA in Visual Arts from Brock University and my MFA from Emily Carr University of Art + Design. My work has been shown in juried shows across Canada, including Niagara Artist Centre’s *Fortune Favours*, the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington’s *The VAC 39th Annual Juried Show*, Langley Art Gallery’s *Memories*, and Gallery 44’s *Envision*. I currently live and work in Richmond, BC, while serving as the Township of Langley’s Fine Arts Curator.

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