The TWISTED ROSE and OTHER LIVES
Post-traumatic stress or PTS is far more common than most of us think. The condition was first recognised in war veterans, but it can start after any traumatic event, any event where you are in danger, your life is threatened, or where you see other people dying or being injured. In spite of the range of causes, PTS symptoms often look very similar: flashbacks, nightmares, intrusive thoughts, agitation, numbness, insomnia, irritability, depression, concentration problems, anxiety, panic, shame, guilt, temper, estrangement.

Sometimes the effects are immediately apparent, but it can be many years between the trauma and seeking help. We don’t like to talk about upsetting events and feelings – we don’t want to be thought of as weak or mentally unstable – we may feel uncomfortable if we try to talk about gruesome or horrifying events. So we try to bury those memories and carry on, until something triggers the memories and the symptoms return.

My own traumatic experiences were much less severe than those who have suffered abuse or been involved in conflict, nonetheless they had a profound impact on my life. Three years ago, I started an MA in painting and this was an opportunity for me to “talk” about what had happened. I realised that sharing those memories through my art was a cathartic process for me. Stephen Joseph says “we human beings are story tellers. Trauma triggers within us the need to tell stories to make sense of what has happened”. Books, songs, poetry and art can provide us with the “language” to capture what we are experiencing. It is in the struggle to make sense of a traumatic event that recovery and growth happen.

People with PTS often find it easier to talk about the other problems that go along with it – the sleep problems, flashbacks, depression, substance abuse, self-harming etc., than the real causes. From my own experience I believe that Art is one way to break down some of these barriers. With the help of the Institute of Mental Health in Nottingham I was able to contact people who have experienced post-traumatic stress and create this series of paintings that brings to life their experiences. I have worked with accounts of trauma from a wide spectrum of sources: abuse, birth, accident, conflict, etc. Most of the paintings are based on the accounts that people have shared directly with me in order to understand their experiences.

One of the most important things I have learnt through talking to people is that it is possible for people to recover and grow as a result of their experiences – finding new meaning and purpose in their lives. I think like many others I believed that the psychological havoc caused by PTS inevitably scars for life. Trauma is not an illness that can be cured by a doctor, but with the help of therapists, friends and family people can learn to accept and give meaning to their experiences.

My hope with this exhibition is to show what it is like to suffer and recover from mental health problems, to raise awareness and consciousness of the issues surrounding trauma, and to provide positive therapeutic outcomes for those directly involved.

Thank you to all those at the IMH and Arts Council England, without their support this exhibition would not have been possible. In addition, I would like to thank Marissa Lambert in particular, for both sharing her own narrative and for connecting me with so many people she has worked with in her peer support role.
Andy Farr is a British artist based in Warwickshire. He is currently engaged in a project with the Institute of Mental Health in Nottingham creating a series of paintings based on people who have experienced Post Traumatic Stress. This is his second project to receive funding from Arts Council England.

Andy’s focus on mental health started during his recently completed MA. He used this to explore his experiences of his father’s bipolar condition and how that impacted his growing up.

Andy came late to art, becoming a full-time artist in 2010 after spending the first part of his career in marketing research and advertising. A serious illness and a damascene moment on the commute to London lead him to embark on a new direction.

In 2018 Andy was a winner in the Ashurst Emerging Artist competition.
“Twisted Rose” was inspired by “Mac’s” story. He suffered childhood abuse, and after therapy describes himself as feeling like “A twisted rose, growing out of the dark into the light, but still carrying the scars of his past”.

Mac gave his permission to his therapist David Murphy to publish transcripts from his treatment.

Andy chose Mac’s metaphor as the title for the exhibition as it seemed to him to sum up much about PTSD and recovery. The past cannot be undone or erased from the memory, but it is possible for people can learn to accept and give meaning to their experiences, and ultimately start to recover and grow.
Rachel experienced a traumatic surgical procedure during her labour. It left her feeling disconnected from her baby son and as if she herself had cheated death. For 18 months her days felt like she was living in a silent lonely, grey world, and her nights were plagued by flashbacks of her time in the operating theatre.

Through therapy Rachel started to rediscover her old self. She describes opening a door and meeting my old self again. “She’s inviting me back to who I used to be”. Outside of the door is dark and shadowy, but once the door is opened it’s like opening it to an awesome house party, you feel nervous going in, you start talking to friends again, and you are happy you went.

Rachel’s response to the painting was:
I’m actually speechless. I cried! the colours are perfect. The me looking round the corner completely sums up that feeling of lost in the grey world feeling frightened of everything. Welcoming Rachel is the old me too. It’s like you looked in my head and painted. It’s honestly amazing. I went to bed thinking about the painting and it’s almost like now there is a third Rachel. The one I am now who is able to connect with both the figures in the painting. Which is really nice. Today also happened to be my last counselling session ever so it’s all come together really nicely. Funny how life does that.
Mark was a successful chef working in Michelin starred restaurants. He had a drive and ambition to be the best, which lead him to work harder and harder. Unfortunately, the adrenaline intensity which fuelled his culinary creativity spiralled out of control. Instead of riding high his life became a revolving door of hell. For six years his life switched between successful chef and hospital.

Two years ago, Mark’s changed the direction of his life, and he now works as a mental health nurse and support worker, his demons under control.

Andy created two paintings based on Mark’s experience:

Alchemy was inspired by something Mark mentioned in their discussions. Mark said that he started to feel he was an “invincible chef” able to successfully marry together more and more unexpected flavours – Strawberry and Red Pepper – and was building incredible sculptures out of chocolate. But then as things went out of control one of the voices Mark heard was of a mad scientist. The painting tries to capture this wild fusion of creativity, alchemy and chocolate as his life started to fragment.

Phoenix the second painting shows Mark’s re-birth, the mythical bird rising from the embers, or in this chocolate, as a metaphor for his change of direction.
Marissa’s experience of personal trauma stems from the pregnancy and birth of her daughter Gretel. She carried her for 20 weeks knowing that her baby was suffering from a life-threatening heart condition. Birth was a bitter-sweet experience, with the constant fear of her child’s fragility.

The world became grey and monochrome, full of fears and uncertainty. Heightened with memories and flashbacks triggered by bleeping monitors and sirens.

Marissa’s personal recovery is epitomised by colour. Colour coming into her daughter’s body and into Marissa’s world. The painting features a picture taken of Gretel wearing a dragon costume. This was used by the British Heart Foundation in a national fundraising campaign – Ramp up the Red.

The image of Marissa holding a monochrome heart rather than her baby was based on Marissa’s recollections of her strength, courage, determination, resilience, but also vulnerability.
Adam has been a paramedic for more than a decade. The nature of that job means that he has been to many traumatic situations involving death and serious injury.

Being a paramedic means you are the most qualified at the scene, you are expected to be in charge, as Adam says:

"People look at you for guidance, reassurance and leadership. We are still however people with emotions and like anyone else feel lost at some traumatic jobs, but we can’t show any weakness or wanting of help as there is nobody else most of the time ... you go into a focused trance of concentration. You isolate and dissociate yourself from the situation. The way I’d describe it is that I’m at the dead centre of someone’s worst ever nightmare who’s begging for help, and the more I want to go forward to help, the tug of someone else needs you, you’re stuck in a mental tug of war of decisions. You dissociate yourself almost like you’re in a dream but you are trying to do the best you can.

After the event, you then process and recap what the hell has just happened, did I do everything right, could I have done anything different, but you can only remember snippets, and they are probably not accurate. That 2 hour ordeal you attended, has left only 5 minutes of memory, you forget most of it, you then worry that you should’ve done more or you missed something. Then you attend another one and it repeats."

When Andy first approached Adam, the idea was that any painting would be anonymous, so people couldn’t identify him, but in order to tell his story Andy wanted to show the man inside the uniform. Adam and his wife agreed that by doing so it could be a good way to get people talking and open up.

In Adam’s words:

"... underneath the mask of a uniform, we are all still regular people. We have emotions and that at the jobs where we are either helpless to assist people, maybe down to scope of practice, or deep down because we know what we are doing is sometimes futile, we carry on. Unfortunately, on occasions we carry these stresses on with us too. We often care more about other’s emotions and wellbeing more than our own."

I believe it’s not just the Ambulance Service staff that can be affected this way but also the Police and Fire Brigade.
Mark is a Detective Sgt. in the police. Whilst through his work he is exposed to traumatic events, his mental health issues stem from sexual abuse as a child and the Warrington bombings. Mark now speaks out about his experiences within the police and more widely:

“I have been delivering a presentation to colleagues (and recently the NHS) on my experiences of abuse and suppression and the more I have spoken about things, the less emotional impact they have on me ...”

He believes that daylight is a powerful disinfectant, and that suppression causes severe damage to people. Within his work when debriefing traumatic incidents, he tries to emphasise how useful it is to get things out in the open by talking about them. As he says:

“From my own perspective, I have always thought about what I did as being suppression, putting things in a box and sealing the box. Unfortunately, boxes leak and it is my firm belief that those leaks are what caused me to develop MH problems. I felt for a long time like it was poisoning me.”

The idea of lifting the lid on his ‘box’ and letting the daylight in was the start point for this painting. Mark’s box is a bit battered now, but back in the past it was a dark, dangerous, leaky and toxic place. As the light is let in those dark and toxic thoughts are replaced with positive experiences such as being on Arran, on a boat, by the sea.

**Daylight**

Oil and Acrylic on Canvas

80 x 120cm

2019
Sue is a keen gardener and she likens her recovery to that of a seed which had over the years, been bruised and beaten and denied the sustenance it needed to grow. At times it had gasped for breath and searched desperately for water so that it might at least remain intact, but the environment around it was often barren, and yet somehow it managed to survive all those years in the wilderness.

Her trauma had left her feeling disempowered, dehumanised, retraumatised, hopeless, isolated, ashamed, terrified, guilty and angry, but most of all desperate. Medication only made matters worse, as if she was slowly being suffocated in a sea of feathers.

For years she searched for a gardener and the right environment where that seed could be nurtured. Until she realised the head gardener was herself. And whilst it has taken every ounce of courage and strength that she possessed she has gradually found ways to nurture that seed allowing it to spread its roots, to grow and to flourish.

But as she says “I didn’t do it alone – there have been “other gardeners” – my children, my friends, my work colleagues, my peers and my therapists – whose courage, strength and love for me have enabled me in one way or another to feel safe, in control and a valuable member of the human race … However, there is one more gardener who I must not forget to mention – without her courage, strength and love I would not be here today, writing this piece. That other gardener is the little Sue who kept that seed alive with her bravery, sheer stubbornness and outright bloody-mindedness, and managed to survive the horrors she was subjected to.”

It is “Little Sue” we see in the painting nurturing the warrior seed.
In 2008 Pete was the victim of a robbery and murder attempt in South Africa. At the time, he thought he had processed the event in a healthy way, and believed he was in a good place. This was far from the truth. His interpretation of the world was slowly evolving, seeing it as a place of danger and leaving him with feelings of deep mistrust. The impact of earlier traumas was also starting to rise to the surface.

In 2015 the symptoms of PTSD had escalated to a point where he was in a constant state of fight or flight, experiencing severe anxiety whilst performing the most mundane of daily tasks. As he says, “In truth, I am learning through my recovery process the exact consequences of not dealing with the trauma earlier on”.

Pete has found his solace at high altitude, an experience where being present is a prerequisite for survival. He is attempting to conquer the Seven Summits – the highest mountain on each continent. In his words “Mountaineering has become more than a passion for me, it is a pinnacle of self-expression, a pathway to self-actualisation where I feel capable of becoming the truest version of myself. The biggest enemy is stillness in terms of PTSD. Solace at high altitude comes in the form of needing to be present 24/7 – whether that be gruelling nature of these expeditions, the breathtaking scenery…not sure…what I do know is up there I feel a lot safer than down here”.

Andy chose Everest as the focus for the painting, because as Pete says “Everest – it’s where I’m heading, and one way or another I’ll get up there. All these other mountains are a prelude. That’s my redemption, the ultimate solace”.

You can find more out about Pete’s Seven Summits challenge and fund raising for MIND and the NSPCC via his website 2½ Hemispheres: www.2andh.com
Emil’s trauma relates to abuse he received during his time in Stockholm. It left him feeling empty, lonely, scared, haunted. It is this feeling of alienation and paranoia that Andy sought to capture with an image based on Sergels torg. This is an area next to Stockholm’s Central Station which in the 1990s was notorious for the drug trade.

These grey and oppressive streets are then contrasted with a colourful and vibrant image of a couple dancing the Salsa. The bright colours represent the liberation Emil found when he moved to London, there finding freedom amidst the Salsa bars and pubs of South Kensington.

Emil’s response was to say:

“I love the bright picture in the painting. So colourful and happy! It very much makes me think of that night. It gives hope”.

Salsa

2018

Oil and acrylic on canvas

120 x 80cm
The inspiration for this painting was a friend’s reminiscences of his grandfather. He remembered his hours of silent contemplation in his allotment, where he was visited by his lost comrades.

Our understanding of PTSD starts with WW1. The psychological impact of life in the trenches was badly misunderstood. Initially the effects were thought to be physiological due to proximity to shells exploding – hence the term shell shock or treated as evidence of cowardice and malingering. In some tragic cases even leading to execution.

One of the problems after that war, and all conflicts, is the difficulty of talking to people about what happened. What do people who were not there actually want to hear? While relatives want details of time and place in order to make meaning out of their loss, do they want to know that the loved one’s body had been blown apart, or had lain rotting unburied for days? There is a ‘natural tendency to repress, being in my experience almost universally fostered by … relatives and friends’ [W. H. Rivers].

The title is drawn from Laurence Binyon’s iconic poem “For the fallen”:

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.
Wayne, an ex-serviceman suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and depression as a result of what he witnessed in the former Yugoslavia. He was there as part of the UN Protection Force in the 1990s. Since completing active service in 1999 he received no support from the army; he was told “here are your discharge papers, see you later”.

Wayne was OK for about ten years, but then everything came to a boil. He ended up having a breakdown and found himself in a mental health ward. He lost his home because he couldn’t pay the rent, and his job due to injury. He had nothing. His recovery started when his Community Psychiatric Nurse introduced him to a local nature reserve that supported people with mental health problems by getting them involved in nature-based projects on the reserve.

As Wayne says “I didn’t even know there was a nature reserve where I lived, and I certainly didn’t think that nature could help me in my situation, but I tried it. Now, looking back, if I hadn’t taken that chance, I definitely wouldn’t be here now”.

Andy photographed Wayne at the nature reserve where he works as a volunteer. A still proud soldier haunted by the memory of his experiences in Bosnia. The reserve is a place of solace and safety from that world.
Vicky’s personal story of trauma stems from experiencing two miscarriages, one of which required a surgical procedure. Vicky had little understanding of miscarriage prior to her experience and as a result found the emotional loss and physical pain very distressing.

Following the miscarriages, Vicky was able to give birth to a daughter. However, during the pregnancy, there were signs of miscarriage again, and Vicky thought she was losing her baby. This experience and an admission to special care shortly after her daughter was born caused a great deal of anxiety for Vicky who often still feels her daughter will be taken way.

One in four pregnancies end in miscarriage, however despite these statistics, miscarriage is often not talked about. By being involved in this exhibition, Vicky hopes to raise awareness, and inspire hope for those who may experience a miscarriage.

Andy wanted to represent Vicky’s sense of loss by portraying her in the style of three studio “Mother and Baby” photographs. The paintings are based on a series of photographs taken of Vicky with and without her daughter.
Susana had a difficult childhood in Spain. Growing up speaking her mind wasn’t always easy or safe. She would hide in her bedroom and escape into an imaginary world she could control. She learnt to suppress many unexpressed thoughts, feelings and emotions that bubbled under the surface. Whilst this enabled her to cope with day to day reality, now as an adult she has come to realise that this coping mechanism was in fact the beginning of her sense of self slowly fading. She felt she was losing herself.

Finding a way to express herself creatively has been something that she has been striving to do her entire life. Through the years she has looked for different outlets that would allow her to find her voice – writing fiction, journaling, drawing, and painting, but it is through photography that she has found her outlet.

Alegria is based on one from a series of photographs that Susana took of herself, as she says:

“They don’t follow a preconceived idea, aesthetic or script – they are simply the result of me stepping in front of the camera and moving on instinct … These spontaneous photographs are the first attempt at self-expression that I consider a personal success. Although I didn’t know it at the time, by standing in front of a lens and removing my clothes and all distractions I was able to really look within – which then gave me the confidence me to gradually start showing others what I saw”.

To anyone feeling lost or struggling with who they are, try picking up a camera to explore the world around you. Talk to strangers and the people in your life, photograph them, and also point the camera at yourself. Photography is a great equalizer and you will probably find a bit of yourself in there. And, in time, the images that the camera reflects back to you will clearly and unequivocally show you what has been there all along”.

The painting is combined with a photograph taken at a funfair when she was about 9. Susana remembers this scene because it was from a brief period which was “the happiest in my life … I had a tonne of friends, was doing great at school, even had a ‘boyfriend’, and was generally a happy go lucky child … the word at the top reads Alegria – Joy in English”.

Alegria

Oil and Acrylic on Canvas
90 x 120cm
2019
Anna is a life coach who specialises in self-esteem. The painting is inspired by the roller-coaster of emotions that Anna herself dealt with following mental abuse, threats, divorce, and low self-esteem.

She has been able to overcome these through meditation. One particular image she uses is to imagine herself leaving her body and floating into the universe. Once there she visualises handing over her pain, sadness, and worries to the universe, trusting that the universe will provide her with the right answer.

As Anna says: “Every time I feel sad, frustrated, worried or even happy, I return to this safe place, my universe to ask for peace of mind, to say thanks, to reconnect or just to feel the immensity of life around me.”

By learning to love herself, and to reconnect with a damaged inner child, she has been able to forgive and grow.

The photograph used for this painting was taken by Anna’s friend Susana, a photographer, whose self-portrait forms the basis of the painting Alegria.
Danny first shared his story on his own blog, which was then included on the MIND website. These are some extracts:

“Between the ages of 19 and 22 I suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. For the best part of three years life was a living hell … It felt like the rest of the world was at the other side of translucent bullet proof ice. I couldn’t even cope with basic functions. I was having up to fifteen panic attacks a day. I wasn’t sleeping. I wasn’t eating. I went down to about ten stone, which isn’t very much when you are 6ft 2 tall. I almost died. I’d spend all day fighting my thoughts, and all night running from imaginary demons and voices.”

“Once I locked myself in the bathroom because all I could hear in my head were these awful voices telling me to hurt and kill. I didn’t want to hurt anyone, but I’d been fighting my thoughts for months and I’d got to the point where I’d become terrified that I wouldn’t be able to stop myself.”

“The reason I’m speaking out now is because there has been a lot of coverage of depression and other mental illnesses recently. People have come forward and spoken out in really brave and touching ways about how they have learned to live with, overcome and even in some cases embrace the dark side. And I found it inspiring.

I’m really lucky I got help. My mum literally carried me to the doctors in the end, and I’m better now.

Not just well, but better. Better than I ever was before. Back then we’d spent so long trying to write songs and failing, nothing had any depth … Embrace sounded like our influences. Melody Maker described Embrace as a ‘A lowest common denominator blend of The Chameleons, The Bunnymen, and U2.’

Aged 22, I picked up a guitar for the first time and learned some chords. The illness took a while to lift, but as it did, the demons that kept me up all night just enabled me to spend more time writing. So I sat there with my acoustic guitar and I wrote and wrote and wrote … now able to see the world with growing clarity as the ice melted.

Colours burned brighter, orchestras played in my head. I felt so alive, I could taste it. Songs poured out of me.”


Danny McNamara is lead singer of the band Embrace
http://www.embrace.co.uk

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Burning Brighter

2018

Oil and acrylic on canvas

200 x 100cm
Sandra’s painting is deeply personal and the result of an extremely traumatic experience, and many years of trying to come to terms with that experience.

Thirty years ago, her first two children were murdered by her husband who also committed suicide. This event was the culmination of years of serious physical, sexual and psychological abuse. Sandra remarried and had a second family. For many years she tried to hide the pain of the grief and her sense of guilt for not being able to protect her children. But through a combination of a physical injury which prevented her from playing sport, which had been her coping mechanism, and the death of her father her symptoms escalated out of control.

However, with the help of Stephen Regel and the team at the Centre for Trauma, Resilience and Growth she has become stronger, in her own words:

“No I am stronger. I don’t feel guilty at all. I can see a light at the end of the tunnel… one of the biggest things I have achieved, and it has taken me 23 years, is I have put an album together of my first two children. I am going to put the photographs of all the children on the wall in my dining room. I haven’t got any photographs up of my first two children, I haven’t got any of my two grown up children either, because I felt guilty”. When Andy read Sandra’s story he suggested creating a painting that featured all her children as a way of both celebrating and commemorating her family.

**Album**

2018

Acrylic on canvas

80 x 60cm
Laura is a Director for a well-known retailer. Throughout her adult life, she has focussed on setting and achieving her own objectives and has used ‘being busy’ as a tool to distance herself from some elements of her past.

Laura experienced sexual abuse and kept it a secret for almost 20 years. She suppressed her feelings in an attempt to forget her abuse and move forward with her life.

“I built a persona for myself during my teenage years and vowed to never re-visit those confusing times and the impact they had on me. Whilst suppressing has allowed me to become career focussed and ambitious it has also meant that my trapped feelings have manifested themselves in other unhealthy ways. I have also struggled with my memory as a result of the trauma and feel permanently frustrated that I’m unable to piece together such a significant part of my life.”

Laura started on her journey of speaking about her abuse in October 2018 and has since reignited her love for writing, particularly poetry.

“I absolutely love writing poetry. Putting together words in a descriptive way, helps me to express the feelings that I often feel very detached from. I vividly remember writing poetry in my bedroom when I was young; desperately trying to make sense of what was happening at that time. Today, when I write, I feel as though I’m reaching out and re-connecting to the girl I lost on a footpath two decades ago. “

The idea for this painting started with a line in Laura’s poem “Let me feel”, combined with her striving to try and put the fragmented jigsaw pieces of her memories back together. The final piece took shape after Andy and Laura revisited one of the places she remembers from her childhood.
I Cope

This painting was inspired by Laura’s poem, “I Cope”. Andy sought to convey the isolation and silent hurt that Laura carries with her.

I carried the weight of that girl,
I hid her behind my back,
I focussed my mind,
   I stayed on track.
I flew solo,
I prided myself on being insular,
I created my own,
   unreachable peninsular.

   ———

I cope,
I carry this girl though my body is tired,
I carry her,
   because I do what’s required.
But I cope,
and I’m fine,
and I only hurt,
   from time to time.

More of Laura’s work can be found on Instagram: @laurawritespoems
The TWISTED ROSE and OTHER LIVES

Exhibition

2018
The Institute of Mental Health, Nottingham University

2019
The Lanchester Research Gallery, Coventry University
CASS ART, Islington, London
Arts Centre, Newcastle Upon Tyne
City Museum, Lancaster

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