

«Det finns ingen som vet vad det är»

– a description and analysis of an art project visualising the sense of sickness, hope and recovery (Eng: Nobody knows what it is)

Master thesis, Master of Fine Art, Art Academy (KIT) at Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU)

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Abstract

This thesis is describing and analysing my master project at the Art academy in Trondheim. The master project is a visualization of state of sickness and recovery. The thesis describes the process of art making, choice of images, techniques, and exhibit display. The art project is discussed in terms of the artist manner, the audience perception in relation to choices of art techniques and exhibit display as well as to the artists' message, and in relation to depiction of disease and sickness in art history.

Introduction

“Det finns ingen som vet vad det är” is a project where I through painting and drawing speak about a period in my life when sickness and uncertainty permeated. But it is also a story of hope, making progression and meeting the world again for the first time. The project is dealing with being struck by ME, a hypothetical post-viral-sickness the medical science and practitioners know little about. I have explored how to convert fleeting memories into images holding the sense and essence of the witnesses and how to resonate to an art audience. In this thesis I describe my working process and how to resonate to a viewer. I write about how the project started, some background information to better understand the topic, my pursuit of making art and the outcome of the process. I discuss how different artistic techniques, or the exhibit display can vary for being able to resonate with the viewer, and the possibility to affect the viewers perception. I also set in a context of depiction of disease in art history.

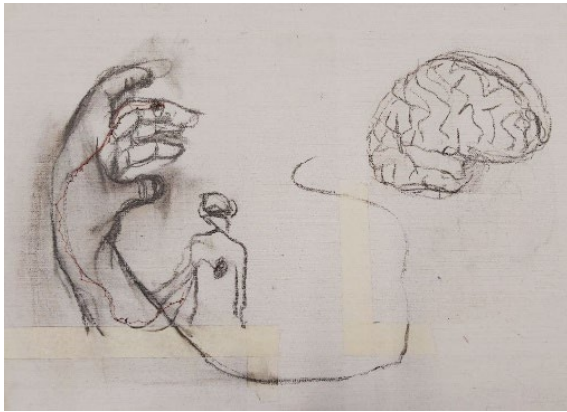
Background - How the project started

In spring 2019 I studied at Öland Folkhögskola, in Sweden, to deepen my artistic language. Johanna Karlin, the course coordinator, initiated an exercise that became the embryo of my master project. She encouraged the students to think about a project we really wanted to do, but for various reasons never carried out. She told us to simplify our projects and how to implement them within one or two days. I had for a while felt a strong willingness to share the personal experience of when I got sick and the process towards recovery. I wanted to share my story for the sake of other people suffering from ME, now and in the future. The healthcare system is in general dysfunctional to people with post-viral-illnesses. People sick and their loved ones need to be heard, acknowledged and to feel recognition.

On my list for implementing the project that never happened was the following:

- Summarize the experiences within 10-15 titles and make illustrations based on those themes.
- A single drawing must not take more than 10 minutes.
- Tone-down the importance.
- Pretend nobody will ever see those drawings.
- Don't expect too much from the result

The method made me open myself and work with my experiences through my art. The final outcome was a series of charcoal sketches on white linen canvas.



ME - Myalgic encephalomyelitis

ME is a complex disease in most cases triggered by a normal infection. It can affect all people, but a majority are women. ME causes exhaustion and a wide spectrum of symptoms where prolonged deterioration and a flulike condition after physical exercise is the most specific. Other symptoms are heart rushes, brain fog and muscle pain. Deterioration is also triggered by cognitive exertion, such as reading, watching a movie or talking to other people. Meeting someone or doing other normal things may require rest for days after. Emotional movement can also make it worse.

When most severe, the ME patient can be bedbound, sensitive to sound and light in need to stay in a dark room protected from stimuli and in need for personal assistance. Complete recovery is rare, but many get better over time. Knowledge about the biophysical processes that causes ME is limited and many experience difficulties faced with health care.

While working on this project, the world was hit by a pandemic, which entails that millions of people around the world experienced lockdowns, a light version of social isolation and avoiding activities people with ME necessarily practice. Unfortunately, covid-19 has also led to more people suffering from ME-like conditions. Post-covid is in focus and certain types are compared with ME. It is a unique opportunity to study the long-term effects of the same virus and bring science a step forward. One can hope. For my project, the pandemic means more people can relate to the theme.

The staging of sickness in art history

Sickness and disease can be expressed in different ways in art. It can be the art showing the often-unconscious expression of the artists own disease. It can be images with people showing symptoms of disease. These two perspectives may require the eye of a viewer trained in medicine. Another example is paintings where the artist intentionally has illustrated sickness and disease. In the following, five categories are described on how sickness and disease can be expressed in art where my work falls into category 3.

1. Art influenced by the artists' disease

People with knowledge and interest in medicine look at art and how artists' experiences are reflected in art. In this case, there is no explicit awareness from the artists to work with the thematic. The viewer can be searching for signs of emerging disease in images from the healthy artist and trying to delineate when illness occurs and discussing how a disease affected an artist's theme and style. Van Gogh, for instance, suffered from epilepsy at a time when digitalis was often prescribed as medical treatment. This medication can cause visual disturbances and about it has been speculated that digitalis may have been a reason for van Gogh's abundant use of the colour yellow in his art.

2. Disease symptoms in images for diagnosis

People with knowledge and interest in medicine hypothetically make diagnoses by looking for signs in images that derive from certain diseases and causality in society the certain era. Swollen vessels or a swallowed throat in portraits, skinny bodies etc. Actually art and medicine have a parallel history; drawings carefully detailed has been crucial for anatomical education and knowledge of anatomy has been part of the artists' education.

3. Sickness from physical disease expressed in art

Some artists explicitly convey the experience of illness, either their own or as an observer of others physical suffering. One example is Goya's "De que mal morira?" in which the doctor sitting at a patients' bedside is portrayed as a donkey, a symbol of stupidity. In "La columna rota" (1944), Frida Kahlo portrayed herself naked wearing bandages, with a fractured pillar through her body symbolizing the malfunctioning spine. A suffering facial expression and nails in her skin speak about pain. Illness and death are recurring motifs in Edvard Munch's oeuvre. "The Sick Girl" (1886) represent his sister in bed with their merciful mother by her side. His sister died of tuberculosis. Later, Edvard portrayed himself suffering from "The Spanish flu" (1919).



«The sick girl», Edvard Munch 1886

4. Sickness from psychological states and disease expressed in art

A fourth category or subcategory of the former are artists who explicitly convey the experience of mental illness, their own or observing the inner pain of others. One example is Carl Fredrik Hill's "Flowering Fruit Trees in a Cave" one of several expressive tree depictions that he created after outbreak of schizophrenia.

5. Epidemics and pandemics in art

We can also find art speaking about the suffering of entire societies during periods of epidemics and pandemics. This includes the Japanese smallpox epidemic in 8th century followed by lepra in 11th century, the plagues, the Columbian exchange spreading disease to The New World, cholera, the flu, tuberculosis, Ebola, HIV and most recently the COVID-19 pandemic. These images often show dramatic scenes with many people and often contain symbols of death such as grim reapers, skeleton, hospital wards, abscesses on bodies, etc. One early known image illustrating the plague was drawn in 1349 and shows people digging graves beside people carrying coffins.

Artistic process

Inspiration and role models

Entering Musee l'Orangerie in my late teens inseed into my memory. Canvases stretching across entire walls of oval-shaped galleries, wet in wet strokes, dry on wet strokes, a patchwork of colour and the subject emerging from a distance. I can still percieve the feeling when disappearing into the emotional world of Monet's. Throught the years I have continued to set off to the sections for impressionism and expressionism in Art museums.



“Summer madness” CY Twombly (1991)



“Lepanto” CY Twombly (2001)

More recently, at Brandhorst Museum in Munich I got enthralled by CY Twombly's “Lepanto” and “Summer madness” in the same way as I once was hit by *Les Nymphéas* in Paris. Calligraphic, colourful and bold brushwork in organic forms filling an entire room, a room whose architecture and proportions are designed to host the specific work of art. Those examples are not directly related to what I am doing, yet the colorist's manners as well as the experiences from Brandhorst collection and others I have admired might have an impact.

How to resonate into a public

I want to emanate intimacy and to create an art exhibit that expresses the despair and grief during long-term sickness. I want to create recognition but also to spread comfort and compassion and to illustrate the beauty of life. The famous author Karin Alvtengen has written a book describing her life as affected by ME. I think she describes the situation very well and the book I think works to identify and to strengthen a person sharing the experience, but I am not sure if her portrayal of an ME patient will lead to deeper understanding for the uninitiated. There is a thin line between arouse interest than being rather repulsive and I hope not to be repulsive. It is also a risk to cause pity for my own person. The story I am telling for sure is a part of me but not who I am anymore. I highlight the theme to the public in the aim to be both understood universally as to raise compassion for patients with ME and I want the exhibition to remain open for interpretations. If I have managed to make people emotionally involved through my art, I have succeeded.

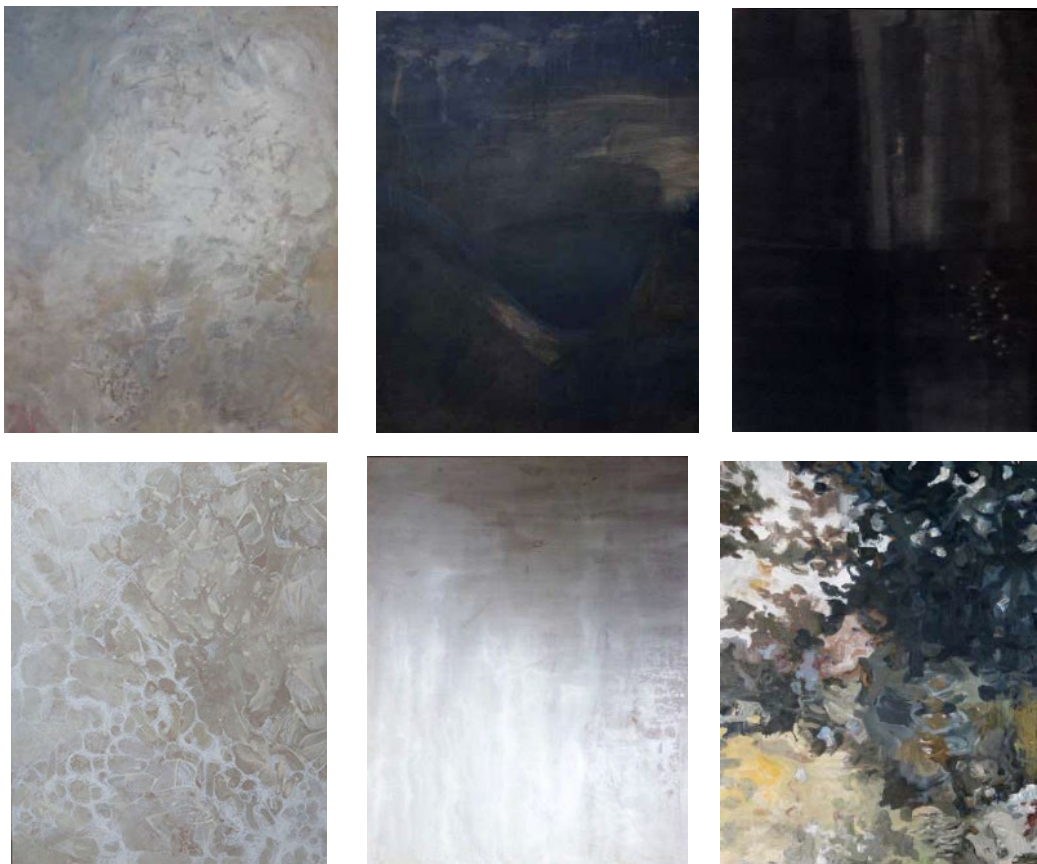
In his painting “The sick girl” Evar Munch shows a concrete image of a person in a sickbed. In comparison, I have chosen a more abstract style, focusing on the sensation of being sick and to convey the inner experience. An ME patient does not show clear physical symptoms. I did this through a series of images, where the images have an abstract connection with the theme. The meaning is gained through the context of the exhibition and guided by the titles.

Exploring abstract painting, techniques and pigments

A pure white and bright surface stand for positivity, while at the same time having a negative meaning. It is death, it is hospital but it is also skiing! When life is put at its edge the soul is hanging between extremes. The smallest of setbacks can take you to abysses while the tiniest improvement may lift you up into the sky. The story I initially told by charcoal sketches was transformed into moods and feelings. The result was a series of abstract paintings, some of them almost landscapes, smooth nuances, close contrast within each painting, and all together forming a modest color spectrum. With the aim to spread hope rather than create obtrusiveness the images were given an aura of balance, a balance I found inside myself to live through a situation prisoned within my own body in a dark quiet room for an indefinite time.

I explored how to create a surface bringing the whitest of white impression on the side of a troubled dark, explored how much color it is possible to add without losing the appearance of white or black. I have used MDF board, all the exact same size (86x110cm) acrylic paint within a restricted palette of pigments. The painting action itself was very explosive and chaotic placing the plates on the floor, applying acrylic layer by layer, a lot of water. The dark images were mixtures of ultramarine and raw umbra. In the bright images, zinc white and titanium white as a base with a small amount of ultramarine and raw umbra. Shading was done by letting the wooden board shine through. In some images, other pigments were also used, but they still had the same base, umbra and ultramarine.

These were my first attempts dealing with abstract images. I struggled and experiment. I found it more difficult to understand when they were complete and to know when to finish a painting, in comparison to the more figurative style that I was used to.



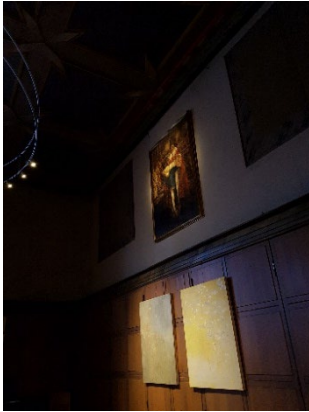
Abstract painting expresses moods and inner landscapes.

Exhibition in St. Margaret s Church in Oslo

In October 2019 I had the opportunity to set up a soloexhibition in the communitysection of St Margaret's church in Oslo, a room with high ceiling, classisistic architecture and oak panels. As a whole calmness and a warm and dark athmosphere with light focusing on the art.

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|---------------------------------------|---|
| "Det finns ingen som vet vad det är" | (eng. "Nobody knows what it is") |
| "Finns det inget som kan hjälpa mig?" | (eng. "Is there anything that can help me?") |
| "Vi ska gå i fjällen igen I" | (eng. "We shall go hiking in the mountains again I") |
| "Jag måste hinna bli frisk" | (eng. "I have to recover in time") |
| "Tyst" | (eng. "Quiet") |
| "Tycka om som det är" | (eng. "Like it the way it is") |
| "Vi ska gå i fjällen igen! II" | (eng. "We shall go hiking in the mountains again II") |

"Hej, hur er det?" (eng. "Hi, how are you?")
 "Ett synnerligen bra flyt och god känsla" (eng. "A particularly good feeling and flow")
 "Det finns ingen som kan hjälpa mig" (eng. "Nobody can help me")
 "Se hur jag sitter som en uppdragen eka" (eng. "Look how I am sitting, hauled up like an old wooden rowboat")
 "Det enda som är viktigt" (eng. "The only thing that matters")
 "Tålamod" (eng. "Patience")



I tested to share different information to the spectators to affect their experience. At the church the visitors knew that the theme was ME. Personal letters sent to me and haiku poems inspired by my paintings was created, as testimonies, the series was genuine and had moved some visitors deeply. The same images were shown in a garden during an art walk. There they did not work that well. The situation with people passing by exploring many things during a day, visiting several art studios, created a different mood among the spectators, more restless and impatient. Nature's dark green and sunlight made the sublime shades disappear.



Mastershow in KIT gallery – a return to the first sketches

My intention was to find a separate location for my Master exhibition and arrange on my own. However, I decided to take the opportunity as a part of the art academy to get together with other students. Solo exhibitions may come later. For long time it was uncertain what facilities that were available for the student exhibitions. I left the search for other places in Trondheim and chose KIT gallery at the academy. I am tempted to exhibit in a "white cube" which I haven't done before.

The abstract series requires a mediative and calm context that is hard to achieve in a group show at the KIT gallery, so I have searched to find another approach. I also wanted to use the opportunity of the final semester at the academy to experiment with new techniques and in some way return to work more figurative. The scale of the gallery allows for large paintings, and I wanted to see how my expression and style could develop in height and width. My supervisor Anne Karin Furunes encouraged me to go back to my original sketches but work big.

In the gallery I will get one quiet inner room without windows and in addition one wall in a brighter room close to a noisy street. The idea for the inner room is to create a series on the theme "Vi ska gå I fjällen igen"(Eng: "We will go hiking in the mountains again"). It is a mantra I kept repeating for myself spending months in a dark room. My intention is also to make a painting, green in its appearance, filling a whole wall in the bright room, as a symbol of activity and health.

Knowledge I previously gained working with the abstract series is brought into the next step, such as define the story, colour choices, the importance working on a several at the same time etc. It took me some time to figure out how to obtain and assemble frames, order linen cloths and learning how to glue canvases of this size to get them tensioned. I fell for the large raw canvases and wanted to leave parts of the canvas blank. The material sucked in the acrylic paint giving it a nice matte touch.

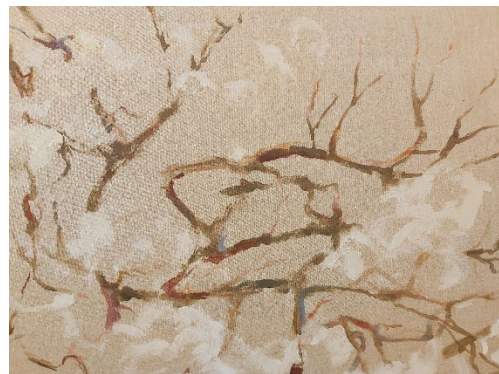


I have been working with such as how to make controlled splash.



«Dag 633» (Eng: «Day 633»). She sits up, progress, but she's fragile. I tried to make a charcoal sketch with the same motif but big. However, I was not happy with the result. Raised in a lounge on a charter tour? I decided instead to enlarged by making graphic copies of the original sketch.





«Dag 645 Bekkefar» (eng. «Day 638 - Brook ravine» 160x180 cm)

Detail.

The setting is the first walk away from my house, away from my street to a nearby brook, tremblingly hopeful, coincidental correlating with spring, downplaying the danger of setbacks. I wanted to catch a feeling of serenity and the content of a day of sunlight, open sky, cottonlike feather-light may-flowering with a touch of veiled anxiety.

This painting was made after four weeks of practical issues. The trial and error of enlarging «Dag 633» to the same size, on the same kind of linen canvases, had surmounted the first fear of failing. I had also previously cleaned out the studio to make more space for big frames. Being mentally and physically prepared, the painting itself was made quickly in a moment of perfect focus and concentration. Well considered, although with a lot of doubts in-between the sessions, paint was added with strokes without hesitation. In contrast to “Dag 633”, “Dag 645 Bekkefar” was shaped without a previous original.

The white strokes are applied first as an underlying sketch, placed as flowers of a fruit tree. This followed by one day of hesitation. Could the result be as simple as white veils dancing in the bottom and beside that empty uncovered linen? What level of abstraction and detailing should I chose? The idea of branches of a tree also representing neurons or blood vessels was born. I wanted to open for the possibility of parallel interpretations, when in context with the other paintings in the project. Single pigmented branches were added using a less wide brush. One week of hesitation followed. Satisfaction is inhibiting and created a fear of continuation. The style left little openness for mistakes. Finally I was convinced that the branches needed shades to bring out the three-dimensionality. Thus, strokes of paint like ultramarine, bulgur, red oxide mixed with raw umber was applied.

I managed to restrain from adding elements like birds and leaves and detailing flowers which was tempting. Avoiding drawing the trunk and by stopping the strokes before the edges of the canvas and to pursuit the character of a sprawling bush I let the image more open to the viewer for associations.

Analysis and discussion

In depiction of disease in art various symbols or attributes of the time has often been used. The following attributes were found to be used to portray sickness in art during the 19th century: large pillows, blankets, books, bottles, and medicine. The pillows and the blankets gave the sense of a caring environment. In my work I am more expressionistic, focusing on the sense of being sick and trapped, on hope and the sense of being reborn through the recovery. I have used white empty spaces, with dazzling snow in the mountains in mind. Today we imagine the hospital environment as white and sterile. My empty white spaces may also evoke that sense, even if my illustrations do not portray hospitals.

Can art generate thoughts in the observer and thereby change the understanding or view for a disease, or something else? The artist Lars Vilks said that “You shall be wary in wanting anything with your art. Through art you test something, but it can never be more than an initiative demanding a response from the audience. The observer’s creativity is as important as the initiative of the artist”. I agree that the observer of an artwork has an important role and that the meaning of the artwork is borne in the process of interpretation. But the observer does not have the full power over the narrative. The artist can make choices in what context to display the artwork and what guidance that is available. In my work titles are important information to the viewer.

I have found that in the creation of my art I need to be open to the unexpected, accidental and to change course. An attendance within the working process, akin to the one abstract expressionist movement is good to pursue, or else, the result tends to get flat, mechanic and miss the sensitivity in the lines. The energy in the moment of creation of an image is subtle, yet visible for the observer.

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