

Pharmaceutical based artwork: an overview.

(extract from PhD Research)

This practice explores sites and memories and came about from putting together two diverse objects one bored evening in 2002. These were herbal pills and dried paint. "What if?" I remember thinking. The result was 'Painting Pills', a bag of drug capsules containing coloured paint by which a person could paint themselves internally by taking a pill. At this point it was just a fun idea and I wasn't sure if the idea had much scope for development. Shortly afterwards though I understood the potential of the work for presenting sites, memories and narratives in pharmaceutical form in order to present them as drug like experiences in line with Buddhist ideas of how phenomena exist. On a visit to the Yorkshire Sculpture Park I collected samples from the site including grass, stone, bird feathers and earth with the intention to create a portrait of the park in pill form.

Initially I used modified matchboxes to present the pills. These matchbox based works were called 'Beautiful Trips' referring to our human desire to have experiences and create things as individuals and as a society that make us happy but which often have side effects. The boxes were white to match gallery walls, and each had a list of contents on the side along with the title and product name 'Beautiful Trips'.

Beautiful Trips' were made between 2002 and 2003 and include:

Sculpture pills, London pills, York Art Gallery pills, My Body pills, Tate Modern pills (which include bits of a Joseph Beuys sculpture), City of Bath pills, Tate Liverpool pills, Brighton pills, Portakabins for the masses, My mothers collection, My fathers collection, Photography pills

All of the eight pills in these works contain collected samples from the specified sites. For example Tate Modern pills contain bits of the white gallery paint, splinters of wood from the floor, outer stonework and brickwork along with in this case a small fragment of the Joseph Beuys work 'The End of the 20th Century'. Each of these samples was placed in a single pill alongside each other, the aim being to present a portrait in pills of a place that explores and questions the way these sites exist and how we are meant to perceive them. I particularly wanted to interrupt societal institutions and their supporting narratives and present them as having relative rather than fixed existence. York Art gallery pills contain not only a bit of a 17th century painting and a gilt frame but also curators skin and gallery guides hair.

This latter work originally consisted of four 'Beautiful Trips' boxes but was subsequently remade in 2006 as a single bottle of pills.

'Photography Pills' is a framed pill work consisting of two matchboxes, one black one white. The black box is subtitled 'Captured', has a picture on the front of a native American Indian and contains the disassembled parts of a camera including plastics and wires referring to the technological development that led to the massacre of the Indians whilst taking photos of them as exotic souvenirs for a cultured white class. The white box contains pills with bits of a contemporary photography gallery in them and has on the front a picture of a gallery preview. The two boxes are designed to work together and serve to question photography and culture.

In 2003 the pharmaceutical work was developed into an installation and exhibition 'Medicine for the Soul' which was shown at York College and Thackray Medical Museum with funding from Arts Council England. The work consisted of 22 small medicine cabinets each containing a different 'soul medicine' obtained from various artists I knew. They supplied pill name, colour or contents, its effect and possible side effects along with an image for the label and I then put the pills together, designed the labels and made the cabinets with the pill information put into a prescription format. In the making I was involved not only in making each part but also the whole work.

Along with this I also obtained funding from the Arts Council to make syringe-based pharmaceutical work. This operates in a same way as the pill work but hit the same issues as the pill work regarding how to present the work. Syringes like pills have little visual impact as art objects even if they contain the unexpected. The solution was again to box the work but to find better and bigger boxes. This box strategy was informed by Susan Hillier's work 'The Freud Museum' in Tate Modern, which uses boxes to present small and diverse material that in themselves have low visual impact but contained in the box assume a coherence and significance.

The syringe work, like the pill work, deals with different sites, ideas and concepts and contains prescription text and an image on the box. The works often arise out of visiting places and collecting materials, though sometimes pieces are made to explore a particular idea or concept. I have also used the format of pharmaceutical powders in works such as 'Mind colouring powders'. From 2003 to date I have made many pharmaceutical works swapping between pills and syringes as

appropriate. Syringes can contain liquids such as river water so that can often dictate the form chosen.

Some of the works have used different housings such as cellophane packaging for 'lifestyle pills', and the Blackpool and Bradford pill bracelets, which use watch boxes to show site pills threaded with elastic and made into bracelets to illustrate how we wear our experience and addictions.

The pharmaceutical work was developed in 2004 and 2006 with the residency 'Reconnection' at Coedhills Rural Artspace in 2004 and 'View' created for the FRED festival in the Lake District in 2006. 'Reconnection' involved working with a resident rural artist community to create a prescription and bottle of pills for each member on the theme of reconnection. The process began with me as 'the art doctor' interviewing each member of the community, asking about their lives, hopes and experiences. They were asked to imagine this information as a prescription and a bottle of pills. They collected materials from the site to put in their pills and designed the bottle label. The pills and formatted prescription text was placed in an all white shed which therefore became both a gallery and a 'first aid hut'. The project was significantly different from Medicine for the Soul in that here I interviewed people face to face and worked with them to collaboratively create the text and the pill bottles whilst before I simply got the text from them.

'View' * is a pharmaceutical installation exploring the 'Lakeland View' consisting of two large white cabinets with associated prescription text. One cabinet contains 18 bottles of pills each of a different Lakeland view. These however are not stereotypical scenic views but include a range of sites including a teashop, a disused main, a busy road, and the church at which social reformer Harriet Martineau spoke at alongside beauty spots such as Tarn Hows. Sites were selected prior to visiting and samples collected them including buying a cream tea as part of the project.

The work suggests that all sites are a view or contain a view and this contrasts with the philosophy of 19th century travellers such as the Reverend Gilpin who visited the lakes with an aesthetic eye and pronounced those views worth seeing and those not. Alongside the 'Views' is a cabinet of 'Viewpoints'. Fifteen viewpoints were chosen randomly from the numerous ones that could have been chosen. Optimism, Marxism, love, aestheticism and consumerism are some of the viewpoints presented in pocket brass pillboxes each of which contain six pills. Making these meant I had to research the meanings of these terms in order to effectively put this

information in prescription form. The work also includes a small cabinet on William Wordsworth whose book on the Lakes inspired me to explore notions of the 'view'. His life and the places he lived are presented in pills and prescription forms. The work was sited in the annex to a café by Grasmere Lake but has been subsequently shown in a gallery setting. Though made for a festival of contemporary rural art in the landscape, I made a high quality gallery work, which was much admired and mentioned favourably in a-n magazine.

I still make pharmaceutical work but not as often, only when the proposed work adds to rather than duplicates the existing body of work. New pieces include works on Room 20 Dusseldorf Academy of Art (Prescription for New Learning), Merzpharm (on Kurt Schwitters and the Elterwater Merzbarn) and Gustav Metzger's Protest Pills.