

## On Art Therapy

By Sam Stiner



(untitled By Sam Stiner, 16in x 20in, 2023)

To understand my abstractions thoroughly you need to have at least a basic understanding of mental illness. An understanding of what it means to be too depressed to get out of bed, a sympathy for those too manic to sleep, and too awake to rest. These states are often the states of mind where I feel I create my best artwork. These days I think what makes me an artist in the terms of the great Joan Mitchell; “What makes an artist...? It’s sort of disease, an addiction.”

My foray into the world of mental health care began long before my exploration into art began, and they have been tied to each other from the start.

What I would call my first encounter with art where I saw myself as an artist, did not happen in a museum, or a school but rather in a hospital, on 72-hour psychiatric hold. As a part of this experience, I encountered art therapy. I remember enjoying the simplicity of the way the oil pastel smeared a picture of the simple prompt, “what do you see in your future?”

At this point in my life my vision for the future was traumatized and bleak. I smeared heavy black lines across the paper to suggest a large black tunnel with a large organic form blocking the path to a single point of yellow in the distance. Of all my takeaways from my experience on a psychiatric hold, from utterly terrifying, the good, and the reckless. The relief and pride in my ability to represent my view of my own future gave me a sense of optimism that I had not felt in a long time.

It would be almost two years before I would pick up my first set of acrylic paints. In the months that followed this significant day; I painted my way through love, and through terror. I painted my way through immense lows of depression and would sometimes financially prioritize the creation of art over my need for sustenance from food. I would spend sleepless nights scribbling in notebooks and throwing paint onto canvas. My abstractions draw heavily from emotion, the highs, and the lows of what the doctors are currently naming Unspecified Bipolar.

Today, my compositions and abstractions are more storied. They tell tales from my life, some fictional, some quite the opposite. Yet to this day, day after day, I am drawn back to the words of Joan Mitchell; "Nothing was indispensable. To paint was indispensable."



(untitled by Sam Stiner, 16in x 18in, 2023)

I have little doubt that the creation of art will be indispensable to me for the rest of my life. I have found nothing is a more productive outlet for when sleep alludes me for the third night in a row. The compulsion to create has the power to drag me out of bed on my most exhausted and depressed days. To anyone who suffers from these kinds of highs and lows, I would urge you to try creating something that brings you joy because the creation of my paintings and drawings is indispensable to my mental health. This is why I say to understand my work you must possess some understanding of mental illness, because I would not be the painter I am if it weren't for a neurodivergence that the doctors are currently naming Unspecified Bipolar.



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