

Exhibition: *Occupying the Fatuous State of Severity*

Opening Remarks

By Dr. Beth Vale

TMRW Gallery
21 Keyes Art Mile
Rosebank
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Most of you will know by now that this exhibition is a collection of artistic responses to Phumlani Pikoli's book, *The Fatuous State of Severity*. But I'm aware that some of you may not yet have read the book. So, I've created a form of meta-art: a jumble of lines that I underlined while re-reading the text and then wove together as a poem to set the tone both for the exhibition and what I have to say about it.

***'You're my happy little boy. I want you to stay like that.
The invincibility of our lives dared another year to destroy us.
He pulled on his gloves. Touched me all the places I complained about.
My thoughts held me hostage. I made a lack lustre effort to keep them together.
This house is sinking. We all live in it, I think.
They had sex in the dark and the couple did not feign pleasure.
This house is sinking and full of ghosts.
Let's pretend everything is not okay and be nice to each other, okay?
Since then I've been biting off and nibbling insignificant pieces of my tongue'.***

So much of mental illness arrives as a type of dissociation: the feeling that everyone, but you, has access to some specially-guarded secret, which makes the world intelligible to them, dissolving all of life's apparent meaninglessness, and brutality, and disappointments. In the early years, our generation of youth was pumped with rainbow-electric optimism, told they were now 'free', and that the world was theirs for the taking, 'alive with possibilities'. With capitalism as its tailwind, democracy promised over-the-counter prosperity, to the tune of cheery SAB ads.

But the reality of young people's lives has been radically different — a story of unmet expectations. We don't expect home to be so baffling to us; or for belonging to feel so unattainable; or to fear our lovers; or to resent our neighbours.

And this feeling of alienation (and I mean that in the Marxist sense) sits at the heart not only of our psychological condition, but also our social condition.

The gift of Phumlani's work, and this exhibition, is that it gives us the tools to talk about mental illness as a social question. And I cannot over-state how radical that is. Capitalism, which would have us believe that everyone is self-made, individualizes our experience, makes it compulsory for us to pursue happiness, and then blames us for our inability to achieve it. We didn't buy enough soy candles; or drink enough matcha.

To acknowledge that it is the world that is frenetic, and broken; It is the world that seeps into our intimate lives and into the recesses of our brains; That the dis-ease is collective — that is a type of defiance.

So often mental illness is de-legitimized by the refrain, 'it's all in your head', suggesting that that our inner lives are an invention of the mind, originating from a plume of smoke. In fact they are an assemblage — a collage, a multi-media and multi-textual reality that draws together a wide emotional and experiential landscape, and often reaches back generations.

Just as we are alienated from others and the world, we are often also alienated from ourselves, partly because we live as *so many* 'selves' — our digital selves, our social selves, the selves in our own heads, the selves we are at home, the selves we are at work — and all these selves are not speaking neatly to each other. They all demand some pretending. And pretending is exhausting. A person can lock themselves in their room for days just to escape pretending.

None of us are delusional to think life is absurd.

Men beat their heads on concrete at the traffic lights.
Children drown in pits of shit.
For every mood, there is Baby Yoda
Years later, colleagues still can't pronounce your name
You order a new vibrator online.
Language is spliced into acronyms: we don't even have vowels to scream
You spend three hours scraping burnt cheese off your oven
Someone is selling you insurance for your own death

In the desert where I do my research, animal carcasses rot in dry dams
There's no water in the taps.
But Coke is sold on every corner, and if you type Amen and share three times, 2020 will favour you.

This exhibition holds the fragments of our fragmented lives, and gives us permission to talk across and between our mind and body, the personal and political, the humour and the pain — precisely because that is how we experience the world.

So what can art do in response to our shared psychological dis-ease? it's easy to call to mind great artists who have been depressed and suicidal, and imagine their work as a type of 'catharsis', or romanticise the artist in pain. I don't think art is a cure, or that art necessarily makes mental illness easier to carry, but there are some things it can do:

It can give us other languages, to bear witness to ourselves and to one another. The medicalisation of mental health has certainly succeeded in giving it some legitimacy. People care when there's a diagnosis or a statistic or an indicator to measure. But all of this can also

add to our alienation, because it has nothing to say about what it is like to live with mental illness.

I, for example, can't define 'anxiety', but I can tell you about not being able to sleep at night because I'm thinking about my parents' deaths, or something stupid I said to a colleague last week. I can't tell you if my disorder is generalised, but I can tell you about being paralysed by questions like: whether hiring a domestic worker is supporting a family; or supporting class, race and gender exploitation; or if asking myself that question is patronising; or the very definition of first-world problems; or if I'm just 'performing woke-ness'; or if I should have mentioned any of that at all in an exhibition opening. I can't tell you about OCD, but I can tell you about rewriting and re-reading text messages for hours and never sending them.

Seeing those realities represented makes one feel less alone, and creates a space for the darker, weirder, nonsensical parts of ourselves to exist.

The task of pursuing mental health is not to do away with the absurdity, or the injustice, of life. It's figuring out how to hold it, and hold each other. How to live through it, give testament to it, sometimes laugh at it. And that's what this exhibition does.

So I want to thank Phumlani, Bale, Brooklyn, Skhumbuzo, Felix, the *TMRW Gallery* and the British Council for coming together and giving it to us.

Thank you.