

An abstract painting with warm, earthy tones of brown, orange, and beige. The texture is visible, suggesting brushstrokes or layered pigments. In the lower-left corner, there is a dark, intricate wire mesh or sculpture that overlaps the painting. The overall mood is contemplative and textured.

*DIFFERENT SHADES
OF LIGHT*

*ANNE BUCKINGHAM
& WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS*

*16 OCTOBER - 9 NOVEMBER
2019*

FOREWORD

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*Rachael Kiang
Gallery Manager*

DIFFERENT SHADES OF LIGHT

ESSAY BY ANNE BUCKINGHAM

Different Shades of Light exhibition explores unique, individual perspectives of mental health and wellbeing whilst acknowledging the collective experience of mental health. It aims to engage the audience as participants in the everyday experience of mental health and wellbeing and so broaden understanding and dialogue.

Mental health and wellbeing can be viewed as a continuum along which we may move. It is a personal and subjective experience. The exhibition focuses on the different shades of those experiences, or the idea of 'shade' as variation. It explores the unique, subtle differences a person may experience from one day to the next, and one individual's experience and perspective compared to another's. As an art therapist, my focus is less on the label or diagnosis an individual uses, or has been given, to describe them ('I'm suffering from anxiety') and more on understanding their unique experience, the nuances, the different aspects and shades of these.

Beyond variation, the term 'shade' was expanded to the lampshade. At its simplest level, a lampshade is part of the everyday, just as mental health and wellbeing is part of the everyday. As a metaphor the lampshade can be seen as providing shade and shelter to protect us from the external world. The shade can be seen as providing a sense of containment, providing boundaries and support. For some it may be the self we wish to share or project externally.



*“When you don’t have the skills or resource to shade yourself, you can
burn out”*

BURNT OUT

THE WORKSHOPS

The majority of shades were produced in workshops open to the public. No art experience was needed and no specific experiences around mental health and wellbeing. These were important aspects of the workshops - enabling creative expression and giving a voice to all. Participants ranged from age 18 to 81.

There were four main aims of the workshops:

- For individuals to have a chance to be immersed in the process and benefits of making art
- for individuals to be able to freely express themselves through the art making process without judgements of what constituted 'good' art;
- to be part of a community of 'makers'
- to reflect upon and communicate about mental health and wellbeing.

For some participants, the emphasis was on the beneficial effects of art making. Participants reported valuing the therapeutic and calming aspect of art making. These were often associated with receptive movements, intricate work or careful planning: *"Making the art was very liberating, calming and like doing meditation."* For others, the benefits were in the opportunity for spontaneity: *"Just doing. Being in the moment. Surprising. I had no idea what would come."*

"Weaving the wool was repetitive and mindful and the fact the wool was so soft and tactile made it even more relaxing."

Each workshop developed its own natural rhythm and in each there was a noted period when all participants were in flow, totally absorbed in their art: *"I really enjoyed it because I was so focused"*. As one participant highlighted, *"Dedication to something significant is helpful to mental health management."*

The opportunity to **find expression through art** was of most value for some participants, many of whom were not regular art makers. Participants were given free choice of available materials and encouraged in their own process. In a 3 hour workshop the emphasis was on involvement and personal expression, not on the perfecting of artistic techniques: *“I liked that whatever I did and however it looked was ok because it was all about how I felt.”*

The aim was to validate everyone’s voice and to provide a safe and personal space for experimentation without external judgement: *“... experience that helped me escape judgement for a few hours. I could be myself.”*

The ability to find a non verbal language for that which can’t easily be expressed verbally, or the actual discovering of thoughts or feelings through the art was commented on by many. The art piece as a container for a variety of emotions and experiences was present for some. *“It was like my anger was out but contained.”*

The tangible outcome - the shade - allowed individuals to see, hold and reflect upon their experiences and perspectives.

“One of the key lessons I have learnt when dealing with mental health issues has been the importance of connection to others.”

Being in the company of others with a shared yet individual activity was, for many, a beneficial experience. *“I enjoyed the company while making the art and appreciate the support from people in the room.”* Some artwork reflected the shared workshop experience as well as the shared experiences of mental health and wellbeing. There was a sense of community in the workshops, with individuals at times completely focused on their own art and then quietly curious of others’ work, and appreciative and respectful of the diversity. *“I liked that other people in the group were all doing their own art and we could be together but do our own things. If I’d been alone I wouldn’t have made this.”*

Finally, the opportunity to reflect upon and **communicate about mental health and wellbeing** was central to some participants experiences. Some participants found the opportunity to express their own experiences of mental health and wellbeing valuable: *“It relates to my experiences of feeling as though my life is ruled by other people and other people’s judgements or assumptions of me.”* For many it was a positive and affirming process and image of their own experience: *“Making the art was a reminder of my journey to being whole and complete.”*

“I wanted to show the different shades of depression from black to grey to mid blue to light blue. The light blue is the best place to be.”

Others particularly wanted to communicate with the audience and enable them to reflect on their own experiences or those of others.



“I hope our viewers can see their own journey in mine”
LIFE HAS ITS UPS AND DOWNS



“Friends who have mental health concerns have different experiences than me but we have a lot in common and can all be there for each other.”

SAME SAME BUT DIFFERENT

THE EXHIBITION

Most artists know the mix of vulnerability and confidence involved in showing their work to others. For individuals who mostly do not describe themselves as artists, and who have produced very personal artwork, there are mixed feelings about exhibiting. Some describe hesitancy but with it an openness to a new experience and *“being part of a collective voice.”* Overall there is a combination of excitement, pride and a sense of achievement: *“Awesome. This is how people get to know me”* and *“I think this is a very wonderful moment for me that I have something I can share with the people”*.

It is clear for the artists that an audience is needed to complete the work by enabling their views and voices to be witnessed and heard. While the actual process of producing the art was central to the experience, so too is the role of art as a means to communicate more widely and to affect or impact an audience. *“I think it’s cool if people see these shades and go “oh mental health affects all of us, it’s not a negative thing.”* Some wanted to offer support to others through their shades. *“I hope it brings three messages of hope for those living with mental illness.”*

Many of the workshop participants specifically expressed a desire to be sharing with the audience or to engage the audience in reflection.

The exhibition aims to engage the audience as participants as they walk amongst the shades and not only witness, but bring their own perspectives, views and experiences to the space.

Audience participants are further invited to contribute to a series of shades, by reflecting on how the art challenged or broadened their own ideas about mental health and wellbeing. The questions are, ‘what has been communicated to you through the exhibition and how has it impacted on your thoughts, feelings or views on the subjects of art and mental health and wellbeing?’ We aim to explore to what extent ‘the audience’ is able to become participants in this space, as an acknowledgement that mental health and wellbeing is not about ‘the other’ but about us all.



“I hope people can relate to my shade and think about being kind to themselves and others. If a feather falls on you, don't worry - it's a little bit of kindness coming your way.”

KINDNESS

Importantly the shades do not carry labels; this is not a shade ‘by someone experiencing anxiety’ or ‘someone diagnosed with schizophrenia’. Just as an individual is not defined by their current mental health, so too the shades represent just a snapshot of the whole. “I liked that it didn’t matter what everyone’s experience of mental health was, whether we had a diagnosis or not, because we all share mental health and we were just there as ourselves.”

This is a multifaceted project in a far reaching field. It touches on aspects of art as a means of expression, as a therapeutic outlet and in providing a sense of community. It explores the power of art as an important means to communicate and impact on others, to break down barriers, and open up dialogue. In producing an immersive exhibition, the hope is to inform, challenge, interest and engage the audiences whilst exploring the wide ranging topic of mental health and wellbeing as part of everyday life.



“In the exhibition see if you can find your own face and how you’re feeling”
FACE OF THE DAY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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