

Inside The Invisible

The last leprosy patients in Norway died in 1946. They were Europeans. Leprosy is a disease of poverty, neglect and terrible living conditions: this was the reality for many Norwegians until the end of the nineteenth century. *Inside The Invisible* was an exhibition made for the St Jorgen's Leprosy Museum in Bergen, Norway in 2002, for which I painted 100 small works on raw linen, each with an English and Norwegian text. Imagine your warmest jacket has stitched inside it, close to your heart, a patterned patch, five inches by five inches. It reminds you of life before you were struck with a disease that took away pieces of your flesh, your foot, your hand, your nose, your ear. You look at your piece of fabric now and again just to remember.

Most of the leprosy patients in Bergen were fisherman – farmers who worked in conditions of 20 degrees below zero on the high seas in very, very wet weather, mostly in the dark. They lived for much of the time on the beach and slept under their boats in vile and inhumane conditions. Some patients or inmates were members of the clergy, musicians, painters, builders, clockmakers, as well as farmers or boat-builders. There were women who, in their former lives, cooked, mended, washed, nursed, gave birth and prayed, as well as all the usual childrearing and food growing and attempting to keep warm and dry that was the norm. They too were infected with leprosy.

I wanted to make a series of works that might give these people a voice. They were individuals, real, idiosyncratic, sexual, thinking people. They had memories, hopes, families. In the same way that slaves were more than slaves, lepers are more than just people with bits of their bodies missing through disease.

The museum, an eighteenth-century wooden church and wooden buildings was reconstructed in 1706 after a fire, at first to separate and segregate the diseased from the clean, then as a place to experiment to find a cure and then to house people who were cured but unacceptable to society. There is a lodge, a barn, two wards on two levels, two large kitchens with open ovens, an herb garden and a courtyard. Those who visit today are very interested in Hansen, the doctor who, with a colleague, identified the leprosy bacteria. They look at his room, his instruments and his belongings.

Each painting has a different pattern in many colours. A yellow background might have orange swirls or blue spots or a green check. A blue background could have purple triangles and orange lines, a green background could have yellow ticks or white circles or brown lines. Each one was always five inches square painted in the centre of a canvas eight inches square. You look at the pattern, see it, read the text, 'This is my boat, my brother helped me build it', and either see the boat or do not. Someone who did not see the object, however hard she looked, decided that the owner of the pattern/object did not want her to look into this private memory, it therefore remained hidden. Each text was handwritten on a tiny card luggage label in Norwegian on one side and in English on the other. This was then attached with string to the back of the paintings and hung down. You could read whichever side you wanted to. Each work existed as a memory, a secret, a history, a fact. Now it has gone.

At the end of the nineteenth century, those who contracted leprosy could be cured, as they can be cured today, but patients usually lost a physical part of themselves. The leper was still thought of as dirty, disabled or not whole, thus invisible.

When you enter the main hall, it looks the same as ever, dark, polished and quiet, with no sign of the sick, sore and rotting people sleeping three to a room. The work was placed in the small rooms in the kitchens and on the stairwell:

These are my dancing shoes, I do not need them now.

I used this tureen on Sundays.

This is a special hook for mending nets.

These oars were made by my uncle

(texts from Inside The Invisible)

I hoped that the Norwegian audience would try and see the objects, invisible in the paintings, many of which related to fishing and farming, but some that referred to family life, creative life and a more contemporary working life. It was meant to respond to the places as well as the people, to help make visible to the Bergen visitors a piece of economic history somewhat buried in a new wealth. I also wanted to be part of making the former hospital less frightening and yet more real. A place of beauty and inner calm beyond the outer terror of a slow, stinking death, on the one hand, while remembering that it then became a place for the cured, but neglected and rejected, almost a prison. In that new place, new family and friends could perhaps be made and a new future possible.

For the past six months I have been working on a project designed to make real the notion of dialogue and communication, links, exchange and collaboration. In response to a commission from the University of Manchester's Architecture and Art History Department, I am participating in a project concerned with the history and sociology of architecture in Manchester. One of the sets of buildings being investigated by the group is the now almost derelict Ancoat Mills. Their history and function in inextricably connected to the wealth of the cotton industry in nineteenth-century Britain.

My monument to dialogue, similarity and difference, partly inspired by the mill-workers' letter to Abraham Lincoln during the American Civil War, will be 100 black-and-white patterned paintings accompanied by small plaques bearing texts. The work will imagine a series of 'e-mail' conversations between the cotton workers, weavers, carders and the spinners of Manchester and the cotton field black slaves of South Carolina, the hoers, the sowers and the pickers who provided free labour so that their British counterparts could live in dire poverty for the profit of a very few millionaires.

They will tell each other about their working conditions, diseases, holidays, food, family, the weather and their bosses. They even exchange plans for escape. One hundred ten inch square canvases with a hundred brass plaques will hang down the wall from the ceiling to the ground and out along the floor in a cacophony of synchronised political banter:

My sister who is a little crazy makes shoes in the loom house, she does not have to work in the fields.

My cousin was whipped yesterday and she is bleeding badly, a pint this morning.

Out on the plantation we get bacon and meal; a peck of meal and three pounds of bacon a week.

We do not have money, but we get trinkets from pedlars in exchange for skins or eggs or feathers.

I am interested in the power that a painting, however small and domestic, can have. I engage with location; public space, private space, the obsession with the control of space, of land, of the sea, and of people.

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