

# ALMOST CERTAINLY, THE CATALOGUE RASIONNÉ OF THE CREATOR(S?) KNOWN AS JJ BEEGAN



## A chance re-discovery in the Adamson archives saw the entire life's expression of one inmate realised in a handful of works

By DAVID O'FLYNN

**L**ittle is known about the asylum artist(s) known as JJ Beegan, whose drawings made using charred matches on institutional toilet paper, or using stubs of blue pencils on pages torn from *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson, Volume VI*, have been recognised in several exhibitions and a book since the 1950s. These works came out of Netherne Hospital in Surrey, UK, where the father of art therapy, Edward Adamson (1911–1996), collected and promoted patients' artworks.

British long-stay mental hospitals were challenging places after World War II, having been starved of staff and resources. Physical treatment such as electric convulsive therapy, insulin coma therapy and brain operations – the infamous lobotomy – were widely used. Antipsychotic medication only became available in the early 1950s. However, a few asylums had started unlocking some of their doors in the late 1930s, known as the “open-door movement”, and progressive social, creative and occupational interventions were emerging.

In the 1920s and 1930s, particularly in the USA, Henry Cotton's “theory of sepsis”, that schizophrenia and other serious mental illnesses were caused by infection hidden in the body, led to people having at least their teeth removed, progressing to major surgery removing the appendix, spleen, large bowel, testicles or ovaries for some. Death rates from these operations were high, and though the practice fell into disrepute in the late 1930s, residents at Netherne when Adamson started leading art sessions in 1946 might have undergone these procedures earlier in their decades-long admissions. Many patients,

their teeth removed, would have shared “ward teeth”: dentures kept in a jar of disinfectant until meal times. In his book, co-authored with his collaborator and partner John Timlin (b. 1930), *Art as Healing* (1984),

Adamson describes his first visit, where, *having passed through long corridors and many locked and re-locked doors, I was ushered into a large hall containing about 100 people... Many of the inhabitants underwent major brain operations, and consequently many were shaven headed. Others were swathed in bandages and were disfigured by post-operative bruises and black eyes.*

Adamson was key in developing art therapy as a profession from the early 1940s. By the mid-1970s he was distanced, disagreeing with the profession's interest in psychoanalysis. He believed that the act and gesture of creating art is therapeutic, and that only what is known about the creator and what the creator says about their work matters.

In his 35 years at Netherne, Adamson collected around 100,000 artworks, about 5,500 of which remain as the Adamson Collection. The Adamson Collection left Netherne with Adamson in 1981 to be housed by the British scientist Miriam Rothschild in East Northamptonshire, until its move in 1997 to Lambeth Hospital, London. Given the need for conservation and preservation, and access by researchers, curators and the public, the Adamson Collection Trust (ACT) transferred 2,500 works by around 200 people to London's Wellcome Library between 2013 and 2015, as well as the archives of Edward Adamson and ACT. ACT still holds about 500 sculptures in flint, ceramic, bone and cement.

All of JJ Beegan's known works are in the Adamson Collection and reproduced here: 13 drawings, and two more reproduced in *Art as Healing* of which the originals are lost. Also referenced here are the known sources, the book and three exhibition catalogues.

So, now the mythology. In 1946, the same year Jean Dubuffet coined the phrase *art brut*,

*images, all courtesy of Adamson Collection / Wellcome Library*

*Graffiti on Lavatory Paper 1* (detail), undated (c. 1946), match char on three sheets of Izal Medicated Toilet Tissue, 4.5 x 18 ins., 11.5 x 45 cm

below:

*Graffiti on Lavatory Paper*, all undated (c. 1946), match char on Izal Medicated Toilet Tissue

From top to bottom: Paper 1, second part of five lions and two people) and Paper 2, first part of five lions and two people, 4.5 x 18 ins. / 11.5 x 45 cm;

Paper 5, "DONKEY FEMLAR TO THE LION", affixed to black card, 4.5 x 24 ins. / 11.5 x 60 cm



Adamson started his collection with drawings by "JJ Beegan", as he tells us in chapter 2 of *Art as Healing*:

*Graffiti on Lavatory Paper: These drawings were presented to me by a very ill man who had been in locked ward in the hospital for many years. He was incontinent and unable to speak clearly. He drew vigorously on the only paper he could find.*

This is almost all we know about him.

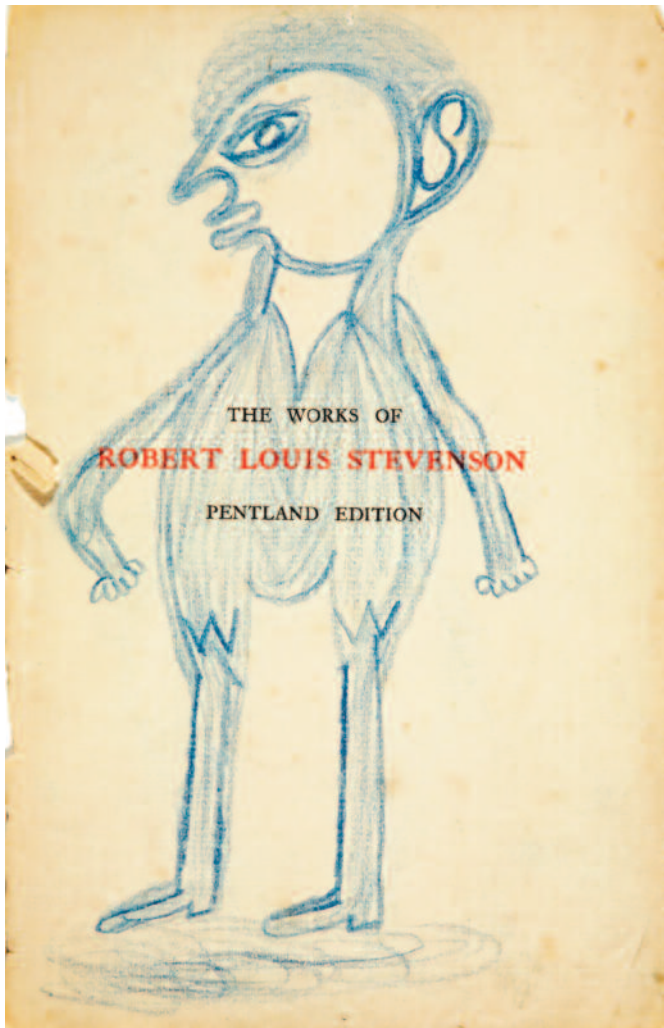
*Graffiti on Lavatory Paper, Papers 1–5:* There are eight drawings on five strips of Izal Toilet Tissue, a hard, shiny

toilet paper that was common in British public institutions, drawn with the char from matches. Five have writing of varying readability on them. Papers 1–3: each strip is of three sheets of Izal Toilet Tissue. Adamson has written "1", "2" and "3" in the top left-hand corner of each strip.

Adamson comments:

*The top strip [Paper 3] is filled with strange shapes and words which had a special meaning for him. The second strip [Paper 2] depicts a lion and its mate, which he loved to draw repeatedly when he later came to the studio.*





Flyleaf 1, with Drawing 1 (above, recto) and Drawing 2 (above right, verso), undated, nurses' blue indelible pencil on flyleaf from *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson, Volume VI*, 5.7 x 8.7 ins./ 14.5 x 22 cm

The third drawing (Paper 1) shows the lions with two figures.

Papers 1 and 2 may have been once joined together – the tail-less lion first on Paper 1 looks like it was originally joined with the disembodied tail of Paper 2 (so we count these as one drawing here). On Paper 3 there is a bottle shape, from which we have attributed the creator his name, written on as if an inscription: “JJ BEEGAN / SCULPTURER / DUNLORST / BALLINASLOE”.

Papers 4 and 5 are of two and four Izal sheets, respectively, both glued to a black cardboard, presumably for exhibiting: the brown marks are glue, and removing the drawings from the backing is a conservation challenge. Paper 4 is a drawing of two fish, with the writing: “BULL FISH SIMLER T a PERCH FOUND IN TH RIVER BARROW / FIKE RIVER NAUGHRINI” (or “NAUGHRIM”). The River Barrow is in Ireland, and has both perch and bull trout, which may hint at an Irish connection for the enigmatic JJ Beegan. The next, perhaps “pike”, is an unknown river or possibly a neologism.

Paper 5 has four objects, each on a sheet, three titled: “DONKEY FEMLAR TO THE LION”, (maybe “donkey familiar to the lion”, or “similar” as in Paper 4 of the bull fish); “COLOLA RUIN BILDEN BILT 1801” (maybe “colonial ruin

building, built 1801”); and “AMERICAN SPRUCE”. The fourth is, maybe, another of his “strange shapes”, as on the third sheet of Paper 3.

*Flyleaves 1–4*, Drawings 1–5 are drawn with stubs of nurses' blue pencils on four pages torn from a hospital library copy of *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson, Volume VI*. *Flyleaf 1* has Drawings 1 and 2, on both sides of the flyleaf. Two of the Drawings are of a solitary person, two of a solitary bird, and one of a creature with a trunk. He draws distinctive ears and mouths. The lips may allude to JJ Beegan having no teeth, and are reminiscent of Anton Muller whose works are in the Collection d'Art Burt, Lausanne, Switzerland.

One of the lost works, the JJ Beegan drawing referred to as *Writing in Art as Healing*, has his most sustained writing. We are in the early days of learning to read him. Structurally disorganised, playful, and misspelt, it may have influences from illiteracy, dyslexia and psychotic disorder, and neologisms. Of *Writing in*, Adamson wrote:

*This man lived in a world of his own. He did many similar drawings, covered with esoteric writing which obviously had a private meaning for him.*

Four amoeba-like figures cross the drawing; the words



right:  
*Flyleaf 4 with Drawing 5*, undated, nurse's blue indelible pencil on flyleaf from *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson, Volume VI*, 5.7 x 8.7 ins., 14.5 x 22 cm

below:  
*Writing In*, undated, pencil on paper. Original drawing lost, reproduced from *Art is Healing*.



below:  
*Three figures*, undated, pencil and black paint on paper. Lost drawing, reproduced here from *Art is Healing*

curve around them, and fill up one of them. Barely legible in our only record, a photo in the Adamson archive, we are transcribing the text as best we can. Note the words "false teeth", and that square brackets have been inserted where the transcription is uncertain:

*Wait [near / new] M page cue*  
*M qu [enos] sedge country brid low [people ago dons] biaz*  
*be Queer oranges*  
*VIATI false teethriller newtos winter autumn dies when*  
*we are him*  
*memo septuesguesim ALSORT Joel boy [eos / is] Galleon eh*  
*Treasure Isles*  
*cannon we balcens as Christians asmiral scudder bl hos*  
*scudder had onto act night*  
*dr S lammers defiance of tingle salmon art dod sort defiance*  
*sits ports IS drin fell to teaoop [author note: text missing]*

The second lost drawing is *Three figures*, and is the last we know of JJ Beegan, an optimistic note:

*The same person later drew these three figures when he came to the studio, and was given a larger sheet of paper and the opportunity to use paint. First he used pencil, then more adventurously he used a brush and black paint. The third figure shows quite a progression from his first. Later this*



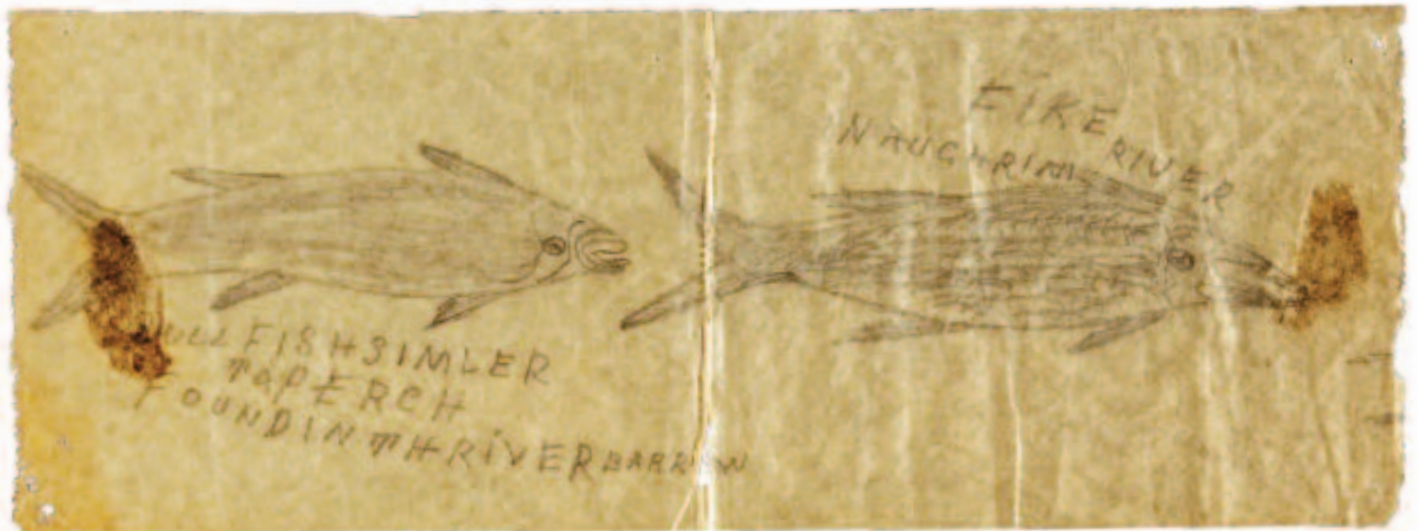


**Notes**

Extracts and images from Edward Adamson, *Art as Healing* (Boston/London: Coventure, 1984) reprinted with permission from Adamson Collection Trust.

Martine Lusardy's quote from *Abandoned Goods*, 2014. Dirs Pia Borg and Edward Lawrenson; prod. Kate Ogborn and Lisa Marie Russo; Fly Film London.

above: *Flyleaf 2*, Drawing 3 (verso; recto is unmarked title page); above right: *Flyleaf 3*, Drawing 4 (verso; recto is unmarked edition page [edn 638/1,550]), both are undated, nurses' blue indelible pencil on flyleaf from *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson, Volume VI*, 5.7 x 8.7 ins. / 14.5 x 22 cm



above: *Graffiti on Lavatory Paper*, Paper 4 ("BULL FISH SIMLER T a PERCH..."), 1946, match char on Izal Medicated Toilet Tissue, affixed to black card, 4.5 x 12 ins. / 11.5 x 30 cm

opposite: *Graffiti on Lavatory Paper*, Paper 3 ("JJ BEEGAN..."), 1946, match char on Izal Medicated Toilet Tissue, 4.5 x 18 ins., 11.5 x 45 cm

man started to use colour and drew a magnificent red lion, which he labelled "Africa Loin", quite distinctly.

JJ Beegan's oeuvre was rediscovered in 2011, during early days of the work to secure the future of the Adamson Collection. The flyleaves and lavatory papers have been kept together since they were given to Adamson in 1946. They are referred to in three major exhibition catalogues: as "Pencil drawings on lavatory paper" in 1963's "Art as

Therapy" at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London; as "Blue-pencil Drawings" in 1968's "Art and Mental Health" at the Commonwealth Institute, London"; and as both in the 1984 "Selection from the Adamson Collection", Ontario, Canada. Importantly, they are not connected in the 1984 catalogue nor the book, implying the blue pencil and the char drawings may be by two creators. If so, we know nothing of the second man other than his drawings. It may

not matter as the drawings are one voice, coming from the same place. They survived a 70-year journey together.

During 2013 and 2014, the documentary *Abandoned Goods* was being made about the Adamson collection (see *RV* #85), and JJ Beegan's works form a central theme. We see them being packed for their move from Lambeth Hospital to the Wellcome Library, a filmed moment that symbolises their transformation from clinical material into art objects. Shown in the film is the installation of all then-known works (except for *Flyleaf 3*, *Drawing 4* and *Flyleaf 4*, *Drawing 5*, which were rediscovered later) at the 2013/14 "Raw Vision: 25 ans d'art brut" exhibition at Halle St Pierre, Paris, their first exhibition for 30 years. As Martine Lusardy says in the film:

*The material is so precarious, fragile. There is a kind of humour in it. It's toilet paper.... It's the most prosaic, vulgar material... but suddenly you forget what it is and it becomes a parchment, a precious object... [As the works] entered the art world. ... [t]he way they are looked at has changed. It's no longer a clinical gaze, but [an] aesthetic and artistic one. The work has changed status, which changes the status and identity of the people who created it. They are given back their place among human beings.*

This transformation of works on toilet paper, from signifier of the wiping away of excrement to *art brut* icons, is our *Fountain* (Marcel Duchamp, 1917), the urinal that through exhibition transformed the profane to the sacred. Works using toilet paper are not unusual in art emerging from institutions – sometimes it is the only paper available to people, for example Hermann Beehle (Beil) (1867–unknown), a patient of the Psychiatric Clinic of the University of Heidelberg and whose works are now held in the Prinzhorn Collection, Heidelberg.

The focus so far has been on the materials, but another is on the obligation to paint. Here was a man detained for years in a locked hospital ward, compelled to make art using the only materials he could find to survive the predicament he found himself in. In 1984 in Ontario, Adamson located JJ Beegan's works in the section "They Need to Draw". This approaches Dubuffet's view of untutored and spontaneous art by people excluded from society, as well as the Surrealists' and German Expressionists' ideas of artistic drives.

Did JJ Beegan have the capacity to consent to these objects being shown? And was his consent sought? Is JJ Beegan more than one man? The drawings were not created in a confidential therapeutic environment, and the key principle for the Adamson Collection Trust is that no works will enter the art market. The Trust believe passionately that all creators whose work are in the collection must have recognition for their names and work. Their existence was denied through their lives in the asylums: to deny them recognition of their identity and their work is to repeat the profound injustice.

These few bits of paper, the words and images scrawled on them with found materials, and Adamson's commentary, give a glimpse of Adamson's work and JJ Beegan's life/lives at Netherne. In Adamson's studio, JJ Beegan painted a magnificent, red "Africa Loin", a sign, maybe, of a man recovering something of himself through art. The recently rediscovered *art brut* master was one of the first to work in an art therapy studio. These drawings remain relics, memento mori, of JJ Beegan's world of locked doors and ward teeth.

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