

Art as Healing: Edward Adamson

David O'Flynn considers the life of a collector and pioneer of Art Therapy



1. Hogan, S. (2001) *Healing Arts: the history of art therapy*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

2. Adamson, E. (1984) *Art as Healing*. London: Coventure. © John Timlin

3. Byrne, P. (1996) Edward Adamson and the experiment. *International Journal of Art Therapy*, 1, 32–36.

4. Adamson, E. (1970) Art for Health. In *The Social Context of Art* by Jean Credly (ed.). London: Tavistock.

5. William Kurelek: *The Messenger* is at Winnipeg Art Gallery: 29 Sep – 31 Dec 2011; Art Gallery of Hamilton: 28 Jan – 29 April 2012; Art Gallery of Greater Victoria: 25 May – 3 Sep 2012. *Where am I, Who Am I, Why am I and I Spit on Life* can be seen together at this exhibition.

above
Rosina Rogers, *Untitled*,
1960, poster paint on paper,
68.6 x 44.5 cm, 27 x 17.5 ins.

Edward Adamson practiced art as healing before there were ever terms or labels like 'Art Therapist'. Being with him for anyone was therapy and yet he didn't play at clinician, but rather served so sweetly as a supreme friend, 'there' for those who had none other. There were for Edward no patients. I think that is why so many lost people in his care found their way back to themselves. Adamson's was an alchemy of the highest sort.

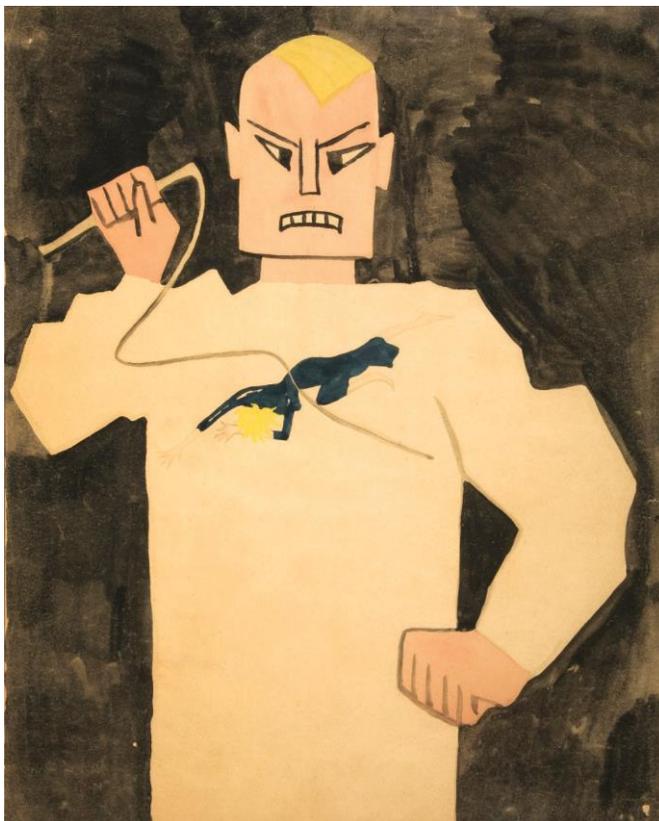
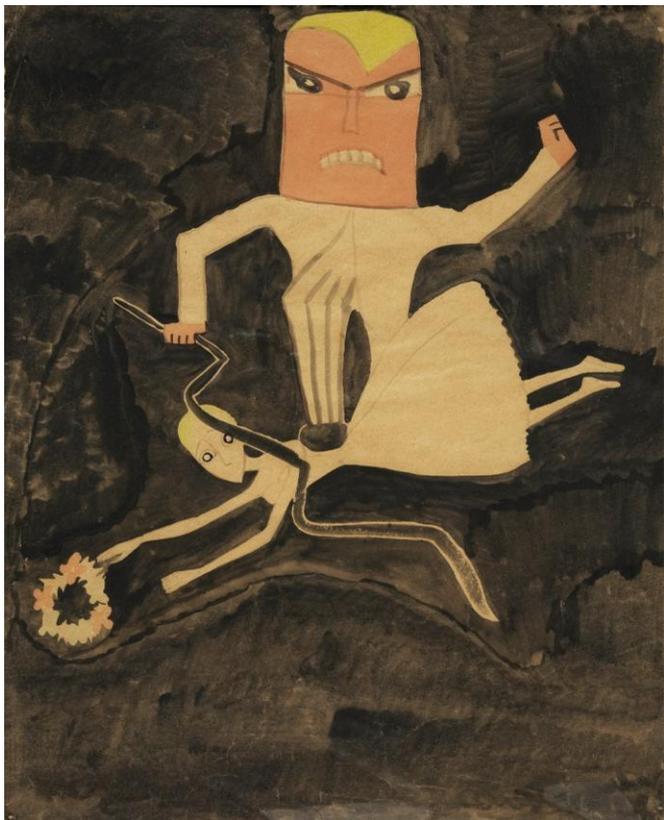
Rebecca Alban Hoffberger, Founder/Director American Visionary Art Museum, 2011

Edward Adamson (1911–1996) encouraged and collected the paintings, drawings and sculptures by people compelled to live in a British long stay mental asylum, Netherne Hospital in Surrey, between 1946 and 1981. The Adamson Collection has 6,000 of these works – of an estimated 100,000 when he retired. He is known as one of the pioneers of Art Therapy in the UK.

Adamson was an artist, and received a degree in Fine Art from Bromley and Beckenham (now Ravensbourne) College. He worked as a graphic artist in the 1930s. During World War II, he served as a 'non-combatant' medical orderly. On demobilisation he volunteered to work with Adrian Hill, another pioneer of British Art Therapy, with the Red Cross Picture Library, to bring art as education to those living in

tuberculosis sanatoria. As these closed after the introduction of effective treatment, the programme was extended to the asylums. (1)

By the 1940s, the Victorian asylums had become places of isolation and confinement, probably closer to prison than hospital. Netherne, under the direction of the reforming psychiatrists Drs Eric Cunningham Dax, Francis Reitman and Rudolf Freudenberg, was seen as a progressive asylum at the forefront of the waves of reforms and developments which led, over the next 50 years, to the eventual closure of the British asylums. They also enthusiastically adopted physical treatments, now viewed as barbaric – insulin coma therapy, electroconvulsive therapy and lobotomy – but then seen as optimistic approaches to the treatment



of mental disorder. In his book on his work and the Collection, *Art as Healing* (1984), Adamson describes that many people who came to his first lecture at Netherne in 1946 had shaved or bandaged heads, and bruised faces and black eyes, following brain surgery. (2)

Adamson started collecting during his early visits (a year after Jean Dubuffet had named Art Brut) when a man on a locked ward gave him the first of several drawings done on lavatory paper with a charred matchstick. He later met other people on the wards – who would have had no personal possessions – working

with whatever materials they could find to create something for themselves. The Collection has about 30 pieces from this period.

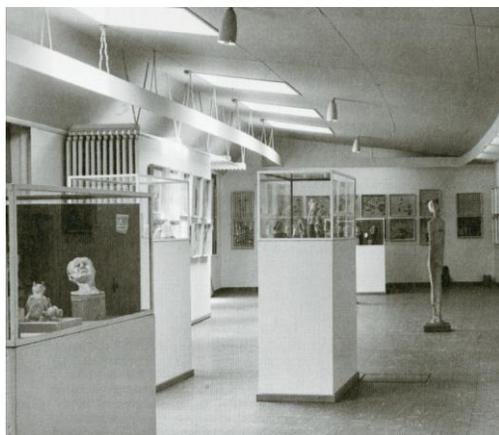
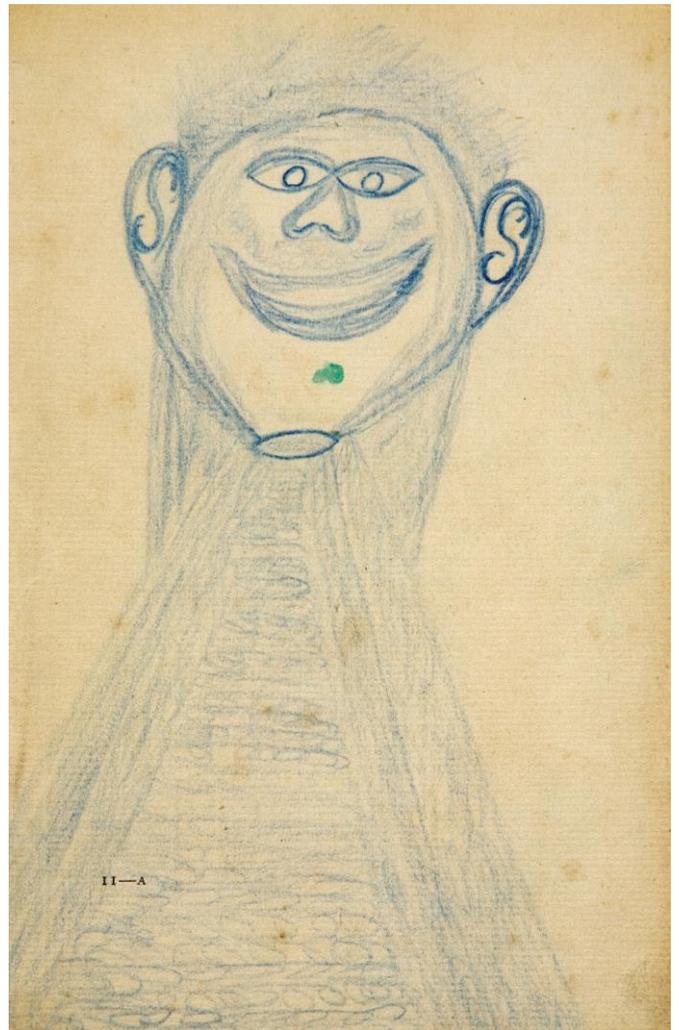
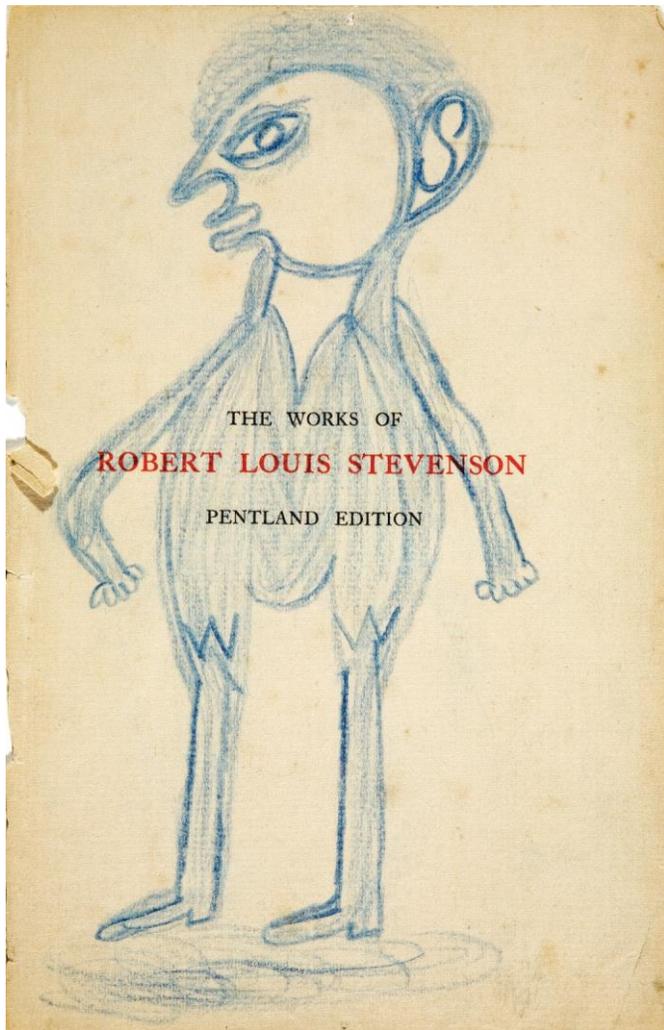
Dax, impressed by Adamson's rapport with the people in the classes, asked him in 1946 to join an 'experiment' into art both as treatment and diagnostic tool. The studio for a group of people 'to express freely' was set up as if a laboratory, each person having an identical easel, chair and table, and painting equipment. Adamson was instructed by Dax not to give any direction, apart from minimal technical assistance. Dax believed

All paintings above by Mary Bishop, late 1950s/early 1960s, poster paint on paper.

top
Both title unknown (under frame), 54.6 x 44.5 cm, 21.5 x 17.5 ins.

bottom
The Cross / Love to Bear, 55.9 x 45.7 cm, 22 x 18 ins.

The Sadist in the White Coat, 54.6 x 44.5 cm, 21.5 x 17.5 ins.



top
both by J. J. Beegan, *Untitled*,
c. 1946, crayon on paper
(hospital library fly-leaf),
22 x 14 cm, 8.5 x 5.5 ins.

above
Netherne Gallery, 1970,

Edward Adamson at Ashton
Wold, 1990.

Netherne Studio, 1965,
photos: courtesy John Timlin.

that the presence of an artist would facilitate self-expression. All the work was kept for discussion by psychiatrists. (3) (Also in 1946, Dr Nise da Silveira had opened her first studio, in a Rio de Janeiro asylum, work which would lead to the Museum of Unconscious in 1952 [www.museuimagensdoinconsciente.org.br]. This was also overseen by an artist, Almir Mavignier [b. 1925], initially, to encourage free expression.)

Adamson worked part-time in a disused shower room before his full-time appointment in 1948 when he moved to a studio, newly built in a disused army hut in the grounds of the hospital. Dax had left Netherne in 1951 to go to Melbourne, and established the Cunningham Dax Collection (www.daxcollection.org.au). His successor as Medical Superintendent, Dr Rudolf Freudenberg, continued enthusiastically to support Adamson's work. In 1953 Adamson met his lifelong collaborator and partner,

the teacher and writer John Timlin (b. 1930). Adamson continued for 35 years. He kept all of the work, writing the person's name and date of completion on the back. By 1970, Adamson had on the hospital grounds five studios, and the Collection had a gallery with an estimated 60,000 pieces, receiving 3,500 visitors yearly by 1981.

Work was exhibited in group shows of 'schizophrenic art' as early as 1947 at Kingston Town Hall – and extensively and internationally throughout Adamson's life, and since. The exhibitions at the Institute of Contemporary Art in 1955 and 1964 were particularly influential. The exhibiting of the work raises debates about ownership, confidentiality, capacity and consent. Adamson was an educator, who saw the sociocultural intervention of showing these people's works to the public who had excluded them – and showing it as an



NOTICE
THE ANIMALS TO BE SEEN IN THIS GROTTTO
AGE OF A FOREKYN THE PASTORAL MANK



Come to Church

WANTED TO BELIEVE BUT THE CHURCH WAS HERE

WANDERINGS WHILE THE CHRISTMAS CLOCK WAS HERE

HONOR THY FATHER AND THY MOTHER

HOME SWEET HOME

GO AWAY YOU DON'T EXIST

I SPIT ON LIFE

FREE! TAKE ONE (OR ELSE) NOW AVAILABLE HERE IN ILLUSTRATED BOOK FORM "MY LOST YOUTH" A PLAY BASED ON THE REAL LIFE TODAY "LIFE WAS BEAUTIFUL"



previous page
William Kurulek, *I Spit on Life*, (detail) 1956, gouache on board, 61 x 89 cm, 24 x 35 ins.

above
J. J. Beegan, *Untitled*, c. 1946, charred matchstick on toilet paper, 44.4 x 11.4 cm, 17.5 x 4.5 ins.

left
William Kurulek, *Where Am I, Who Am I, Why Am I*, 1953, oil on canvas, 48.3 x 38.1 cm, 19 x 15 ins, collection of AVAM, Baltimore.

David O'Flynn is a Consultant Rehabilitation Psychiatrist at Lambeth and The Maudsley Hospitals, who has worked for 25 years with people living with schizophrenia in deprived areas of inner London. He is the Chair of the Adamson Collection, and a friend of John Timlin.

Images courtesy of the Adamson Collection.



All Gwyneth Rowlands, n.d., India ink, watercolour and varnish on flint
Woman and Girl (Woman with Child on reverse),
14 x 11.4 cm, 5.5 x 4.5 ins.



Woman's Head,
22.9 x 12.7 cm, 9 x 5 ins.



Woman with Child (Woman and Girl on reverse),
14 x 11.4 cm, 5.5 x 4.5 ins.



above
Anonymous, *Recovery*,
c. 1950, carved applewood,
165.1 x 38.1 cm, 65 x 15 ins,
collection of AVAM, Baltimore.

overleaf, top
Unknown, *You're Getting in
my Hair*, no date,
poster paint on paper,
53.3 x 38 cm, 21 x 15 ins.

overleaf, bottom
Unknown, *The Tear*, no date,
acrylic on canvas,
48.3 x 38 cm, 19 x 15 ins.

important contribution to their culture – as a way to change public opinion.

Adamson saw people recovering something of themselves – ‘healing’, in his terms – through the act of expressing themselves through art. He continued the ‘non-interventionist’ way of working, unchanging over his career. He brought a silent presence, providing a sympathetic atmosphere. He offered people a range of media. The studios were an enabling place for people surviving in a bleak asylum. Subverting the quasi-scientific ‘experiment’ into a crucible where people excluded so profoundly from society were free to express themselves without judgement, and to value that expression, was a first step in opening up a dialogue with those considered voiceless. Over 35 years, a remarkable and diverse body of work was created at the studios:

Gwyneth Rowlands, at Netherne for over 30 years, started by collecting pebbles by the seashore, and copying pictures of butterflies from a book on them. Later she collected flints and stones from the fields surrounding the hospital, and, intrigued by their jagged surfaces, made some of the most astonishing works in the Collection.

Mary Bishop was also there for over 30 years. The Collection has about 350 of several thousand pictures, which Adamson terms her ‘cri de coeur’: the expression of her distress so as to survive psychologically. She also painted her relationship with her doctors, portraying her ambivalence with the doctor as huge, threatening figures, and herself as wounded or seeking his love with flowers.

Recovery is the only known work by a man in his thirties, who committed suicide about two years later. Adamson got him some tools – hospital rules prevented

people handling ‘lethal instruments’ – to carve a self portrait from a fallen apple tree that he had found in the hospital grounds.

William Kurelek (1927–1977) came to Netherne from the Maudsley Hospital to work with Adamson from November 1953 to January 1955. He came to the UK to be an artist, but broke down – and was later to be an important Canadian painter. One of his first works, *Where Am I, Who Am I, Why am I*, portrays how he felt, blind and lost. Later he painted a larger work, *I Spit on Life*, with 13 scenes from his life, including his Netherne studio (still in the Collection). (5)

Throughout his career, Adamson maintained an identity as an outsider, mirroring the situation of those he worked with. He always called himself an artist – never an art therapist. However, he was active from the mid 1950s in the discussions leading to the founding of the British Association of Art Therapists in 1964, and briefly its first Chair, and, with others, with the first art therapy training course in UK, at St Alban’s in the 1970s. He is acknowledged as a pioneer in the complex history of British Art Therapy, well documented by Susan Hogan. Adamson refused to align himself with any theoretical position or join groups. He disapproved of psychological interpretation, which he considered the therapist’s projections of their own beliefs onto the work. What mattered to Adamson was the act of creation, and the person’s narrative. However his writings have a Jungian spirit, and he was a regular visitor to Withymede, the Jungian art therapy community established by Irene and Gilbert Champernowne in 1942.

The Adamson Collection Trust was established in 1978. When Adamson retired in 1981 Dr Miriam Rothschild provided a medieval barn at Ashton Wold where some of the Collection was moved, and opened to



the public in 1983. When Adamson and Timlin returned to Netherne to collect the rest of the estimated 100,000 works, they had gone. A police investigation never established what happened. After Adamson's death in 1996, the Curator and Art Therapist, Alice Jackson, brought the Collection to Lambeth Hospital, an inner London mental health unit, part of South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust. The Collection currently contains about 6,000 works by over 100 people, 300 pieces on permanent display at Lambeth Hospital and associated buildings, the rest in storage, in far from ideal conservation circumstances. Given much of the work was done with cheap materials, it is inevitably deteriorating.

Adamson and Timlin attended the inauguration of the American Visionary Arts Museum (AVAM) in 1995, and donated *Where am I, Who Am I, Why am I* and *Recovery*. In 1996, Timlin also gave AVAM Adamson's library of books, reference materials, magazines, and documents. In 2000, the new mental health wing at St Thomas Hospital, London, was named the Adamson Centre for Mental Health. In 2010 the Wellcome Library accepted Adamson's personal papers, photographs and other artefacts.

Now, in the centenary of Adamson's birth (31 May, 1911), his collection may be a bit scattered, but it is not forgotten. Thirty years since leaving Netherne, the collection is seen as unique in the history of art therapy, of the reforming psychiatry of the 1950s and 1960s, of British Jungians and of outsider art: collected by an artist rather than a psychiatrist, with a strong representation of the work of women, and is, above all, a memorial to all those who suffered in the asylums, and to the human need to express.

