

Private Intentions: The story behind the Adamson Collection

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Gwyneth Rowlands, 'Snarling Head', date unknown. Courtesy of Adamson Collection Trust.

Here, we start with a photograph of an object, recently titled by curators 'Snarling Head'.

It is the work of a woman, Gwyneth Rowlands, on a flint collected from the ploughed fields around where she lived for 35 years until the early 1980s. She has painted it with Indian ink, watercolour, and varnish. By seemingly following the contours and irregularities of the material, and leaving exposed stone as colour, she has found the face of a woman – a person wanting to be released from the flint. We know that two of her early works on flint are self-portraits. One, 'Skull Head', has on its underside "a painting of her mind" (Adamson, 1994) – a beautiful, small watercolour under the bone-grey, skull-like vault of the head. There are many paintings on flint of women throughout her oeuvre, so possibly 'Snarling Head' is a representation of herself made grotesque by her commitment to the material. In each of her 200 painted flints is a fantastic world, with recurring patterns, themes, motifs, and images, both figurative and abstract.

Gwyneth Rowlands was admitted to Netherne Hospital – a long-stay mental hospital in Surrey, near London – in around 1946, and left when the British asylums were closed in the mid-1980s. Netherne, like most London asylums, was just outside the city, surrounded by the farm fields from which she gathered her flints. Rowlands initially had a folk art style, meticulously copying images of butterflies in books onto pebbles she collected from the seaside during hospital outings. In a rare intervention, the artist Edward Adamson, with whom she worked, suggested she might think of doing something else. From that point on, she painted her beautiful worlds on flint. This transformation was an epiphany. She would go on to create all her objects in Edward Adamson's studio at Netherne, with her painting materials supplied by him.

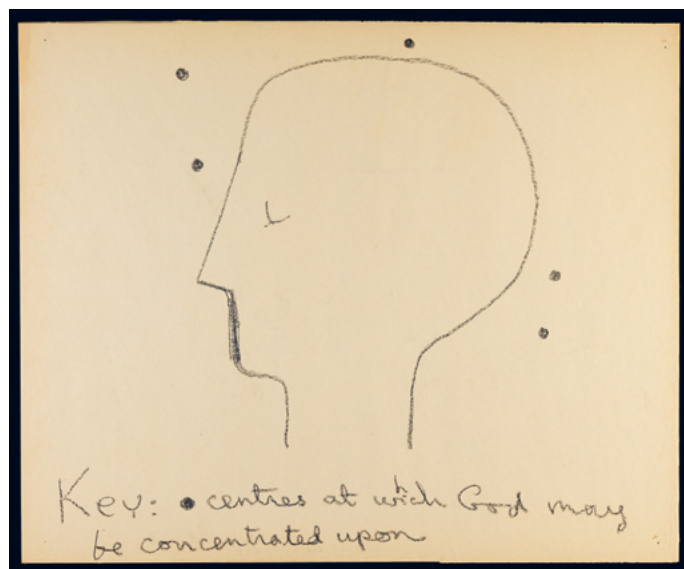
Adamson (1911-1996), a trained artist who had exhibited in Paris and London during the 1930s, arrived at Netherne in 1946 and worked there until his retirement in 1981. He was employed by the



Margaret Parkes, 'Untitled', 1967. Courtesy of Adamson Collection / Wellcome Library.



Creator, title and date currently unknown. Courtesy of Adamson Collection / Wellcome Library.



Martin Birch 'Key: Centres at which God may be concentrated upon', date currently unknown. Courtesy of Adamson Collection / Wellcome Library.

progressive psychiatrists Eric Cunningham Dax and Francis Reitmann to run an art research studio for the long-term patients where they could express themselves freely with paint on paper: Adamson's role was to oversee, rather than to provide technical advice. Almost 700 people produced over 3,000 paintings from 1946 to 1951 in this quasi-experimental studio. The psychiatrists were curious about art as a diagnostic tool, and extensively analysed the work. Their research – published in Reitmann's 1950 book, *Psychotic Art* and Dax's 1953 *Experimental Studies in Psychiatric Art* – feels very out of date now. The way they interpreted the creativity of those detained in asylums was pathologising; in the art, they saw only symptoms:

"Schizophrenic patients, especially those who are chronic or deteriorated, are much bolder in their use of colour than normal individuals. Besides this, an unpleasing choice of colour is fairly typical of schizophrenic paintings in general [...] One aspect is a preference for colours not often employed by the normal and distasteful to them, such as [a] curious tone of red." (Reitman, *Psychotic Art*, 1950)

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When the studio was left to Adamson's sole control in 1951, he began a subversion of the experiment. Rather than viewing the art people created as expressive of their psychosis, he saw the act of creating as enabling psychological recovery. He was opposed to any interpretation of the visual content of an object, and he would never direct, criticise, praise, or lead a person's visual expression. The principles Adamson developed in his 35 years at Netherne were foundational for the emergence of Art Therapy and art studios in mental health settings.

He documented his work over the years, in interviews and in articles often co-authored by his collaborator John Timlin, culminating in their book, *Art as Healing* (1984). But his theoretical position is perhaps best encapsulated here:

"I want the creators to interpret their pictures to me. Because you can read all sorts of things into a picture which are not true. It's the easiest thing in the world, to tell a false story [...] The art they are producing: that's the thing that is getting them better. The mere

fact that they put their brush to paper and try and paint." (Sefiel, L., 'A Conversation with Edward Adamson', *American Journal of Art*, 1987)

Adamson collected almost all of the work made in the studios and exhibited a selection. He believed that showing the works created by those in the asylums would prove their humanity to the society who had dehumanised them.

Materials are a recurring theme in the discussion of this sort of art, that of the excluded and the untrained – people termed outsiders, whose art is created with private intentions, outside the cultural mainstream and its institutions and markets. Adamson provided all the materials he could with the sparse funds he was assigned, but still most paintings were done with poster paint, and on wallpaper lining. He describes how people would search the hospital, foraging for materials that they would bring back to the studio. Rolanda Polansky (1923-1996) was an artist and sculptor who had exhibited with the Surrealists in Paris in the 1930s. Adamson met her at Netherne mopping floors – he swiftly found her a studio to work in, and battled with the hospital authorities to allow her to have "potentially dangerous weapons" – the sculptor's tools of a hammer and chisel (Adamson, *Art as Healing*, 1984).

The Adamson Collection, edited down from 100,000 objects to around 5,500, left Netherne with Adamson in 1981. After his death in 1996, it was moved to an inner-city mental health hospital, Lambeth Hospital. During this period it dropped out of sight, still referenced but rarely seen. Much of the Collection was haphazardly stored in a working office and a disused shower room, while its archives were scattered all across the country in various trustees' homes. It is only recently, after five arduous years of finding and cataloguing objects and archive material that the Adamson Collection Trust has re-secured its physical integrity. 2,500 paintings and drawings have been transferred to the Wellcome Library, now known as The Adamson Collection / Wellcome Library, and are available to the public, researchers, and curators.

The cultural repositioning of the objects as art, and their creators as artists, has not been without controversy. The very process of transporting the object from a mental health setting to a major cultural institution transforms its meaning. Take the first works in the Collection: JJ Beegan's eight drawings with burnt match char on five strips of toilet paper. Exhibited in Paris at the Halle St. Pierre in 2013, these drawings were hailed as newly discovered masterpieces of art brut. JJ Beegan was drawing to survive – this is art created in the most desperate of circumstances, with the most basic of materials. Now, his work is reconceptualised as worthy of being behind the glass of the art world, and in their exhibition, JJ Beegan is remembered, and he is celebrated.