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Diary Drawings: Mental Illness and Me

Bobby Baker
Profile Books (December 2010)
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Sinking under the inexplicable mental illness that threatened to unravel her life in 1997, Bobby Baker began an eleven-year process of healing at the Pine Street Day Centre art room in London. An accomplished artist whose performance pieces have toured the world, Baker imposed a strict creative rule to help herself cope: she must create one watercolor painting for each day of her stay within the therapy community at Pine Street. Over the course of her tumultuous journey towards recovery, Baker created over 700 watercolor paintings. Of these, 158 were featured in an exhibition at the Wellcome Collection in London and have been reproduced for *Diary Drawings.*

Like visitors to a gallery on opening night, readers may feel a gluttonous sense of expectation when handling Baker's book for the first time. These are, after all, drawings from a *diary*, a sanctum of intensely personal emotion not typically meant for the public eye. Just as visitors to the exhibit must have weaved through the gallery in quiet awe and concern, readers may traipse day by day through the stages of Baker's illness. A ruminative summary accompanies each section and explains Baker's mindset at the time of composition. These brief notes provide both context and literary value to the collection, helping the reader make connections between Baker's own understanding of her mental condition and the full-color representations of her mind they see before them.

The paintings themselves are at once curiously cartoonish and disconcerting; simple, disproportionate line drawings are filled with swoops of expressive color. Although every drawing can be considered a self-portrait, they differ greatly in mood and style from piece to piece. Rife with metaphorical elements, Baker's brightly colored efforts reveal dark undertones, featuring such elements as oversized heads, warped bodies, and rivers of tears. In one piece, Baker is "attacked by sharp thoughts," razor-like darts pricking into her head, while in another she is a mess of watery earth tones, a contrast to the striped-suited, always-in-control consultant seated across from her. Baker's dry, self-deprecating wit gives the collection a much-needed dose of light-hearted humor.

The book includes essays that offer theoretical criticism on Baker's works and help readers understand and appreciate it. Maria Warner's essay, *Chronicle of a Life Repaired,* offers valuable background information on Baker's 35-year artistic career, placing pieces within specific contexts, and offering an analysis of diary-keeping as the art of spontaneous expression and "unknowability."

Diary Drawings is an intimate reading and viewing experience that will appeal to readers interested in the relationship between art, therapy, and mental health.
SHOILEE KHAN (January / February 2011)

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