

The artist Annabel Merrett in conversation with Adam Hines-Green, RCPsych Artist in Residence

Adam: I hoped we could start with the thinking that went into this project at the very beginning?

Annabel: I was learning how to sculpt live models in clay, which involved recognising how bodies are put together – the hards bits, bones, and the soft bits, organs, and the bits in between. I was looking at how one is often the scaffolding or receptacle for the other. This prompted me to think about how I could unite proper anatomy with what's going on in my head. As a result, I measured up my own head with callipers, sculpted it in clay, made a silicone mould of the clay, and created a self-portrait-like head in plaster. To incorporate emotions, I cut a section into the brain and my thoughts extended from what goes on in my head to other people's heads too – our motivations, fears, and our ability to muck things up for ourselves because of our fears. Those things are common to all of us.

Adam: I think that comes out in the sculptures, the question of how relevant they feel to an individual, such as you as the artist, as opposed to the shared and more universal feelings of others.

Annabel: Yes, well, they all come from my imagination but also my sense of empathy. It's both personal and observed. I don't think any of them are just me. I'm fairly porous to other people's emotions, and I've come up with a theme for each head that relates to lots of people.

Adam: Yes, and there are these texts that accompany them, aren't there? They're handwritten on bits of lined paper, and they also include the typed titles of the works.

Annabel: I spend a lot of time discussing and thinking about whether it's appropriate to have words with sculpture. I'm a big fan of Tracey Emin and Grayson Perry, who both use words, and their handwriting is recognisable. But I was mindful that you want people to look at the objects and not to be overly led by any associated text. When they were completely typed they didn't sound like me anymore, so I wrote them out.

Adam: I wanted to ask what it might mean to have these works displayed at the Royal College of Psychiatrists?

Annabel: I'm delighted. Doctors are a specific breed. The idea of turning their heads a little feels important – to let the logic quieten for a second and let the emotion in. Just to get through all those exams, and the type of exams they are, you have to think in a certain way, you have to absorb huge amounts of knowledge and have to think in straight lines, right from the beginning. And that's very important for mankind. But I like the idea that, right in the heart of science, I might put a few little red flags up to say that the more chaotic parts of our mind need airing too. We all have these fears, it's scary for your patients, it's scary for doctors too, and we're all human.

Adam: I totally agree. Thinking of doctors as humans too is critical to the profession in my eyes.

Annabel: Absolutely. And it's breathtaking, even, the way people speak to each other within the profession, especially seniors to juniors. I sense it can be a very vulnerable place, to train as a doctor.

Adam: I also think in medical education and in medicine more broadly, we are rarely encouraged to think outside of the straight lines, as you say. It can be quite frustrating.

Annabel: You might not survive as a doctor if you were to start thinking like that too much. And it's tough, that training. And it seems to me that you have to be tough in front of your peers to a certain degree. So, shutting down the more messy thoughts seems useful, and perhaps staying within the tidy lines helps your career.

Adam: Perhaps. I don't think it helps you personally and your life more broadly though.

Annabel: Yes. We have clever young people who feel embarrassed that they might fail, and might not necessarily feel that they can ask for help early enough. Particularly, I think of suicide rates in young people, especially men, and this is a deep and terrible shame we all need to address. I hope these works, on display here, at the very least, might open up some discussion about these things, or even serve as a place to have those conversations.