



Mary Barnes in Bow

Dina Ibrahim and Andrew Roberts went to see the paintings of Mary Barnes on display at the Nunnery Gallery: <http://www.bowarts.org/nunnery> The Nunnery is a gallery for modern art with space for living artists to work. It is maintained by Bow Arts Trust. To reach it we passed between the old St Mary Atta le Bow Church and a Catholic Church. We thought this was worth mentioning because Mary's paintings often use Christian imagery interpreted in a way that is relevant to everyone. We found on the web that the gallery is in a

convent established in 1866 by the nuns who then built the Catholic church. This seemed very appropriate for Mary, who often lived with Carmelite nuns. The picture shows the church with an arrow pointing out the Nunnery.

Like Mary, Dina and Andrew have been patients in mental hospitals. Nowadays people like us often call ourselves "survivors", and one of the reasons for our visit was to write a report for the Survivors History Group: <http://studymore.org.uk/mpu.htm>

The public space we visited had two rooms (the gallery) and a cafe (the Carmelite Cafe established in 2012) arranged in a square with an alley between two buildings providing the fourth side. The alley links Bow Road with a small park with a stone cross in the middle of it. Perhaps this was once the nuns' private garden?

From the road along the alley (towards the park) you come first to the entrance to the gallery. A little further along is the entrance to the cafe. We went straight into the exhibition and followed it round to the cafe. Later we went to the park.

At the entrance you are only told that this is an exhibition of Mary Barnes' work and that she was born in 1923 and died in 2001. Most of the paintings are not given titles, or explained. Knowing more about Mary and her paintings would have helped. Mary was a nurse who went into a Carmelite convent in Wales in 1951, had a breakdown and, after periods in conventional mental hospitals, entered an unconventional community where she was allowed to be as mad as she wanted. She doodled in her own shit and, being encouraged to use crayons instead, discovered that she was a brilliant artist.

The main part of the exhibition is made of about twenty-four of her paintings from the period in the community (1965-1970) to the 1990s. It also has her tin trunk of work, and some drawings from it, photographs of some incidents in her life, and a few of her poems. You can also listen, on headphones, to a play of her screaming. We made notes from which we are constructing an unofficial catalogue, to help other visitors, at <http://studymore.org.uk/marybarn.htm>

A poem in black letters on the white wall of the first room is painful: It speaks of her friends "biting of chunks of my flesh". It is also forgiving: "and still I LOVE them, for they are my Friends".

Walking through the two rooms of the gallery and sitting down for coffee, what are our first impressions of what we have seen?

Mary is expressional: Very open about her feelings, which is something not everyone would be able to do. To go through the feeling of each of these paintings as part of your life is extraordinary. Going through distress, she is able to recognise the sources of energy in her life. There are happy vibrant colours when paintings are relating with other people. An example is one called Joe and Shree 1995, which you can buy as a large card. Some of the other pictures can also be bought as postcards or cards.



In a painting with impressions of water and fire we noticed a form like that of a woman, floating calmly on the surface of a river.

Dina was impressed by how Mary's paintings and poems showed an ability to express her feelings.

"If I could have expressed what I was

feeling so openly, I might have overcome a lot of issues". "Because you put the feelings outside you, or because you shared them with other people?" "I think because I shared them."

We both thought that expressing feelings so openly could lead to us learning we can be accepted, but that it could also lead to stigma: a sign setting us apart for rejection. Whichever it is, sharing and then reflecting on other people's responses can lead to self-clarification. Mary asked why other people in the community did not want her paintings all over the place, and her doctor suggested it was because her paintings were too powerful for them to live with. Dina felt the same and decided to take only her memories home, not postcards or a book of Mary's paintings, but we have bought some to show at the next meeting of the Survivors History Group on Wednesday 25.3.2015 from 1pm to 5pm at Together, 12 Old Street, London, EC1V 9BE Perhaps we will see you there?

Dina Ibrahim and Andrew Roberts 12.2.2015

The Mary Barnes exhibition is at the Nunnery Gallery Bow Arts Trust, 183 Bow Road, London, E3 2SJ from 15 January to 29 March 2015.
Opening Hours: Tuesday - Sunday 10am-5pm