Phosphenes of Qualia

A glass fine art exhibition

Xavier Hilts White
School of Health and Social Care
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**Forward**

Introducing an Artist in Residence, as part of London South Bank University’s School of Health and Social Care, has been a process of discovery. Tirsa Couto, a Learning Disability Nursing student, had an enterprise idea to encourage people living with a long term disability to create art as part of her ‘valuing the person’ initiative.

The School of Health and Social Care was also establishing a People’s Academy, for people with a lived experience of health and social care to join School staff as valued University members. These initiatives led to a meeting at the Bethlem Gallery in July 2015 with Beth Elliot, the Gallery Curator, and Xavier White. The ideas and shared philosophy that had begun to form could not be halted. Professor Warren Turner, as Pro Vice Chancellor / Dean of the School approved our concept for introducing HSC’s first Artist in Residence.

Xavier White has overcome enormous personal trauma; surviving a near fatal head injury in 1985. This residency has challenged him and the University, in how best to incorporate his ‘quirky, post head-injury, radical outsiderness’ (artist’s own words) into a large, conventional, education institution. His life experiences exude into his art pieces with humility, humour and passion in equal measure, exploring the dark and light of life’s encounters. Staff and students remain curious as his exhibition pieces expand across the University site.

This glass art exhibition, *Phosphenes of Qualia*, is a fitting end to a year of exploration. Xavier exhibits pieces that explore and explain elements of his life-long interest in neurology, brain structure, how the mind influences our thoughts, human actions and emotions. He has created some beautiful poignant imagery.

The exhibition brings together Xavier’s ongoing fascination with the mind, the brain, long term potentiation and neuroplasticity. He plays with ideas and imagery of neuro-chemical-transmitters; seeking a suitable metaphor to reveal the complexity of hidden activity taking place in our brains.

The displays chosen for the exhibition aim to replicate and capture a retrospective through the use of ‘curio-cabinets’, as if displaying pieces of psychiatric/medical history. We follow Xavier’s own process of mind mapping across the residency year, including exerts from his sketch books and his creative art processes in different stages of development. The personal qualia, of a craftsman’s auto-ethnography reveals itself in Xavier’s approach to his individual pieces as they take form.

A series of stained glass ‘Blessed’ pieces form the central element of the display area. Each ‘Blessed’ piece is individually unique, yet follows the same template. Rather like us as human beings. We invite you to explore and experience the Phosphenes of Qualia as insight into how our minds remain central to who we are as unique individuals.

*Professor Sally Hardy*
Head of Mental Health and Learning Disabilities
School of Health and Social Care, LSBU
During my year as Artist in Residence at London South Bank University, I have been introduced to the notion of auto-ethnography; a kind of academic mythology, a personal learning journey, and a chance for personal story telling. Rather like mythology, story telling has longevity, sharing information and purpose; exploring, exposing and gaining new meaning from the stimulations, inspirations, paths, choices and demons of our lives. Auto-ethnography also offers a reading of people’s personal qualia.

Maybe, I should start with a previous collective exhibition ‘Cohedia, wish you were here. Xx’, at the Bethlem Gallery, (February, 2015) which brought me here. Continuing my story, moving forward with my wishes, in a Utopic year.... in an attempt to fit in, an attempt to find a routine, create new works, obtain some routine. I wanted to develop my craft in glass. The residency offered an enormous challenge from the outset, as an outside artist, moving towards the inside. So what of my own Qualia, on this road to Utopia (2016 being 500 years of Thomas Moore’s book) via Cohedia?

The process of using objects and materials collected over time has been recycled in this new exhibition as part of My Human Campaign. I came with baggage, so to speak. My creative energies continued to worry away at this potential for a security, directly opposing my personal vulnerabilities. I aimed to change my chaotic working patterns embedded from prior experience. All art is practice William Morris said, in this I think of the Long Term Potentiation required to craft a work. Skills are not merely mechanical and easily learned: they threaten self-expression, creativity, imagination. Art has become a quick fix for commenting upon contemporary society; theory rules practice as never before.

We all have our own theory of mind...we all operate in our own way, developing and producing a very personal production and theory of mind as we try to understand our place in the world, our way of relating to other human beings that come in and out of our lives.

Like the neuroscientist, Richard G Morris’s rat experiment (explained more fully in my Open Studio’s speech, December, 2016) with Blessed I found where the platform is, now I would hope with repetition / praxis the Long Term Potentiation (LTP) of working in the safe space of the old chocolate room, (in the basement of the LSBU Bakery School, room J003) will come and my mind will be able to meditate more fully on these issues.

Let me tell you about qualia...The qualia of making.

How process and content are interdependent and mutually enriching; how the artist can use the communal culture of discovery, invention, innovation, technique and insight to transform their own self-expression becomes part of an internal dialogue you have whilst making. Deciding and exploring options, lines, best fit, worst fit, what becomes a form then a composition. Processing information through handling and working with the different materials, physically interacting with them is for me a form of qualia. The qualia of how neurological activity interacts with a vast constellation of synapses firing and responding to those external stimuli internally.

Glass is a medium that represents a good metaphor and tool to represent the mind. It’s windows and lenses, it’s brittleness and fragility. As with a window, we are expected to look up and through, rather than down and in, experiencing a Qualia in itself, using those internal constellations (Phosphenes) that light up, shape and colour our experiences. This exhibition entitled Phosphenes of Qualia, explores the unconscious acts within our brain and how they becoming visible actions, representation of the art, as a qualia of the maker.

My long-term interest in the brain, stems from personal experience of a near death head injury.
My art uses my brain to investigate the brain. A blancmange like organ inside all of us, that can imagine the vastness of the universe and it’s own processes of thought.

The exhibition has become a catharsis; an auto-ethnographic process. I call it the journey of what I am going through as part of the residency. It is great when the genii are coming out of the walls to inspire me, but it has mostly been an isolating paradoxical journey of discomfort and discovery. I am processing years of acquired, selected, inspirational objects to create a series of glass sculptural pieces. These have been cluttering my home and my mind as each represent a variety of activities, moods and emotions that take place between the sulcus and gyrus of our brains. Having the residency has enabled me to find space to create.

I am attempting to expose works around the theme of Qualia, as individual instances of subjective conscious experience.

This is a theme I have been thinking about for a while now, as my interest in the hard problem of how our mind interacts with experience and movement. How neurons and chemicals affect an emotional response, or physical actions. These are my meditations on neurology and the hard problem of consciousness.

Come and see Xavier’s phosphenes; the exciters and inhibitors brought to us by action potentials!

Xavier White

Artist in Residence

London South Bank University 2016/7
**Phosphenes of Qualia**

Xavier’s working practices used in producing new art inspired by his residency are on display in this glass art exhibition entitled, Phosphenes of Qualia.

‘Phosphenes of Qualia are my progressive processes; occurring in the brain as a series of repetitions, a neural Long Term Potentiation which is an essential part of our craftsmanship and skill’.

His work draws from the past to reveal a modern day fascination with the mind-body connection, exploring aspects of the brain and it’s interaction with mind, body and spirit.

The collection forms an auto-ethnographic exploration of the processing of Xavier’s working practices. It offers an artistic expression of neurology, from it’s historic revelations, in the areas of phrenology and psychiatry, to contemporary notions of neuroscience.

Xavier uses a palette of collected curiosities, combined with his life’s experiences, obsessions and observations. Each of these aspects exhibited throughout the University campus are a result of his experimental residency year. The creation of the exhibition has in itself been an auto-ethnographic journey, evidence of which is mapped out through use of numerous sketch book entries and a variety of works in progress.

Xavier writes:

“This has been a cathartic process, an accumulative expression of my thoughts, findings and feelings, drawn together as part of the residency, pulling my craft into an ordered representation. Realising years of acquired selected objects and observations forms this series of glass pieces; influencing their shapes, expressions moods and emotions.

In this new exhibition I am attempting to expose works of individual subjective conscious experience. This is a theme I have been thinking and working with for a while, as the hard problem of consciousness, (i.e Qualia) and its impact on mental health. It’s like a bridge between the physicality neurons and a meta-physicality of ideas (internal) coming to fruition in my art pieces or in our day to day actions and decisions (external). My previous research around cognitive aesthetics led to the Verrelic Spires and installations deepening my fascination with neurology and cognition.

The ‘Blessed’ pieces are central to the exhibition. Beginning with complex structures repeating the template pattern, taking my craft through Long Term Potentiation I have moved towards a distilled representation, more ethereal like thoughts. Each Blessed piece presents different personalities and reflects responses to life’s slings and arrows of outrageous fortune that shape, scar and mold us.”

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**Blessed: Phosphenes of Qualia (2017)**

Cut glass, sandblasted mirror, leaded
Phosphene of Qualia

‘I’ll ne’er believe a madman until I see his brain’
The Tempest: William Shakespeare (White, 2017)

Engraved (blackened) glass mirror

LTP: Long term potentiation repetition (2017)
Brain stem shaped cut glass and mirror

What are words worth? (2017)
Engraved (blackened) cut glass

Neuro-tinglers: Phosphenes (2017)
Sandblasted and blackened cut glass
Phrenology

The notion of Phrenology is very similar to a stained-glass window, where individual facets make up a whole. As with phrenology these different facets represent aspects of personality identified and positioned in separate areas of the brain.

Phrenology, although now identified as an unsubstantiated theory, was initially claimed as the ‘only true science of the brain’; using theories derived from Viennese physician Franz Joseph Gall (1758 - 1828). Popular in England during the Victorian era, phrenology and craniology (measuring the shape and size of the skull) continued to influence how people understood behaviour and personal characteristics.

Phrenology has terms still in use today in our vocabulary that attribute certain characteristics to describe a person. For example, ‘thick skulled’ (as someone who is slow to learn or understand social etiquette) and ‘well rounded’ (as someone who can cope well in different circumstances). The idea of ‘seeing a shrink’, is an American term derived from phrenology for visiting a Psychiatrist; as someone who could ‘shrink’ your ego or any undesirable qualities in a person such as diminishing any mad thoughts or bad behaviours. More recently the phrase ‘shrink’ has been attributed to the physical outcome of shrinking the brain through over reliance and use of antipsychotic medications, and likened to the Amazonian tribes that would shrink heads to prevent someone avenging their death.

From the early 1900’s however, Phrenology was replaced in popularity by Sigmund Freud’s (1856-1939) theory of psychoanalysis which was beginning to influence theories of the mind, as well as increasing interest in understanding the function and anatomy of the brain.

Today, understanding which sections of the brain influence our thoughts and actions, plus how interactive and interdependent these areas are remain a fascination. These fascinations and hidden interconnections are visually displayed and explored using glass, as the main medium to create shapes and representations of brain anatomy, function and highlighting different inter-related regions. Various glass pieces are transposed to mimic phrenology diagrams.

As shown in the exhibition each manifestation and compartmentalisation of the brain can take a unique and interactive exploration of what goes on inside an individual’s head, their thoughts and hidden levels of consciousness revealing themselves through chemical interplay. Three dimensional sculptures give rise to how different aspects and the shapes of the skull and areas of the brain are thought to reveal themselves in a person’s behaviours, moods and actions.
Phrenology

Neurotransmitters: A chemical crash helmet (2017)
Engraved (blackened) cut glass, pencil on paper

Colours of Phrenology (2017)
Cut coloured glass

Pollock Brain (2016)
Paint and Ink on paper

Dancing Gyrus and Sulcus (2017)
Paint on cut patterned (arctic) glass
Phosphenes

Phosphenes are the perception of light when there is no external stimulus. At it’s simplest form, they are unseen lights in the mind, derived from the Greek work phos – for light, and phainein, meaning to show - as a manifestation of lights.

Phosphenes can exist in a variety of form and are subject to how our minds and neural transmitters interpret information, through the visual cortex, producing kaleidoscopic manifestations.

The phrase, ‘seeing stars’ is commonly used to describe the internal imagery of lights following a blow to the head. Neuroscientists have created fascinating images of the internal ‘lights’ capturing how neurological transmitters interplay as the brain is stimulated.

A developmental significance to Phosphenes is suggested by a study, conducted by Rhoda Kellogg at the Golden Gate Nursery School in San Francisco, of some 300,000 scribblings made by young children of different ethnic origins. Children between the ages of two and four, are capable of manipulating a pencil but not of making naturalistic pictures. The children’s drawn figures have a distinct phosphene character (Kellogg R. 1965:1129-1130).

Oster (1970:83) points out that this type of study may be of some interest to art historians, they might consider the possible effects of phosphenes as an ‘intrinsic’ source of inspiration for people of many different societies when they are speculating on relations and cross influences among primitive cultures. To date it seems that archaeologists, anthropologists and art historians have merely touched on this or used it in only a small and specific area of study, not utilising its universal potential (Oster 1970:83).
Qualia

Philosopher, Daniel C Dennet says of Qualia –

‘it is an unfamiliar term that could not be more familiar to us, the way things seem to us’. I work with this in my images and materials to create the pieces for the exhibition, enhancing viewer’s perspectives and understanding of how the brain works and interacts with our minds.

Qualia are thought to be instances of experience, as subjective or qualitative properties of that experience. What does it feel like to witness an experience or interaction? Philosophers describe qualia as the introspective elements of an experience. As phenomenal aspects of our mental lives such as perception and bodily sensations; feeling an itch, felt moods and their associated physiological responses and reactions such as lust, fear, passion (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2015).

Strawson (1994) explains these as ‘thought-experiences’ or as an ‘inner conscience - inner consciousness’. Others limit qualia to a physiological response to external and internal stimuli, explained in relation to how we perceive and respond to colour.

How a person reacts and responds to what they observe is an important element of mental health practice. Miller et al (1989) state that

‘emotion holds a cardinal place. it has to be observed, recorded and it will occur in the observer and the observed. It is not a distraction or contaminant. Correctly grasped the emotional factor is an indispensable tool to be used in the service of greater understanding’ (Miller et al, 1989; 3).

Conventionally, an observer aims to remain impartial, putting aside any physiological response or feelings in an attempt to record accurately what they see, as events occur. Whereas in mental health, remaining completely objective is not considered possible, as human beings are responsive and inter-relational. Our inner emotive responses occur naturally responding and reacting to what is being observed. These emotive responses form the essence of a methodological process in understanding the interpersonal psychodynamics of a helping relationship (Brown & Pedder,1991).

Psychoanalytical methods of observation are closely related to the clinical method of psychoanalysis, seeking to identify a holistic coherence, where not only is behaviour important, but the person’s character, their relationships, conflicts and tensions are all equally important.

Psychoanalytical observation methods, like those of anthropologists or ethnographic scientists, requires the observer to have in mind a range of conceptions and latent expectations that give coherence and shape to their experiences. Remaining ‘open minded’ and receptive to the qualia (as intuitive emotive responses) arising from particular situations and events can be a difficult experience for the subjective observer. Whereas, paying attention to one’s inner consciousness (or inner conscience), as you observe and engage with the exhibition may stimulate new experiences and interpretations of the glass art on display.

For some, time and space at a critical distance from the material may enable greater insights, for others, this can be immediate. We ask you remain open to new experiences as they come into view and to mind.
Blessed are the cracked, for they let in the light (Groucho Marx)

Blessed: are the cracked (2016)
Cut glass, leaded

Blessed: Phosphenes of Qualia (2017)
Cut glass, sandblasted mirror, leaded

Blessed: Beyond Blue (2017)
Cut glass, leaded

Blessed: Purple Haze (2017)
Cut glass, leaded

Blessed: in the making (2017)
Cut glass & mirror, nails & lead

Blessed: Between the Petals (2017)
Cut glass, sandblasted mirror leaded

Blessed: Texture brings depth (2017)
Cut glass, leaded

Blessed: Reflective Catharsis (2017)
Cut glass & mirror leaded

Blessed: For they let in the light (2017)
Cut glass, leaded
Original ideas of asylum by Xavier White (2016)

Concepts of asylum for me are around environments and expressions of how humans interact. There is asylum in living in harmony with our environment. I love the ideas of concepts, messages and aesthetics. The messages I am working with often have multiple meaning, tackling hard problems such as unconscious processes as well as human encounters that promote healing. What I see as the issues we need to address in modern society are: mental health, rehabilitation, wellbeing, education, literacy, housing, green energy, road safety; how we utilise waste and upcycling, as waste of an item and/or waste of the person.

My work steps deeper into the notion of mental asylum, it’s about what goes on inside our heads, the neurology, the making of the person and our inner worlds. My work juxtaposes historical concepts of asylum, by looking at resilience and compassion and this is how the Bedlam Asylum and Beyond at the Wellcome Trust exhibition ends, on a more positive goal. This is what I am working on at the moment, through the Dance of Caring Persons and the Shields of Resilience which I hope will help future health practitioners cope and manage their own asylum. (http://www.lsbu.ac.uk/about-us/news/artist-residence-exhibition)

When I was repairing the Chapel windows at the Bethlem Royal Hospital, a man would come in and play the piano, he played Chopin, which is a piece I had used in my Verrilic Spires movie (www.xavierwhite.weebly.com). Music can be asylum. Creativity too.

I like the qualia involved in the creative head space as an internal dialogue. My working practices are quite chaotic, but out of that comes works that explore my meditations around the subjects. I am working on a metaphor of dance and movement, how shapes and forms create a waterfall of connections using whatever I have around that helps me find an expression of the subject areas; bringing in new aspects, realisations and additions (as qualia), widening out meaning and deepening understanding, to arrive at a finished piece that challenges people’s thinking. I would like people to take away their own discussion about the aesthetics of the piece in question, to enjoy their own qualia, as similar of a new reading of what I had experienced in the meditation of making the piece and its discussions, aesthetics and meanings that arise.

I find sanctuary in immersing myself in making. The difficult thing is focusing and getting into that phase of making. I created Cohedia, a mind expanding city scape, as a foundation for my arts education and as a short film (https://youtube.com/watch?v=XmqxrBtEnfU), based on my interests and obsessions. It was supposed to be a backbone that helped me deepen my understanding of things I was interested in but it helped me with my own mental health during my university degree course. Maybe I will return there one day. Cohedia’s University of Understanding’s maquette and Windows of Opportunity is on display at London South Bank University.

I am a head injury survivor and found the pressures of life during my Bachelor’s degree stress inducing and I needed a safe space to explore my learning processes and the cognitive steps I needed to keep me safe – in my own asylum. Setting myself a problem to consider that would then be a safe space for others to learn.

I have been blessed to survive a traumatic head injury and am now blessed with a safe space to explore my research further, improving the care for mental health of our community, as artist in residence at the School of Health and Social Care, London South Bank University, where I am hosting a series of Blessed Open Studios during December 2016. (http://www.lsbu.ac.uk/about-us/news/artist-residence-open-studios-event)
My Human Campaign

Campaigning for humanity with artworks that present understandings of our individual neurological and emotional behaviour, responses and interactions (White, 2016).

Xavier White has embarked on a year’s residency at London South Bank University (2016/7).

A survivor of a near fatal head injury, when hit by a car whilst cycling, he has had to re-learn all his life skills. He works around the around; focusing the residency on the human interactions in the context health and social care re-examining a focus on creative practices that promote connectedness and reciprocity that support ‘mutual recovery' in terms of mental health and well-being for all involved in a human encounter.

You will be compassionate with lots of patience and the ability to remain calm under pressure, with reserves of mental stamina as well as an inquiring mind and willingness to learn about best practice in this field of nursing. Exceptional people skills and communicating clearly with people from different backgrounds is essential. The main resource mental health nurses have to draw upon is themselves and how they engage effectively with service users.

Activities and installations:

- Think About It… installed in K2 café street side window + MY Human Campaign poster
- First Steps + Across the Board + Robert Walks through Water, Chess OBE (3,4)
  + Verrelic spires, walkway between K2 and the Keyworth Centre.
- Synaptic Senses (x6) glass sculptures raised on plinths positioned around roofs of revolving door in K2 reception area.
- Stair Lifts (K2 white staircase)
- Windows of Opportunity realisations (Keyworth reception area)
- University of Understanding maquette (K2 reception area)
- Verrelic Spires (Perry Library and Clarence Centre reception areas)

Outside In Art Blog

https://outsideinpallant.wordpress.com/2017/02/06/xavier-white-lsbu-artist-in-residence

(accessed, 15/3/2017)

Published paper:


Workshop series developed by Xavier during the residency year exploring compassion and resilience for all teams and individuals working in the caring professions.

1: The Dance of caring persons (After Pross)

The Dance of Caring persons captures and integrates creative learning, thoughtful use of self, and physicality through gestures and movement in promoting effective person centred and therapeutic interactions between health care professionals and their clients. The original dance of caring persons is recognised as; a relational model that supports a way of being with others that respects and explicitly values each person; including how people relate to each other in teams, and in organisations (Pross, Hilton, Boykin and Thomas, 2011: 28). The purpose of the ‘Dance of Caring Persons’ conference presentation was to promote human interactions that are meaningful and therapeutic for both parties in a caring exchange.

2: Shields of Compassion and Resilience

The workshop will guide participants through the use of symbolic imagery used on shields to promote compassion and resilience in the workplace. Heraldic Symbols are given a contemporary slant exploring personal attributes, characteristics and visual metaphors in the area of compassion and resilience. Creating your personal shield can then be used to remind yourself of your inner strengths and inherent characteristics that can shield you against the slings and arrows of life.

3: Six-sided patient cubes

The workshop takes you through a creative exploration of the person you are caring for. Use each side of the cube to represent for the person key areas of their life, loves and interests. Understanding the person through person centred practice goes back to the writings of Martin Buber (1936), who writes about I and Thou, philosophical writings help to articulate the relationship between self and other. His work still resonates in the modern world as mindfulness gains empirical evidence for linking a person’s nature to their physical health and mental wellbeing (Hardy, 2015). To book a workshop please contact the People’s Academy at LSBU: hscpa@lsbu.ac.uk
Xavier White: The Old Chocolate Room (J003) LSBU

Melancholia: A self portrait
Bethlem Gallery (White, 2016)

Cohedia Pageant Barrow (White, 2016)
Found object, wood, paint vinyl sticker & help from James Whitten
Blessed Endings: Blessed Beginnings

Future areas of work and a phrenology of possibilities

A summary of the residency 2016/7.

The story of this journey is a process of rehabilitation. As the first Artist in Residence, for the School of Health and Social Care, it has been one big experiment, having to find a suitable working space amongst offices and classrooms, and finding the right head space alongside the right level of learning support (as a head injury survivor).

A cat’s cradle has emerged, rather than just a mess of knots which has allowed me to become a functional team member of staff at LSBU. The residency then has provided me a secure place. I have a function, an identity and importantly a platform from which to stop swimming (Morris’s rat experiment). With stimulation, support, demands, deadlines, and a desire to satisfy the opportunity has given me, I have aimed to apply my creative potentials more systematically.

As the residency ends, (all too quickly) I move onto other opportunities the residency year has led me towards. For example, the Court Diversion Project with Dr Eddie Chaplin, providing art based interventions for people with learning disabilities. Through joining forces with the LSBU People’s Academy I can utilize the workshops I have devised, as a series of wellbeing interventions for staff and students that has emerged during my time with the School of Health and Social care. Something I can give back to those who helped me back in the neuro-rehab unit. I was tasked with bringing a creative understanding to complex terms like compassion and resilience by looking at the craft of caring as it is for the health care workforce.

The workshops on offer are
i) The Dance of Caring persons
ii) The Shields of Compassion and
iii) The Person Centred Story Cube.

I plan for this series of creative workshops to be taken forward, expanded and shared around South London and the Maudsley, for staff and students to benefit from, learning together.

Ongoing are my continuing links with the Bethlem Gallery at the Bethlem Royal Hospital, doing great work to showcase the art works …And

Finally, my big ambition is to bring together the People’s Academy, Bethlemites, LSBU Students as a posse to take the Cohedia pageant barrow, outwards, towards the Thames, as a welcome to Maria Balshaw as the new Director of the Tate… (my leading lady on BBC4 Artsnight, Museum of the Year award shortlists, 2016).

Thank you one, thank you all

Xavier
Royal Bethlem Hospital’s Museum of the Mind shortlisted for Museum of the Year 2016

Promotional shot with Xavier White and Museum staff

with permission from photographer Rankin.
Special thanks go to:

Warren Turner, Angela Morris Winmill, Sally Hardy

And all nurses and cyclists everywhere