

It has never been a family subject, the subject of obsession and mental illness; it, however, has always been apparent in our society. Some people see it on the streets, in the strangers passing by. Some see it in social situations, in school or in friends. Some even see it in their families and close loved ones. The topic of mental illness has always been a taboo, an uncomfortable topic of discussion at the dinner table. One that has a mental illness is shunned in my culture; it is unusual and something to be kept to the self. My actions and motions were observed, everything was recorded: the things that made me happy, things that made me sad, things I obsessed over. Everything was recorded and used as a diagnostic tool.

I have been struggling with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder for much of my life. I have always been a nit-picky person, straightening my shoes at the doorway, lining up my peas on my dinner plate, picking out the carrots in my fried rice, eating the blue M&Ms first. I didn't become obsessed to the point where it was hard to move through daily life until the year of 6<sup>th</sup> grade. I was young and stressed and I would notice everything. I believed the world would end if I didn't wipe off a table; I would be bothered by a crooked edge from across the room; I would count the steps it took to a certain place and be mad if it was too many. I created a pattern for myself and structured all my actions accordingly. I would brush my teeth in two strokes on top five on the bottom six strokes diagonally to the right, and then I would repeat the pattern. These habits made my life very systematic.

I can't say I'm not like that to this day. I still line up my shoes and wipe off my shelves for dust. I still rub sanitizer on my feet before I sleep and I continue to wash my hands five times before I leave the bathroom. I can't eat unless I have counted a certain sequence in my head a couple of times. I haven't changed much. I am obsessed. What is an obsession? What does it mean to have an obsessed mind? What is a compulsion? An obsession can be manifested through a state of mind and a compulsion through art and pattern.

I have always seen the act of making art as a form of expression, I doodled in class, drew on my walls, made silly cards for friends and relatives, but I didn't start doing art as a real form of self-expression until the 9<sup>th</sup> grade when I joined "Artists for Humanity." I painted scenes that I had seen in my everyday life, fantastical images I created from my mind, and sometimes I just put a paintbrush down on wood. But never once had I created art about my obsession with patterns. My OCD has always been a huge part of my life. I believe it is what makes me *me*. It doesn't take over my life; it isn't an obstacle for me. It is a basis on which I live, on which I breathe. Why shouldn't it be focused on in my art? Isn't art a representation of the self?

Obsession can definitely be manifested through mental illness. For example, a mental illness such as OCD:

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), a type of anxiety disorder, is a potentially disabling illness that traps people in endless cycles of repetitive thoughts and behaviors. People with OCD are plagued by recurring and distressing thoughts, fears, or images (obsessions) they cannot control. The anxiety (nervousness) produced by these thoughts leads to an urgent need to perform certain rituals or routines (compulsions). The compulsive rituals are performed in an attempt to prevent the obsessive thoughts or make them go away. (Web MD)

In *The Center Cannot Hold*, Elyn R. Saks discusses her OCD and schizophrenia as it ran havoc over her life. She found herself struggling through life and constantly unable to function, “Sitting on my bed I rocked back and forth, moaning in fear and isolation” (Saks 138). Saks was a complete wreck.

One can pull similarities from the definition of OCD and the definition of obsession. As defined in an online dictionary, obsession is where a compulsive thought, usually unwanted, is accompanied by anxiety and impulses (The Free Dictionary). In these definitions there is mention of unwanted feelings, anxiety, and persistent ideas. It is clear that OCD and obsession are closely tied together.

In the case of Elyn R. Saks, she found herself obsessed with certain ideas and morals. She was convinced that by talking she would “spread [her] evil around” (Saks 58). She began to be completely engulfed by her mental illness. “[She] began to live entirely inside it” (Saks 55). Her experiences were terrifying, combined with the active effects of schizophrenia Saks became her worst nightmare every day and night. At night she was “convinced day would never come again” (Saks 61). In the day she described it as

At first, the day is bright enough, the sky is clear, the sunlight warms your shoulders. But soon, you notice a haze beginning to gather around you, and the air feels not quite so warm. After a while, the sun is a dim light bulb behind a heavy cloth, the horizon has vanished into a gray mist, and you feel a thick dampness in your lungs as you stand cold and wet, in the afternoon dark. (Saks 35)

She was alone and dark in the midst of light. She couldn’t go long without thinking that she was alone and in the dark. She felt trapped and she didn’t know where to go. The idea of being evil was her most recurring obsession. Through this obsession her social life started to decline as she constantly blurted out a stream of inappropriate words, threatening people and upsetting them. She couldn’t control what came out of her mouth because she was convinced that another was thinking for her. After her outbursts, she convinced herself that “Everyone [will] know the truth of my worthlessness, my evil” (Saks 138). Her obsession with the idea “that beings in the sky controlled [her] thoughts and were poised to hurt [her]” (Saks 91) is what ultimately drove her mental illness to its climax. Saks was beginning to become more and more obsessed with her delusions. Her obsession was beginning to become crippling, not allowing her to live her life. She fell deep into mental illness. “[She] began to live entirely inside it” (Saks 55).

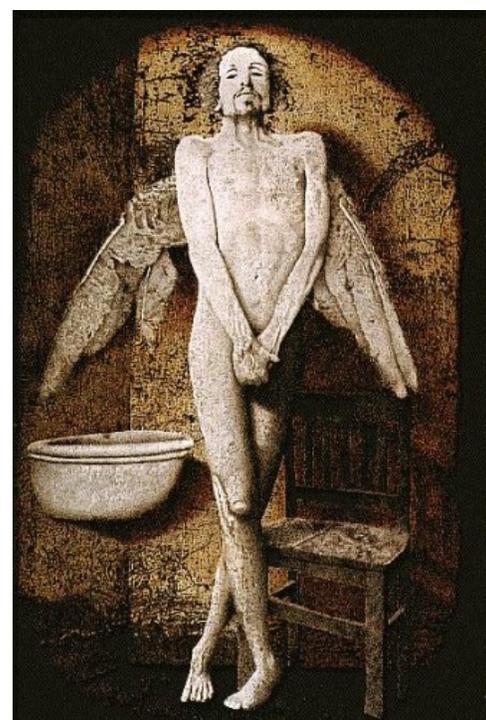
Obsession through OCD is sometimes a crippling illness that causes the person to undergo pain and suffering; many times the illness isn’t detected or isn’t treated until much later in life. In many cases of OCD, the person realizes that their thoughts and behaviors are senseless, that they are ridiculous (Psych Central). Their thoughts become obsessive, and soon those thoughts become obsessions. Though it’s true that obsession can be categorized as part of mental illness, one doesn’t have to have a mental illness to have an obsession.



An artist by the name of Joel Lorand produced art that has aspects of symmetry and distortion in the mix. In many cases of OCD, the person is found obsessing over an order.

Symmetry is a common compulsion within patients, since the idea of being neat and precise is a concern of many patients with the illness. Many of his paintings are shown on exhibit of Art Brut in Gugging. Gugging is a psychiatric clinic in the outskirts of Vienna, Austria (Gugging). Many of the patients there are known to be “outsider artists.” Joel Lorand’s pieces feature aspects that may seem sinister because they are different; one looks at his pieces allured by an atmosphere of mystery and allusion. In his piece *Father*, Joel Lorand uses pencils and crayon to create a piece that is humanlike but still maintains a sinister feel in his approach. It shows complicated line work, work that requires detail and precision. Lorand has portrayed his father as rugged and scary; by using colours that are dull and flesh-toned Lorand makes his drawing look morbid and unusual. Joel Lorand’s connection to his father is non-existent “I don't know who my father was which perhaps explains why I have always had a certain psychological fragility and instability” (Outsider Art). His art piece demonstrates the complex feelings he has harbored for his father. Lorand mentions that he has been struggling with a psychological fragility, relating his obsession in his art to mental struggle.

Charles Benefiel is another artist that is included in the outsider art category. He sees his art as a way of “fixing externally the negative aspects of his life” (Outsider Art). Benefiel has severe OCD and his pieces are usually not planned out and just done, he starts with a series of dots and lines and because he doesn’t plan his pieces out he maintains control of his lines (Outsider Art). Most of his art is an expressive physical form of his own emotions and troubles. In his piece *Wingman* it is apparent that there is some distressed feeling surrounding the man with wings, the details are precise and look as if each mark was made deliberately, the piece as a whole is calm and melancholy, the man is standing in an almost graceful stance, but seen in the stiffness of the body it is clear that the man is tense. Benefiel’s art usually comes out of his OCD attacks; given this, the tenseness of the body can be interrupted as an expression of Benefiel’s emotion as he made it. Because Benefiel’s work is an expression of anxiety and stress, much of his art is hidden from view in his home; he has destroyed some of his work at least once (Outsider Art). Benefiel works without an audience in mind. He doesn’t think of showing his work to other people. In fact, most of his work is centered on the expulsion of emotion from within. His 1 through his art; his obsession is represented through the beautiful art piece, but also the ugly process which leaves Benefiel feeling satisfied...but only until he has to do it again.



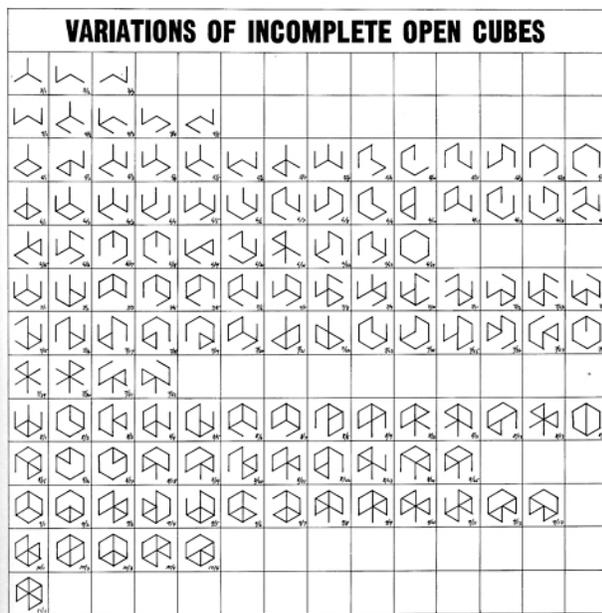
Charles Benefiel- “Wingman”

One of the most celebrated “outsider artists” is Henry Darger. The unusual part about Darger’s work is that it was discovered after he died. Darger was a janitor in a Catholic church. He started work there at age 16 and proceeded to work there up to his death (Prokopoff). His work was discovered in his room after his death. In the room it was discovered that he had written about 19,000 pages of a story that was entitled *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in what is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion* or the *Realms of the Unreal* for short (Prokopoff). Most of his stories were written by hand on paper. Darger was in the process of typing the manuscript when he passed. What Darger is famous for is not his writing but the amazing watercolours he left behind. These

watercolours were companions to the story and some were almost 10 feet long and depicted wild scenes from his story. Many were glimpses into the *Realms of the Unreal*, girls were portrayed with male private parts, and they were seen running around in fields in some and fighting off people in others. Darger was a lonely child; he lost his father early on and was enlisted into a mental institution. When he finally got out, he started working at the church and attended mass every day. Darger didn't have many friends and barely any relatives; he lived his life in solitude. His work is deemed as the most well-known outsider art because of the unusual circumstances that surround his art work. Darger's work is a representation of his mental state; he was isolated and alone, he shunned other people and kept to himself, he didn't care about being with other people because he had his fantasy, his art. His mental illness is what pushed him to make all the art that he made.

Obsession in art isn't only represented through individuals with a mental illness; many artists work with personal systems that may or may not be conceived through mental illness. Some artists just work in patterns and methods that are repeated many times, the act of which is obsessive itself. The act of doing something over and over, each time following a specific pattern and not straying far from it, is a form of an obsession.

One artist who exhibits obsessions through pattern and systems is Sol Lewitt. In many of



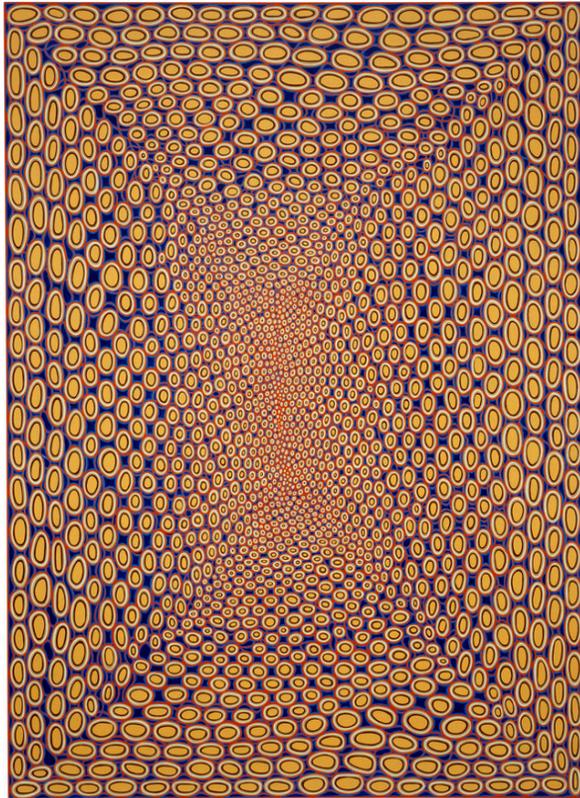
Sol Lewitt- "Variations of Incomplete Open Cubes"

his pieces, there is a set of instructions that guide the viewer through the piece. Many of his pieces are done in the gallery by people other than himself. He creates his system and passes it on to others. The others figure out and create the piece in his place. Many of his pieces require meticulous calculations of details. In his piece *Variations of Incomplete Open Cubes* each row is separated by only a small detail, usually a line or dash. Sol Lewitt is very well-known for his work in systems and patterns. His work is calculated and purposeful. He is known especially for his wall pieces. In his series of wall drawings it is clear that Sol Lewitt works from a system. In the drawing number 51, he connects all corners and points with lines, and from that, creates a mysterious line work; from something so

simple Sol Lewitt creates a piece that is simple yet intricate because of its brilliance. It takes a very steady and meticulous mind to be able to draw so many lines and not get tired and give up. By using systems Sol Lewitt has successfully represented an obsessive process without being directly connected to a mental illness.

Another artist that values patterns and systems is James Siena: "His art is typically created through a series of self-imposed constraints also sometimes referred to as visual algorithms" (James Siena). His work is very much involved with line work and a repetition of pattern. His pieces incorporate line detail and precision to create art. He uses methods and constricts himself to a certain point; when there is the basis of a pattern, he repeats it. His work

is seen as obsessive through the constant pattern of skill and lines. Siena does not attempt to stray from his pattern work once he has laid one down, making his work very engulfing. For example, in his piece *Battery* it is clear that there is a certain aspect to imagery. The shapes are repeated in what looks like a square pattern, each shape is meticulously made out. Siena “wanted to make drawings and works that act as machines. The way they act as machines is you have to find your way into them and find your way out of them. As you undo the making of them they come to life” (MOMA).



I am inspired to use patterns in my own work. I am fascinated with the association of numbers. What do numbers look like when they aren't in my head? What do my own systems look like when they are physically in front of me? Since I was a young child I have struggled a lot with the numbers, my OCD controlled my thoughts and my movements. Art is my release; it is where I can finally express my obsession and my anxiety.

Obsession isn't just associated with mental illness; it doesn't have to be a taboo thing in society. It is shown commonly in artwork, through pattern and a precise way of creating art. It's ironic to think about how commonly obsession is seen through the perception that it is bad, messy, and something to turn a blind eye to when it can also be represented through a patterning process, a process that is neat and aesthetically pleasing to the eye.

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