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Photographer Nick Knight donated his 2008 piece "Lily" to the project.
IMAGE courtesy of Nick Knight

NEWS

Hospital Rooms

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When London-based curator Niamh White and artist Tim A Shaw visited a close friend in an English psychiatric ward, they were immediately struck by the unit’s sterility. As visually oriented people, they felt the austere interiors might not be conducive to a quick recovery, particularly for patients with creative or artistic inclinations.

Fired by their experience at the ward, a year ago White and Shaw conceived of a project called Hospital Rooms. Artists and designers would collaborate to create permanent museum-quality artwork and installations in mental health care units throughout the UK. “Our expertise is about making spaces exciting or interesting,” says Shaw. “For us it was common sense that making a better environment is beneficial if you’re feeling mentally or emotionally or physically unwell.”

This month, the project reaches first realisation. White and Shaw have gathered a roster of ten respected artists and designers, who are currently beginning installation at the Phoenix Unit of Springfield University Hospital in Tooting, south London. Built in 2005, the wood-panelled psychiatric rehabilitation ward securely houses up to 18 patients with diagnoses of schizophrenia. The designers set to transform the space include [SHOWstudio’s Nick Knight](#), 2015 Turner Prize-winning architecture collective Assemble, landscape architect Joh Bates, and design and architecture practice Acconci Studio, among others. It’s a diverse mix of disciplines, tailored so that each participant can work on a different aspect of the ward.

It is important that the installed work serves as a more than just window dressing. Among the installations is a large wooden notice board designed by Assemble in the homegrown and rustic style of their [Granby Workshop project in Liverpool](#), which patients and staff can use to organise the week’s agenda. Landscape designer Joh Bates will convert the outdoor space with a permanent covered pergola and a selection of non-toxic plants. Photographer Nick Knight’s vibrantly coloured floral and fashion photographs will be printed directly onto foamex and pasted on the walls. Shaw will create a salon hang wall in the dining area to serve as a gallery space for work by the patients, many of whom have fine art and design backgrounds. White and Shaw emphasised communality in their briefings with the designers, asking them to refocus the rooms away from television screens and towards patients and staff.

“I think it’s very difficult to create a clinical environment that is homely,” says White. “With residential units that have service users that live there, the challenge is to make the space more liveable, more interesting and stimulating. We’d like to see how environmental conditions can be beneficial and put that to the test with introducing high quality artworks to the space.” In this they have been supported by Dr Emma Whicher, medical director at South West London and St George’s Mental Health NHS Trust, who was integral in organising NHS’s involvement in the project. In Whicher’s view, “involvement in a project like this is really saying that art, the environment and an appreciation of the experience is really important to patients’ wider recovery.”

Unlike many other public service art initiatives, the collaborators in Hospital Rooms could not simply donate pre-existing pieces. Due to the project’s clinical setting, the designers and artists are set a tight brief to ensure that the space remains hygienic, secure and safe for high risk and vulnerable adults. This includes restrictions regarding glass, framing, ligatures, fixtures, toxic plants or anything that could be thrown or used for self-harm. And despite funding from Arts Council England and the Morris Markowe League of Friends, Hospital Rooms’ budget was a departure from the affluent gallery settings that White and Shaw are accustomed to working in. “Here we had to look at how to cost effectively create safe, but also beautiful and stimulating rooms where that hasn’t always been the number one agenda,” says White.

For the team behind Hospital Rooms, this is the very crux of the project. Shaw and White agree that the project is in part about engaging patients in ideas and creative practices that have nothing to do with their diagnoses. Many of the designers’ concepts came through continued dialogue with patients and staff, which will influence the artistic outcomes. But White says it’s also about rethinking how societies value certain spaces over others.

“We’re installing work that you might see in the National Portrait Gallery or in the Tate Gallery,” says White. “Those are the spaces that we most revere. So what happens when you treat a space that might be on the periphery in the same manner? And what happens to the people that are in there? We’d like to see how that care translates.” Whicher agrees, saying that while Hospital Rooms and projects like it are integral in destigmatising mental illness, they also show patients that society cares about their recovery. “We’re saying that this is an environment where we value your dignity and we respect you,” says Whicher. “By valuing the environment, we’re valuing the people who inhabit that environment.”

Although only time will allow the curative impact of Hospital Rooms to be assessed, its aims, sensitivity and attention to detail are certainly laudable. Its belief in art for everyone and faith in the positive power of art and design make a refreshing counterpoint to the commercially-led nature of much of the present creative industries. With any luck, the installations at the Springfield University Hospital will be just the beginning.

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