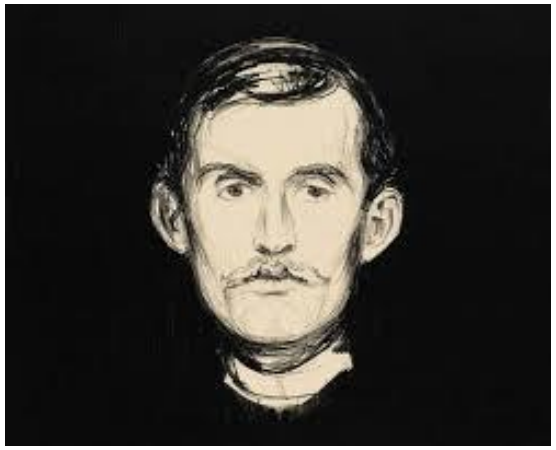
Inside Out: Art and the Mind

By: Rachael Smith

-Mental illness is often a deeply personal struggle, and many people experience it in silence. The ways in which mental illness manifests can vary greatly from person to person, making it difficult for others to fully understand these experiences. This lack of understanding can contribute to stigma, leaving those who struggle with mental illness feeling isolated and misunderstood.

-Art offers a powerful way to convey these complex emotions. This exhibition highlights how artists transform internal struggles into visual experiences. Featuring the works of Edvard Munch, Yayoi Kusama, Frida Kahlo, and Norman Klenicki, the exhibition explores not only how mental illness is represented through art but also how these representations can challenge stereotypes and reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness.



Edvard Munch

Edvard Munch (1863–1944) was a Norwegian painter who played a significant role in Expressionism. Some of his most famous works include *The Scream* and *The Vampire*. Born in Løten, Norway, Munch was the second of five children in a middle-class family. His mother and eldest sister both died of tuberculosis when he was just 15—a loss he later reflected in his painting *The Sick Child*.

Munch showed an interest in drawing from an early age. He received support from the Kristiania Boheme, a circle of artists in Norway. In 1890, he left the group and moved to Paris to further his artistic development.

In his mid-40s, Munch struggled with alcohol abuse and became increasingly concerned about his mental health, eventually admitting himself to a mental institution. He viewed his art as a protective shield against his fears. After receiving treatment, Munch's work took on a more optimistic tone.

The Scream by Edvard Munch (1893) is an Expressionist painting. Expressionism, an early 20th-century European movement, emphasized the depiction of emotions over realistic representation, often using bold colors, swirling forms, and distorted figures. Munch created this work using oil, tempera (a type of paint made with egg yolk), and pastel on cardboard. The painting is characterized by its exaggerated shapes and striking, unnatural colors, all of which convey intense emotional turmoil.

The Scream by Edvard Munch

The Scream shows Munch's internal distress. The warped figure and swirling colors represent intense feelings of dread, panic, and anxiety. The painting depicts a time when Munch was on a walk and was consumed with anxiety; he would later describe the event as "a scream passing through nature."

Throughout his life, Munch struggled with alcoholism, bipolar disorder, and depression. By transforming his personal experiences into art, Munch made invisible emotions visible, allowing his audience to better understand what an anxiety attack can feel like. This representation plays an important role in how society views mental illness. The image could reduce stigma or anxiety and mental illness by normalizing emotional suffering and encouraging empathy, or may even occasion fear of those experiences because of the intensity of the depiction.

Munch made multiple versions of the image, depicting the mood in different ways, but always with unnatural colors suggesting the unnatural distress the figure experienced.

Frida Kahlo

Frida Kahlo (1907–1954) was a Mexican painter known for blending elements of surrealism with traditional folk art. She was born in Coyoacán, Mexico, to a middle-class family; her father was of German-Hungarian descent, and her mother Indigenous.

At the age of six, Kahlo contracted polio, which left her with a permanent limp. Later, she attended the National Preparatory School with the intention of studying medicine, where she met her future husband, the muralist Diego Rivera. Around this time, she was involved in a severe bus accident that caused lifelong injuries and chronic pain.

Kahlo's ongoing health struggles, combined with the difficulties in her marriage, contributed to her having multiple miscarriages and periods of depression. During this time, she turned to art as a form of therapy, using it to process her experiences and transform her physical and emotional pain into powerful, expressive works.

The Broken Column by Frida Kahlo (1944) is a surrealist-influenced painting. Surrealism, a 20th-century art movement, focused on the subconscious mind and explored dreams and emotional experiences through unrealistic and symbolic imagery. Kahlo created this work using oil paint on masonite, a hardboard surface often used for painting.

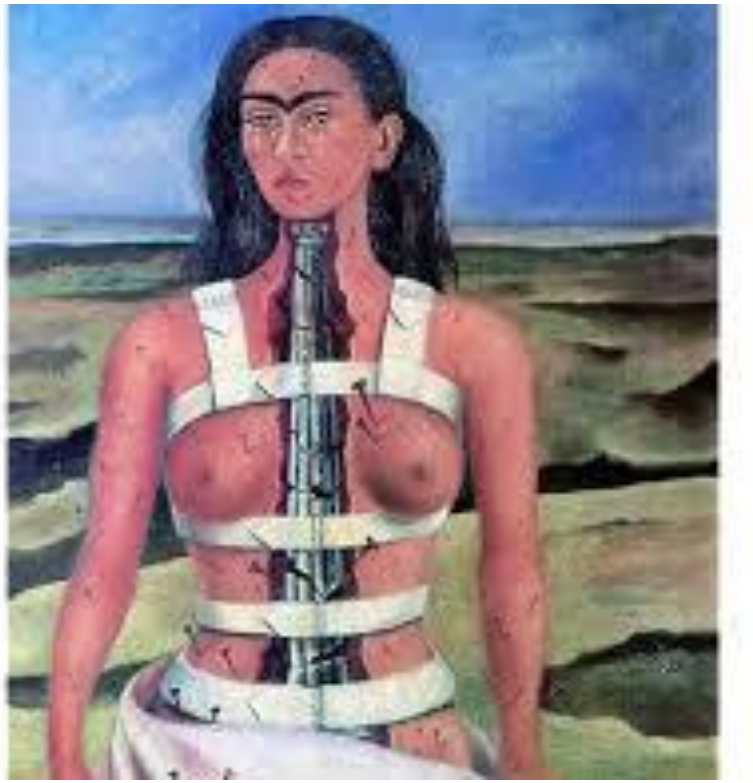
This piece depicts her body split open, revealing a column in place of her spine. This symbolizes her physical suffering. Kahlo used a muted color palette to emphasize pain.

Without Hope by Frida Kahlo (1945) is a surrealist-influenced painting created a year after *The Broken Column*. The artwork depicts Kahlo lying in bed as a funnel forces food into her mouth, creating a disturbing image. Through this exaggerated imagery, she conveyed intense feelings of helplessness. Kahlo also used earthy red tones to emphasize suffering and emotional distress.

Without Hope vs. *The Broken Column*

Without Hope (1945) illustrates suffering in an extreme and debilitating way. Kahlo is seen lying in bed with a funnel force feeding her food. The funnel represents illness and dependence. Though this art piece clearly shows physical and emotional pain, the extreme way in which it was done could unintentionally reinforce the stigma of mental illness. It can suggest that mental illness is all consuming and leaves no room for hope. The feeding funnel can also reinforce the stigma that mentally ill people are dependent on others.

In contrast, *The Broken Column* (1944) depicts Kahlo's torso split open with a column in place of her spine. The column has protruding nail's and her face is covered in tears, but she's still standing tall. This art piece clearly shows her mental pain,
but also doesn't show her completely debilitated. It communicates that you can be mentally ill and struggling, but that does not define you.



Yayoi Kusama

Yayoi Kusama (born 1929) is a Japanese artist who is best known for her excessive use of polka dots and her use of vibrant colors. Kusama was born in Matsumoto, Nagano, Japan, and always wanted to be a painter. She was born into a wealthy, conservative family that did not support her art. During her childhood, she suffered from emotional and physical abuse from her mother as well as hallucinations starting from a young age.

Kusama first left home to attend the Kyoto School of Arts and Crafts, and later (1958), she left Japan to go to New York to completely escape societal pressure and her parents. Though she left Japan to escape her troubles, she ended up going back to Japan after experiencing mental turmoil and admitted herself to a mental hospital. Kusama uses her art to translate “her inner fears into repetitive, tangible creations.” (Suma et al., 2018, p. 156.) She now uses art as her only method for managing her illness.

The Souls of Millions of Light Years Away by Yayoi Kusama (2013) is a surrealist-influenced artwork. Known as one of her *Infinity Mirrored Rooms*, it surrounds the viewer with mirrors and countless small LED lights.

The piece is constructed from materials such as wood, metal, glass mirrors, plastic, rubber, and water, with lights suspended throughout the room.

When visitors enter the space, the mirrors multiply the lights in every direction, making it feel as though they are standing inside of the universe.

The Souls of Millions of Light Years Away by Yayoi Kusama

The Souls of Millions of Light Years Away by Yayoi Kusama (2013) can have both positive and negative effects on how mental health is perceived. The immersion creates a calming experience through its endless reflections of light. This sense of infinity can potentially reduce feelings of isolation. This art piece can also help reduce stigma by showing how personal struggles can be transformed into meaningful and beautiful art, encouraging empathy and understanding.

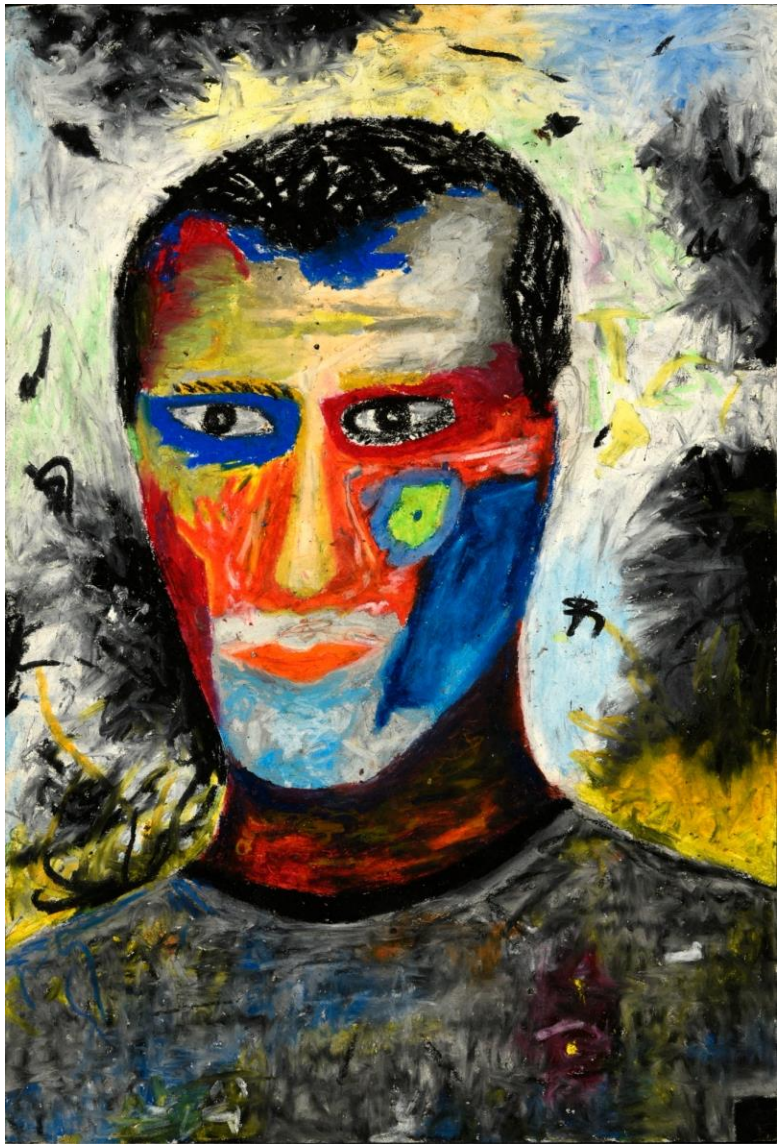
On the other hand, the overwhelming space may have the opposite effect for some viewers. The endless reflections can feel disorienting, which may reinforce the idea that mental illness is chaotic or frightening. The piece is so abstract, some people may not fully understand its connection to mental health and instead view it as strange, which could unintentionally maintain stigma rather than reduce it.

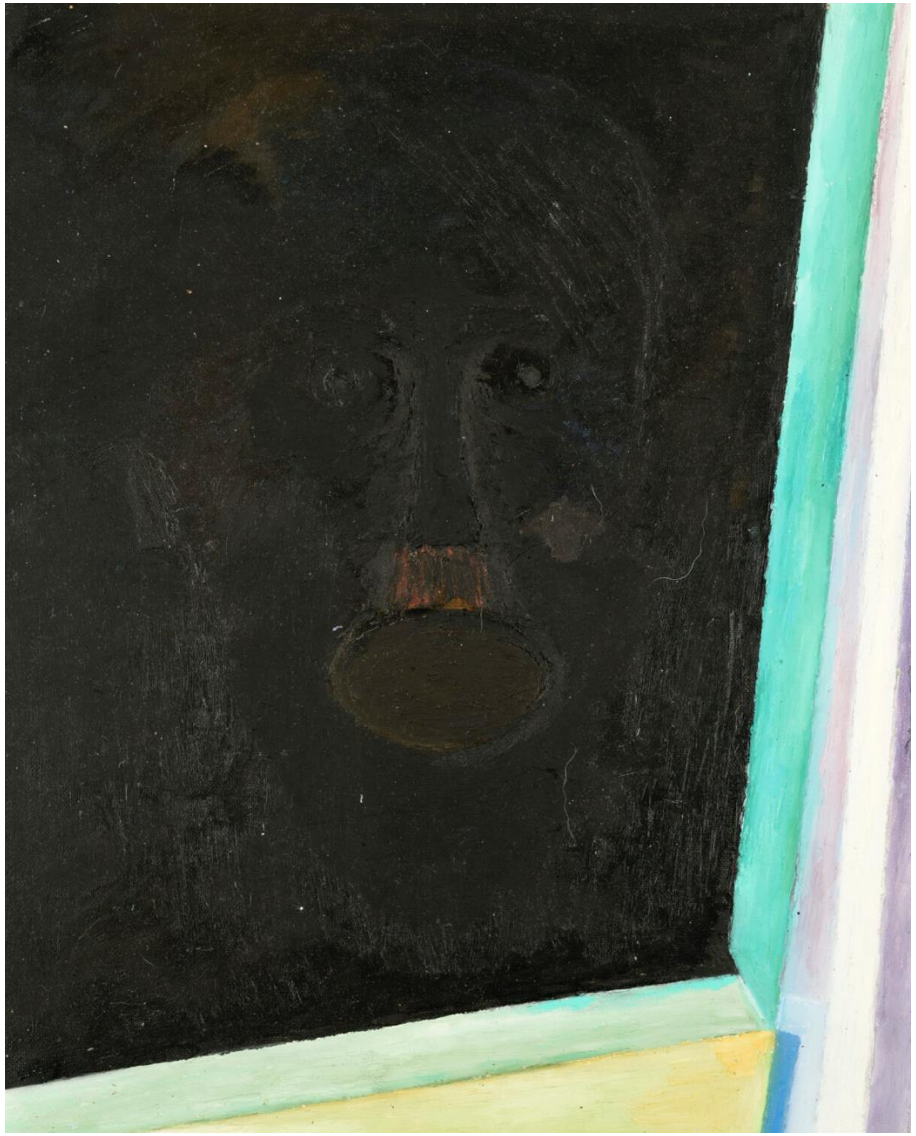
Norman Klenicki

Norman Klenicki (depicted in this self-portrait) is an artist known for his expressive and abstract painting style. His work often explores themes of mental health through abstract shapes and color. I had the opportunity to interview Klenicki over Zoom, where he shared his thoughts, artistic journey, and process.

Klenicki did not begin as an artist. He discovered his interest in art during his first marriage while visiting a sculpture studio, where he experienced an “explosion of creativity” and began carving and painting. Although he stepped away from art for a period due to personal struggles, he returned to it in his 30s and has continued creating ever since.

As the child of Holocaust survivors, and someone who has faced mental illness, Klenicki uses art as a form of therapy. He often creates emotional, abstract pieces that reflect his inner thoughts and feelings. He believes that art allows him to express emotions that cannot be put into words and sees the creative process as both meditative and healing. His focus on emotion and self-expression has remained central to his work.





Hitler at My Door (1990s) by Norman Klenicki is an oil painting on canvas paper, measuring 16” x 20”. In this piece, Klenicki scratches the image of Adolf Hitler into the black background, creating a ghoul-like figure. The painting conveys the long-term, inherited trauma experienced by Klenicki as the child of Holocaust survivors.

Hitler at my Door by Norman Klenicki

This piece can support mental health by validating the lasting impact of trauma. It can help reduce the stigma of mental illness by opening a dialogue about inherited pain.

On the other hand, the intense imagery might make some viewers scared. For those who struggle with similar experiences, it could feel overwhelming, and for others, it might reinforce fear or increase misunderstanding about what living with trauma or mental health challenges is like.

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Norman Klenicki
Interview with Rachael Smith via Zoom. 2026.