

The Reason for “Between Two Poles”

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“How deeply can you delve?” This was both a question and a challenge. Constructing pieces for “Between Two Poles: A Bipolar Themed Exhibition,” demanded discipline and a considerable amount of introspection. When bipolar disorder is the theme, an inward gaze into the depths of the psyche is a given.

Chronicling manic highs and depressing lows, characteristics of this enigmatic condition, reliving my personal experiences became necessary. A considerable amount of anguish had to be recalled in order to find the most effective way to express what it feels like to be in constant flux. It is said we forget pain. This is not true when mood disorders are involved.

In order to express what this affliction feels like, a willingness to take risks became necessary. Addressing topics like alienation can be done with a certain economy. The theme is concise. Moving into the complex territory of oscillating mental states frequently meant eschewing austere expressive tactics. Recognizable imagery and narratives were more effective communicators, in some instances.

More than just a few artists have lived with bipolar disorder. The connection between creativity and this illness are still being studied. The idea for this exhibition came to me midway while reading Dr. Kay Jamison’s [*Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*](#). Incidentally, Jamison has bipolar disorder.

In the process of dealing with my bipolar disorder, I experienced a period where I began to cut myself. My depressions brought me to a place where this was a release from pain. Of all the things a mentally ill person can do, cutting is the most private. Either as a prelude to a suicide, or a way to communicate incorporeal pain physically, it is ultimately a visual reminder of just how bad this affliction can be. Scars become travelogues of a trip to a kind of sorrow that perhaps only images can convey.

In one cutting episode, I had a vision. It was very clear. I saw an eagle, wings spread, with an arm on either side. The eagle was divided into a dark side and a lighter side. The arm on the right showed the cuts. The arm on the left showed none. Each arm represented the dual nature of bipolar disorder. Sometimes you have very rough ideas of what you want in a work. This was not the case. The completed work matched up tightly with the mental image I had painted in my mind.

Something very similar happened with “Pferd.” In that painting I saw a horse perpetually running between two poles, representations of mania and depression. Again, the finished work matched up very closely with the image I had in mind.

Representational imagery was emerging in my work after a long disappearance. For the most part, my previous efforts had been abstract paintings, constructions or hard to define hybrids between sculpture and painting. Representationalism was confined to my drawings

As the new pieces were completed, I had emerged as something of a symbolist. Objects were not just objects but symbolic presentations of abstract ideas. Horses became symbols for the mind in anguish. Birds became crippled souls in flight.

One of the things I made an effort to avoid was using this as therapy. For me, art has never been therapeutic. The discipline, the ideas, the effort, even the very drive to create it requires that you be highly functional, or at least slightly manic but in some control. To just express minus the fine tuning that is a key element of art never held interest for me. Sharpening ideas is what transforms materials into artistry.

When I was engulfed in deep depression, everything shut down. Nothing was worth doing. The desire to just be was absent. The technical term for that state is anhedonia, when nothing brings you pleasure. All you have around you is emptiness. It is a void so empty there are no colorful images. One wakes up and feels the relentless void of nothing. Capturing that in a body of work is not easy.

The artistic drive can be fueled by sadness. It can express it, but if caught in bipolar depression that is too deep, it can shut down the drive to create. There were periods where I could not work. Only when I was far along in my therapy was I able to start the creative process again.

Mania is a powerful creative force. It allows you to pull ideas together. It can help you see what cannot be seen. Depression is the gravitas. It is what makes what you do serious, meaningful and important. The two are the twin souls of art. You cannot have one without the other. The obvious disadvantage is that it drains the creator.

If you want to make art, a piece of your soul is involved. You have to be willing to go to places most people seldom do. You need a heart and soul as delicate as butterfly wings, and the hide of a Rhinoceros to make art, even for a moment.

“If I got rid of my demons, I’d lose my angels,” said the late Playwright Tennessee Williams. With bipolar disorder, you don’t really have to worry about that. The demons never go away. You simply learn handle them a bit better and make art from the shrapnel that is left.