

A *Riflemaker* Exhibition

JOSEPHINE KING  
LIFE SO FAR

September - November 2010



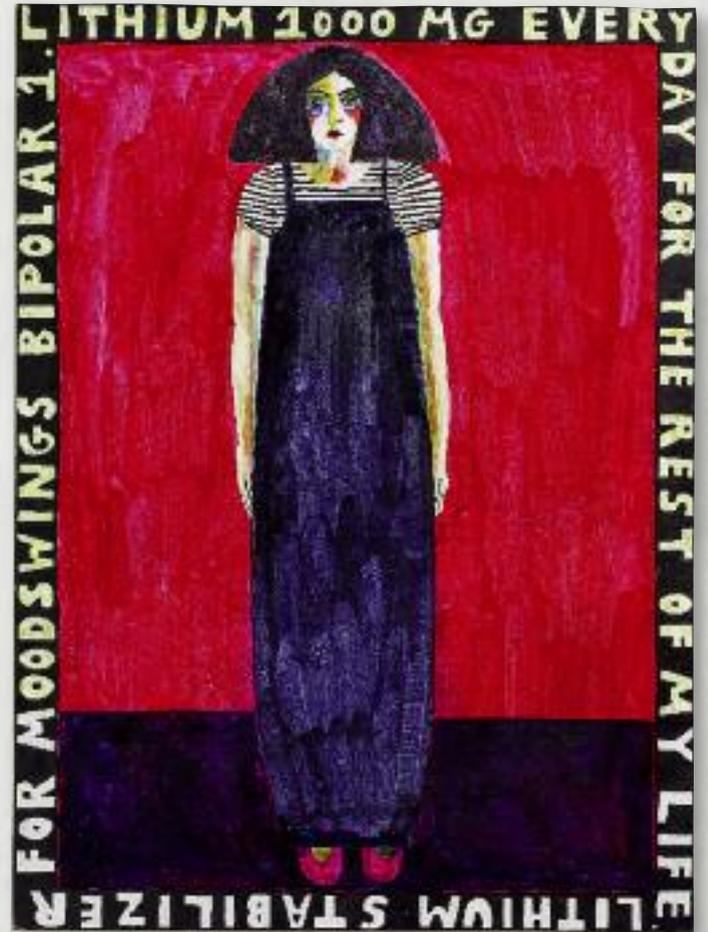
**Manic-Depression** France, 2006. 76 x 56 cm. Ink on paper  
*Opposite: Time* France, 2009. 100 x 70 cm. Ink on paper



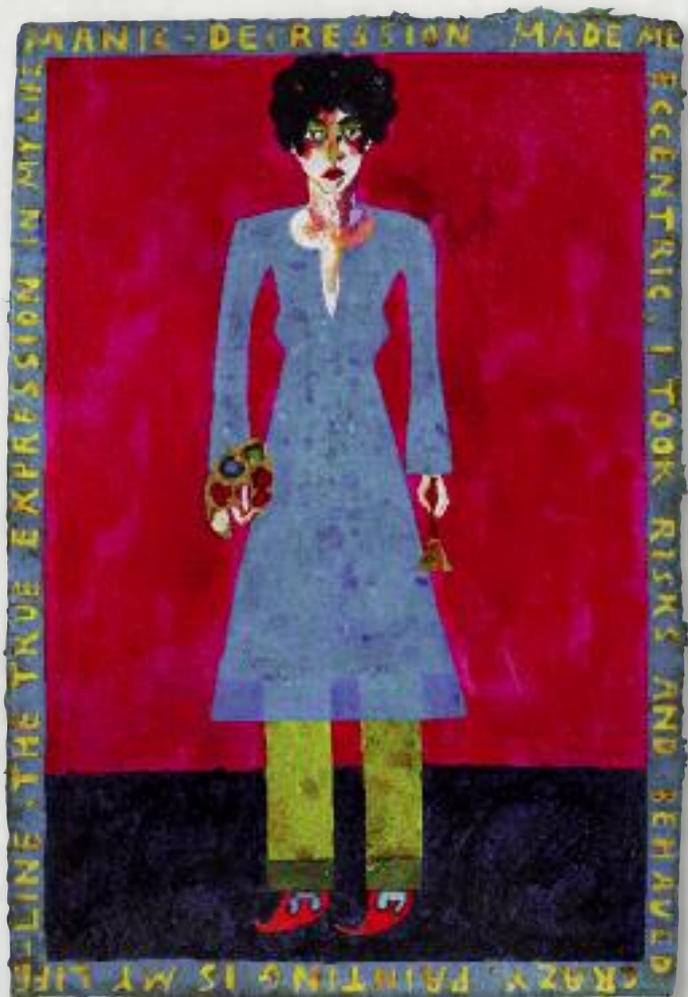
**Manic Depression** France, 2009. 100 x 70 cm. Ink on paper

Opposite: **Death Equals Release** France, 2007. 76 x 56 cm. Ink on paper



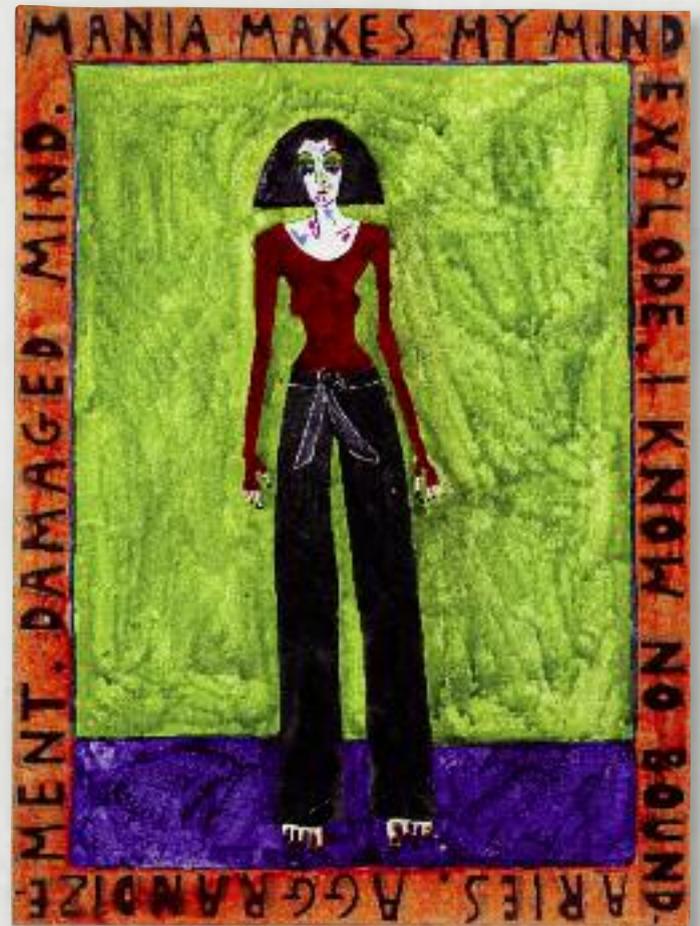
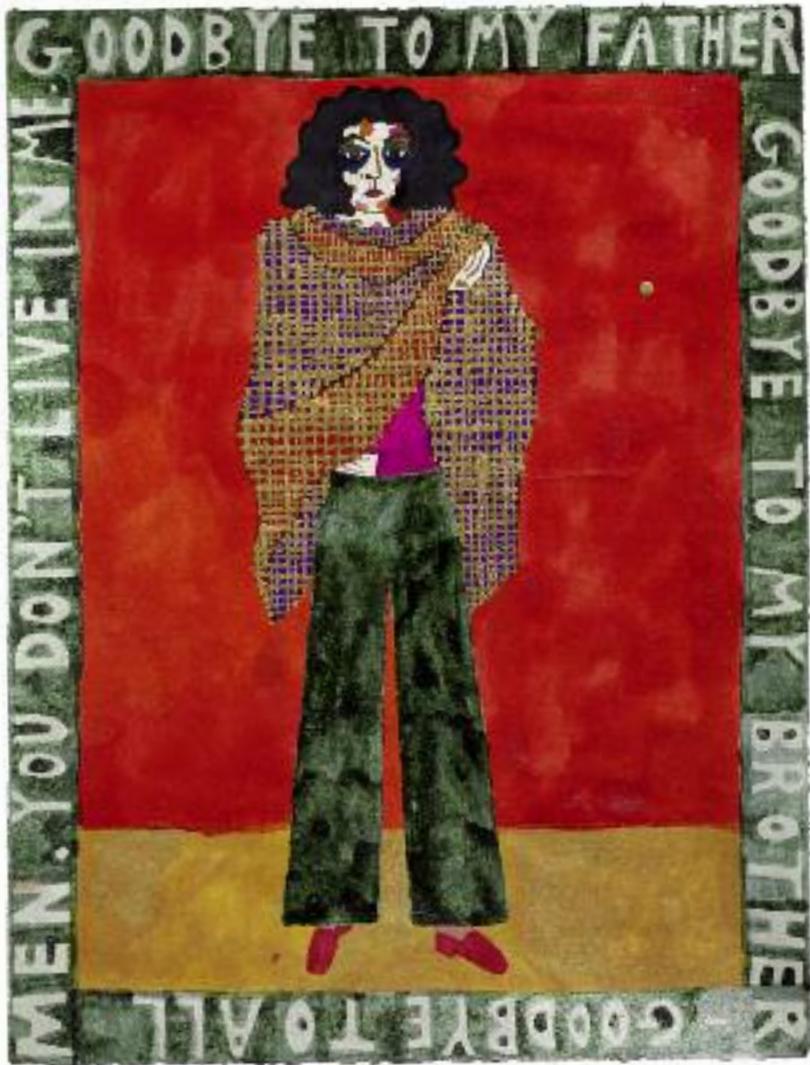


**Lithium** France, 2006. 76 x 56 cm. Ink on board  
Opposite: **Suicide Ultimately** France, 2007. 110 x 75 cm. Ink on paper

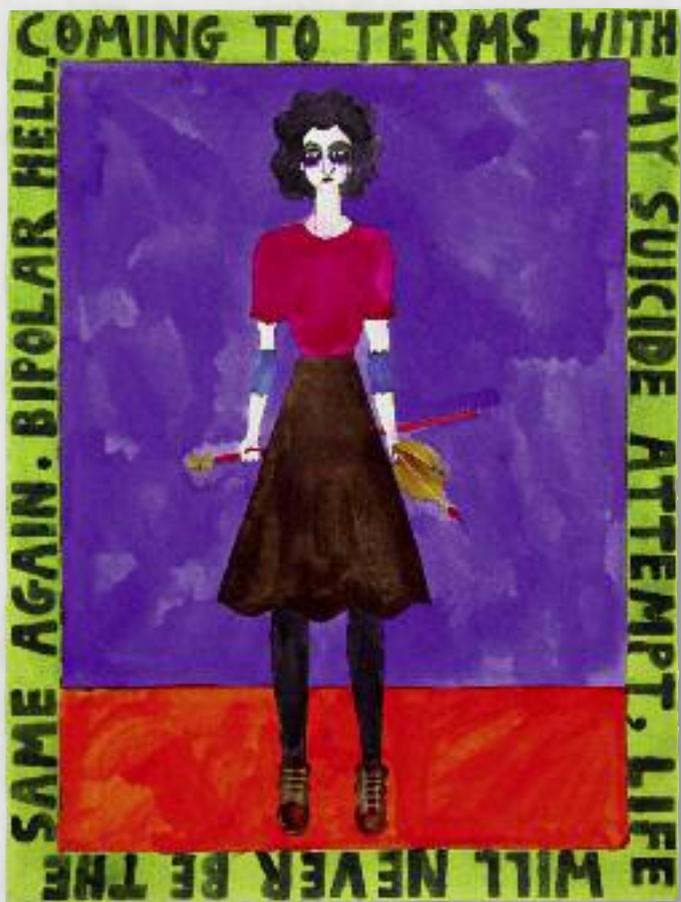


**Manic Depression** France, 2007. 64 x 43 cm. Ink on paper  
*Opposite: This Isn't Living* France, 2009. 100 x 70 cm. Ink on paper





**Mania** France, 2008. 76 x 56 cm. Ink on paper  
*Opposite: No Title* France, 2009. 65 x 50 cm. Ink on paper



**My Suicide Attempt** France, 2007. 76 x 56 cm. Ink on paper

*Opposite: No Title* France, 2009. 100 x 70 cm. Ink on paper

*Overleaf: Hospitals & Clinics* England, 2007. 76 x 56 cm. Ink on paper





### Josephine King: Life So Far...

*"This is a grim and terrible subject, and the fact that she has shown it as playful – with child-like images make it more frightening. They seem to me to be totally truthful pictures, from the heart, and they frighten me. Brave girl. Many people will identify with these images."* Paula Rego.

Josephine King (b.1965 London) makes ink-paintings on paper, a flat 'cut out and keep'-style portrait framed by text documenting the often traumatic experience of the artist's 'life so far'.

The subject of the work is King's extreme bi-polar mania, an illness which has plagued her all her life leading to several suicide attempts, whilst at the same time providing her with the subject matter for her art. The painting style is intensely colourful, almost a kind of pop Fauvism, featuring the artist in a variety of starched and patterned clothing often holding a 'prop' – knife, pills, tube of paint – though the work, rather than appearing depressing in any way is intimate, inspiring – apparently optimistic.

It is clear from the syntax of the compositions that King has an innate faculty for and interest in design, the poster layout of the paintings likely to have been influenced by the working environment of her father (the designer and photographer David King), though *Life so Far* also reveals an interest in heightened stylisation – from haute couture and classical Indian portraiture to Victoriana, Art Nouveau and the decorative arts.

*Life so Far* is co-curated by Virginia Damtsa and Tot Taylor with Adrian Dannatt.

## Josephine King: by herself

All through my life I've been dreamy, almost in a dream, living in my own dream world. I always went around talking to myself, or to my imaginary friend. Whenever and wherever I've been confronted with real life, real people and reality, it's as if I've been woken up each time out of my own existence. I often feel that I misunderstand or misread what other people are saying to me; my mind seems to somehow work or perceive things differently.

When I was very young I used to sleepwalk. It was a problem. I would touch something and wake up with a shock. So dreamy was I that sometimes I would even sleepwalk whilst being awake, bumping into lamp posts on the way back from school, hitting my head hard, being so far away in my mind.



Especially around ten years old, around those years, my mother would find me at my desk late at night, at two or three in the morning, scribbling madly and obsessively. At first she thought I was writing, but soon realised as she got closer that I was in a deep sleep, frantically scrawling in the darkness.

The strangest paradox of my life has been my fear of being different, 'unlike others'. At my junior school there was a party where we all had to sit at the big table wearing hats we had made in class. But mine was different from everybody

else's. I felt terrified and wouldn't put it on. Then, at the last minute, my teacher, to try to make me feel better, said "Josephine, you are the princess" and she clipped some brightly coloured streamers on my hat and placed it on my head. I looked at myself in the mirror and completely panicked, ran out of the room crying. I saw that I was different from the others, felt terrified, thought they would laugh at me or point me out. I wanted to conform but was unable to conform. The odd hat story continued on through my life; if I got a bad comment or criticism, I could fall into a depression... or anger.

I was about three years old, staying with my maternal grandparents. I was standing on the stairs on a bright red carpet. My hands were outstretched, covered in paint from drawing and painting. My grandmother was screaming at me, grabbing my arms in fury:

"Wash your hands immediately! You can't go around like that!"

When we stayed there overnight during the holidays, my grandmother would read bedtime stories to my brother and me. But she would always force me to turn my face to the wall whilst she read. She had a hatred for women and any kind of intimacy. She used to command me: "Don't touch your brother!" Twenty years later it was revealed that she had suffered the trauma of childhood sexual abuse.

The closest relationship that I have had in my life - even without words, even if contact has been interrupted over the years by circumstance - has been with my brother. Slightly older than me, he quietly protected and looked after me. I walked very much in his footsteps, I relied on him by nature. I didn't have to worry about a thing, he took on all the responsibilities. For him it must have been very different; he bore the brunt of painful situations, especially the divorce of our parents. Whereas for me everything went unnoticed, for him it was the reverse. Today our lives are very different but the deepset roles and feelings between us are still there. We are, in other words, still close - even without words.

When my mother told my brother and me that the three of us were going to live in Amsterdam I just went along with it; no fear, no worry, no thought. At ten years old I entered a Dutch school, speaking no Dutch at all. It was a wonderful feeling to learn the language in three months flat and it gave me the confidence to later learn French, Portuguese and German as well.

At thirteen, my mother sent me to the Rudolf Steiner School in Amsterdam. Out of the twenty children in the class, nineteen of them had divorced parents, so I felt that I had landed on my feet. There were times I remember feeling sad for my father, I adored him and missed him, but I never felt alienated from him. Even at times when we didn't have much contact, I always knew he loved me.

At the Steiner School there was a great emphasis on drawing and painting, concentrating on direct colour using big blocks of natural wax colours - bleeding in the shades. Colour was all around. The classrooms were painted in strong colours - blood red, blood orange, deep blue, pale green. The effect was warm and stimulating. The concept of the art lessons was not figurative but more in the style of Albers, Kandinsky, Mondrian - abstract colour forms. And sometimes they even made us paint with our feet.

Both my mother and father had always encouraged me to draw, I

grew up with drawing, so the Steiner School suited me well. It played a major part in my becoming a painter. It set a pattern for working and painting in a direct way, looking at the world through colour...and innocence.

Steiner teaching is based on the theory of anthroposophy, a human-orientated spiritual philosophy. The search for the "Holy Spirit" was the key, although I never really quite grasped what the "Holy Spirit" was. The Steiner way is to keep the child young for as long as possible. This was ideal for me, always singing, writing and reading, always in a world of my own, not academic at all, and blind to numbers. The classes were small and they kept the same pupils together through the years, thus we all saw each other grow up. If there was some subject that I didn't understand well, they never pushed me, just stimulated and guided. At nineteen, when I left, my mind was still very much intact as it had been when I enrolled there six years earlier - but in an adult's body.

My father often said to me that wherever I was in the world, I had a need to be somewhere else. Searching for something to do, to give my life a meaning, I left Amsterdam for London where perhaps I could learn to act, or become a photographer. But at this time, aged about 21, without realising it, my bipolar condition started to kick in. I began to experience serious mood swings. I became directionless, lost, prone to depression. I stood in the tube on the platform at the entrance of the tunnel where the train shoots through. Over and over again in my head: "Jump, jump, just jump".

Encouraged by my father and brother, I started to draw in sketchbooks again as I had as a child. Drawing became the thing I felt was really close and real to me, the only place where I could be in my own world. (I still fill sketchbooks; I have over 300 of them). I applied to Saint Martin's art school. They rejected me: "Too naive". Eventually I returned to Amsterdam. I walked into the Rietveld Academie with two or three of my sketchbooks and they accepted me immediately for the five-year course. They saw the point and so did I.

Since leaving the Rietveld I have travelled widely, always looking at art, always making art: London, America, Italy, three years in Portugal, Moscow, China, India, Spain, France and Berlin. But the bipolar condition never went away and sometimes got completely out of control, having a devastating effect on my relationships, decisions and actions. But positively, I know that being bipolar has had a major role in giving me the stubbornness, confidence and determination needed to be a painter. It pushes you to the limits - spontaneous reactions, often risky, often strange, the mind running

wild with imagination. Even the downside of bipolar - the depressions, the loneliness and despair - makes me turn to the act of painting as the solution to break through it. Bipolar is now so widely recognised by doctors and controllable with the right medication, and over the years I have learned better to live and deal with it.

When I am painting I can't tell you exactly what I am thinking about. Within, say, half an hour I fall into a kind of subconscious, I become one with the world of my picture. Once in that state, strange things happen. If I am painting something from my past I will literally smell that time, that place...I can feel again exactly as I felt at that moment, even if it was way, way back. A time reversal.



Colour is my inner world. Especially bold, strong colours; plates of blood red, deep yellow, bleeding purple moving like a film across my mind. Saturated colours, even if my mood is dark. Black is ever present but some of my most intensely coloured works have been carried out whilst I was in the darkest valleys of depression. The pigments of the paint never seemed to be strong enough so I turned to inks. They have come closest to the colours needed by my brain and I apply them through direct feeling...instinctively.

The content of my work comes from personal life experience and the way I see the world around me. Faces, objects, expressions. From outdoor sketchbook to finished composition in the studio, it is a personal world, figurative but not realistic, using my own interpretation of colour and line. The final image is always clear, recognisable... but strange. Although the subject matter of my current work has been influenced by my experience of being bipolar, I am not a 'bipolar artist'. My subject matter will continue to change. In other words, I never feel inhibited about expressing myself.

*London, May 2010*



**Bipolar Made Me (1)** France, 2009. 100 x 70 cm. Ink on paper  
*Opposite: Tidal Wave* France, 2009. 100 x 70 cm. Ink on paper



**No Title** France, 2009. 100 x 70 cm. Ink on paper  
*Opposite: Paper Tigers* France, 2007. 102 x 65 cm. Ink on paper

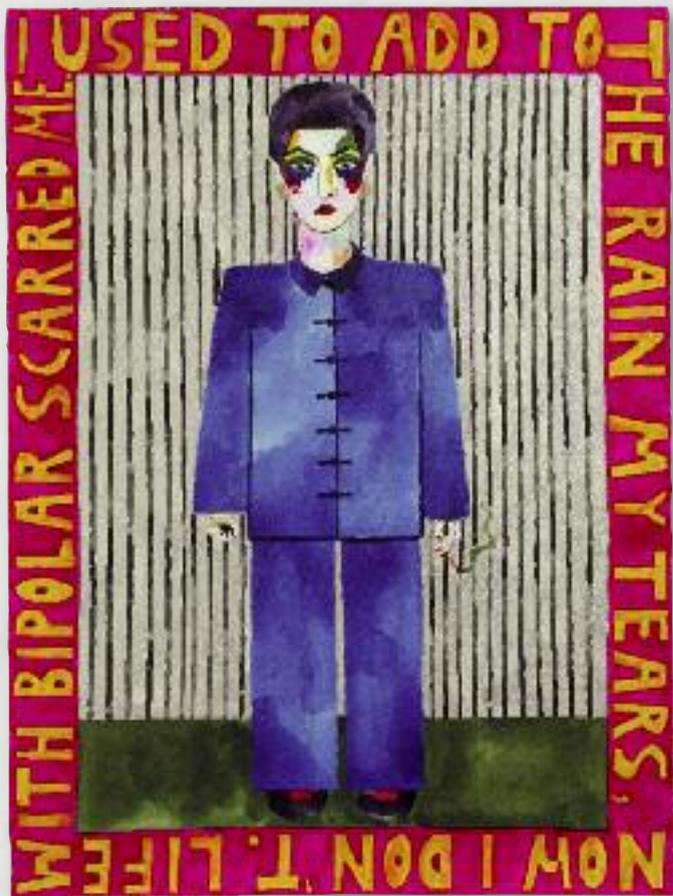




**Not Many People Go The Distance**

France, 2008. 77 x 57 cm. Ink on paper

Opposite: **Bipolar Made Me (2)** France, 2009. 100 x 70 cm. Ink on paper



**My Tears** France, 2007. 76 x 56 cm. Ink on paper  
*Opposite:* **Born With Bipolar Disorder**  
France, 2009. 100 x 70 cm. Ink on paper





**Manic-Depression Has Ruined My Life**

France, 2006. 76 x 56 cm. Ink on paper

Opposite: **Bipolar Made Me (3)** France, 2009. 100 x 70 cm. Ink on paper



**Trembling Hands** France, 2006. 76 x 56 cm. Ink on paper  
*Opposite: Life* France, 2007. 76 x 56 cm. Ink on paper



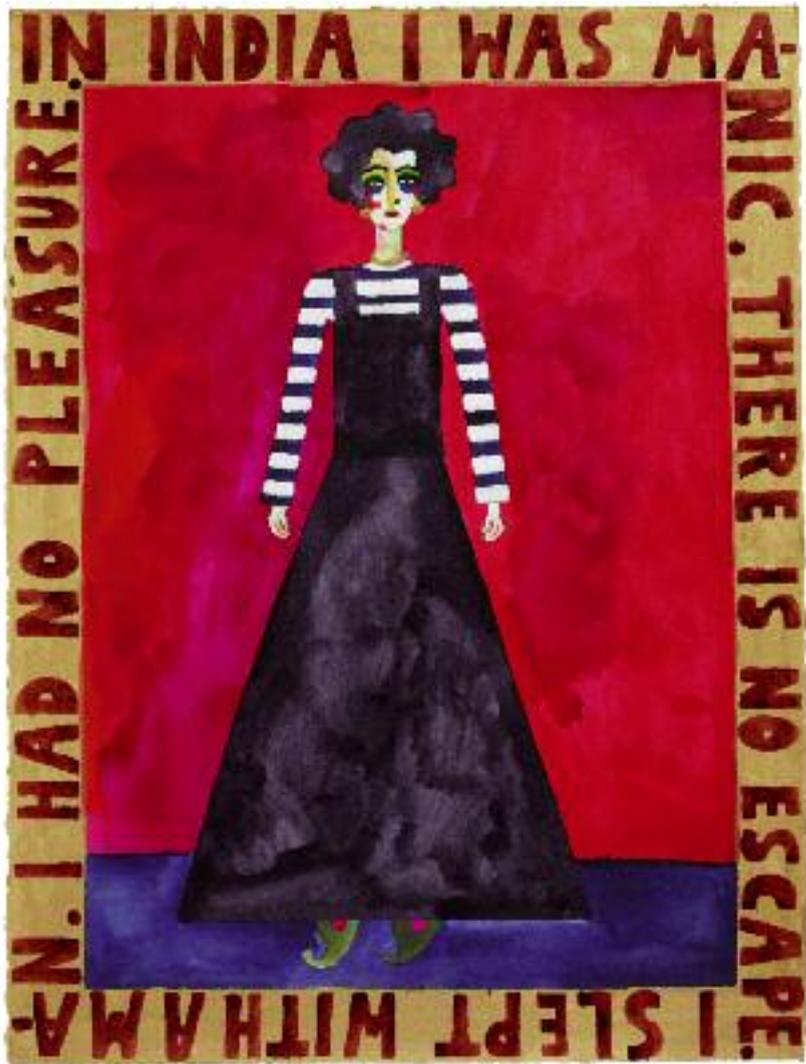


**Bipolar Disorder** France, 2007. 76 x 56 cm. Ink on paper  
*Opposite:* **Bipolar Disorder** France, 2007. 76 x 56 cm. Ink on paper



**Pushed To The Limit** France, 2007. 76 x 56 cm. Ink on paper  
*Opposite: The Sole Carer* France, 2006. 76 x 56 cm. Ink on paper





**I Don't Understand** England, 2006. 76 x 56 cm. Ink on paper  
*Opposite:* **No Pleasure** France, 2007. 76 x 56 cm. Ink on paper



**Unmanageable** England, 2006. 76 x 56 cm. Ink on paper

*Opposite:* **Manic-Depressive And Borderline**

France, 2006. 76 x 56 cm. Ink on board

*Overleaf:* **The Coach House** England, 2006. 76 x 56 cm. Ink on board





### JOSEPHINE KING: by Adrian Dannatt

*"The Primitives are the salt of the earth, through their existence alone does contemporary art, so knowing, so sophisticated and daring, preserve in its depth sources of freshness and life..."*  
 Jean Cassou 1950, Director, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris

The full-frontal force of Josephine King's work, its resonance and power, combines the unorthodox nature of her autobiography with the delicacy of her aesthetic being. We are forced to confront the reality of coping with illness, whilst unable to resist the seductive dazzle of the artist's hand.

The absolute candour of King's self-revelation is matched only by her compulsion to make beautiful, decorative art, something she seems driven to do by her very nature.

We recognise artists as those who cannot stop themselves creating, regardless of audience or response, for whom such artmaking is the very essence of their existence. Thus, the poignancy and potency of King's work comes from the sense that her illness is somehow wired to her creativity, that the two exist as symbiotic energies, creative and destructive, fused as one. Mania not only provides a subject matter for her, but can also be felt as an integral component, a companion, and a deadly engine of the artist's creativity.

Making art is quite literally what Josephine King lives for, having only survived and surmounted her illness by converting it into art. But this illness also appears inextricably linked to her artistic nature, the good and the bad inter-dependent and inseparable.

This, of course, is an area of much speculation and investigation within the medical and psychological community, a topic already having its own vast literature both scientific and populist, on the relation between creativity, depression and mental instability. Within this field one might compare King's work to the groundbreaking confessional poetry of Robert Lowell and its influence on subsequent poets such as John Berryman and Anne Sexton, all suicidal, and condemned and then commended for their use of their own lives, their illness, as raw subject matter. How easily embarrassed and ashamed we can appear when faced with such unblinking honesty, such frankness, though all of these poets were initially criticised for not making their self-revelations 'poetic' enough, not disguising them with customary delicacy.

But today we can appreciate that this was *another* sort of art, a *different* poetry, but one equally dependent on skill and style. Likewise the temptation to criticise King's work for being too blunt, too straightforward, unmitigated by the refinement of artistic transformation, simply does not acknowledge the originality, the fresh juice of just such a position.

Perhaps it is very English to shy away from the embarrassment of such direct address and to condemn all self-reference as mere narcissism. And if King is technically English she is also Dutch, having grown up in Amsterdam, and has spent most of her subsequent life in Portugal, India or France, far removed indeed from those still prevalent norms of Anglo-Saxon self-effacement and ironic modesty. Dutch art, the art King grew up with, will forever be dominated by Rembrandt and Van Gogh, the obsessive self-portraitist and the self-destructive manic-depressive, the psychological realist and the fantastic colourist; a combination one might ponder culminating in King herself.



A closer comparison might probably be Frida Kahlo, continually painting her illness as the central theme of her oeuvre whose vibrant palette might have obvious affinities. It might also be mentioned that both Kahlo and King have inevitably been influenced by family. Kahlo by Diego Rivera and King by the revolutionary aesthetics of her father, a well-known designer and photographer as well as being a renowned collector of Soviet art and design.

Another comparison could be made to Käthe Kollwitz, whose own father, a radical social activist, did everything to encourage her art making, not least the numerous posters on political causes she produced in the 1920s. Kollwitz, who suffered from recurrent bouts of depression, became best known for her many "frontal" self-portraits, images of herself deeply linked to her own death, with such stark titles as "Here I Stand and Dig My Own Grave." Kollwitz probing of the human condition did not entail an effacement of personal identity, but on the contrary began and ended with her own experience. As she put it, "I have always worked with my blood – all my work hides within it *life itself* and it is with life that I contend through my work. I want to be free of everything that hinders my real self...I want to develop myself, that is, to unfold myself: *Käthe Kollwitz.*"

In the art-history of self-portraiture it is interesting that the origins of the genre are in professional and artisanal pride, the artist depicting themselves with the tools of their trade, their technical abilities on offer, a sort of advertising banner. Only much later did the self-portrait become a psychological, revelatory exercise in character. And King's paintings, showing herself very much the painter, brushes in hand, palette and paint tubes around her, have something of that earlier and more innocent desire to portray oneself as craftsman, artisan, worker: a working artist, in the manner of a labourer.

In this context it should be noted that King worked for a long time with ceramic tiles, creating and hand-painting designs to be used as practical accessories rather than treated as untouchable art. She is entirely at home with the longer historic tradition of art as something "useful"; something with a purpose.

Thus Josephine King's paintings are almost akin to posters, to a whole vernacular tradition of folk painting from fairground signs to domestic decoration, whose technical skills and obligations were always as high as those of any fine artist. The use of text in these paintings is also highly sophisticated though deceptively simplistic, which might also serve as a description of the work as a whole.

It is curious that before affliction by her illness King hardly ever used text, her previous paintings being absolutely outside language, entirely dependent on colour and form. Whilst when she embarked on these images dealing with her illness she felt obliged to "spell out", to make clear just how and what she had suffered, knowing that if she hid the pain, did not make it as overt as possible she would not be able to cast it out, exorcise it, through the literally "magic" process of painting.

But at the same time the use of text is so elegant, so well-designed, so colourful, that we can almost ignore the bluntness of its message, see it with a certain formalism as part of the overall composition. And to read the text we are also requested to move with it, to tilt our head, turn our body, practically go upside down, make ourselves slightly physically uncomfortable or at least make a modicum of effort, which becomes somehow an acknowledgment, however slight, a sort of nod, a bow, to her own physical condition there, to her presence here.

A connection might also be made to the art of India, a culture with which King feels special affinity, and especially late 16th century portraiture of the Mughal Court. This utilised a wide variety of formats and often humble materials, from large-scale paintings on

cloth used at stately events to decorative paintings on wooden panels, and small paintings preserved in book form or wrapped in cloth and only brought out to be seen on special occasions. Certainly King's countless sketchbooks which she fills obsessively everyday, especially if she is travelling, have all the visual richness and intimate secrecy of such Indian treasures.

And just as Western self-portraiture was initially about social status and professional identity, and only later became psychological, likewise Indian portraiture only slowly mutated from a formal and highly dispassionate ritualised process into something altogether more revelatory, more real.



King's work seems on just such a borderline. Far from being an expressionistic self-indulgence it retains a formality, a regulated and logical pattern, a measured propriety worthy of older and deeper traditions of artisan art-making worldwide.

King might be called a "primitive" not in the conjured sense of untamed or crude expression but quite the contrary as one who obeys by certain rules, whether self-imposed or societal, who feels an obligation of excellence to their technical trade if not Guild, as artists did before the rise of individualism.

This is clearly a paradox, as King's work appears to be so much about herself and nothing else, and yet in its formal qualities, its affinity with the sign and stamper, the poster or painted billboard, it recalls the era of the anonymous artisan, whether of medieval Europe or contemporary India. And this is precisely why King's paintings are so resonant, combining the acute confessional mode of late 20th century with much older representational traditions of entirely other eras and cultures, as if a master stained-glass maker of the middle-ages had started channelling Sylvia Plath.

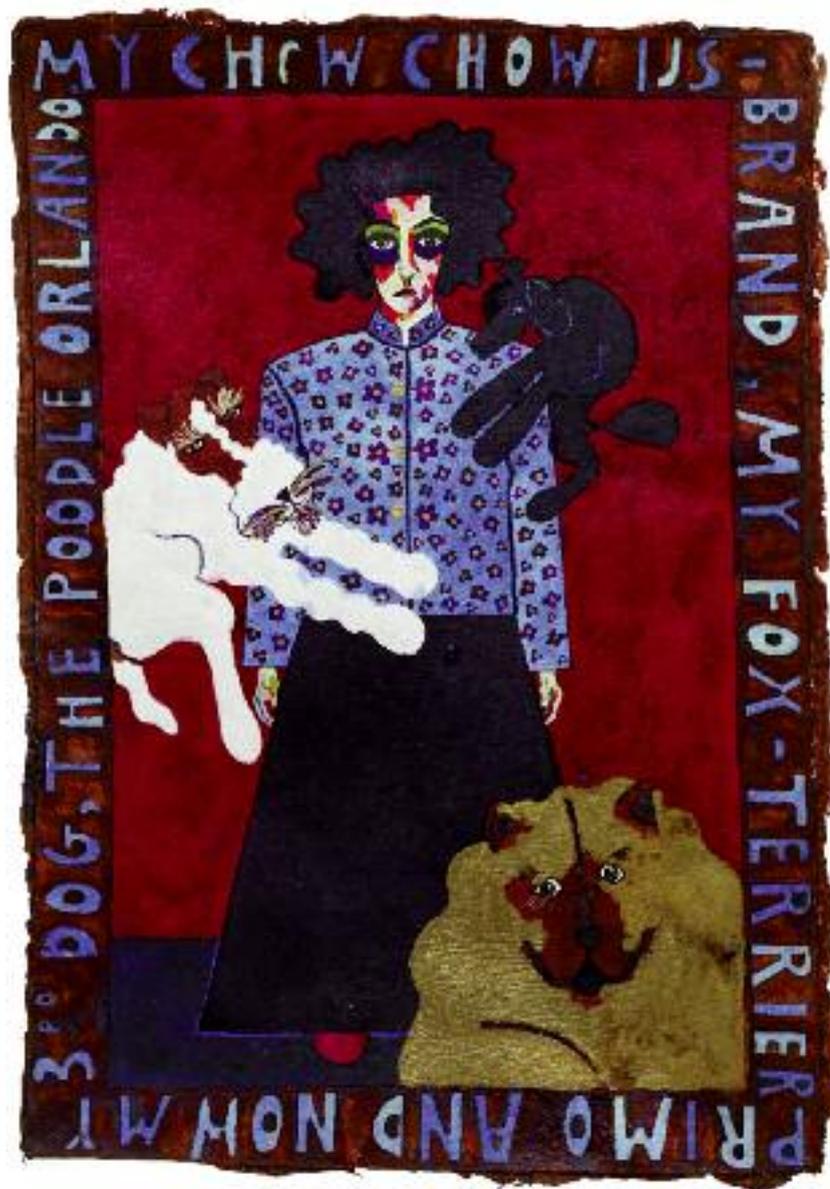
But however many sources or suggestions, historic connections, literary analogies, comparisons to previous artistic movements one might enjoy in some network of reference within which to situate

King's work, the most important fact remains its sheer singularity. One could list a hundred different artists, some of whom King herself might know and admire, many of whom she may have never heard, but the support of such names is not necessary, for once one has seen King's oeuvre its own identity is assured. This artistic assurance, on the other side of what Harold Bloom terms the "anxiety of influence" is an increasingly rare gift in a culture where an ever-escalating diffusion of knowledge and image has begun to blur the very notion of originality. Thus as in literature, King's work has that strange sense of having already existed, already necessary, recognisable, that deep familiarity all the more mysterious for being so entirely original.

*Adrian Dannatt is a writer and curator and regular contributor to The Art Newspaper*



**My Diagnosis** France, 2006. 76 x 56 cm. Ink on board  
*Opposite: My Dogs* France, 2010. 100 x 70 cm. Ink on paper





**Bad Men** France, 2010. 100 x 70 cm. Ink on paper  
*Opposite: **Grief** France, 2010. 100 x 70 cm. Ink on paper*



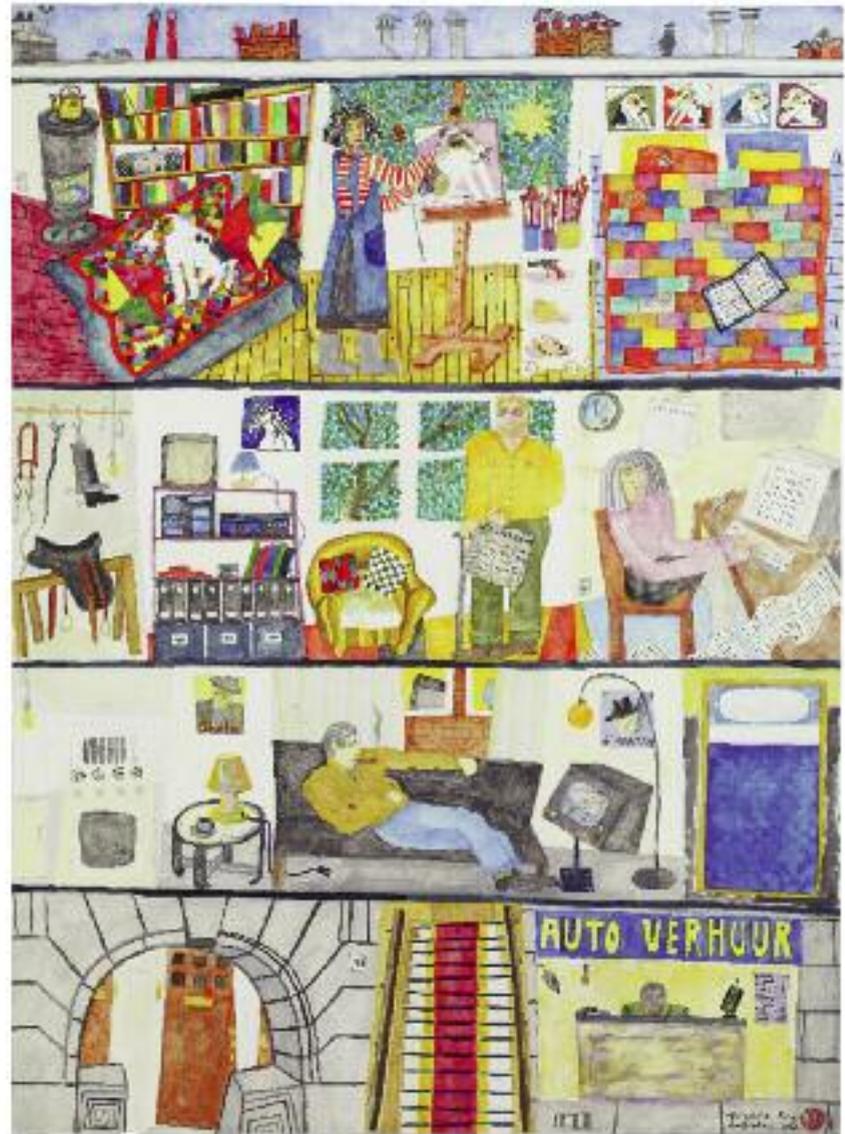
**The Doctor** France, 2010. 100 x 70 cm. Ink on paper

Opposite: **The Psychiatric Hospital** France, 2010. 100 x 70 cm. Ink on paper





**Love Is Out** France, 2007. 102 x 65 cm. Ink on paper  
Opposite: **Chain-Smoker** France, 2010. 100 x 70 cm. Ink on paper  
Overleaf: **Suicide** Amsterdam, 2006. 76 x 56 cm. Ink on board



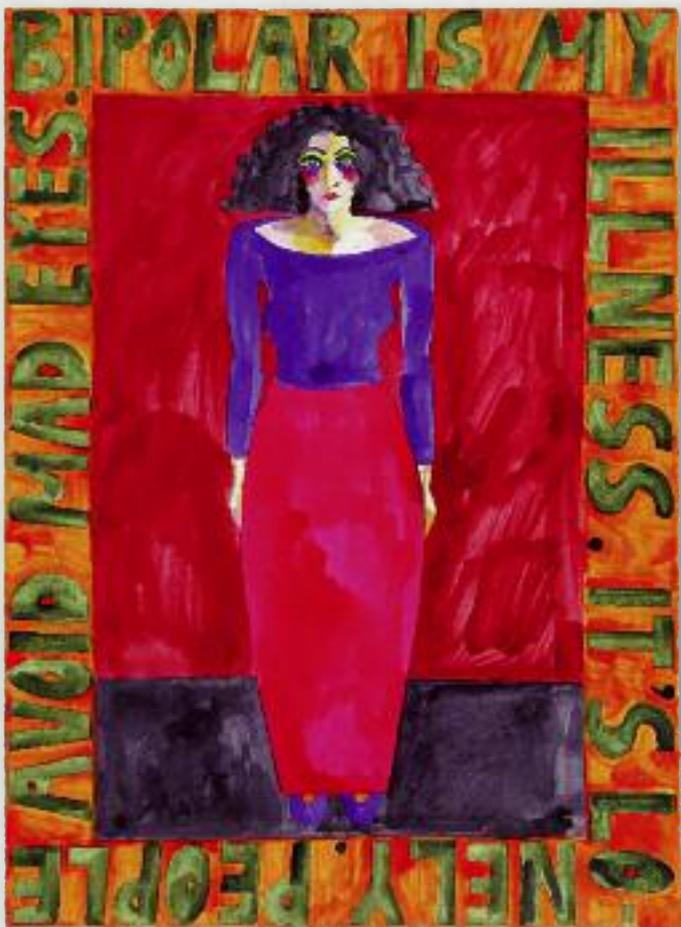


Previous page: **My Flat** Amsterdam, 2006. 76 x 56 cm. Ink on board  
**Never Understood** France, 2010. 100 x 70 cm. Ink on paper  
 Opposite: **Suicide** France, 2010. 100 x 70 cm. Ink on paper

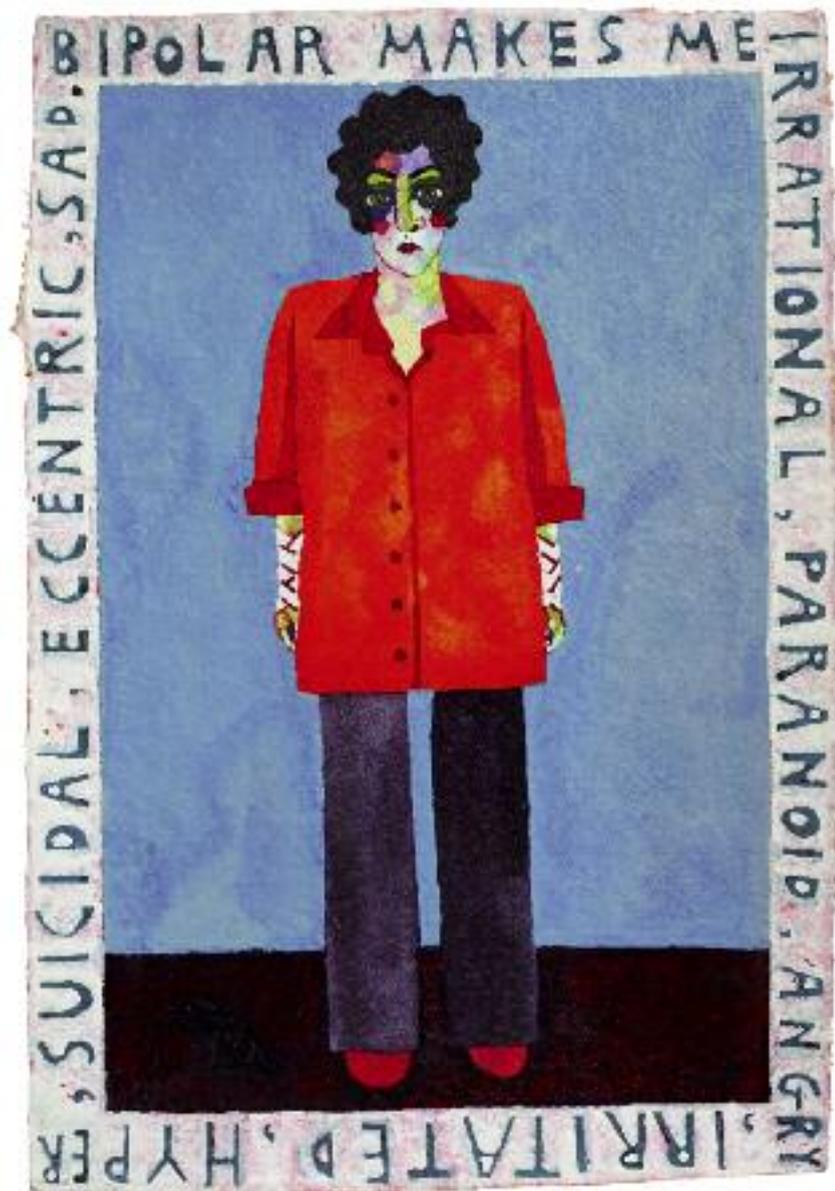


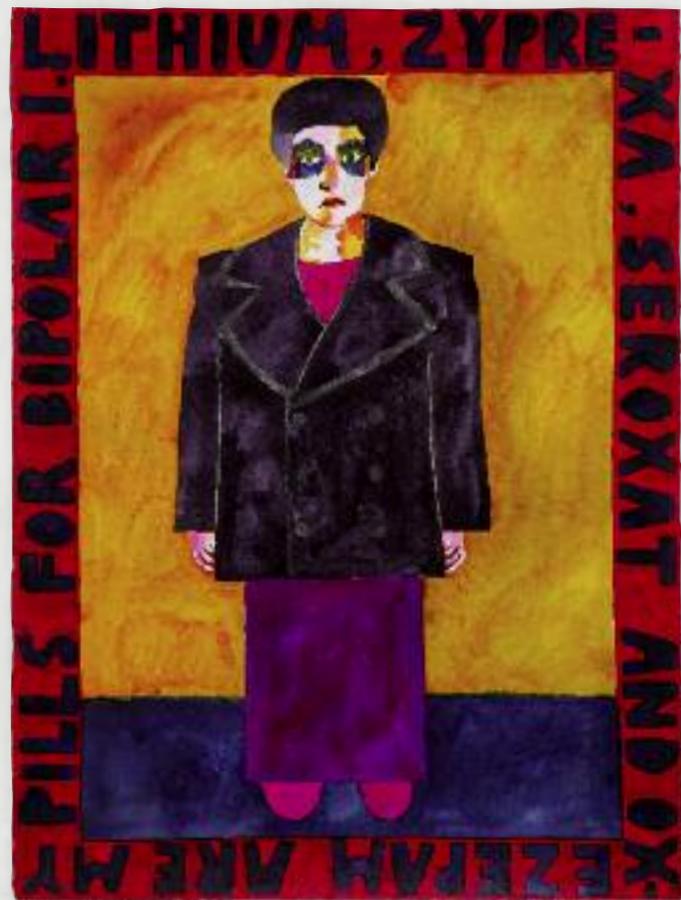


**I Scream At Night** France, 2006. 76 x 56 cm. Ink on paper  
*Opposite: My Destiny* France, 2007. 102 x 65 cm. Ink on paper



**People Avoid Mad Eyes** France, 2006. 76 x 56 cm. Ink on paper  
*Opposite: **Bipolar Makes Me** France, 2007. 64 x 43 cm. Ink on paper*





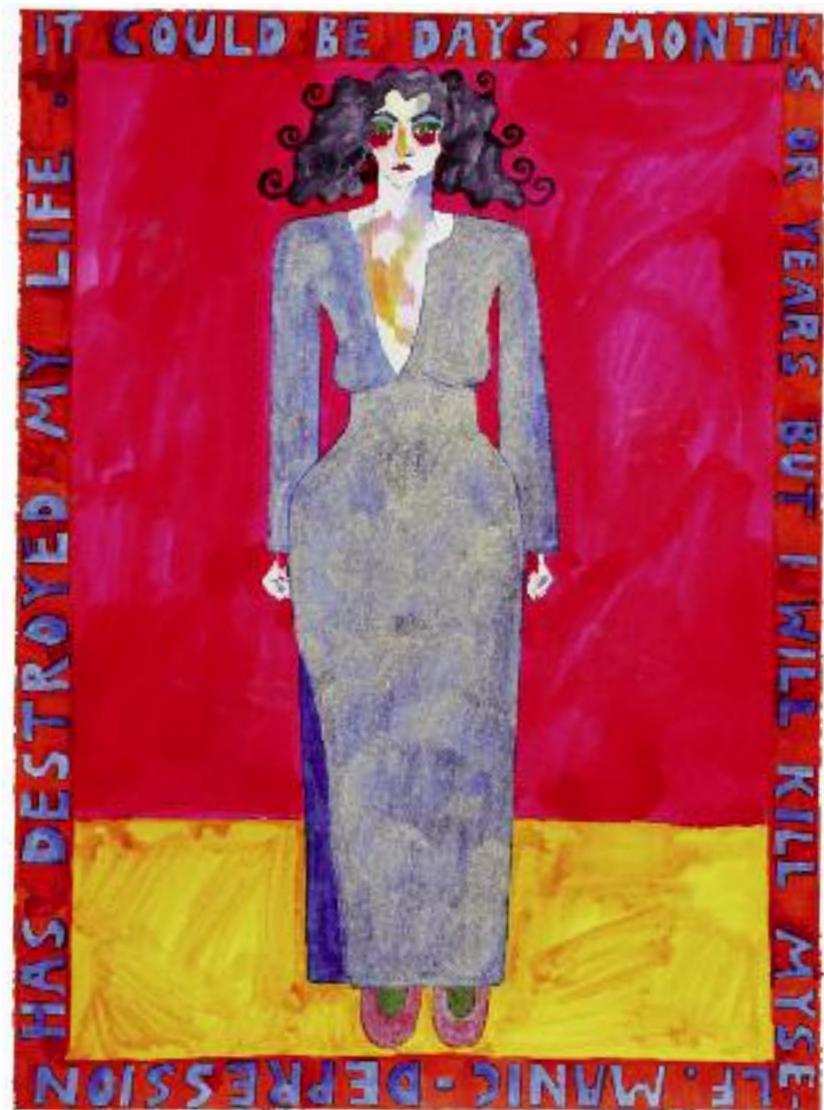
**Pills** France, 2007. 76 x 56 cm. Ink on paper  
*Opposite: The Men I've Known* France, 2009. 76 x 56 cm. Ink on paper

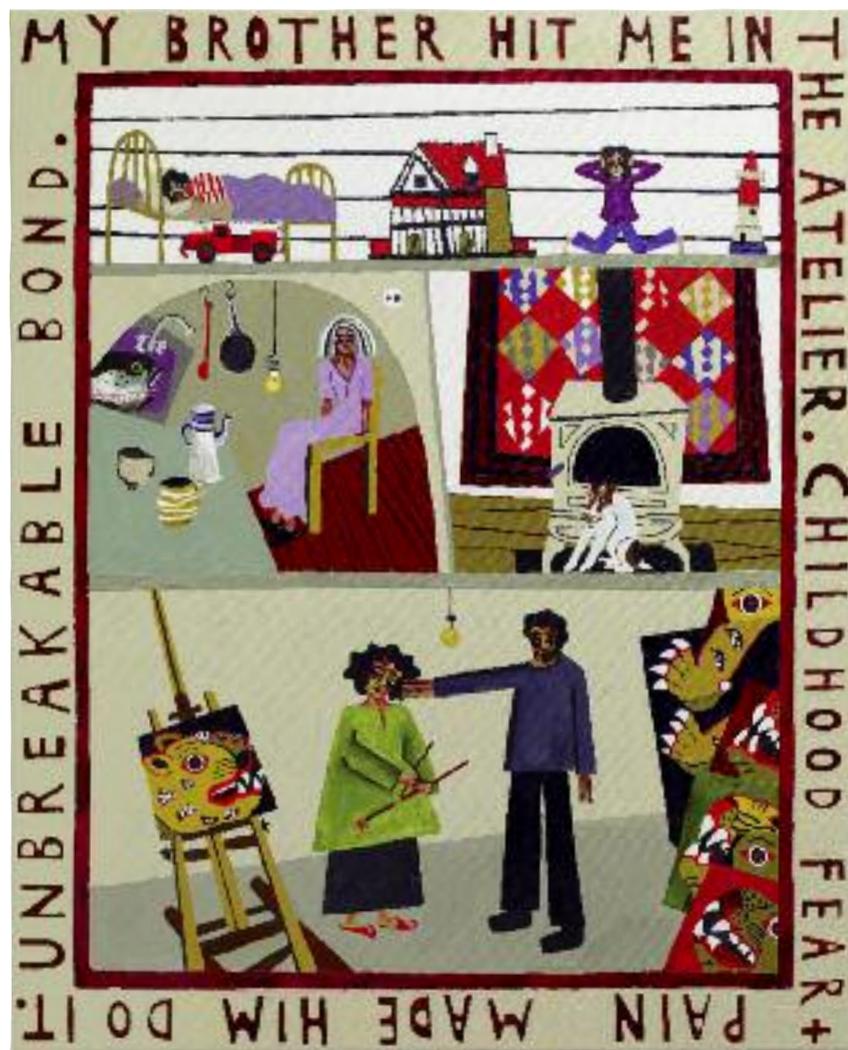


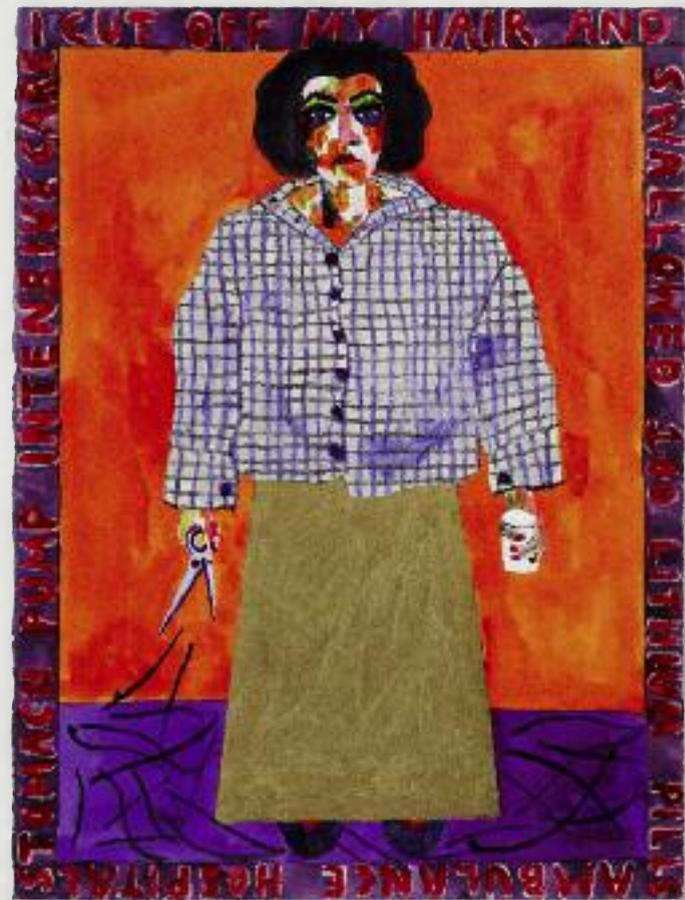
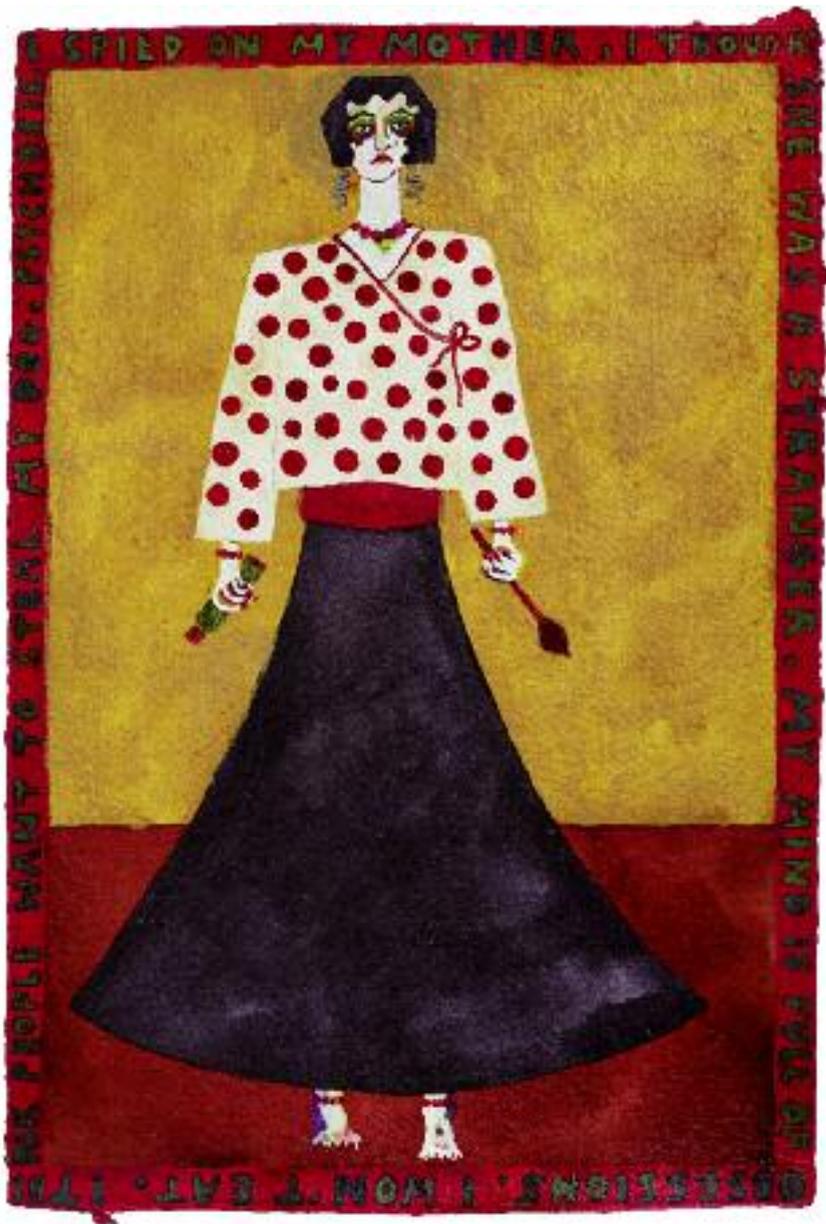
**Psychosis** France, 2007. 64 x 43 cm. Ink on paper

Opposite: **Days, Months, Years** France, 2006. 56 x 76 cm. Ink on paper

Overleaf: **The Scream** France, 2010. 82 x 65 cm. Acrylic on canvas







Previous page: **Unbreakable Bond** France, 2008. 100 x 82 cm. Acrylic on canvas

**I Cut My Hair** England, 2006. 76 x 56 cm. Ink on paper

Opposite: **Psychosis** France, 2007. 64 x 43 cm. Ink on paper



**My Intense Life** France, 2006. 102 x 67 cm. Ink on paper  
*Opposite: My Life* France, 2007. 64 x 43 cm. Ink on paper





**Love Didn't Come To Me** France, 2007. 64 x 43 cm. Ink on paper  
Opposite: **Lithium** France, 2007. 64 x 43 cm. Ink on paper



**I Am Bipolar Personified** France, 2007. 110 x 75 cm. Ink on paper  
Opposite: **Manic Depression** France, 2007. 102 x 65 cm. Ink on paper



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Christopher Bucklow *If This Be Not I* by Christopher Bucklow, 2004  
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