Crooked Beauty

and

The Embodiment of 'Madness'

by Ken Paul Rosenthal
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> "The cyclic and contrasting nature of manic-depressive illness is perhaps its most defining clinical feature. Indeed a strong argument can be made that the periodicities of the natural world—as well as its great beholdenness to light, its chaos, perturbances, agitations, and violence, its fluctuations, shadows, edges, and upheavals—that all of these find their analogue in the periodicities and patterns intrinsic to the artistic and the manic-depressive temperaments….In fact there is an accumulation of evidence to suggest that those who have manic-depressive illness show an elevated responsiveness and sensitivity to changes in light." (Jameson, *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*, page 129)

In the Winter of 2005, I read an article by artist Jacks Ashley McNamara that touched the core of my identity as a filmmaker. In her story 'Anatomy of Flight,' which chronicles her transformation from being a patient of the Western psychiatric establishment to a radical mental health activist, Jacks describes how "…the world seemed to hit me so much harder and fill me so much fuller than anyone else I knew. Slanted sunlight could make me dizzy with its beauty and witnessing unkindness filled me with physical pain." Similarly, my own experience of the world had always been one of visual osmosis; light clung to me like liquid to a dry sponge. As a child, I would frequently stare down the sun, holding my gaze until the sensation was unbearable. Whether holding my hand to hot irons, teetering on the precipice of great heights, or playing Russian roulette with my X-acto blades, I felt *invited* to reach for places that were clearly unsafe. Was there something wrong with me, or was I in need of models and mentorship that could help me make the transition from having my sensitivities overwhelm me, to having them give me information I could use?

While Jacks' journey and mine have been very different, my simultaneously inquisitive and self-destructive response to the phenomena of the world deeply resonated with Jacks' notion of the 'dangerous gift'—the idea that one's darker inclinations and experiences might also allow us access to more transcendent possibilities. With the Greek myth of Icarus as her guiding metaphor, Jacks' mission to 'navigate the space between brilliance and madness', suggests that one's life could be more integrated and meaningful if managed with compassion and care rather than medicated into submission. This crucial idea helped me reconsider aspects of my own life, particularly my filmmaking practice as it related to the 'mad' rituals of play in my youth. Like a moth drawn to flame, I was intoxicated by how far—and how furiously—I could fly. So I began to question what my mixed blessings could give me access to, *if I learned to harness them*. How could I see the light, rather than become consumed by it?

As I began to conceptualize my documentary film, *Crooked Beauty*, the process of making film blossomed into far more than a manifestation of my primal attraction to light. I recognized a complimentary relationship between film's literal grasp of light and dark, and the polarities of mania and depression. I also saw parallels between the disease model of treating 'mental disorders' and the industry model of mainstream filmmaking, both of which elevate power and profit over integration and insight. I imagined a film that approached mental health issues from unique thematic and visual perspectives—one that would restore authenticity to experiences that are marginalized and stigmatized in our society. Jacks' testimony would serve as a touchstone for the viewer's own stories. But portraying Jacks carried risk; she had survived childhood trauma, substance abuse, been diagnosed 'bi-polar', and locked down in a psych ward by the age of 19. How could I recount her troubled history with compassion rather than exploitation typical of films about 'mental illness'?

The exploitation and annihilation of persons with disabilities in documentary film—from medical films of uncovered epileptic seizures to on-camera exterminations of persons with psychiatric disabilities by the Nazis—has evolved considerably since the first half of the 20th century. Contemporary independent filmmakers have advocated for themselves and their characters with highly personal, complex and truthful representations of mental health struggles. However, many of these films either reference images of despair and self-harming, indulge stylized excess to illustrate a highly subjective view of insanity, or perpetuate the myth of the mad genius/savant. For me, these films ultimately became portraits of 'otherness' rather than inclusion. As a filmmaker with an experimental background and fresh concerns about representation, I became particularly obsessed with *how we would see Jacks onscreen.* The traditional model of the featured character speaking to an off-screen interviewer felt contrived and inauthentic because it deferred to an unseen authority. So I began to think outside of *representation* and more about *embodiment*. What if I dispensed with a talking head altogether, and found symbols for the face of 'madness'? Had I not discovered it by gazing into the sun as a child? Could the archetypal journey of Icarus offer possibilities that were more illuminating than misguided?

The 'beholdenness to light', 'shadows', and 'cyclic and contrasting nature' that Kay Redfield Jameson cites above as characteristic to both manic-depression and the natural world are also relative to cinema. From the division of every frame of light on a strip of film by a black line to its intermittent motion through a camera, the mechanics of cinema operate through its interplay of fluctuations and contradictions, unseen by the audience like many conditions of the mind. But where so many films function like over the counter prescriptions for escaping the world, my film *returns viewers to it*. *Crooked Beauty* explores natural and urban landscapes for images that embody *difference and conflict* as visual counterparts to extreme mood states. Connecting the fissures and fault lines of human nature to the unstable topography and mercurial weather patterns of the San Francisco Bay Area situates both the speaking subject and viewer in a broad and complex field of forces and phenomena that shape our collective human experience. The outer world functions as a psychological road map upon which to explore the geography of breakdown and the regenerative power of nature. Jacks' history inhabits familiar places—

her words illustrate the images—transforming the mundane into talismans and the transitory into narrative markers. The edges and agitations where light and shadow and urban and natural spaces intersect would embody what Jacks refers to as the 'fragile fire' in her mind. The grammar and syntax of cinema becomes her voice, the film becomes her body.

Jacks' vision for making our own maps in response to society's prescribed models for normalcy inspired me to cultivate a new process for finding images that authentically embody 'madness'. In contrast to the conventions of carefully crafted screenplays and climate-controlled sound stages, I've spent hundreds of hours wandering in deep observation, following the signs embedded in natural and man-made spaces alike. I look to birds perched on telephone wires as barometers for the incoming fog; I follow trails of discarded radios, shopping carts, and clothing like breadcrumbs to the margins of urban space; and can almost smell subtle shifts in the direction, texture and weight of light. *It's as if I can hear the shots call me*—am I 'crazy' or am I just highly intuitive? Sometimes I will mistake doubt as curiosity, and defer to more obvious paths. I once spent three days shooting in abandoned mental asylums, ignoring the ghosts of the formerly interred, only to realize later that such structures—even in ruin—point too literally to the horrors they once contained. Being offered and denied shots comes with the territory on a map made of serpentine and tangled trails. But these are the ones I must follow for they lead me to the places where incongruous elements overlap in broken harmony and crooked grace.

Jacks asserts that, "There would be a lot less mental illness, quote unquote, in our society if people were given spaces to work through emotions like anger and grief instead of denying and suppressing them." In the mid-19th century, the cramped, poorly lit structures and layouts of mental hospitals were redesigned as sanctuaries of compassion intended to facilitate the patient's recovery and self-healing. The power of architecture to shape human behavior affected how the patients saw themselves, *as well as how they were seen*. Similarly, the framework of *Crooked Beauty* supports a *new moral architecture* that liberates Jacks from the confines of photographic representation and encourages the viewer to freely integrate the testimony into their own experience. Cinematic space—both onscreen and in the theater—is re-imagined as a collective site for navigating the space between brilliance and 'madness'.

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