

## *Invisible Pain*

### **Sarah Dennis**

Pain does not require a physical presence. Pain can eat away at your insides. Your emotional turmoil could be taking over your mind; your body could be on fire, and no one would know. I drew inspiration from the idea of invisible pain, particularly Complex Regional Pain Syndrome (CRPS) and mental health disorders to create a body of work, including oil paintings, a multi-media composition and a series of photographs.

In 2012, my sister Annabelle was diagnosed with Complex Regional Pain Syndrome; a pain syndrome caused by nerve damage, preventing the pain receptors in her brain from turning off. This leaves the victim in constant agony, yet as a nerve injury, there are no visual symptoms. The deterioration of my sister's physical and mental health influenced my decision to focus on communicating the idea of pain through visual art. The discrimination that my sister faced, living with an invisible pain syndrome, has motivated me to give her a voice by translating her pain into art for others to interpret and hopefully, understand better. To a certain extent, my work is a social statement.

Since CPRS is so rare and was not well researched or known about both by professionals and the general public, my sister was often bullied and denied help from peers and teachers whilst at school. She was told that she was faking her pain and was treated horribly; leading her to grow up feeling like a burden to the people around her. The pain related to CPRS is so severe that it is often referred to as "suicide syndrome" since many of its victims succumb to taking their lives to escape the agony. The mental turmoil caused by CPRS inspired the first part of the diptych.

Inspired by contemporary Columbian Artist, Cesar Biojo, who paints in oils, naked, vulnerable figures in uncomfortable, exposed postures. Then dragging a palette knife through the completed painting, smearing the wet paint and adding more aggressive abstract, texture, "destroying" his composition. The juxtaposition of the harsh palette knife or textural brush strokes over the soft, vulnerable realistic figures creates a confronting, yet powerful image that expresses the mental turmoil and weakness of his subjects. The subject matter and political stance of his artwork express the vulnerability of people with mental health issues. To begin my composition, I painted a naked, female figure curled up in a foetal position, facing away from the viewer. The figure is gripping their knees to their chest, as if to protect their identity and innocence. Once finished with the realistic image of the subject, a palette knife with a range of skin tones, pinks and purples were dragged across the subject's head, symbolising the mental anguish, anxiety and fear felt by the victims of CPRS. Whilst not as technically accomplished as Caser's work I feel that my work has a similar impact with the contrast of a vulnerable figure with smooth realistic colour and tone, disrupted by a smear of textual paint over the head and symbolically, the mind of my subject.

For the second part of my diptych, the surrealist movement, with its symbolism and juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated images, inspired me. In particular, Frida Kahlo's *"The Broken Column" 1944*, addressed a similar concept to what I was interested in presenting. Kahlo painted her confronting self-portrait, with bandages wrapped around her body, nails impaling her skin and the middle of the torso is cut open to reveal a metal column where her spine should be. This powerful composition influenced my own concept: I decided to create a version of Annabelle's leg and foot, showing her pain in a literal

manner. Oil paint created a rendition of realistic detail showing her feet and one of her crutches. This composition allows the audience to connect with the notion of physical pain, creating a clear visual relationship between the crutch and the cracked, discoloured leg and foot. The cracked surface of the skin on the affected left leg and foot, allowed the audience to interpret the physical pain felt by the sufferers. This represents molten lava, symbolising the intense, deep, boiling pain felt by Complex Regional Pain Syndrome victims. This clear visual symbolisation is similar to that shown in Kahlo's depiction – it leaves the viewer in no doubt that the work is about pain. I think that this part of my work was particularly successful in communicating the concept of physical pain, influenced by the strong symbolism seen Kahlo's works. It is clear that she wanted to express what she was going through and how she saw herself- this is what I too hoped to depict.

A photo series was the key part to the final part of my work. 'Burst' photos of a scene created by pouring nail polish remover over a rose and setting it alight. This piece embodies the victims of CPRS. The rose represents beauty and love, symbolising the sufferers themselves, whilst the flame signifies destruction and deterioration of both the physical and mental aspects of their being. The movement of the flames are important as it relates to the fluctuation of pain felt by those with Complex Regional Pain Syndrome. Australian Artist Tim Storrier was influential with his series of striking paintings depicting burning lines of rope and wood – "Point to point" 2008 and "Night embers" 2008.

I printed a single image from the photographic series onto canvas paper, I then worked over the top with glazes of semi opaque oil paint to emphasise the colours and visual texture within the composition. The closely cropped image creates a confronting destructive image encouraging the audience to interpret the agony of CPRS. This was heightened by burning through the canvas itself, "destroying" the beautiful image to reveal the harsher structure of the canvas, symbolising the pain felt beneath the skin, that is not visible to the outside world. The burning of the canvas also refers to symbol of the public burning of art done by Nazi Germany during World War 2. This was done by the Nazi regimen to conceal and suppress information. The burning motif represents the denial that was shown towards my sister's agony during her schooling. The destruction of the canvas creates a confronting composition, allowing the audience to understand the damage CPRS victims suffer.

Throughout my sister's time at school, her invisible pain made her subject to disbelief and as a result, bullying. My aim throughout the creation of this body of work is to allow people to understand the pain of my sister; giving her, and other CPRS sufferers the opportunity to express their pain, despite a lack of physical presence; through a universal medium of visual communication -Art. With this body of work I feel satisfied that I have achieved this.

#