

## BRAIN DISORDERS JOURNEY INTO THE ENDLESS MAZE OF THE MIND



I was Happy, Ink and collage on paper, 77x56cm, 2011

Brain disorders: a touchy, sometimes taboo subject in our modern society. However, most of us have been affected at some point in our lives by a form of mental breakdown, such as depression, or heard of some other forms of mental illness. As the brain remains an unsolved mystery, any dysfunctions associated with it remain largely unexplained. The unknown naturally brings about fear and incomprehension.

In a set of drawings called *Psychological Landscapes*, I explore what is commonly called bipolar disorder or manic-depression. The illness is characterized by a succession of highs and lows punctuated by more stable periods, that we all experience, but can in affected patients spiral out of control and result in a frantic search for adrenaline-charged experiences or at the other end of the spectrum, death by suicide.

I chose to explore this sensitive issue by using drawing, the simplest form of mark making. Pencil and ink seemed the ideal mediums to convey a sense of intimacy and immediacy while grey and dark shades illustrate the dark side of the brain that we commonly call grey matter.

My starting point was the study of numerous brain scans and the stunning drawings of Santiago Ramón y Cajal. Considered by many as the father of modern neuroscience, he used a microscopic cellular staining technique developed by Camillo Golgi in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, which enabled a new understanding of localised neural processes. In drawings such as *I am Happy* and *An Island of contradictory emotions in an unpredictable ocean: is there a way out?* I moved away from these purely visual representations to try to depict a more psychological dimension, which is necessarily a personal interpretation but whose sequential narratives is found globally in all patients.

The brain contains 100 billion nerve cells and some 100 trillion synapses or neural connections and cannot be transplanted. Thinking about these incredible numbers, I could not help thinking that breakdowns and dysfunctions are inevitable. And although mental disorders can become so overwhelming as they can take over an individual's life and lead to madness and death, the immense possibility of the brain made me ponder about another big mystery: the universe. Is it a mere coincidence that the number of stars in our galaxy is estimated as roughly 100 billion?

If the cerebral cortex (also called grey matter) were to be unfolded, its surface would be close to 2000 cm<sup>2</sup> (2 sq ft). I imagined this surface, run through by synapses, flattened. It made me think about a starry sky at night whose boundaries would always evade. In *Beyond the reach of (grey) matter*, through the act of repetition of simple hatched marks reflecting the endless routine of our brain connections, I simultaneously wanted to convey in a poetic way the sense of mystery and vastness found in us and around us.