

## Out of Hours

# 'Stitched drawings' and caring for our older people

*'In the UK, 3.8 older people live alone ... Depression affects 22% of men and 28% of women aged 65 or over.'*<sup>1</sup>

Monmouth is an 8000-strong community on the borders of Wales and England. Geography and history funnel you from your wooded drive along the Wye across a solid stone bridge beneath the 1067 Norman fortress, its stones familiar with the ever fluid times and politics in the lives and community nestled at this confluence of water.

Through 20 stitched portraits of older people, and a 13-minute film *Thursday Afternoons*, Georgie Meadows and Monmouth open their hearts, and rekindle yours, to the stories and vitality that still live beneath the dulled wrinkles and fraying minds of the older population we can struggle to know how to engage with, or care for with local care pathways.

Over recent years so much shame and blame, pointing and pain, has spilled through my radio speakers and over the broadsheets, that it took these works of art to highlight how my vision for holistic elderly care has regressed, so that words such as 'compassion' or 'Staffs.' may actually have me instinctively reaching to turn off the radio to avoid the next onslaught of anger. They highlighted, and thus re-envisioned, the doctor who, during hospital weekend on-calls, used to have lunch with (help feed) her patients as a way to unwind, during which I would, for example, be transported to a noisy B45 bomber above Germany in the dead of night. Maybe I'm being nostalgic, but on the

**Figure 1. Georgie Meadows — Stitched drawings.**  
© Georgie Meadows.



ward round the next day his body no longer seemed so stopped. Instead he was sitting proudly as though taking the General's salute, and as his hand held the throttle of that plane, I held his hand, looking searchingly from above for a tell-tale river, or vein.

Throughout our lives, professional or otherwise, we are vulnerable to closing off to ourselves, and therefore others, in our fight to survive. Unfortunately for our isolated, depressed older population, closing down our imagination and beliefs can leave us feeling that creating or supporting living community systems is naïve idealism, or for those in England now legally charged to commission such systems from April 2013, political utopia. Happily, artists such as Georgie, through their ability to stay alive, and communicate to us all through stitch, or music as demonstrated in *Thursday Afternoons*, can re-oxygenate our tiredness and innate vision.

Over the Spring of 2013 I scuttled past the pieces that made up *Stitched Drawings* in the radiology corridor of the Royal United Hospital, Bath, at a pace appropriate for a busy mind whirring with radiology requests and another patient in the emergency department. They slowed me, even if momentarily, as is appropriate for the intense study that has gone into creating such a fine set of portraits. The simplicity of the lines helps you to strip away the distracting smell of urine wafting from the residential home chairs, the noisy neighbour, or pressure to have a 'package answer' to the concern they are more confused. The majority of patients that inspired Georgie's art are aging with depression or dementia. The faces are familiar, skilfully carved by creating texture through layered wadding, adding colour to their contours as you would make-up, with dangling threads creating thinning, unkempt hair. Some of the pieces create a sense of space and place, such as the lady in her winged chair huddled in the corner.

These pieces of art allow you to look and then touch, in the way you may your sleeping child, or older parent, and then with the next caricature, further down the corridor, letting you look and reach out again. Gradually you notice that within and beside each sketch is a simple story:

*'This woman got a name for being a difficult resident because she wouldn't join in with the social activities. She had always been*

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*a private person. No one had asked her if she wanted to come to the party or wear the ridiculous hat.* (Figure 1)

Some are sad, some weave hope, and you've met them all.

A further beauty of this art is that it has a practical outworking. Inspired by her looking and ability to reach out, the artist Georgie Meadows set up a remarkably cheap weekly community initiative that provides for social interaction, rekindles memories (and thus a sense of self), and improves fitness (and dance skills) in the old and not so old. This is captured in the film that accompanies the exhibition, *Thursday Afternoons*.

Having watched *Thursday Afternoons* via the Wellcome Collection website<sup>2</sup> I was left believing once again in all that is possible locally. Perhaps if we designed our working lives in a way that allows us to go and laugh and dance with our patients once a month, it may just reduce our stress, improve our cardiovascular health, and regain some of the respect we've lost. How 'joined-up' to address the mental health and activity levels of the patients and their doctors in one cheap manoeuvre. As simple and seamless as *Stitched Drawings*. Equally, for all of you with patients feeling their lives have lost meaning, or can hear cynicism in the timbre of your colleague's speech, could *Stitched Drawings* or *Thursday Afternoons* be helpful as a springboard for the next consultation/appraisal meeting?

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### REFERENCES

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2. Wellcome collection. *Thursday afternoons. A film by Barry Lewis*. <http://www.wellcomecollection.org/whats-on/exhibitions/georgie-meadows/film-thursday-afternoons.aspx> [accessed 18 Oct 2013].