

## ***Lost Person***

2018

James Paddock

Essay by Charlotte Bradley

Contemporary visual artist James Paddock often uses his work to address social understanding of mental illness and how it is handled in society today. In his most recent work, a moving image installation entitled *Lost Person*, Paddock uses art to focus on those without a voice in society; individuals suffering from mental health afflictions who have over time been swept under the carpet by the very institutions they rely on. Made in collaboration with music video director Rob Luckins, and edited alongside animator Martin Davey, the moving image piece documents a man drowning under his bed sheets as he calls out for help through a monologue we are unable to hear. Paddock further adds to this by orchestrating various other visual and audio components to visually re-construct the cacophony and confusion of a mental health problem.

Paddock's research looks at how mental illness has escalated and been dealt with in recent history. He begins by looking specifically at the 1980s when 'Care in the Community' was the primary means of treating physically and mentally disabled people outside of the institution, within the safety of their own homes. Paddock's artwork therefore focuses on the social isolation that has come as a consequence of this in recent years. Rather than be imprisoned within an institution, many are left confined within their homes, trapped both physically and psychologically. The artist's work plays on our empathy and awareness: this is now *our* problem, not just *their* problem. Paddock uses his work to stand for those lost within a culture that does not look back, and a society that is rapidly accelerating, ready to turn a blind eye to any obstacle in its path.

*Lost Person* immediately traps us within a clinical, almost medicated space. We watch intrusively through a viewfinder that focuses on a man lying in his bed, anxiously battling with his thoughts. Although interpretations will inevitably vary, the bedding and pillows he is surrounded by could be seen as a form of entrapment. As pillows are normally indicative of comfort and support, our preconception of what symbolizes 'comfort' here is arguably perverted: the subject is almost suffocated by the bedding around him. This becomes a parallel to Paddock's interest in those currently suffocated by loneliness within the 'safety' of their own home. The over-exposure of the white bedding and setting around him is also blinding; a feature that is arguably suggestive of society turning a blind eye to what we don't want to either see or acknowledge. But we cannot move on from this image. The camera lens remains fixated on the male subject, and as the audience, we too become trapped in his situation. We are made to truly identify with our role as a spectator: helpless and at a loss as we watch this individual suffer.

Following on from the topic of helplessness, although we see the subject talking his voice is muted. We come to understand what he saying only through the subtitles at the bottom of the screen, thus creating an immediate, awkward disconnection between the spectator and the spectated. This disconnection is ambiguous. Is this a metaphor for the lost voices of those with a mental illness? Or are we are the ones who are not connecting with those who need help anymore? Returning to Paddock's research, the use of subtitles and muting of a voice here is fundamentally analogous to the state or community not truly hearing those suffering with a mental illness. These interpretations point towards a break in humanity, and a lost sense of solicitude. The rhetoric Paddock incites therefore begs the question, who really is the 'lost person' here?

In continuation of the sense of loss, Paddock adds to this by replacing what we should hear with various voices of British sitcom characters and a laughter track. This comedic value is a stark contrast from the solemnity of the visual image presented before us. The laughter is awkward and uncomfortable to listen to as it makes a mockery of the man on screen, and again we are put in a position of discomfort. We sit observantly on the sideline as the humiliation perpetuates and the man continues to struggle with his thoughts. Perhaps referencing the insecurities and vulnerabilities those with mental illness are made to feel, this tense atmosphere Paddock creates makes for a raw artwork that we have much to take from.

Paddock adds another layer of audio to the moving image piece: a contemporary waltz composed by musician Dan Keen, creating an unusual, curiously disjointed dynamic. Our instinct is to find associations between the sounds but perhaps in this case we are required to step back and do the very opposite. The resounding contrast between the upbeat, carousel-like waltz with the distress of the male subject, his words we read off the screen, and the taunting voices of the sitcom characters adds to the overall theme of disconnection. Arguably this soundtrack highlights the fragmentation in our comprehension of mental illness, our increasing social disconnections, and thus the 'lost person' we have all become.

*Lost Person* is not a straightforward documentation of mental illness. The moving image piece requires reflection, contemplation, analysis and empathy to understand what the artist James Paddock is telling us. Upon face value, we see the distress and anxiety of an individual suffering from a mental health problem, but the work is multifaceted. There are layers within the work that operate on a subconscious level, providing us the opportunity to fully understand the loneliness, the perversion, and the irrationality of a psychological issue that varies so much on a personal level. The artist requires us to step back and reflect on what we see, to analyze the components of the contemporary art piece, and use the space to both witness the situation as a spectator, whilst simultaneously wholly empathize with the spectated. *Lost Person* is a statement; it is a mirror to an aspect of society we cannot ignore anymore.