

Marcus Coates: The Directors



Still from *The Directors*, Marcus Coates (2022) Courtesy of Artangel and the artist (4)

Time Out says



Psychosis is reduced to one-liners in New Wave songs and clichés in horror films, but it's a deeply complex condition. So making art about it - especially art that doesn't descend into wildy insensitive, patronising farce - isn't easy.

But Marcus Coates has tried anyway. He's made five films about psychosis and dotted them around Pimlico, each one directed by someone in recovery from the condition, using Coates as the protagonist to tell their stories.

It's obviously very tricky territory; it would be so easy for this to be exploitative, crass and voyeuristic. But in working so closely with people whose lives have been affected by psychosis, and giving the directors total agency and autonomy to tell their stories, Coates has just about walked that tightrope, and created some genuinely devastating art in the process.

It starts in the Churchill Gardens residents association building. Upstairs in a faceless meeting room, you watch Coates being used to tell Marcus Gordon's story. He sits on a stage and Gordon takes him through the feelings of being on a bus ride as hallucinations pulse through

him and voices chatter wildly in his head. He's convinced that he's hot, that he's cold, that he stinks, that he's pissed himself, that everyone on the bus is staring. The voices grow louder, the heat hotter, the cold colder. It's chaotic, terrifying, uncontrollable. But it's just in his mind, it's not real. 'My mind hates me?' Coates asks Gordon uncomprehendingly. How could your own brain have it in for you like this?

It's a brutal, powerful opening that's deeply uncomfortable, utterly affecting, and in truth, quite triggering. I left feeling genuinely shaken.

“It's art to leave you feeling completely ground down, exhausted, worn out”

Up on the fifth floor of a nearby tower block, you walk into Lucy's room. In the video, filmed in this same room, Lucy talks of being 14 years old and becoming more and more convinced that the world is fake, that people are puppets, that nothing is real. She's haunted by a tall, silent silhouette, by a clown girl with a fanged smile who pops balloons so Lucy can never relax or escape. This little room is the only palace she feels safe, but it's no sanctuary. The space, the hallucinations, the paranoia, Lucy's youth: it's claustrophobic, visceral, and almost too much to handle.

In a local Indian restaurant, Stephen's film shows Coates unable to leave the house, dragging himself along the walls just to make it out of the door, gripped by fear of surveillance and control. He compulsively checks taps and light switches, every face out of the window is watching him, everyone is staring.

In the fourth film, downstairs in a medical centre up the road, Coates is directed by Anthony here, who hides himself away under a blanket for weeks, months. He can no longer recognise his mum. He's angry, confused, humiliated by voices in his head. At this point, Coates himself seems like he's starting to struggle. He's trying desperately to understand, to relate, and can never come close.

In the final film, shown in a shop near the Tube, Mark directs his relentless negative inner monologue at Coates as he walks through a park, a barrage of self-hating misery that hits far too close to the bone. He forces Coates to walk blindfolded, pushes him, punches him, leaves him lying miserable and muddied on the Thames foreshore.

In all of these films, the dominant sense is of inescapability, of these scenarios being permanent. The fear, paranoia, anxiety, isolation and sadness here feel like they'll last forever. 'I literally can't imagine coping with this' says Coates at one point, But people do cope with it, every day, all the time, and they survive.

This isn't easy, pleasant, aesthetic art. It's not a painting to brighten your living room, or a sculpture for a bank lobby, it's art to shock and shake you, art to leave you feeling completely ground down, exhausted, worn out, art to give people a voice. And it's brilliant.

Written by Eddy Frankel
Friday 2 September 2022