

CUTS LIKE A KNIFE

THE WORK OF OLIVER HEMSLEY

By Jenny Smith

July 16, 2021

*“You take your problems to a god,
but what you really need is for the god to take you to the inside of you.” – Tina Turner*

With a sharp drag, followed by a swallow of white wine (with ice), Oliver describes his pug “Viv” as a “cunt”. When they go out, she runs between the wheels of his chair and barks at anyone who comes near him, and he loves this cunt-like quality in her.ⁱ

As time is marked with BC and AD, there are two periods for Hemsley, before the knife attack and after. His work before, the botanicals, painted almost to be the imitation of a thing, or its ideal, without blemish, perform in theatrical starkness. Each one, alone on the stage, possessing an ironic and self-aware jejuneness that will lodge in your skin if you dare to touch them. They are his *Private Dancers*. At the epoch of the attack, Hemsley was pronounced clinically dead. The only hope that the doctors had was to perform “a brutal piece of high-risk surgery called a clam-shell thoracotomy... To do this, they cut him from one side of his chest to the other, lifted his ribs, parted his lungs, reached in, took his heart from his body and coaxed it back to life.”ⁱⁱ Which is the same type of surgery his art performs on the viewer. After being completely paralyzed, it was divine grace that his left hand began to function again, because it is the hand he uses to draw. In the beginning of his rehabilitation someone had to strap the pencil to it as he “swooped blindly”ⁱⁱⁱ at the paper. He announced during the TalkArt podcast interview, that his right hand can “fuck off”.

It seems to me the series where it appears he is laying on a table as a glowing orb floats above his body, with a silhouette in the background, that I believe is also him, depicts an out of body experience. But it also looks like when a man is drubbing himself. And it could be that both things are happening. Because he clinically died, it isn't untrue to refer to this period as After Death for Hemsley. I don't know if he has contemplated this, but he lets out a wry chuckle as TalkArt refers to his bedroom as his tomb. It isn't entirely impossible that Hemsley exists as a revenant; most artists act as instruments for art, while his entire existence has become a manifestation of it - it seems that is all he is able to do with it. The masks, that both look like a balaclava and a skull, which he wears in his earlier self-portraits also indicate a clairvoyance to the not so distant future of the pandemic, reminding us of the cycle of history, the vanitas and memento mori that dominated art during the plagues of the middle ages. All of this happens with such deceptively simple lines and sparsely used medium; it is a true surprise how he reaches such depth and mystery employing their antonyms.



Oliver Hemsley from <https://www.facebook.com/artagainstknivesgallery/photos/993000237471089>

And <https://www.oliverhemsley.co.uk/page1>

ⁱ TalkArt podcast

ⁱⁱ <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/a-brush-with-death-why-britain-s-coolest-art-and-fashion-names-have-rallied-around-a-victim-of-random-knife-crime-1778125.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ TalkArt podcast