DEPICTIONS OF AN ODYSSEY

Depictions of an odyssey
by Peter MacKarell.
Edited by Sheila Paine.
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On the walls of a top floor at Guy’s Hospital, London, are a series of small gouache paintings. Visitors and hospital staff are captivated by the colourful works which painfully illustrate the impact of optic neuritis on an artist’s perception of light and form. This book is a posthumous and touching tribute to the painter and patient, Peter MacKarell.

In 1980 Peter MacKarell experienced the onset of multiple sclerosis to which he succumbed eight years later. The artist’s struggle with his illness, his fortitude and persistently enquiring nature are described in various ways in the book. It is well written, but the text is eclipsed by MacKarell’s paintings.

The foreword is by Richard Hoggart who was warden of Goldsmith’s College where the artist was a teacher. It is a warm and generous introduction which describes the artist’s “incarceration” in various hospitals, each of which affected the artist’s creativity. For example, gloom and despair characterised a period in a ward for the young and chronically disabled. The first chapter by the writer Bevis Hillier covers the artist’s career as an illustrator and cartoonist. The second is by a fellow painter, Stanislav Frenkel, who movingly describes the changing styles, techniques and subjects of the painter as his circumstances and vision alter with the illness.

The last two chapters are by the artist himself. He writes about the optic neuritis which heralded the onset of his disease. He describes the puzzling circumstances of deteriorating vision, blindness and recovery. His series of highly personal pictures illustrate this experience. A later sequence of pictures painted during convalescence now hang in the Institute of Ophthalmology.

The last chapter contains some excerpts from an illustrated journal he kept for his daughter whilst he was in a nursing home. His decline is all too apparent. In the closing pages he struggles to make sense of the confused images of shape and colour, analysing them with an artist’s training, and reflecting fondly on earlier painters who had influenced him.

Peter MacKarell was a supremely talented artist who must have been a great inspiration to his family and friends.

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