

Portraits of pauper patients in Epsom's Horton Cemetery, inspires artist

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Eric Fong is a multimedia artist whose work spans film, photography, sculpture, and installation, often exploring themes of the body, identity, and vulnerability. His unique approach is informed by his background as a former medical doctor, merging art with science and technology.

His latest project, Apparitions, is a series of cyanotype portraits derived from Victorian-era glass plate negatives of pauper patients from the Manor Hospital (part of the Epsom cluster). These haunting images were salvaged after being abandoned in the 1990s and now reside at Surrey History Centre. Fong's cyanotypes, toned with ivy leaves gathered from the burial site of Horton Cemetery, symbolise the connection between the patients' bodies and overgrown landscape. This project reclaims the dignity of these long-forgotten individuals and encourages a reflection on mental illness both in the past and today.

You can also view cyanotypes of found Victorian needlework, referencing those made/mended/worn by female patients in Victorian asylums through his Asylum Needlework project.

Keeping with the Asylum photograph theme, Us and Them led by Alana Harris (Department of History at Kings College London), creatively re-imagined 19th-century asylum photographs to highlight issues surrounding disability and challenge how people with disabilities have been portrayed over time.

In partnership with Surrey History Centre, the project unearthed archival photographs taken in local psychiatric institutions and paired them with newly commissioned portraits of the disabled artists. Guided by portrait photographer Emma Brown and oral historian Laura Mitchison, the artists used historical photographic techniques to create new images that provoke questions about ableism, mental health, and representation.

The project culminated in a public exhibition at The Horton Arts Centre in Epsom, where the new and historical photographs were displayed side by side. The exhibition opened to great public interest, sparking important discussions around disability and inclusion.

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