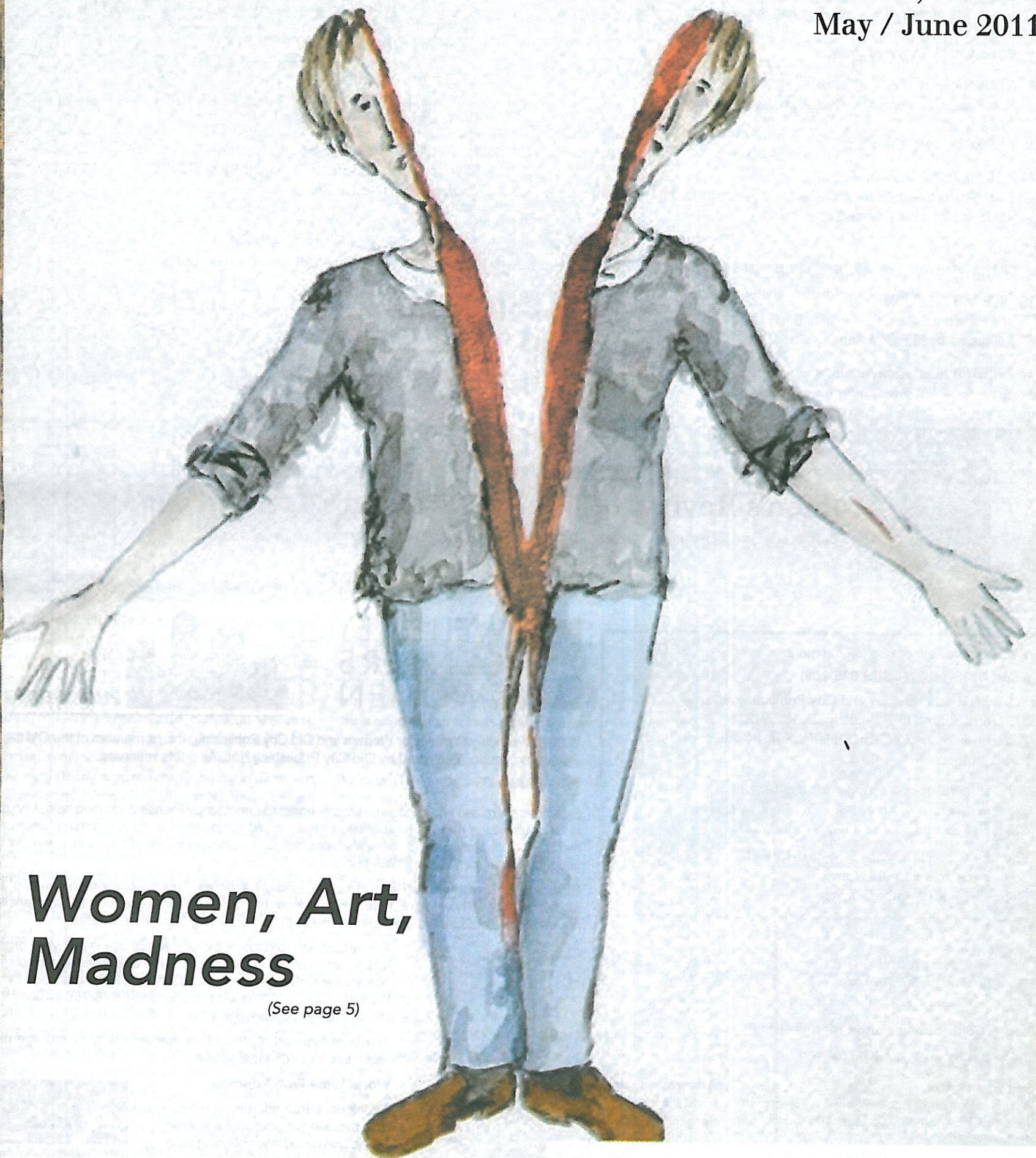


# Women's Review *of Books*

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## **Women, Art, Madness**

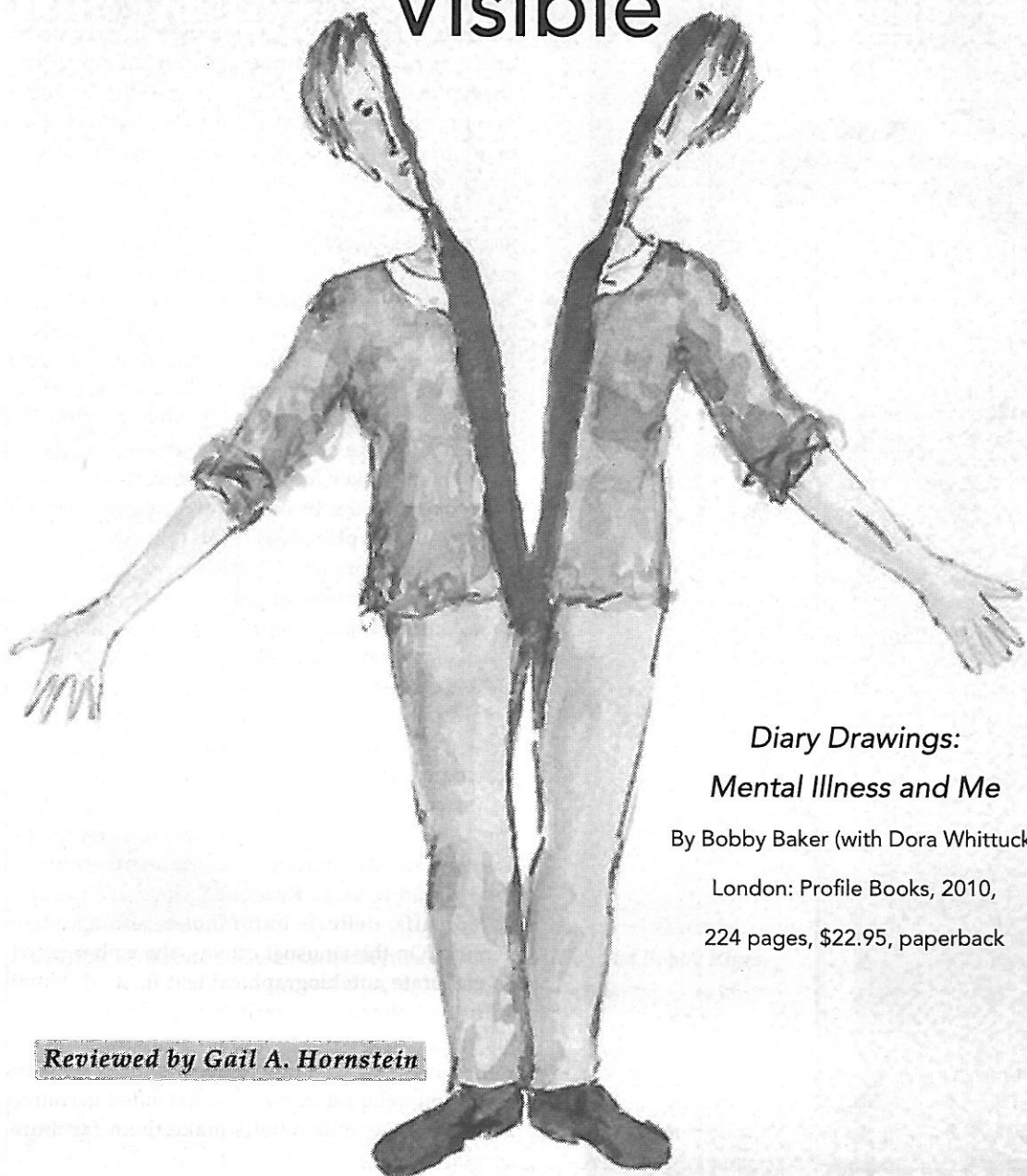
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# Making the Agony Visible



## Diary Drawings: Mental Illness and Me

By Bobby Baker (with Dora Whittuck)

London: Profile Books, 2010,

224 pages, \$22.95, paperback

Reviewed by Gail A. Hornstein

**B**obby Baker is a feminist performance artist, widely acclaimed and popular in her native Britain for forty years of witty, outrageous, and brilliantly subversive depictions of domesticity. Against the background of an art world enamored of monumental structures made of bronze and iron, she chose food as her main medium: among her best-known pieces are a life-sized family constructed out of cake and a recreation of the history of modern painting made entirely of icing sugar. In "Displaying the Sunday Dinner," Baker appeared with raw roasts of beef as breasts, cabbage leaves in her hair, roast potatoes strung round her neck, her bare feet thrust into pans of custard, her expression abject. In early performances, Baker literally fed the work to her audience or ate it herself at the piece's end. Her posh accent and well-appointed North London home (which figures in many of her performances) instantly mark her as the well-brought-up, sixty-year-old woman she now is. But her politics are uncompromising and her style humorous and never didactic. Audiences respond powerfully to the combination: last year, more than 50,000 people in the UK saw her work.

Although some of her performances dealt in part with mental health issues (such as "Box Story," in which Baker appeared in a giant Pandora's box, opening parts of her life history, or "How to Live," in which she was a psychotherapist with a pea as her patient), audiences had no sense that madness was key to her experience. In 2009 that all changed, when the Wellcome Collection in London mounted a major exhibition, "Bobby Baker's Diary Drawings: Mental Illness and Me, 1997 - 2008." Thousands of people flocked to see the exhibit, and it received rave reviews everywhere from medical journals to tony art magazines to tabloid newspapers.

Now there is a book to document the piece. As someone fortunate enough to have seen the exhibit (and to have met Bobby herself), I'm delighted that this beautifully produced volume can bring Baker's work to the much larger audience—especially in the US—that it so deserves.

For hundreds of years, people with first-hand experience of madness have sought to portray their extreme emotions or unusual states of mind. But very few such accounts are diaries. And even fewer take the form of drawings rather than prose writing. So Baker's *Diary Drawings* makes a

unique contribution to a genre already complex and powerful.

The exhibit and the book include all 158 of the drawings Baker chose to make public (from the more than 700 she created over an eleven-year period of cycling in and out of psychiatric facilities). She made the first drawing the day she entered a London crisis center in January 1997, and she did one every day for more than a year, before switching to a once-a-week regimen. Like any diary, the drawings served many different functions for Baker during these agonizing years. "The discipline of making them, and then sticking at it, proved a vital method of survival," she now says.

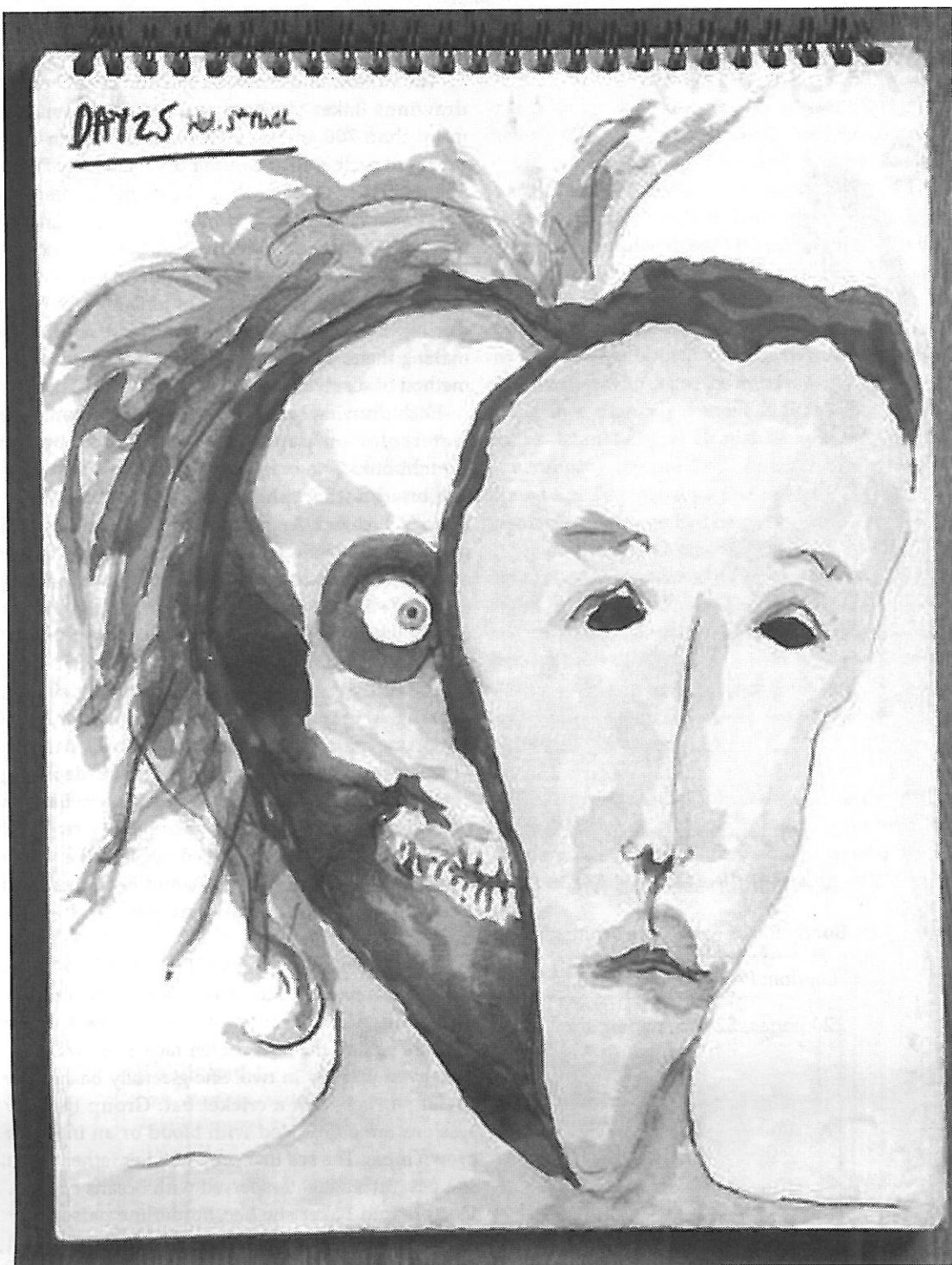
Each drawing takes the same form: a luminous watercolor on paper from a 12" x 9" bound sketchbook. The originals themselves were not exhibited; rather, photographs were created by Baker's husband, Andrew Whittuck, a professional photographer who has documented much of her art. He shot each diary drawing in identical fashion—as a close-up, the spiral of the binder clearly visible at the top, the image framed by the wood of their kitchen table.

The drawings at first look deceptively simple, evoking Art Spiegelman's graphic memoir *Maus* (1986) or Charlotte Salomon's *Life or Theater?* (1999). They create an extended visual narrative, depicting key moments in a harrowing experience. Baker's formal art training makes each a fully realized painting, but it is the combined effect of the whole work that so powerfully pulls audiences into this multilayered pastiche of raw pain and ironic humor.

At one level, the images tell the story of Baker's illness and recovery. She arrives, desperate for help, at a London crisis center. A frightening daemon appears behind the mask of her face. Her own body is cleaved literally in two. She gleefully bashes her social worker with a cricket bat. Group therapy sessions are obliterated with blood or an inchoate brown mess. The sea that drowned her father when she was fifteen is interspersed with oceans of tears. Doctors told Baker she had borderline personality disorder—the diagnosis that psychiatrist and feminist Judith Herman famously called "little more than a sophisticated insult" in her classic *Trauma and Recovery* (1992). Baker was outraged by the implication that there was something wrong with her character from which she could never recover. She told the doctor: "I beg your pardon, but speak for yourself."

One of the most powerful themes of the drawings is, as Baker has written, "that those who have the greatest difficulties to overcome... I was distressed beyond anything I imagined it possible for a human being to be and remain alive." But she refuses to see her ability to keep going as exceptional. "Many, many people live lives this hard and are strong—I have merely recorded it," she says (from an unpublished grant proposal, January 2011).

Much has been made by other reviewers of the drawings that depict her therapist as a murderer: this has, not surprisingly, distressed some professionals. But Baker isn't a literalist. She's making art, not journalism. She has a complicated understanding of the process of psychotherapy, and her vivid images of the rage as well as the love she felt for her those treating her show how deeply she explored herself in the therapeutic work.



In an essay at the end of the book, Baker confronts the questions people constantly ask her: Why did you get ill? Whose fault is it? This is “clearly an issue that burns a hole in people’s brains whenever the subject of mental illness is raised,” she says.

We live in a culture of blame, a culture that craves precise answers and solutions when troubling matters arise. People seem fearful that they too could get ill, or that as parents they may damage their children’s mental health. I can’t provide simple and neat answers to these fears—because there are none.

This is rare honesty in a field like psychiatry, so filled with spin and subterfuge.

Not only does Baker challenge the received wisdom about mental illness; she also confronts some classic feminist stereotypes. Ever since Phyllis Chesler published *Women and Madness* in 1972, a long line of feminist writers has cast domestic pressure as a leading cause of women’s breakdowns. But Baker says that continuing to do the cooking, shopping, and housework, “as well as

contributing financially and offering emotional and practical support to my family” during her years of profound suffering “helped me to hang on to fragments of self-respect.” The work kept her from killing herself. “I was desperate to protect my children—the energy you get from that will keep you walking over hot coals,” she said in a June 28, 2009, interview by Kate Kellaway in *The Observer*. Despite her own torment, Baker and her husband did everything they could to “keep ourselves and our children together as a close-knit family. This was our greatest achievement and strength, and yet people involved in my care often failed to understand the extent of our mutual capabilities and autonomy.” Baker’s moving depictions of how the rituals of daily life can counter the self-loathing of paranoia and deep depression refute any simple equation of traditional feminine roles with women’s suffering.


Several of Baker’s drawings are contemporaneous portraits of her family—her husband Andrew, daughter Dora, and son Charlie. They are straightforward, artful, and utterly without distortion, unlike so many of the other drawings. Each person is present as him or herself, a hugely steadying influ-

ence. This is a remarkable family, and Baker’s contribution to maintaining its closeness despite her own terrible suffering is itself a work of art.

She paints a striking contrast between her treatment for mental illness and that she received for the breast cancer with which she was later diagnosed. Her oncologists told her “in great detail and as a matter of course, the side effects of her chemotherapy medication.” This was like “walking into full sunlight after years in the shadows—I was being treated as an adult at last, rather than as an irresponsible child. ...as a whole person, with a variety of needs and strengths—and above all not judged, not judged, not judged.”

Especially powerful are Baker’s many images of “self-harming,” the absurd name given to cutting or other actions often mistaken as attempts at suicide. Rather, “women who hurt themselves,” as one popular author calls them, make visible in their physical bodies the pain they already experience in their minds. Like others who do this—men as well as women—Baker found relief in cutting herself, even though in the 1990s, this was a rare act among well-brought-up English women in their forties. The drawing from Day 10, where every inch of her body is covered with red slashes, is tragic, but also has a “simple beauty,” as Baker herself comments.

In some ways, that’s the point of any depiction of madness—to make the agony visible. For years, I’ve been studying an intricate, startling piece of textile art, now in a museum in Heidelberg, Germany. It’s the work of Agnes Richter, a seamstress incarcerated in a mental institution in the 1890s. Reconstructed from the prison-like uniform mental patients in nineteenth-century Europe had to wear, Richter’s jacket has beautiful flared cuffs, delicate buttonholes, and a stylish peplum. On this unusual canvas, she embroidered an elaborate autobiographical text in six different colors of thread, covering every inch of the garment. Bobby Baker’s diary drawings have a similar intensity, that urgent need to make sense of the incomprehensible, but their extended narrative and often hilarious details make them far more accessible than Richter’s compressed and coded words.

My favorite of all the drawings is from Day 526, a highly creative and successful period in Baker’s life, when she had sell-out shows at London’s Barbican Theatre and tours to Beijing and Australia. It was also a time of financial pressure, physical illness, and desperate frustration with the “mental health system.” In the drawing, she sits at a round table, evoking the rich wood of her beloved kitchen. She droops in her chair, clearly exhausted, the table seeming to hold her up, but she looks relaxed in comfortable circumstances. A mug of tea sits beside her, amid scattered papers (this was the period during which Baker began seriously to write). What perfects the drawing is the rainbow-colored chicken perched on her head, the note of whimsy evident even at the most awful moments, which makes Bobby Baker’s art so distinctive and so appealing to such a broad audience. 

Gail A. Hornstein is a professor of Psychology at Mount Holyoke College and the author of *Agnes’s Jacket: A Psychologist’s Search for the Meanings of Madness* (2009). Her *Bibliography of First-Person Narratives of Madness*, which lists more than 700 titles, can be freely downloaded from [www.gailhornstein.com](http://www.gailhornstein.com).