

**I**t is a testament to Rotherham that it can not only attract but retain creative talent to live and work here. Visual artist and mental health advocate Leigh de Vries fell in love with Rotherham and has made it her home since 2007.

Born with a Dutch father and a South African mother, she moved from Cape Town, South Africa to London in 2003. While she loves her home country, at that time it was going through a lot of turmoil and she felt unsafe. London offered a different life, giving Leigh the possibility to discover more of her potential and express her creativity, within the excitement and possibilities that a big bustling city can bring.

My experience of working with Leigh is she gets things done – once she has decided on a course of action, there is no time like the present, and she works with such authenticity it is difficult to not be carried away by her determination.

It perhaps came as no surprise that she almost apologetically confesses to being a self-taught computer programmer, learning from the mighty Google to code in multiple languages which enabled her to stretch her credentials and secure employment, subsequently funding her own art practice. This clear demonstration of independence and self belief gives Leigh an inner strength she comes to explore later in her life.

## ‘SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART CAN PROMOTE GOOD MENTAL HEALTH’

Rotherham Open Arts Renaissance (ROAR) chief executive **SHARON GILL** talks to artist Leigh de Vries

From the age of 16 years, Leigh has cultivated a public persona, starting as a singer in an all-girl Death Metal band called Misery. It was here she began to write music, create costumes, and construct the visual impact of the band. It began the interest in the crossover areas of art, technology and science. It was while making music in London that Leigh met her future husband, a music producer local to Rotherham, which got her to make the move.

Having always lived in big cities, moving to Rotherham and being surrounded by the beauty of Yorkshire and the warm-hearted friendly people, to be able to slow down the pace of her life and remove the unnecessary distraction that a big city life entails and really focus, made Leigh feel she had found her home and even managed to encourage her parents to move here.

Leigh has struggled with a mental health disorder called Body Dysmorphia Disorder (BDD). Having been born with a lazy eye, bullying and humiliation were childhood companions which caused a deep trauma, and as a child she believed there was “something wrong with me”.

The lazy eye was corrected but this did not fix the impacts of 26 years of traumatised self identification, which has manifested as BDD.

Leigh’s public persona, like everything she applies herself to, was professionally successful. She won the People’s Music Award in 2011, an amazing accolade. However, this only served to further polarise her public image where you give yourself and your energy away, against the inner personal recluse, where you believe the world sees you in the

same way you do, and you have created a distorted self image.

In 2012, Leigh’s BDD was at its worst and she found it difficult to leave the house, sometimes self isolating for up to two weeks. It was at that point that Leigh realised that she needed to create a project where she could understand the distorted self in reality so that she could have some sort of mental mending. That’s when she contacted Shaun Harrison, one of the UK’s most celebrated make-up artists, to create a prosthetic for her face.

“I realised if I could create the distorted self and wear it out in public I’d be able to make some sense of what was going on in my mind,” she said.

With two of her friends armed with secret cameras, Leigh spent the day in Manchester capturing her own experience as well as the candid responses of the general public to her disfigurement. Unknown to Leigh at that time, she was applying what psychiatrists refer to as “flooding or exposure therapy” to herself, albeit in the extreme. After a long day of filming, it was the act of taking the prosthetic off when Leigh felt a real sense of recovery and had a realisation for the first time that there was nothing wrong with her.

She said: “The mind can really convince us of one thing and then to create it in physicality and to understand that it’s not real is huge and I think that was a big part of my learning.”

The radical exposure therapy has helped Leigh’s BDD immensely and although she still has moments she is able to better understand in her mind what is real and what is not real. This ‘artwork’ was created for intensely personal reasons, but it felt important and significant too.

Leigh had an art studio at ROAR during this time and went to the team there to talk through her film and see if it had a life beyond her own purpose. I recall quite clearly the resolution and commitment from Leigh that she had found a direction for her life’s creative work. This led to a successful Arts Council bid to create an installation, My Broken Reality, in the Old Market Gallery. Consisting of two stark black and white video viewing rooms conjoined by dark maze-like passages with the use of sensory deprivation, and enveloping soundscape, the installation simultaneously deprived and overloaded the audience’s senses. Inviting reflection and serving as a sort of rite of passage for many of the audience allowing them an opportunity to transcend their identities and experience themselves differently, amplifying their own situation and experiences back to them.

This work was only open to the public for

one day; on the other days Leigh had arranged to work with different youth groups and settings, with pre-visit workshops and post-experience on-site workshops exploring identity through the use of masks. This was as a result of her research and communications with the National BDD Association, where she learned BDD tends to manifest during adolescence between 12 and 22 years of age.

We might be more comfortable now talking and recognising the difficulties people face with mental health conditions, but in 2015 it was not so prevalent, making this a groundbreaking and life-changing work for many of the young people involved. Being able to openly discuss abnormalities, fears, and to access those emotions opened up curiosity and it was often the first experience of visiting a gallery or experiencing high-quality art. Fundamentally Leigh wanted to express to any young person that if they felt valueless, there is help and information available.

The piece provided art as a healer, increased people’s self awareness and the awareness of others, contributed to the education around the disorder BDD, increased people’s awareness around what it is like to live with a disfigurement, exposed people to high quality art experiences, and allowed people to open up communication around self image, self worth and body image.

Due to Leigh’s London connections the project received a visit from the Dazed and Confused media team which sent the project’s profile stratospheric. Attention came from all over the world and the story has been translated and broadcast by news websites in over 30 countries. There were over 11 million hits on her website. What this experience did teach Leigh is the empathy the experiential effect of her work has could not be replicated remotely through digital formats. That would require a different approach, but now there was clear evidence that art can be a healer.

The BDD Foundation hosted its first ever conference in London on May 30, 2015, aimed exclusively at people with BDD and their families. Leigh’s work Exposure was included in the day’s programme and played to the audience as a short film. The support and encouragement of this community enabled Leigh with her new understanding to reach out to BDD expert Dr Jamie D Feusner at the University of California (UCLA) as she wanted to open up discussions around creating a form of art therapy using this radical exposure therapy for BDD sufferers.

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Leigh was awarded an O1 artist visa and travelled to Los Angeles to start the discussions around the potential growth of the project and for Leigh to open her project up to a wider audience. With the support of Dr Feusner, she co-programmed an exhibition with two UCLA undergraduate groups – Active Minds and the Student Wellness Commission Body Image Task Force. The event revolved around Leigh's short film *Exposure: The Broken Reality Tunnel* and talks from Dr Feusner and Leigh, followed by a Q&A session. This event was heavily publicised in the US press and featured on the homepage of LA Weekly.

Leigh spent a lot of time travelling to and working in Los Angeles but found the big city life too distracting and not suited to her reclusive creative needs. When Covid-19 hit, like many of us Leigh was forced to remain still, to get off the hamster wheel, and she feels it has given her a chance to rethink her approach to how she had been working and how her focus had been affected with how busy she had made her life. It has become clear to her to do her best work she needs to slow down and remove all of the distractions. Her life in Rotherham provides her with that space and environment to do just that. To be home, to be happy, and to be near her parents where she can take stock and build on her USA experiences.

From her lived experience Leigh has come to really understand the importance of positive art exposure and the social efficacy of art, how strategies from the field of art participate in transforming a given situation, and have the potential to positively impact a person and a community. Leigh's new work has evolved from her time in the USA and she is now focused on understanding trauma and how we store and carry trauma in and around our bodies and how the reactivation of a past traumatic event influences our central nervous system.

She said: "I am very interested in exploring and understanding the various parts that we develop over time within our consciousness to protect us and are

triggered at any sign of danger causing extreme fight/flight responses in the body.

"Long after a traumatic experience is over, it may be reactivated at the slightest hint of danger and mobilise disturbed brain circuits and secrete massive amounts of stress hormones. This precipitates unpleasant emotions, intense physical sensations and impulsive and aggressive actions. These post-traumatic reactions feel incomprehensible and overwhelming. Feeling out of control, survivors of trauma often begin to fear that they are damaged to the core and beyond redemption."

This is all leading towards her own manifesto, where she asks three things of her work:

- 1 Does the work create change in herself, to help her move forward?
- 2 Does the work create change in society, the tribe, and or the community?
- 3 Does the work create change in the universe?

Using this framework, Leigh can define a problem and develop a creative action that addresses that problem, always putting people at the heart to generate positive change. This is immediately recognisable in what she calls "Leighisms", questions meant to provoke and challenge that can be large-scale projections, or in the digital field.

Leigh now has Rotherham in her focus and is looking to help make it a town of resilience. To that end, she shares a few words of wisdom: "In uncertain times, connect to each other, rebuild trust, forge new ways for understanding and unity. Socially engaged art can coax a new shared understanding that promotes good mental health."

Expect to see some new opportunities to collaborate in the very near future.

You can find out more about Leigh on her website [www.leighdevries.com](http://www.leighdevries.com).

**A direct link to the film *My Broken Reality* is at <http://www.leighdevries.com/my-broken-reality>.**

**Information about BDD can be found at <http://www.leighdevries.com/body-dysmorphic-disorder>.**

