

# Edinburgh Fringe Festival 2016 Interview – Dale vN Marshall: I am not a child



by Ricky Brown

Originally a graffiti artist tagging under the name “Vermin”, whose canvas was the streets of Bristol, Dale vN Marshall went on to study fine art and abstract art. His *Walls with Wounds* solo museum show sold out within hours and attracted over 8,000 visitors.

Marshall was once sectioned in one of Britain’s oldest psychiatric hospitals, St Lawrence’s in Cornwall, and his latest exhibition, *I am not a child*, aims to help to raise awareness of mental health in the young. It draws inspiration from the time he spent painting and talking with teenagers in Edinburgh who live with conditions such as anxiety, ADHD, autism and circumstantial trauma.

I spoke to Dale in advance of the unveiling of *I am not a child* at the Scottish Storytelling Centre as part of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe.

**RB:** *I am not a child* is being displayed at the Scottish Storytelling Centre – can you tell me a little about how you see the relationship between storytelling and your more graphic form of art?

**DM:** It was interesting, I’ve been exhibiting in galleries around the world for six years now, and Vanessa Brodrick at VB Fine Art thought the Storytelling Centre would be a great venue for my work. Working in that space felt like the right

thing to do. I've always worked on walls and on outside walls, so when it came to working with young people at the Storytelling Centre, I changed my work to fit with the narrative of other people. The work became very poignant and powerful. My work is quite abstract, and I work with emotion and it's very distilled. The subject matter of this exhibition fits well with this.

**RB:** Your early graffiti art involved painting your own poetry. Does creating solely text-based work hold any appeal?

**DM:** My work is really more about emotion. When the workshops for *I am not a child* started, I didn't really know what to expect. I just wanted to see what these young people were all about. For me, the important thing was listening to them, and relating to them. We talked about them not having a voice, and not being understood. That's what I wanted people to walk away with – a sense of how these young people felt. The collection reflects the confusion these young people feel, and I've created something that takes the words they produced, and how they made me feel. It's not really a pretty collection – it's pretty and ugly at the same time. There's happiness there, and pain, too.

**RB:** What do you feel you've learned in your interaction with the young people you've been working with?

**DM:** I felt that working with these young people gave me the courage to produce a show that I wouldn't have had the confidence to produce otherwise. I understand what they've been through, and I felt I had to take a chance on this collection and let go myself. They had to drop their masks, and I really had to do the same with mine and produce a really honest body of work.

The times are different, though. They have to deal with a lot more in their lives. Today, with social media and the related bullying – there's a real lack of control and people feel very

exposed. That's something I got from the workshops – the difference between their time and my time. I wouldn't want to be a young person trying to express myself in these times – having the eccentricity we all have, and not being able to express that. I think that's the cause of a lot of problems right now.

**RB:** We hear, I think, a lot more discussion of young people's mental health than we did in the past. Do you think this comes primarily from a heightened awareness of mental issues, or do you perceive an increase in mental health problems for young people?

**DM:** Well, I always have to say to myself, I'm no psychiatrist. I don't have all the answers, and I'm not an ambassador for mental health issues. I'm just a guy who has been through all this, and has some artistic gifts. The bottom line is for me, the way society is more complex now has made things more complex for people. I think there's a lot more struggle for young people to fit in, with what they're being force-fed by media about who you're meant to be. People are more aware of mental health – there are a lot more boxes, and new names for illnesses.

And without wanting to get too political about that, I wonder if there's something else going on. I don't know whether it's the pressure of society, the things we eat, or what's in the air. We're sold medications to the greatest degree, and sometimes that's a short-term solution. On the other hand, I've found that art is a really powerful tool for happiness to build your self-esteem.

**RB:** Can you tell me about how the name of the exhibition came about?

**DM:** Even before the show started, I was brainstorming some ideas, some about having a breakdown at the age of 25. Back then, I had to face the consequences of what was happening to

me. The person who I was before had really died, and this was a new chapter. And when I started to look after myself, people were still treating me like that child who couldn't look after himself. It was a long, seven-year struggle to move forward and become the artist I wanted to be, and to do that, I had had to become a child again. On top of all that, on the positive side, this is a celebration of overcoming that period of time, and becoming a fulfilled and happy artist. I'm not a child any more.

**RB:** Now that "I am not a child" is about to open, how do you look back on the experience of creating the exhibition?

From the young people's side of things, they were really brave young people who were very open to sharing. We shared a lot, and that enabled us to create the exhibition. I saw some real triumphs in their lives. It wasn't just about me working with them. They really enabled me to work alongside them on an equal platform, and they brought something out in me for this exhibition. I think when people come to see the show, they'll see a really relateable show, and that's down to the young people, their strengths, and their openness and their honesty and what they brought to the show. I really appreciate their bravery.

Dale vN Marshall: *I am not a child*. Wednesday 3rd August-3rd September at the Scottish Storytelling Centre, 43-45 High Street, Edinburgh, EH1 1SR. Free, unticketed.

[More information here.](#)