

# BJPpsych

The British Journal of Psychiatry



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## Cover picture

### Sonja Gerstner, You Came?

1952–1971 • Oil on fiberboard • 30 × 40 cm • Inv.No. D 8073/2 (2007)

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Sonja Gerstner (1952–1971) was 16 years old when she first showed symptoms of a psychiatric disorder. Her parents were celebrities in the GDR (East Germany): her father, Karl-Heinz Gerstner, was a television journalist, her mother, Sybille, was a painter and costume designer, founder of the famous GDR fashion magazine *Sibylle*. She later wrote about her daughter's misfortune under a pseudonym in the book *Flucht in die Wolken (Flight into the Clouds, 1981)*, detailing her daughter's three stays in a closed psychiatric ward (with insulin coma and electroconvulsive therapy), the increasing helplessness and social isolation. The demands of Sonja's parents for different treatments and psychotherapeutic supervision remained unsuccessful. Sonja Gerstner's forced separation from her boyfriend Peter, following medical advice, was a traumatic experience for her. In the psychiatric clinic, she kept a diary, wrote poems, composed songs, and displayed a remarkable artistic talent. In her drawings and paintings, she processed her love for "Peer" and her first sexual experiences, which she was ashamed of, but also her doubts, her fears, and her suicidal thoughts. 'You came?' is the title of a self-portrait with her boyfriend, which she painted after receiving an electroshock treatment in 1970.

In December 1970, Sonja Gerstner was released from the psychiatric ward. She felt lonely, unloved, and worthless, and took her own life on March 8, 1971 (on International Women's Day) at the age of 19. In 2007, her mother entrusted the largest part of her daughter's artistic legacy, 150 works in total, to the Prinzhorn Collection on permanent loan.

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