

Open Arts My Self - a curators reflection

by Matt Bray

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The My Self project was joyful. Working with Wendy and Christopher the work in the exhibition, the artists involved in the project - my one overriding emotion reflecting on this project is joy.

I was curator and mentor for this project which was funded by Arts Council National Lottery Project Grant Funding, Ideas Test, Kent Association for the Blind, University of Kent and Medway Council. My Self was created by Sun Pier House with artists Wendy Daws and Christopher Sacre of the Mess Room.

The project was hugely successful with an overwhelmingly positive response from participants and audience, and we hope to continue this success with future projects. Here I would like to take a moment to reflect on the work that was made for this beautiful exhibition, show you some photographs I took of the work in situ, and give my reflections on the art that was made and my experience curating and mentoring the artists involved.

People of all ages from 3 months to 96 years took part in a series of creative workshops to create this inclusive group exhibition exploring identity. The artist groups include Kent Association for the Blind, Medway Deaf Club, students from Danecourt School, Barnsole Primary Trust, All Faiths Children's Academy, and young people and families from Sip and Sign.

The star of the show was undoubtedly the 'shed'. This piece was a team effort between Wendy, Christopher and myself, and started with a conversation about how we could display the work of multiple groups of school children. We wanted to create something cohesive and interactive and envisioned fairly early on a structure that the audience could go inside; experiencing the work from the inside as well as being visually exciting from the outside. It went through a few conceptual iterations; an igloo, a tent, a dome, but we finally settled on a shed, largely for practical reasons which involved the height of the ceiling, our ability to build the thing ourselves and to dismantle and move it to a new site later on.



The wonderful My Self shed and portrait wall

The shed was constructed by Christopher Sacre, while the willow panels were a team effort between Christopher, Wendy, Sophie Wynne, and Mid Kent College work experience students. Wendy traced all the paintings with 3D tactile gel pen to create the internal images for the panels, and the whole team (including Zara Carpenter and Molly Millar) helped with the painstaking process of attaching all the panels to the frame. The result, I'm sure you will agree was entirely worth the effort and in my opinion, is one of the most striking inhabitants the gallery has seen).

All of the artists that I worked with were wonderful human beings, keen to share their stories and their lives, and to see them realise that ambition with such finesse and unique energy was genuinely exciting and satisfying. The challenge of this show from a curatorial perspective was how to best balance all these different energies to create something coherent, in order to give the audience a way visually through the different visual stimuli. Because the work had such high levels of visual engagement, it took a few days to discover the best way of displaying everything, to give the eye and the mind the requisite space to digest each piece in a narrative continuum.



A happy Shed team :)

This also came into play during the mentoring phase, and one example which illustrates this was the work Janet Norfolk was making. She was using the motif of the tree to illustrate her self identity and had made the most beautiful tree as a wall relief from tea bag material - it was a diaphanous white tree sculpted so as to appear to be growing on or from the white wall. It had an entrancing minimal aesthetic that was immediately appealing and as soon as I saw it, I could tell how stunning it was going to look in the final show. Janet had intended to paint the tree and hang a series of trinkets from the branches, then take it from the wall and have it free standing. Between us we decided to keep it as it was to retain this wonderful minimal aesthetic and I think we made the correct decision; in the final exhibition the tree was absolutely spectacular, one of my favourite pieces in the show.

I am always so blown away by the skills of the artists in these various groups and Janet is an exemplar of this - she is 90 years old and with very limited vision due to Macular Degeneration, and yet the work she made is truly breathtaking. The white minimalism was a language we fostered throughout the project as a way of balancing the high-key vibrancy of a lot of the work that was made, particularly the shed panels and the wall of wonky portraits.

As a quick aside - I am really grateful that Wendy and Christopher trusted me so much during this project, the conversations we had really made me feel valued in a way I haven't had before, so a quick heartfelt thanks to them for that.



Janet and her wonderful tree

OK, back to minimalism, another series of works that benefited from this balancing trick was the floor sculptures made by Ken Fane.

Ken's work is instantly affecting, seeing him produce his work in the studio is just something to behold; we call him the art machine because he just doesn't stop until he runs out of materials or time. Ken is an autistic artist, and his work has a childlike aesthetic, in the best of ways - having worked with children, including my own nephew, their ability to unselfconsciously create is something I have tried very hard to learn from and incorporate into my own practice. Ken has that quality, his marks are intuitive and his thought process completely idiosyncratic.

The sculptures made by Christopher, Wendy, Sophie Wynne and Sarah King are shaped like curved cones, made using the same willow branches covered with painted wet strength tissue paper that we used for the shed panels. These objects represent the people around him and are covered with his signature drawings, and were universally loved by visitors; his decision to depict his friends in this unusual form is exciting and intriguing. We kept the drawings in black to retain the minimal monochrome aesthetic and allow the shape of the structures to be the dominant visual element, and this worked really well in the space, I love these pieces so much, great work Ken!



A happy visitor exploring Ken's sculptures

So the main space of the exhibition was dominated by a triumvirate of pieces; the shed, Ken's sculptures and the portrait wall. This third element was 90 self portraits made using collaged coloured paper, portraying everyone involved in the project; artists, schoolchildren, facilitators, and even myself. Individually these wonky portraits were adorable, charming, idiosyncratic wonders, but en-masse they were a site to behold. The portrait wall was the visual coda that held the exhibition together, rhyming with the panels of the shed, and creating a thematic narrative for the concept of the show as self-portraits, albeit elsewhere as less traditional self-portraiture. The playful,

youthful exuberance of the work gave license to enjoy the show as a whole, in a manner of childlike wonder, and the blast of high-key colour that you got from being in that space was a treat for the eyes. I genuinely loved seeing that wall come together, and have that now as a reference going forward curatorially to draw upon.

Another individual piece that stands out in my memory was the life size replica of Uri the guide dog made by Tracey Lane. The artist is partially sighted with Retinal Pigmentosa , and Uri is her guide dog. The artwork has been lovingly created in velvet making it irresistibly tactile and also incredibly lifelike. I saw other dogs come up to it and try to interact, convinced that it was a real dog. Tracey wanted her dark glasses near the dog to represent herself alongside her companion, so we came up with a way of suspending the glasses above the dog, as well as suspending the handle from the dogs harness, so it looked like she was stood with the dog, albeit invisible apart from her glasses. I think the final result was quite effective, and I enjoyed the playfulness of the presentation very much.



Art dog and real dog

There were many other wonderful pieces in the show - Helen's gorgeous sunrise paintings, the children's papier-mâché sculptures, Norma's tea-bag dress, and loads, loads more. Everything in the exhibition showed

individuality and exuberance, and I congratulate everyone involved on a beautiful, heart-warming, and exciting show. Well done to Wendy and Christopher for their generous and gentle mentoring to help the artists to create such amazing work, I know how hard they worked (as always) and it is a credit to them that such fantastic work ended up coming to me for curation. Well done also to Heather Burgess from Sun Pier House, who organised the project and Caren Stafford who secured the funding to make it a reality - this is their first project of this kind and goes to show that Sun Pier House can run highly successful projects of this scale that help underrepresented social groups while also being incredibly exciting from a purely aesthetic standpoint. Bravo!

If you got to see the show yourself, I am sure you agree with me what a fantastic spectacle it was, and one that will live in our memories for some time to come. The My Self show has since been exhibited in full in the Crypt at Rochester Cathedral and was very well received and is now installed at Ideas Test, 34 High Street, Sittingbourne, Sittingbourne Library and Phoenix House to create an art trail.

All the best! Matt x



Some of the project's participants and facilitators in front of the portrait wall