

## Art In Mind

Art in Mind was a project that aimed to deepen links between the university and the local community and, specifically, to extend access to the University's Collection of 20<sup>th</sup> British art to those for whom engaging with mainstream art galleries may be a challenge.



A collaboration between the Otter Gallery, the University of Chichester's Fine Art department and Coastal West Sussex Mind, the project was initiated by Fine Art lecturer Rachel Johnston and Gallery Officer Laura Kidner. Coastal West Sussex Mind works in the Chichester and Arun areas and is "committed to challenging stigma and barriers in the community, for people with mental health needs" (CWSM website). Mind also helps its members to access local activities and it was hoped that the outcomes of the project would support both of these aims. Recent Fine Art graduate, Helen Peters, was funded by Graduate On to organise and run the workshops with Mind members and the project was funded with a grant from the Research Facilitation Fund.



PROCESS: Art in Mind used the artworks from the Otter Collection as a starting point in inspiring a series of new artworks made by members of Mind. There were two groups from Coastal West Sussex Mind who participated in the project. The first group of 5-6 project participants are regulars at Bognor Tea and Chat, a service for older people that meets at the Hub on a weekly basis. Members see each other regularly and with the support of staff, are able to provide one another with mutual support. The second group of around 10-12 people, attend Chichester Tea and Chat, a group of mostly older people, some of whom are in the early stages of dementia. They meet at the Boys' Club in Chichester weekly. Be Ok, a group focussing on young people (aged 18-30) joined the project later after initial organisational issues and only managed to complete five sessions before funding cuts meant they had to close.

The project began with a visit by both groups to the Otter Gallery. Laura Kidner, Gallery Officer, has a strong and ongoing commitment to community engagement and broadening access to the collections. Alongside Helen, she welcomed the participants and talked to them about the gallery and artworks. Project participants were shown a range of artworks at the gallery and were invited to select pieces which might then be used as inspiration in creating new artwork. A varied range of works, including some of the rarely exhibited textile pieces, were chosen by the groups. This trip to the Otter Gallery formed a significant starting point for the collaboration - the value of the visit and the way that it shaped the outcomes of the

project were a source of reflection at the end of the project. The participants felt that looking at the original artworks had been inspiring and, when we talked about the project some months later, they remembered their own and others' reactions to the artworks very clearly. Pieces were also taken to the centres during subsequent sessions - some of these artworks were quite unusual (Marilyn Rathbone's piece made of human hair, for example) and the unexpected or challenging nature of these worked well in provoking discussion amongst the wider group. The participants were also able to see where their artworks would be exhibited at the end of the project, giving a sense of purpose and context for the work.



“It made a difference visiting the gallery – you see the pictures and artefacts in a different light, you think ‘how did they get that effect?’ with the weaving for example.”

*B, participant, Chichester group*

Subsequent sessions took place at each of the centres in Bognor Regis and Chichester. The process of interpreting the artworks and the creation of new pieces was decided through discussion between the members of Mind and the artist. Helen found this daunting at first and was conscious of the time constraints that the project imposed upon her – it was planned that she would work with each group for 10 half-day

sessions. After some initial experiments and discussion with the participants, it was decided that the focus would be on the power of texture, drawn line and colour. The medium and techniques used in the creation of final pieces was left for Helen to decide and she chose to reflect her own strengths in making, mostly focussing on textiles. Helen's experience of working with others and her thoughtful approach allowed her to be flexible and responsive in the way that she dealt with the individuals and groups.

“Through working with the groups I was able to assess their personal strengths and their strengths in the way they worked together, and through this decided on individual sketchbooks and collaborative final artwork.” *Helen Peters, project artist*

Helen explored the chosen artworks with the groups in ways that allowed them to move away from a dogged copying of the original, taking elements of the pieces as a starting point in making something entirely new. A series of playful, process-based techniques such as printmaking, weaving and collage worked well and meant that individuals didn't get bogged down in the inevitable “I can't draw” feelings that many, especially older, people feel when it comes to art. The skill for an artist working in this context is to have the confidence



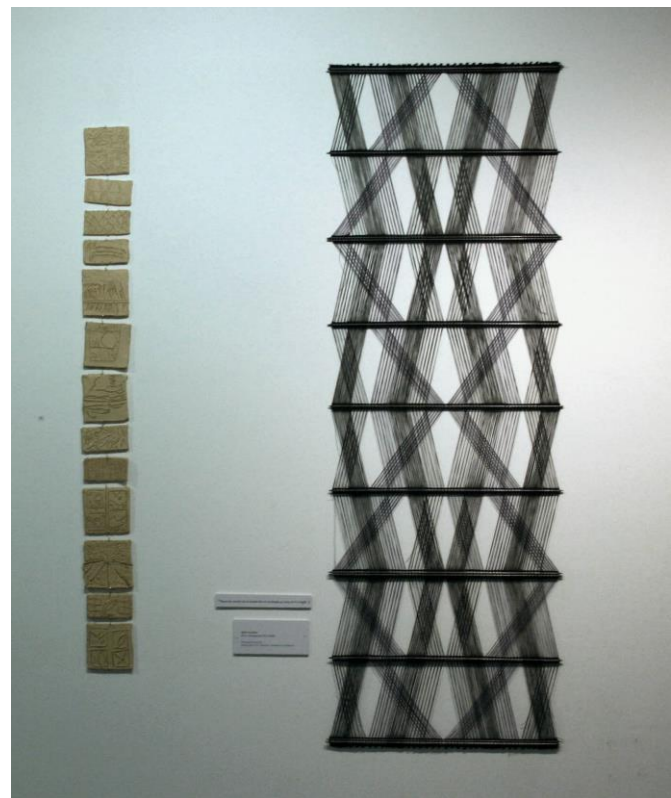
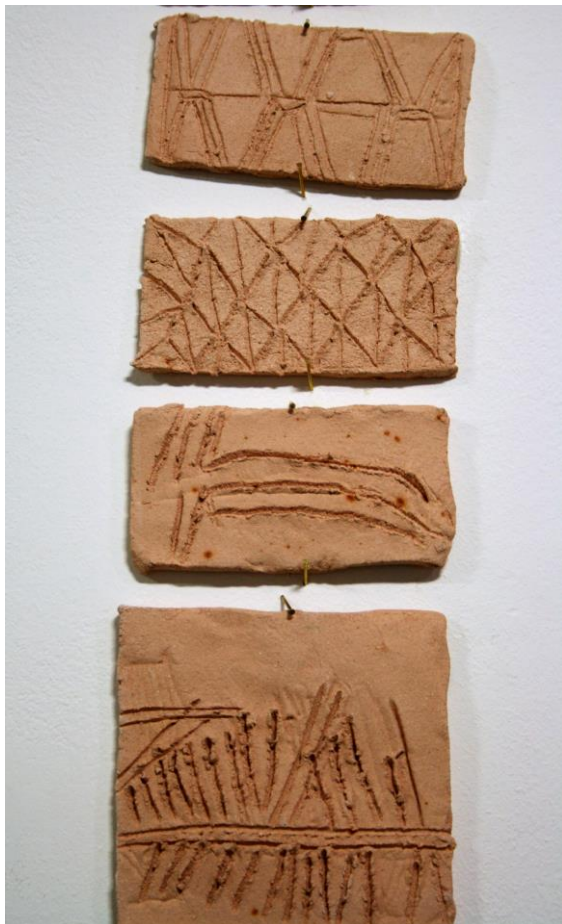


to apply what they know from their own experience – that ideas are not fully formed before the making or image-making process begins, but must ‘unfold’ through an exploration of materials. As an artist working with others, you provide the ‘spark’ that allows the individuals to manifest their thoughts on the page, but it can be nerve-wracking especially if tangible outcomes such as an exhibition are expected. The focus here was on making art collaboratively, not art therapy and Helen managed to do this with enormous success.



‘Red Painting’ by Terry Frost provided a source of inspiration for several participants - for and Helen helped them to reflect their interest in its bold colour and pattern using a technique involving paint and bondaweb (left) on synthetic felt to make small textural collages.

The line and textural values of Peter Collingwood’s textile work ‘Macrogauze’ was explored in a series of block prints and ceramic work on tiles (below). The mixing up of imagery and medium resulted in some startling and interesting responses.





“While some were a little hesitant to start with I have seen them grow in confidence with ideas and positivity when it comes to using their practical skills to achieve several different outcomes.” *Mary Evison, Project Organiser, Bognor Tea and Chat, Coastal West Sussex Mind*

For many of the group, looking at modern art is not a regular occurrence. Using unexpected or challenging artworks can work well in stimulating discussion and Mary Evison noted that the group had been challenged in their ideas around what art should or could be and their own appreciation of a range of works.

“Last week one of the clients who never wants to join in if it means moving around the hall asked the question ‘what were the others doing at the top end of the room?’ where upon I asked if M.S. would like to go and have a look. We slowly walked to the other end of the room where M.S. decided to sit and watch what the others were doing. M.S. stayed at the table for about 15 minutes chatting and asking questions. Upon returning to her seat M.S. proceeded to have a conversation expressing her own views and options on Art. This is something that has not happened before.” *Mary Evison, Project Organiser, Bognor Tea and Chat, Coastal West Sussex Mind*

It was decided that a collaborative piece involving members of both groups would complete the artwork for the exhibition. Inspired by John Hitchens’ ‘Flowers in a Shore Window’, David Mitchie’s ‘Patterned Garden’ and John Bratby’s ‘Girl with a Rose In her Lap’, a group of ceramic flowers were produced (below). These paintings were of much interest to both sets of participants and the focus on colour, shape and texture reflected this. Having previously enjoyed using clay when producing tiles, the group wanted to develop their skills further in making 3D work and using coloured glazes.





EXHIBITION: The Art in Mind exhibition resulting from this project ran from June – September 2015. Around 20 pieces from the gallery’s permanent collection – including John Bratby, John Craxton, Mary Fedden, Anthony Frost and John Hitchens, Peter Collingwood and Tadek Beutlich were shown, alongside the project participants’ artistic responses. It was hoped that one of the of the project outcomes, in addition to the benefits of producing the artwork, would be a move towards creating understanding and dispelling myths around the issue of mental health through the sharing of experiences. A video by Lois Zoppi documenting the workshops and with feedback from participants allowed the participants’ voices to be heard and was integrated with the artworks in the exhibition.

OUTCOMES: The positive outcomes from this project have been numerous. The Mind members who participated gained a real insight into new ways of using art as a tool for exploring the world and as a means for self-expression allowing them to challenge their expectations of themselves.

“We have all thoroughly enjoyed the 'Art in Mind' Project. Helen has encouraged our members in such a positive way by exploring various different mediums. There has been something for everyone regardless of artistic ability. We have been particularly delighted to see the response from one of our members who is living with dementia and has very little conversation, she was able to express herself through art and spent at least an hour just drawing continuously in her workbook ... the benefits have been clear to see.” *Theresa Taylor, Project Organiser, Chichester Tea and Chat, Coastal West Sussex Mind.*

At the Bognor Regis group one participant R hadn’t originally planned to get involved, but went on the trip to the Otter Gallery to make up numbers on the bus! Talking to her at the end of the project, it was clear that she had gained enormously from the experience and was missing it now it was finished. It was the first time she’d really done any art, being at school in

London during the Second World War, “I didn’t know I could do it...” This sense of individuals being taken beyond their own preconceptions of their abilities was echoed by several of the participants. M from the Chichester group said, “You lose yourself in it, sometimes I just don’t want to go home.” The benefits inherent in using art as a means of reframing experience and looking at things anew, were clear: J said that previously she hadn’t bothered to look at things around her “but now I look at buildings and different objects I find.” Another man B, “It’s sharpened my awareness.”

Working together to make art is a very particular experience and often gives people an opportunity to think about personal issues such as mental health in a new way – the talk that goes on around the making can be as important as the artwork itself. Quite often during Helen’s sessions (and from my own experience in other contexts) there is a layer of ‘distant’ participation – people who don’t want to be directly involved but are curious and hover around the edges talking and observing. Helen also observed that there were benefits to carers who accompanied participants to the sessions: for one couple, where the woman had dementia and was unable to engage in conversation with the rest of the group, her husband who went with her got a lot of support from the other members of the group, while she joined in with the art.



“[she] really engaged with the materials, processes and colours and spent the whole session engrossed in her work. She was also the one that when they first visited the gallery, really engaged in the drawing, which was when we realised the art sessions were something she would gain a lot from, socially and expressing her creativity.” *Helen Peters, Project Artist*

The participants valued the sense of a common purpose that the project generated and being able to work together towards a goal. The connection with the University was important too and gave the project weight:

“The collaborative working has ensured that clients have a feeling of being valued and can make a valid contribution in the community.” *Mary Evison Project Organiser, Bognor Tea and Chat, Coastal West Sussex Mind*

#### FUTURE PROJECTS:

During a conversation with participants once the exhibition was over in October 2015, their reflections on the process were warm and positive. The overwhelming feeling was that they wanted to continue with the work, but found it difficult without someone to sort things out. I asked R, a member of the Bognor Regis group, if she had continued making artwork at home and she replied that she didn’t. This is typical – it seems too difficult for people to find motivation, inspiration, materials and time at home and the social dimension of the work is such a big part of it.

“when you’re depressed you can’t do things – I enjoyed it because I was with other people. I’m always on my own. You can get ideas from someone else... you need inspiration.” *R, participant Bognor Regis group*



Sessions need to be established and run by an artist with access to materials and knowledge of art processes. Both the Chichester and Bognor Regis groups are keen to do further work, but feel that having someone to structure and organise the activity is the only way to proceed. During a conversation with Theresa Taylor, now Project Manager of Chichester Area Mental Health Support Foundation (Chichester Lunch Club) in October 2015, she was keen to emphasise that this focus on art was something they would like to continue, even if the sessions were only once a month. The group has 38 members many of whom are interested in art. She felt that the art workshops were especially beneficial for people with dementia, of which there are a sizeable number in the group. Theresa said that Chichester

Lunch Club would be prepared to share costs if the University was able to support a further project (many members already make a financial contribution to activities). The success of this kind of work is highly dependent on the artist involved and their ability to respond to participants with compassion and patience. Helen was fantastic and all of the participants and staff noted this.

As well resulting in a well-received exhibition which staff and members of Coastal West Sussex Mind and Chichester Lunch Club attended, this project has raised awareness of the work that Mind and Chichester Area Mental Health Support Foundation does locally and strengthened the engagement of the Otter Gallery's and University with the community. There is a strong desire amongst the staff and members of both organisations as well as staff at the university to continue this work.

*With many thanks to Helen Peters and Laura Kidner.*

Rachel Johnston, December 2015

*Quotes taken from feedback and interviews given by staff and members of WSCM and Chichester Area Mental Health Support Foundation.*