

# FREEHAND

Saturday 23 May – Sunday 5 July 2015

The work on show has been made through a series of artist-led workshops which took place through autumn and winter 2014 and spring 2015. A wide range of schools, organisations and community groups are represented in this exhibition. Some are mainstream schools with outstanding art departments whereas other organisations were identified as being less likely to have access to arts opportunities. Several of our participating groups had almost no experience of creative visual arts activities.

The workshop tutors, all practicing artists and makers, are showing examples of their own work alongside that of the workshop participants. The overall theme of the exhibition is **freedom** – a concept which participants, in keeping with the theme, were asked to address in any way they chose.

Devon Guild of Craftsmen became a charity with an educational mission in 1987. It is a stated aim of Devon Guild to '*inspire the creativity of people across all age ranges and abilities, both directly involving them with practical activity and engaging them with the creativity of others*'. A large part of the work of Devon Guild staff, members and our associated makers and artists is directed towards this end.

The groups taking part in *Freehand* joined in for a variety of reasons which include alleviating social/geographical isolation, making work for exam portfolio assessment, trying something new, making something to liven up a school space, learning a new skill, respite from existing responsibilities or using an art project as an extension of curriculum learning. While the tangible outcomes of the projects are on view in the gallery it's important to say the exhibition is not solely about the visible results, it's just as much about the *experience* of the participants as they engaged with the making process.

A workshop, once a building or room where things were made or mended, can now also be a *group of people engaged in study or work on a creative project*. This second sort of workshop, not exactly a class and certainly not a lecture, is an interesting entity. It is *active* learning in that participants are simultaneously engaged in doing things and thinking about, and discussing, the things they are doing. The outcome may be planned but it is never exact; the workshop leader will have prepared activities and materials but the participants may respond in unexpected ways. There are few certainties in a workshop, therefore it's a process that can be described as a dialogue, a conversation between everyone present, with an outcome that is often unpredictable.



It is difficult to put a value on an arts participation workshop. It might consist of a session of advanced teaching, or a 'have a go' session for absolute beginners. It might be a full week of sustained development of a particular piece of work or it might be a series of evening/day classes. In addition to the material outcome of the work produced, there is increasing recognition of the well-being factor, the sense of achievement or a boost to self-confidence that taking part in a creative activity can generate. 'Feeling happy' is a comment that has appeared several times in feedback from children and adults who took part in these workshops. Making something makes you feel good.

Tutor Naomi Vincent was struck by the intense focus and sense of achievement from a boy who usually has great difficulty with communication and application in the classroom: *He made the most amazing sculpture, full of narrative and expression and was profoundly affected by his achievement.*

In the wood-carving project which took place in the Exeter centre for students who, for a variety of reasons, are not in mainstream education, both the visiting sculptor and the regular art teacher commented on the increasingly positive attitude of the students who took part.



The sculptor: *As we proceeded with the carving each student began to ask more questions, wanted to master the material and the tools and became more concerned with the quality of the outcome.*

The art teacher: *The conversations that emerged between Reece and the students as they carved were part of the valuable experience of working alongside a practicing artist who wasn't their teacher. It reinforced for me, the power and therapeutic benefit of making and exploring materials.*

The student: *I learned to listen, to wood carve, to think, to have social skills, to control the chisel.*

Devon Guild of Craftsmen's outreach educational projects are a three-way partnership with the school and the artist. The success of an artist's visit to school relies on the teacher's contribution to advance planning and overall support of the project. Similarly, with community groups or organisations the support workers are central to a positive outcome through their on-going relationship with the participants and their overall support of the group.



This is illustrated very well by tutor Michelle McQuinn Farrand comments on her workshops at Yourway support in Plymouth: *The success of this project was also very much down to the excellent support workers at the centre who have a wonderful positive attitude - they really embraced this project with gusto! I felt quite emotional and sad to finish as everyone at Yourway made me feel so welcome - they really were a very special group to work with.*

Craft education in schools has been on the wane for a long time; from 2003 – 2013 there was a 50% drop in the GCSE numbers for Design and Technology<sup>1</sup>. This can't simply be put down to lack of interest from students as it coincides with craft subjects no longer being a core subject of the national curriculum. At the same time we lament the lack of practical skills in the younger members of society and complain we no longer produce home-grown trades people with artisan skills. Yet Britain has a long, rich history of craft skills with our environment and architecture enhanced by the enduring works of masons, potters, woodcarvers, metalsmiths, and many associated vocations. Furthermore, and particularly at the 'high' end of the cultural spectrum, the 2015 Warwick Report<sup>2</sup> found that Britain falls a long way short from providing 'equal access for everyone to a rich cultural education and the opportunity to live a creative life.'

Devon Guild of Craftsmen is a partner organisation in the Crafts Council's Education Manifesto<sup>3</sup> and therefore subscribes to the five calls for change which makes up the action plan. These are:

- To put craft and making at the heart of education
- Build more routes into craft careers
- Bring craft enterprise into education
- Invest in skills throughout careers
- Promote world-class higher education and research in craft.

Practically speaking, Devon Guild aims to facilitate hands-on participation in craft activity as much as it can. Our activities include not just the day-to-day facilitation of arts workshops but also fundraising and seeking partnerships which target groups who may not get much opportunity for arts activities. We also look for partnerships which offer interesting places and inspiring themes for arts projects.

We hope that visitors to *Freehand* will enjoy the work in the exhibition and be happy to see work by individuals who are not professional artists or makers in a public gallery.

Image 1: Naomi Vincent and pupils at South Brent Primary School

Image 2: Reece Ingram and Bobbi, woodcarving at SchoolsCompany

Image 3: Michelle McQuinn Farrand working with adults at Yourway Support

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<sup>1</sup> The Guardian, 18 Feb 2015

<sup>2</sup> The Warwick Report 2015, Enriching Britain: Culture, Creativity and Growth

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/education-manifesto/>