

A Good Age

Celebrating age, change and creativity

Saturday 21 September – Sunday 3 November

This exhibition came about through an Arts Council initiative to support cultural spaces and other organisations working collaboratively to be more open, positive and welcoming for older people, and to take high quality arts and culture into places where older people would find it easier to engage. A Good Age is one of several projects taking place nationally, all under the umbrella of *Celebrating Age*.

Age UK's recent research highlights engagement with arts and culture as a way to enhance meaningful interaction with the wider world and as a very effective way to improve wellbeing. "Creative and cultural participation is important to older people: we need to promote it, enable older people to access it, and increase the opportunities to take part." ([Creative and Cultural Activities and Wellbeing in Later Life](#))

Devon Guild of Craftsmen (DGoC), in partnership with Libraries Unlimited, has been working with groups of older people in a series of craft-based workshops centred on the theme of 'Change in my time'. The workshops were facilitated by skilled workshop artists, assisted by community mentors, with the aim of developing participants' skills, confidence and group relationships whilst working towards this exhibition. The workshops took place in five towns across Devon and the work produced was also exhibited in each group's locality: Exeter, Crediton, Cullompton, Honiton and Tiverton.

Alongside the participatory project, through a nationally advertised open submission process, DGoC commissioned five

professional artists, all born before 1947, to create new work relating to the same theme of change in their lifetime.

This exhibition is the culmination of the community workshops and the five artists' commissions.

While the art and craft world provides a trickle of bursaries, prizes and exhibition opportunities for young artists, makers and designers there is almost nothing comparable for older artists. Yet a lifetime of experience and acquisition of skills, coupled with, sometimes, the freedom from time restrictions, means that older artists are in pole position for creative activity.

In answer to the question, 'do you feel as driven now as you did at the start of your career?' sculptor David King replied, 'More so – spurred on by a sense of time. Do it now or forget it. There is also the luxury of time – contrary I know – and experience; and I now have the facilities to make ambitious work.'

So does creativity have an expiration date? The short answer is no. Clearly we are not the same at eighty as we are at twenty but, if we are able and motivated, then creativity doesn't wane. Anecdotal evidence in the fields of maths and science shows that most 'brilliant breakthrough' moments happen in the younger years whereas studies of older adults show declines in some areas but improvements in others. Most commonly, older adults show impairments in tasks of attention, working memory, and episodic memory relative to younger adults. However, older adults show improvements in cognitive tasks where they can rely on experience, performing well in tests assessing wisdom and general knowledge. 'What's really interesting from the neuroscience point of view is that we are hard-wired for creativity for as long as we stay at it, as long as nothing bad happens to our brain.'¹

¹ Boundless Potential: Transform Your Brain, Unleash Your Talents, Reinvent Your Work in Midlife and Beyond, Mark S. Walton, 2012

Some of our commissioned artists have referred to the challenges of making work when faced with diminishing physical strength, either in energy levels or strength required for handling particular materials, however they also talk about the positive aspects of ageing, which includes an increase in perception and the crystallisation of many years of ideas and recurring themes. Elizabeth Turrell describes how early memories come forwards and gather meaning;

‘As I grow older, observations on the visual power of the earliest experience of place become more deeply and permanently etched into the vocabulary of my work. Barbara Hepworth says : *all my memories are of forms and shapes and textures ... Perhaps what one wants to say is formed in childhood and the rest of one’s life is spent trying to say it.*’²

Matisse is a well-known example of an artist who made paper cut-outs in his later years after serious illness left him bed-bound and unable to paint. He started to use cut paper collage, a technique he had previously used as a way to ‘map’ compositions, as a simpler way to make work.



The Parakeet and the Mermaid, Henri Matisse 1952

Starting off as relatively small works in 1946, the collages grew in size to murals and then to installations which filled whole rooms. They became the sole medium of expression for Matisse until his death in 1954.

² Barbara Hepworth, *A Pictorial Autobiography*, Adams & Dart, 1970

It's quite possible, especially for younger generations, that Matisse is now best known for the work he produced in the last years of his life, rather than in the years that are sometimes described as the prime of life. Clearly Matisse possessed a great deal of talent and drive but perhaps he also possessed optimism and saw no reason, ever, to stop doing the thing he loved best. Instead, using his years of experience and accumulated knowledge, he adapted to his circumstances and carried on working.



The Red Turban, Henri Matisse, 1907

One of the central questions of Age UK's research is, 'What makes later life worth living?' It's no surprise to find the answer was, in a nutshell, friends, health and some money. However, the strongest message from the research was 'the importance of maintaining meaningful engagement with the world around you in later life – whether this is through social, creative or physical activity, work, or belonging to some form of community group...follow up qualitative research showed that, even for people with very low wellbeing overall, having something creative to do really helps.'³

Comments from some of our own workshop participants back this up and in answer to the question, 'What is the most important thing that has happened for you since starting this project?', responses ranged from 'very much enjoyed being with the group' to 're-joining the human race'. Several people also referred to an increase in confidence and making new friendships.

³ Creative and Cultural Activities and Wellbeing in Later Life, www.ageuk.org.uk/creativewellbeing



Red bird – Exeter workshop. Image: Jess Pearson

The theme of ‘Change in my time’, used by the workshop participants as well as the artists, was the subject, or hook, to make the project hang together. In many discussions about age and living a long life, familiar phrases are, ‘*how things have changed*’ and ‘*it wasn’t like that when I was I was young*’, so it seemed logical to suggest to our participants and artists that they might like to base their work on some aspect of the changes they have seen in their lifetime. There were no ‘rules’ about what changes, just the proposition that these be could be personal, social, technological, environmental, local or global.

Keith Gretton’s rugs are based on Devon coastal walks he used to take in his younger years. In his initial submission he wrote, ‘The precise depictions... have become more abstract and bright colours have more appeal as I grow older. I see ‘Change in my Time’ as being a search for vibrancy in memories rather than direct experience’.

Our commissioned artists were all born before 1947 and, inevitably, their early years were affected by the Second World War, either the aftermath or the actual war years. Ian Gregory’s work refers to something that, sadly, has *not* changed in his lifetime, the plight of refugees forced to leave their homes when violence and conflict erupt around them. Elizabeth Turrell refers to her father’s experience as a POW, initially listed as missing and then confirmed as a prisoner in Changi, Singapore – circumstances that couldn’t fail to impact on a child’s memories.

Between them, our workshop participants have made a wide range of observations about change in their time, some light-hearted and some serious. Food, fashion, the degradation of our

environment, further mention of the post-war years in terms of rationing, childhood memories and technology have all been referenced in a range of materials.

We hope you enjoy the exhibition and that it may spark some reflection of your own on ‘Change in my Time.’

Devon Guild of Craftsmen is an educational charity as well as an acclaimed exhibition space for contemporary crafts and design. Our charitable mission is to promote and facilitate hands-on craft and making opportunities for all.

All our Jubilee Gallery exhibitions have free activities for families and our long-established scheme *Freehand* places artists and makers directly in schools and communities.

We would like to thank Jess Pearson, Shimnix Films for the film *A Good Age* and providing us with stills of the project.

With thanks to *The Austin and Hope Pilkington Trust*

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We encourage visits from schools, colleges and community groups. Let us know in advance and we can arrange an introductory talk and tour of a particular exhibition.

