

All for art: an introduction to the RA's Access programme by Caroline Bugler

How do you break the barriers that stop people coming to an art institution? Caroline Bugler gets some first-hand experience of the RA's creative sessions that encourage access for everyone.

In November last year, I found myself in the Royal Academy's large exhibition gallery, inspecting two companion paintings by Anselm Kiefer Hon RA in minute detail. Nothing extraordinary about that, of course, but what is remarkable is that I was learning about the art of looking in the company of eight people who have some degree of visual impairment. We listened intently as artist Harry Baxter lingered over every inch of the canvases, describing motifs, colours and surfaces encrusted with globules of paint, straw, canvas and wood. As I began to discover details that I had previously overlooked, I realised that for those who have trouble seeing, or who cannot see at all, this meticulous account was a wonderful way to paint those pictures in the mind.

Part of the Academy's InTouch programme, the session had begun earlier over refreshments in the John Madejski Fine Rooms, with Baxter outlining the different phases of Kiefer's career. He explained that he would concentrate on six paintings in the exhibition, each representing a particular aspect of the artist's work. I wondered how easy it would be for people to engage with objects that they had difficulty seeing, but when I mentioned this to the group, they reminded me that listening to objects described on the radio can be just as enjoyable as seeing them in reality. Sensitive storytelling can bring art to life with extraordinary vividness.

Kiefer's paintings are highly textured – "like treacle or molasses" as Baxter put it – but since you couldn't reach out and touch them in the exhibition, he had thought of an ingenious way to convey their tactile qualities in the handling session that followed the gallery visit. He passed round a 'mini Kiefer' he had made himself, complete with impasto and collage, together with another canvas covered with gold leaf, so everyone could feel the surfaces. Some typical Kiefer materials were also circulated: a piece of lead, shellac and cubic zirconia (representing the diamonds embedded in some of the pieces).

The imagination that goes into these sessions makes them highly popular; most of those present attend as often as they can. Robin, a regular, said: "I have been able to see in the past, but I would like to come even if I could see again."

I have passed through the RA on numerous occasions without knowing a great deal about its Access programme. But, as I soon discovered, it is a central part of the Academy's activities. "I'm very pleased we do as much as we do," says Charles Saumarez Smith, the RA's Secretary and Chief Executive. 'People assume that because the RA is a private institution that doesn't get public funding we're not under the same pressure to do public and access programmes. It's not a requirement of funding, but we want to do it because we want people to be able to come and experience the collection and the exhibitions across the spectrum.'

The InTouch event was one of four sessions that Molly Bretton, manager of the Access programme, invited me to sample. Over coffee, she explained that she and her team of artist-educators and volunteers present workshops and sessions for a range of audiences that might otherwise face considerable barriers to accessing the exhibitions and events, including children and adults with learning and physical disabilities, people experiencing mental health issues, those with hearing and visual impairments, and people with dementia and their carers. All of the sessions draw upon the RA's resources, whether that means what is on show in the exhibition galleries, the elegant Fine Rooms with their display of Academicians' works, or the architecture of the RA.

The RA's involvement in the making of art gives it a unique advantage. "As an artist-led institution, the Academy has a commitment to the idea of practice, which makes it different from a traditional museum," says Saumarez Smith. "It's not just about treating our works as things to be admired and respected, but showing that they derive from a process. And people should be encouraged to think about that process."

The handling element of the InTouch session that I visited certainly fosters that awareness, as do practical workshops where participants get a chance to make their own work. These currently take place in a room in Burlington House, but when the Academy's new development at Burlington Gardens is complete in 2018, there will be a dedicated learning studio on the ground floor next to a new lecture theatre, allowing for the future expansion of the programme.

I went on to attend a family workshop for children with special educational needs (pictured at top). The walls of the current studio were covered with images of forests, and sprigs of greenery lay on tables alongside makeshift palettes with daubs of blue, green, yellow and brown paint. Nine family groups were taking part. Most of the children, whose ages ranged from two to late teens, had learning disabilities or autism, and some had mobility and visual impairments.

Cash Aspeek, the facilitator, described how the forest theme had been inspired by the Kiefer show, and the family groups began creating their own 'forests in a box', using cardboard, paint or bits of vegetation. The parents seemed to be having just as much fun as the children. Nadine, an artist with a disabled son of five, said she relishes the time that she has with him here. "It gives me a chance to spend three hours with my son with no interruptions. We work together and I evolve as well. I love coming here because there's no pressure and it's so friendly and it's a quiet time."

At the end of the workshop the little forest boxes were displayed together on a table. Each family had come up with a completely individual take on the theme. Ethan, whose father is Canadian, had inserted a lumberjack in his forest alongside a tree nymph and a wolf. Natasha opted to make a winter woodland, while her father painted a blazing sun for the roof. Most were planning to continue work on their pieces and display them after they had taken them home.

The RA's InMind sessions cater for an older audience of people with early- to mid-stage dementia and their family members, friends and carers. I was once again astonished at just how much I gained from the intense experience of looking encouraged in these meetings. The aim is to provoke immediate responses without reliance on memory, and picture labels are covered up so no-one approaches the paintings with prior knowledge.

Two groups were assembled in the Fine Rooms, each focusing on a different work. The first, led by Baxter and fellow artist and educator Jonathan Huxley, gathered in front of William Hamilton's *Vertumnus and Pomona* (c.1789). "We just want to know what you think," said Baxter, "there are no right or wrong answers." Most of those present are unlikely to have come across the picture's relatively obscure subject, from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but the duo skilfully drew out the participants by asking what they thought of the picture, before inviting them to speculate on what the figures' gestures might mean.

Meanwhile, a group in another room, led by Francesca Herrick and Kim Jacobson, were passing round pieces of fake fur fabric as they discussed Briton Rivière's *The King Drinks* (1881) – a painting of a lion lapping the waters of an oasis. The samples prompted a discussion about the texture of the lion's mane, and whether the artist had ever seen a lion in the wild. (It turned out that he had travelled no further than London Zoo.) At the end of the session both groups came together to vote on the pictures they would like to discuss next time they meet. In the best democratic tradition, everyone was given a wooden spoon to hold up beside his or her chosen picture.

The multi-sensory and active nature of these sessions sometimes spurs unexpected creativity. Tony, a former barrister who is one of the regulars, said that at a previous session he had been encouraged to draw. He had never picked up a pencil or brush before, but was so inspired that he went on to produce his own art at home, encouraged by William, a volunteer. Tony's art was recently displayed at an event co-hosted with the Alzheimer's Society and held in the Fine Rooms. Rowena, who had been coming along for around nine months, said that although she no longer made her own art because her condition meant she has trouble interpreting visual data, she goes home feeling her 'brain has been stimulated'.

According to Bretton, an important element of these sessions is the way that they allow people to voice their opinions and make decisions. When someone is no longer able to communicate in the way they used to, they can often lose confidence in articulating their ideas, and many decisions can begin to be made for them. Bretton and her team try to structure sessions so that there are a series of choices to make.

Artist Ruth Harris'Bone presents her work at an InPractice forum at the RA.
Photo: Richard Dawson.

Being heard is also a key element in the InPractice sessions, in which artists who may face barriers to accessing the art world, such as disabled artists, are provided with an opportunity to present their practice on Powerpoint. They receive constructive feedback and get the chance to form new contacts. At the session I attended the nine participants showed colourful abstracts and figurative canvases, watercolour landscapes, ceramics, woven and crocheted works and installation. None of them was making a living from their art, although many had exhibited publicly, at venues including a London health centre, the Morley Gallery in Lambeth and Chichester's Pallant House Gallery.

As I watched the presentations, I wondered whether some of the works might be considered Outsider Art – work that exists outside the official art establishment. But

it didn't fit neatly into that category. A number of the participants had been to art school or had some art training, and in any case the emphasis was firmly on ensuring they could overcome any exclusion from the establishment rather than setting them apart from it. But it was certainly true that everyone there had a powerfully original voice that had not been stifled by any attempt to conform to the demands of market or fashion. "I like to do things my own way and to use my own inspiration," said one of the participants, as one of her paintings flashed up on screen. That is a sentiment that must be shared by every single Academician.

Caroline Bugler, *RA MAGAZINE*, Spring 2015