

Flourishing Creative Friendships

By Emily Chilvers

I want to share a story, a celebration of creativity and community. It began in June 2017 during London Creativity and Wellbeing Week when, after almost 8 years teaching pottery to the 65+ I decided to put on my first collaborative exhibition of four of my regular groups to celebrate their work and the stories behind what they make. I wanted to show that clay is such an interesting way of starting conversations with people and allowing people to flourish.



Clay by nature is a blank canvas; out of the bag it comes, a round ball, soft, often cold and it can be anything you want it to be! Suddenly each maker's hands turn it into something so individual and gives it such a personality in its form and subject. Those who come to my session have often tried pottery 'way back when I was at school', often told they were never good at it so never tried again. Most have never tried it before, (some always wanting to but never found the time) and many think 'I'll have a go' and discover they have a real talent for it. Other's engagement is tactile and sensory, more about the process and the stimulation rather than the outcome.

Whatever the need or desire to come to one of the classes I run, whether it's to learn a new skill, make a gift for a grandchild, 'come and see what everyone is up to', some dexterous exercise for the hands or simply to pass the time it can be shaped to suit everyone and is certainly as much about the social connections it creates as the creativity.

And indeed the exhibition at Cave in Pimlico celebrated all those stories and was received so warmly by the public. The artists were able to come and proudly soak up the compliments and there were even a few sales! The four groups were from Nightingale House in Clapham, the Royal Hospital Chelsea, St Wilfrid's Care Home and Sunrise of Purley. It was lovely to create a connection between them for the first time.



About a month before the exhibition I had attended a wonderful conference hosted by Flourishing Lives and was delighted when they attended the exhibition. Their support to the creative community working with the elderly across London is just wonderful so I was thrilled they came and enjoyed the show. Even more delighted was I when in May this year they gave me the opportunity to take the exhibition on tour to their event at Tate Exchange. It was called Re:Generation and celebrated the importance of creative ageing in all its forms! Back in class there was a lot of jaw dropping going on, disbelief that they would be exhibiting at the Tate! And what a wonderful week ensued with the artists pottery displayed amongst performances from choirs and flamenco dancers, interactive poetry workshops and exhibitions of many other talented artists from the coalition of organisations working across London.



All four pottery groups attended the week and got to meet each other which was one of the highlights for me, realising they are part of a creative community and sharing their stories. Alongside their exhibition they also helped me run a workshop for the public to come and have a go making with clay, 'let's show them what all the fuss is about!'. We themed the workshop around the architecture of the Tate and surrounding buildings and in the weeks building up to the event, had made textured stamps that people could use to decorate the clay. Over the event 100s of clay tiles were produced by school groups, families, staff and volunteers, they were everywhere!! But it really summed up the wonderful community spirit that the event created and how therapeutic clay can be once you start working with it! We were so grateful to be a part of such an uplifting event.



And I wanted the tiles to become the legacy of the event. So since May the tiles have been split into four and returned to each group for glazing. It has been lovely looking at all the different textures created and reminiscing about where and how they had been made and who the artists had chatted to while making them. They have now been turned into four mosaic panels, all loosely depicting a London scene and were unveiled on 25th October at Nightingale House with two of the groups in attendance.



I cannot describe the joy I felt to witness the buzz in the room that afternoon! It was a perfect mix of coffee, cake, conversation and creativity and really demonstrated the community spirit that was so important to this project.



The legacy now lives on in those mosaics that have returned to each home to be displayed proudly. They are symbol that you are never too old to try something new and that within us all there is a creative streak that can shine in many forms. And here it was clay that prevailed!



I love my job and am just so happy I was able to show the power pottery can have in bringing out the treasures in people. Thank you to all the care homes I work with for valuing the importance of creativity in their programs. To all my volunteers who support me in my sessions. And to my groups who are just wonderful, I love working with each and every one of you.

For more information about me and my work please visit my website www.emily-hall.co.uk or email at info@emily-hall.co.uk.