

'I FELT SELF CONCIOUS ABOUT MY ACCENT'

As a kid from Warrington, Warrington Museum & Art Gallery has played a role in my parents' and my own childhood memories as an intriguing building, an amalgamation of ancient and new. Recently I was part of Marie Jones' exhibition "Let's Get Stuck In Traffic" there, in the form of my quote 'I FELT SELF CONCIOUS ABOUT MY ACCENT'. Among several quotes from other local Warrington female artists, these were knitted on large banners and hung individually in front of a large collection of historic paintings depicting important male figures. The install was an intervention that reinstated female voices and narratives back into the museum's collection. It was strangely invigorating to see my own insecurities reflected back at me in a museum context associated with my upbringing and identity, even more so to see a comment on institutionalised social stigma of accents displayed alongside such lavish and privileged figures in oil paintings. Historically, museums are complex bodies that have supposed civic duties and social organisations that contribute to shared values of their society. However, they must provide this to a large public sphere; "They must serve two unique communities – society's ancestors and those who are not yet born."¹ This creates competing values and interests that came to the forefront in this exhibition.

Born in Warrington and as a recent graduate at the time, my quote stemmed from my experience in art education and studying at The Glasgow School of Art. A rich experience but I was so suddenly very aware of my background, my hometown, what my parents did for work and the way I spoke. This is natural when moving away from home, thrown into social situations of people from all over. I wasn't totally naive to this and before I started, I was anxious around the elitist, stuck up connections to art institutions. But I was overwhelmed on how much it effected my social interactions and confidence around my own creative practice – would I be taken as seriously if I can't talk as eloquently? Or if I didn't do my foundation in London like the majority in my year? Or that my parents didn't go to university and study at an art school? Or that I'm one of the first people in my family to go to university? Eventually gets to the point of WHY AM I EVEN HERE?... I don't deserve to be here. An unhelpful, overwhelming and destructive cycle at best. Where do these insecurities come from? How have these imbalances manifested into something as tangible as feeling self-conscious about my accent?

Somewhere it starts with lack of representation and visibility in the way we recognise our social history. A strong response to the exhibition by a few members of the public, raises important questions surrounding a museum's role in society; challenging questions around who's heritage should be given priority and above all the shift in museum's being dynamic spaces that now facilitate engaging new audiences, giving voice to previously eclipsed parts of society and the potential for improving social inclusion in their collections. The quote was interpreted as offensive towards the painted portrait of a successful Warrington sportsman that was covered by the knitted banner, as being ashamed of his Warrington roots. A worrying contradiction that claims of class consciousness but from a standpoint reliant on interpreting a museum in its elitist form. Relying on a link between visibility and power and holding onto the myth there exists a singular line of history that inherits an expected hierarchy and a duty of 'neutrality' that these sites have had built into their historic, civic role. Nobody is born feeling ashamed of where they come from, social psyche in Britain regarding class and working class identity has become much more complicated since the heyday of Warrington sportsman at the beginning of the 20st century. These spaces are aching for more contemporary working class female narratives to be visible in museums, galleries, art education and the wider art industry in general.

¹ Museums without Borders: Selected Writings of Robert R. Janes pg.153

An installation where staff at Warrington museum must of wrestled with historic duties against daring contemporary installation but in commissioning artists to respond to their collections, boldly raises very current issues of entitlement in these spaces by displaying a broader, inclusive culture not because it is politically correct but because it reflects the complexity and discrimination within our shared histories. Further involvement and opportunity between museum staff with young local artists in the last 12 months have took the form of residencies, an international group of artists taking over an honorary cabinet and stage area within their collection, a group show off site in the town centre and offering studio space on site at the museum has provided internal and external arrangements, that has allowed artists to take over , question and bring out potentials in how we encounter the histories of our local spaces. Are museum's a hub for activism? Using them as ground for social commentary has definitely engaged and attracted bigger audiences and discussion. Warrington Museum & Art gallery is such a great amalgamation of social histories and public discourse that it is a great place to start crossovers between exclusion and inclusion. When this happens it lowers barriers and casts more questioning over the validity and reliability of the truths we are presented with, but fundamentally - whose truth is it anyway?

- Alice Cornelia