

The Public Exhibition Centre - Outside In: On Tour

By Clare Butler

When the quirky, modern architectural design of The Public exhibition centre dawned on the West Midlands skyline in 2008, critics were quick to claim that the build was just a waste of taxpayer's money. However, five years on, the news of the closure of the once labelled 'giant shoe box'; has left the West Bromwich community without the multi-purpose venue that has boasted an array of cultural events during its time.

It wasn't until 2012 that I fully got involved with The Public via arts agency Outside In, who provides a platform for artists who find it difficult to access the art world either due to mental health or disability issues. It was from visiting one of Outside In's road shows that met at The Public, that I gained a valuable insight into how the venue accommodated and encouraged such a worthy cause.

Fast forward 18 months and Outside In were back at the Midlands venue for their last stop of their national tour; which displayed pieces from a nationwide competition held at headquarters Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, in 2012. All artworks featured had carefully been crafted by artists who ranged from diverse backgrounds who each faced a significant struggle to breakthrough into mainstream art, or to create pieces that are 'socially accepted.'



Outside In: On Tour



The Public Exhibition Centre, West Bromwich

The tour also featured six award winners, with names such as Kate Bradbury and Nigel Kingsbury on the list, whose pieces had been deemed extra special by either their craft or persona that shone through.

On October 8th 2013 I made my last visit to The Public to meet with Outside In Coordinator, Jennifer Gilbert, and Public Exhibition Manager, Graham Peet, to launch the tour in the venues prominent window exhibition space - which instantly captured the interest of passers-by and art lovers alike. From initial thoughts I was, as always, intrigued and captivated by

each individual art work and yearned to know the story or circumstance surrounding them. I also sadly sensed a bittersweet atmosphere that was present amongst the tour; - due to it being the last window exhibition to feature at The Public before its impending closure on November 16th.

Whilst Jennifer chatted to visitors I had my first chat with Graham, who was proud to have the Outside In: On Tour exhibition as one of The Public's last. "It is an honour to have Outside In work as the last exhibition here, the pieces are so strong, and totally represent what we've been trying to portray here at The Public...the message of accessibility..." , Graham explained. It was clear as we chatted that Graham was proud of the pieces and accomplishments that featured in the Outside In tour, but was aware how tainted the exhibition was with the upcoming closure.

"Decisions have been made outside of our control", he told me, as he began to describe how much everyone at the venue felt 'at a loss'. "There is nowhere in West Bromwich that can sustain the mixture of space, facilities and spectacular setting to take art seriously like we have done....the good thing is that arts groups such as Outside In are still very present in reflecting our values, and most importantly giving artists a voice."



Jennifer speaks with visitors

After speaking with Graham, I followed Jennifer as she gave an in-depth insight into the featured pieces. I found myself instantly drawn to Kate Bradbury's and Chaz Waldren's intricate detail in their art pieces, and also liked the tale behind Nigel Kingsbury's 'Woman' and his fascination with the female figure. One visitor on the morning, who wished to remain anonymous, told me how he could see many 'links' to famous artists works and he felt he

really could 'connect' to many pieces. "It's great to see this sort of stuff on display...it's really special...it speaks to me and gives me many ideas for going out creating my own stuff. It's wicked!" he added.

Jennifer expressed her joy of the exhibition featuring in The Public's window, but also the sadness of the tour coming to an end ultimately at a venue whose closure would take art away from the Midlands. But most importantly the reception of the tour was what mattered in encouraging more people to enter the art world. "It's nice to see how its inspired people and many have said it's one of the best exhibitions they've seen.....it's great that its opening people's eyes to a new form of art work that should be appreciated more", Jennifer told me.

One of the main messages that Jennifer recited was that of appreciation and inspiration that was hoped to be drawn from the pieces and hopefully encourage more people to get involved. "The artwork here is really varied, and I hope it inspires others to not be afraid to experiment and use different materials to create and express there selves."

Jennifer stated how Kate Bradbury's black and white art piece was her favourite due to its detail and the 'up close and personal' aspect it offered. "When we had it at Pallant House we had a magnify

glass by it so that people could get a true sense of the intricate detail included. Every time I look at it I see something new, and that's really inspiring!"

Not only had the chosen winners had the opportunity to sell pieces of their work but also a solo show and a private view at Pallant House gallery,

and Jennifer was more than keen in encouraging others to follow in their footsteps. "People should come and see the show and see how these pieces have travelled and become visible to a wider audience...I think people should look for art groups in their local area or buy some art materials and see the joy that art and putting your feelings on paper can actually bring."

Personally I felt that the tour was a resounding success, and that by coming to an end at The Public it was giving the venue a proud send off. I loved how the pieces were defying the mainstream, or what you may call 'the norm', and was instead offering personal and powerful insights into the art world and ultimately the artists there selves. It was great to work alongside The Public and Outside In, and discover another side to art which both outlets have truly represented.



Winning Artwork