



WAYS OF SEEING

Turner Prize-nominated Project Art Works shines fresh light both on experiences of neurodiversity and on art itself, finds Amel Mukhtar. Photographs by Misan Harriman

Outside Project Art Works in Hastings, summer drizzle has turned everything – sea, sky, cement – a deep grey. But inside, the railway-arch studios abound with huge, colourful works in progress, the walls streaked and spattered with paint. As he walks past his jaw-dropping 15ft-tall maritime abstracts, Sean Ormonde’s eyes sparkle with pride. For three years, until 2019, he had been prescribed medication for mental ill-health that had put an end to his creativity. But then, his mother, Lone, an artist and Sean’s full-time carer, recalls, “I thought we’d try and see if we could get a place here. He’s been painting ever since.”

Sean, 42, and Lone are among the 70 or so people who make up Project Art Works, a community of neurodivergent creators with complex support needs, their carers, artist facilitators and a network of people helping them navigate the education, health and care systems. Some have learning disabilities, autism, ADHD or Tourette’s, but at PAW, diagnoses take a back seat. “We see people as contributors, whether it’s through their artistic practice or otherwise,”

says creative director Tim Corrigan. “The way we respect the work, the way it’s archived – that in itself is kind of a political act.”

This year, PAW is up for the Turner Prize, on a shortlist solely made up of collectives – although the group isn’t sure how it fits the usual mould. Unlike the other four nominees for the £25,000 prize, PAW isn’t a collaborative team. Most members engage in solo practice. Some don’t identify as artists; the term “makers” carries less weighty expectations.

However, they are growing used to the art world’s attention. Earlier this year, members were invited to take a residency at Hastings Contemporary, where brightly spotted paintings were shown with pencilled cartoon characters, while a short film chronicling members’ time exploring a Scottish glen made PAW joint winners of the 2020 Jarman Award. As a Turner nominee, PAW will show at Coventry’s Herbert Art Gallery and Museum from 29 September (with the winner announced on 1 December), and in 2022, they will take part in the renowned exhibition Documenta 15 in Germany.



BEN AMANDO, JAMEELA ELFARI

Exhibiting is a choice, led by each artist. Like Sean, Phoebe, 23, works in multiple media – painting, dressmaking, haircutting – and is colouring with pencils when we speak, but she doesn’t show publicly. “I work on loads of stuff in my bedroom, cluttering the whole place up,” she says wryly. Phoebe lives in care, which Patricia Finnegan, an immensely warm artist facilitator, explains can be complex, as she “struggles in environments that have different expectations of her”. At PAW, Phoebe feels accepted.

PAW was founded by artists Kate Adams, CEO, and Jonathan Cole, in 1996, after they noticed that in the neurodiverse classrooms attended by her son, every child’s artwork was of the same high standard. In the past five years or so, PAW has seen its membership balloon, which Finnegan thinks is “a response to adult social care being cut, and the need becoming greater for people to have meaningfulness to their life”.

Carl Sexton, 26, used to frequently engage in injurious behaviour, his mother Doreen says. Carl is non-verbal; as he writes striking, boldly colour-coded words on a huge sheet of paper, he makes occasional happy sounds. When they came to PAW, Doreen was “really on tenterhooks”.

But Carl loved it. Non-verbal people “work on vibes,” she explains. “They have to be that much more attuned because they don’t know those other things that we take for granted.”

“There’s a belief particularly around autism that people aren’t able to be social,” says Finnegan. “That’s never the case. That connection is really important, it just happens in a different way.”

It comes down to reciprocity. “There is a genuine interest in me,” says 27-year-old Lucy. “There’s no fear of being laughed at or made to look silly.” She sews gorgeously detailed costumes to embody her larger-than-life personas, such as *Red Dwarf*-inspired Lister Cat. Lucy, however, describes herself as shy. “I was quite badly bullied and laughed at, so that’s why I’m a bit nervy about doing new things and meeting new people.” She brightens. “It was a long time ago. Since joining here, I’ve grown in confidence.”

Proud as they all are to be nominated, there is scepticism, too. “We’ve been doing this work for 20 years, but it seems the idea of socially engaged practice is very ‘now,’” says Thomas Lepora, another facilitator. Lucy, though, puts it best: “It’s just nice that a good organisation like this has been nominated for a prize like that.” ■



Main image: Carl Sexton (in hood) with, from left, his sister Janine, his mother Doreen, his sister’s boyfriend Nathan Ackerley, Sean, Lucy (in costume) and Phoebe. Left: another of Lucy’s costumes. This page: at work in the PAW studios



THREE MORE COLLECTIVES



AZEEMA

Through its pioneering print magazine, online platform, agency and events, Azeema celebrates women and non-binary people with South Asian, Middle Eastern and North African roots. Look out for the collective’s workshops and electric shows.



RUN DEM CREW

Founded 14 years ago by DJ and poet Charlie Dark, this now 500-strong (and growing daily) collective unites creatives from all walks of life through a love of running. They meet to explore the streets of London and other major cities across the world, and to collaborate on fresh ideas.



TOUCHING BASS

Errol Anderson and Alex Rita have created a community through music, bringing artists and appreciators together via curated concert series and club nights, the Touching Bass label – which represents the jazz greats of tomorrow, such as cktrl and Demae – and their fortnightly NTS radio show.