

Katie Taylor reflects on her experience in Singapore with ART:DIS February 2023

Empowerment through creative freedom is at the core of our practice, so we were delighted to receive an invitation from ART:DIS to take part in a programme of events in February 2023. ART:DIS is an established Singapore-based not-for-profit, established in 1993, which - in their own words - “organises art programmes, projects, collaborations, exhibitions and performances for people with disabilities to reach for excellence and be relevant in the future. ART:DIS further establishes pathways in the arts for persons with disabilities to express themselves, gain confidence and be part of a community.” We were fortunate to also be able to work with SAM (Singapore Art Museum) as part of our visit.

The invitation from ART:DIS was to deliver presentations and workshops to support professionals in their ecosystem to understand more about making art with people with complex support needs. As usual with such trips, we learned as much as we imparted.

The visit began with the launch of SAM’s new monthly art and wellbeing programme, Art Dose. Held on Saturdays and intended to give space for art-based approaches to supporting wellbeing for all, the session included a 3-hour drop-in solar printing workshop, followed by a panel discussion. SAM’s building is currently undergoing major renovations, tucked away behind a hoarding in the centre of the city. While these works are taking place, SAM has relocated to a destination site in a dockside area a little further out of town. Shipping containers, cranes and warehouses provided a fitting backdrop for an afternoon of exchange between cultures.

Tim and Katie were grateful to work with a fantastic team of volunteers from SAM and ART:DIS. Through collaboration, experimentation and a lot of gentle coaxing of the printer, we worked with members of the public from children to elders to create an evolving installation which culminated in the display of 63 solar printed portraits. People reflected that the process was satisfyingly direct and enjoyed the magic of seeing prints develop in the sun. The workshop was supported through SSL (Singaporean Sign Language) interpretation, which continued for the panel discussion.

On the panel, Tim and Katie were joined by Lim Chye Hong, Head of Access and Inclusion at SAM, and Angela Tan, Executive Director of ART:DIS. There was a full audience, again including some young visitors, for a discussion of the respective roles of cultural organisations (SAM), not-for-profits (ART:DIS) and artists (PAW) in creating equality of access to the arts. The practice of artist/makers who use the studio at Project Art Works practice was represented through film and we took time to explain our approach of using film, installations and live events to activate our

exhibition spaces and enable people to represent themselves on their own terms. We learned that ART:DIS runs a range of programmes across many creative disciplines to facilitate people's journeys, from taking their first steps in their creative practice to becoming professional artists in their chosen field. Recognition of this kind is an important driver for many of the people that ART:DIS works with and their families.

The next day, we were lucky to be able to visit one of the three ART:DIS centres across Singapore. We toured the facilities with Angela and Frances, one of the skilled and committed tutors on the programme. We were envious of the kilns and clay room and enjoyed seeing students' work displayed around the building. We also had the chance to drop in on a class where we met four students, who shared their work with us in different ways with confidence and pride.

The next two days saw Tim and Katie join together with 26 arts facilitators, museum and gallery professionals, school teachers, volunteers and ART:DIS students for an extended workshop as part of the Arts and Disability Forum, an event conceived and hosted by ART:DIS. Intended to develop skills in making art with people with complex support needs, the workshop moved between introductions to elements of Project Art Works' practice, sharing of films and art works to represent artist/makers and their practice and material propositions to support hands-on engagement. Participants found many commonalities in ways of working as well as differences that prompted useful conversations. A key theme was the importance of process, as opposed to product, and we recognised the need to allow proper time for things to unfold. We adjusted our programme according to that and agreed that this flexibility-responding to the needs in the room-was a real strength.

Everyone brought their own experience into the space and shared with open-heartedness, generosity and vulnerability, creating fertile ground for the seeds of new collaborations to grow. Participation of the ART:DIS students was essential and created a deeper learning experience for everyone as the students' strengths shone through. One particularly memorable moment from the first day was the building of a wall of cardboard boxes: our plan to create a neatly tessellated brick wall quickly adapted to students' playful responses to the invitation to place cardboard-box bricks one by one. We built and rebuilt the structure collaboratively, moving from chaos to order and back again. We saw how the students' unique contributions enabled other group members to participate with a helpful combination of conviction and sensitivity. The wall finally became the prompt for the creation of a group portrait, initiated by tracing sections of a projected group photo through gaps made by removing individual "bricks". Day two's highlight came in response to a request from one student at the end of day one for some "aggressive art". We offered a large-scale surface to work on, priming it with a background colour in the morning and working into it in the afternoon by throwing, spraying and splashing

paint. Others enjoyed using painting tools mounted on poles to engage with the collaboration without getting messy. The resulting painting captured a sense of the freedom and playfulness that had characterised the workshop days.

The final day of the visit gave Tim and Katie the opportunity to participate in a day of keynote talks, panel discussions and sharings of creative work made by ART:DIS artists from the organisation's professional development pathways and mentoring programmes. Project Art Works joined international keynote speakers from the inspiring "barrier-free" big-i centre in Japan and old friends Studio A from Australia (with whom we most recently collaborated as part of the first iteration of the EXPLORERS programme).

Tim and Katie were joined in their keynote talk, which focused on rights and representation, by Trevor Lee, an ART:DIS student whose end-of-day workshop reflections cut to the core of the themes we were working with. In the keynote, Trevor spoke with confidence, candour and comedy about the development of his creative practice, and showed one of his many paintings that centre on two of his great loves, desserts and puns.

After the keynote, Tim joined a panel discussion, facilitated by Alecia [need to check surname] to explore pathways of creative development. The discussion centred on the need to put the individual at the heart of planning such pathways and to recognise, celebrate and build on each individual's unique strengths and interests.

ART:DIS'S commitment to widening access was demonstrated throughout the day through provision of SSL interpretation, audio description, live captioning (including creative captioning for some performances), sighted guides and facilities such as a quiet room. We reflected with other international speakers that we are not used to seeing this breadth of provision in our own communities.

We left Singapore on the next morning, a little exhausted, but very inspired by the possibilities that new relationships forged through the visit might open up.

Thanks to everyone we connected with in Singapore for a generous and illuminating exchange. We look forward to building on these foundations in the coming months!